

**PERFORMANCE AND MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
22ND MARCH 2005**

PRESENT: The Chair (Councillor Bryant)
Councillors Bush, Campbell, Hampson, Hubbard, Muldoon,
Tormey and Williams

APOLOGIES: Councillors Akroyd and Brown.

51. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8th February 2005 were confirmed and signed.

52. DISCLOSURES OF PERSONAL INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of personal interests.

53. DECLARATIONS – THE PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of the existence of the party whip.

PART 2 (DELEGATED)

54. BUDGET MONITORING – GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

In accordance with the Committee's work programme, reports on the position with the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account budgets to the end of period 11 (February 2005) were submitted and the Head of Financial Services attended the meeting to assist the Committee in its consideration of the issue.

The report showed the major variances against General Fund salary budgets, involving five service areas, and major variances on non-salary budgets, involving six service areas.

Concern was expressed that the budget for Food Hygiene and Safety was £41,000 underspent to date, suggesting either that the budget was too great or that action in relation to food hygiene was not in accordance with the Service Development Plan. It was an issue that the Committee should consider in more detail to establish the reasons for the current position.

Overall there was a net underspend on the General Fund of approximately £777,000. That position was questioned by a member of the Committee as representing a large sum, which in turn raised the question of whether the Council

was able to deliver the services that it had planned to deliver or whether the budget had been wrong originally.

The Head of Financial Services commented that the underspend at the end of the financial year was unlikely to be anywhere as great as that sum. In part the explanation was related to delays in invoicing, slow payment of invoices and the like. However, the point was made by a member of the Committee that original budgets and out-turn figures had been close to each other in the previous two financial years and the issue was one which should be drawn to the Cabinet's attention to consider whether service delivery was falling short of that expected, or whether there were remaining problems with the budgeting process.

In relation to the balance of income and expenditure for Loughborough Town Hall being £43,000 over budget at month 11, the Head of Financial Services referred to the fact that income was lower than had been budgeted since the building had re-opened in December.

Views were expressed by members of the Committee:

- (i) that the Committee should review the position when the out-turn figures were available, as there were issues about the accuracy of the figures for the reasons stated.
- (ii) that the explanations given for under and over spending needed to be more detailed, in the form of an explanation provided by the relevant Head of Service rather than as brief notes.

In relation to the Housing Revenue Account, a member of the Committee referred to the increase in rent arrears by £38,000 above the figure of £643,000 at the end of February 2004. He expressed the view that such a level of arrears was unfair on those who did pay their rent and that there should be nobody who could not pay.

The Acting Rents Manager stated that some tenants would not apply for benefit or provide the paperwork that was required to support a claim for benefit. The Housing Service had one full-time and one part-time visiting officer to address these issues, but there had been high levels of sickness absence within the service and that had affected the ability to achieve a reduction in the level of arrears. There had also been a reduction of the number of staff in the section and, overall, the fact that the increase in arrears had not been higher than £38,000 was something of an achievement. Staff in the section were trained by the Benefits team so that they could assist tenants in claiming that to which they were entitled, but not all would co-operate. That tended to be true of younger tenants and every effort was made to ensure that completed benefit forms and supporting papers were provided at the "tenancy sign-up" stage.

A member of the Committee expressed the view that the tenants involved represented a small minority and the issues involved were not straight forward.

RESOLVED

1. That Cabinet be advised of the Committee's concern at the level of underspending on the General Fund at the end of period 11 and concerns that exist in terms of either a problem with the budgeting process or failure to achieve certain service delivery targets.
2. That future reports in relation to budget monitoring incorporate a more detailed explanation of major variations.
3. That consideration be given to including Food Hygiene and Loughborough Town Hall in the work programme at item 12 on the agenda.
4. That the information relating to the HRA budget monitoring be noted.
5. That it be suggested to the Scrutiny Commission that consideration be given to the issue of rent arrears being considered by a Panel of the Investigation and Review Scrutiny Committee.

55. ICT STRATEGY / BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN

A report on these issues was submitted as part of the annual review of the strategy and action plan. The Head of Information and Communication Services attended the meeting to assist the Committee in its consideration of the issues. He advised that an annual review of the documents would be undertaken by the Cabinet on the 28th April. He was aware that some of the issues were out of date and that it was more appropriate to consider a "status report" rather than looking at a document that was over two years old.

In reply to a question, the Head of Information and Communication Services advised that, following a review by APSE and the closure of the ICT training unit, ECDL training was arranged for staff in conjunction with Loughborough College. Currently, the opportunities for some in-house training within The Academy programme were also being considered. For many people, the requirement was not to attend courses but to receive assistance on particular applications at the time they required that assistance.

In terms of the e-Government route map, a report on that would be considered by the Cabinet in the next two months or so. Although the Council was slightly behind its own targets, the action being taken to develop the website would cater for much of the shortfall. The Head of Information and Communication Services indicated that he was confident that, with work undertaken in recent months, targets would be achieved.

In terms of arrangements for Councillors, that was the subject of a review and that would include member training as part of that.

RESOLVED that the current position be noted and the Committee be kept informed of progress of the ICT elements of The Academy Programme.

56. HARASSMENT AND BULLYING – DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES

In accordance with the Committee's work programme, a report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Change Management) on the policy and procedures was submitted. The Human Resources Manager attended the meeting to assist the Committee in its consideration of the issues.

In reply to a question, the Human Resources Manager stated that the number of employees attending harassment and bullying procedure courses/briefings had reduced in recent times but further courses were to take place in April and May. They were compulsory for managers but not for other employees. The number of reported cases was at the level that might be expected in an organisation of Charnwood's size, although that was not to say that there were not other unreported cases. The procedure was clear and easy to use but needed to be kept under review.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

57. REVIEW OF CHARNWOOD'S HOUSING STRATEGY 2005/2010

In accordance with the Committee's work programme the Head of Housing Services submitted a report on the current position with the review of the Housing Strategy and the timetable for completion. The Principal Housing Officer (Strategy) attended the meeting to assist the Committee in its consideration of the issues. He referred to the recent stakeholder consultation that had been held at Loughborough Town Hall, which had proved to be a very successful event. He confirmed that GOEM was working positively with Housing Officers on the strategy.

A member of the Committee referred to the fact that the Audit and Risk Management Scrutiny Committee would be considering the draft strategy from a risk management perspective.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

58. HOUSING SERVICES IMPROVEMENTS

Although the issue had been programmed for consideration at the meeting, the Chair had agreed to defer consideration to a future meeting, so that it would take place as part of the next review cycle for the Improvement Plan.

RESOLVED that the action taken be noted and that the issue be programmed accordingly.

59. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

In accordance with procedures established by the Scrutiny Commission in February 2004, a report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Risk Management) on performance against the range of nationally prescribed performance indicators for 2003/04 was submitted.

A member of the Committee referred to the fact that sickness absence had increased year on year and the Council's position relative to other authorities had worsened, despite it having been identified as an area of concern. The measures that had been put in place did not appear to be working.

The Chair referred to the fact that it was an issue which the Committee had a commitment to keep under review, to take account of the long-term trends, and was one of the reasons why the Committee planned to consider a range of Human Resource issues at its meeting in May 2005.

The Head of Benefits and Revenues Services commented in relation to the indicator "Benefits - overall satisfaction" that there was an error in the table and that the "actual" for 2003/04 should read 78% rather than 48%. The true position was reflected in the more detailed description of elements within the satisfaction survey referred to in the list of indicators.

In relation to "Planning costs per head of population", the Head of Planning Services explained that the formula had changed and new guidance had been published by the ODPM as a consequence. The gross cost of building control had been added into the package and there had been considerable investment in Planning Services. There was a lack of confidence nationally in the usefulness of the particular indicator, which was to be discontinued at the end of 2004/05.

RESOLVED that the performance indicator information be noted, the Committee's concern at the level of sickness absence be recorded and be looked at in detail as part of the report on Human Resource related issues programmed to be considered on 31st May 2005.

60. LEGAL SERVICES BEST VALUE REVIEW PANEL

At its meeting on 3rd March 2005, the Cabinet had agreed to undertake an internal Best Value Review of Legal Services, with a panel comprising of two members of the Cabinet and two members of the Performance and Management Scrutiny Committee being set up to oversee that review. The Committee was asked to nominate two of its members as members of the panel.

A member of the Committee expressed the view that the process should either remain as had been the case in the past, a Panel comprising of Scrutiny members plus one member of the Cabinet or the Panel should comprise of members of the Cabinet, as the Executive, with Scrutiny taking an overview.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Commission be requested to consider the matter as urgent business at its meeting to be held on 29th March 2005.

61. WORK PROGRAMME

Details of the Committee's current work programme were submitted. The committee was asked to review the programme, taking account of the issues raised in resolution 3. to minute 54.

RESOLVED that the Committee's work programme be as follows:

ISSUE	MEETING
Budget Monitoring (General Fund and Housing Revenue Account)	Ongoing.
Human Resources issues	31 st May 2005
Leicestershire's Public Service Agreement	On a quarterly basis. Last considered 8 th February 2005. Next to be considered 31 st May 2005.
Performance Indicators	On a quarterly basis. Last considered 8 th February 2005. Next to be considered 31 st May 2005.
Refuse Collection/Street Cleaning (via Customer Services Scrutiny Committee)	June 2005
Support Service Charges	July 2005
Development Control Best Value Outcome Improvement Plan – Progress	Every six months. Last considered 8 th February 2005. Next to be considered 13 th September 2005.
Emergency Planning	November 2005
Implementing e-Government	December 2005
Section 106 Agreements – Charging for officer time	To be programmed
Charnwood Wildlife	To be programmed
Leisure and Culture Best Value Improvement Plan	To be programmed
Food Hygiene Service – Effects of Restructuring	To be programmed
Loughborough Town Hall – Trading position following refurbishment	To be programmed

NOTE - No reference may be made to these minutes at the Council meeting on 5th September 2005 unless notice to that effect is given to the Democratic Services Manager by five members of the Council by 5:00pm on 8th July 2005.