

ITEM 4

Time started – 6.00pm
Time finished – 7.37pm

RESOURCES COMMISSION 19 JULY 2010

Present: Councillor Naitta (Chair)
Councillors Atwal, Chera, Davis, Leeming, Repton and L
Winter

01/10 Appointment of the Vice Chair

Resolved to appoint Councillor Repton as Vice Chair of the Resources Commission.

02/10 Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S Khan.

03/10 Late Items introduced by the Chair

There were no late items.

04/10 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Redfern declared a personal interest in Minute 7/10 as a Council appointed member of the Board of Derby Homes.

05/10 Call-in

There were no call-ins to report to the Commission

06/10 Councillor Call for Action

There were no Councillor Calls for Action to report to the Commission

07/10 Responses of the Council Cabinet to any reports of the Commission

There were no responses of the Council Cabinet to report.

08/10 Housing and Council Tax Benefit Administration

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Customer Services on the processing of Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims. The Head of Benefits, Mark Holmes, informed Members that the service had reduced the

amount of time each claim takes to process for the third year running. The improvements have been achieved despite a 13 percent increase in the caseload from 23,308 to 26,352 claims. The service is now processing claims in 22.69 days on average. This has been achieved by introducing a number of new processes to increase the efficiency of the service such as an electronic verification process and an express processing facility where some customers can have their claims processed on the same day.

Councillor Repton asked how Derby compares to other cities in terms of the number of people claiming benefits. The Head of Benefits stated that the Council is similar to other neighbouring authorities.

Councillor Leeming expressed concern that in the coming months there would be an increase in missed rent payments to the Council. He asked for more information on the current situation. The Head of Benefits stated that he would report back to the commission at a future meeting.

Councillor Leeming asked if private landlords have to ensure their properties meet a minimum before the Council will support their tenants. The Head of Benefits stated that the entitlement to benefits is not linked to the standard of the home in which a resident resides. He informed the Commission that Environmental Health have the power to inspect properties if they are considered to be sub-standard.

Councillor Chera asked if new IT software would automatically trigger new claims for an applicant. The Head of Benefits stated that it would not trigger new claims but it would highlight to officers what an applicant might be entitled to. The officer would then explain the process to them.

Councillor Davis expressed concern that the electronic verification of data from applicants may expose the Council to fraudulent applications. The Head of Benefits stated that this process involved no more risk than paper submissions.

Councillor Atwal stated that a problem of the current system is that benefits, such as assistance with rent, are paid to residents directly now and not landlords. This has led many landlords to stop letting their properties because they do not want to take the risk of not receiving rent. He asked the Head of Benefits if the Council could do anything to change the situation. The Head of Benefits stated that currently his service is bound by statute. However, in some cases, for example when a resident has drug or alcohol problems a landlord can approach the Council to ensure that their rent is paid directly to the landlord. A landlord can also apply for the rent to be paid to them if a resident falls behind by eight weeks with their rent. If councillors wish to amend the current statute then they can lobby the Government.

The Chair raised concern with the companies being used to recover Council Tax payments. He stated that he had received complaints from residents that they have been treated in a heavy handed manner.

The Director of Customer Services, Kath Gruber, stated that bailiffs are bound by statutory guidance and are assessed by their own code of conduct. She informed the commission that she has asked for a review of the complaints log of the two companies the Council currently use. This will highlight any trends as common complainants or types of complaint.

Resolved:

- 1. To note the report**
- 2. To request the Head of Benefits to bring a report to the Commission detailing the rent arrears currently owed to the authority**
- 3. To report the findings of the review into the Council's bailiff contractors to the chair.**

09/10 Customer Services

The Commission considered a report of the Strategic Director of Resources on the standard of customer service the Council provides. The Head of Customer Services, Bernard Fenton, informed the commission that customer service standards across the Council were improving. The recession meant that the Council dealt with more customers and he felt his challenge was to get a higher output from his staff with the same resources.

He stated that the key to improve the performance of customer services in the Council was to reduce the amount of avoidable contact officers have with the public. To do this the service had introduced an automated phone service so that members of the public could report missed bins without having to wait to speak to an adviser. A recorded message would inform them about the amount of time they can expect to have to wait for their bin to be collected. This practice was also in place for the reporting of highways faults. He stated that the service now had weekly updates from all of the services so that officers in the contact centre are properly briefed to inform the public.

The Head of Customer Services told the commission that the improvements made to the service had led to a drop in waiting times for callers and the number of calls the Council receives. The Council was buying a new telephone system which would also increase performance by diverting calls of a more difficult nature to those officers with the necessary skills to help the caller. The service would be moved to Albion Street when the Council moves out of its current accommodation.

Councillor Repton asked if consideration had been given to employing staff on a flexible working contract. This would improve the services capacity to meet the needs of the public and enable the service desks to open for longer hours. The Head of Customer Services stated that Derby Direct had already changed its operating schedule to open from 8am to 7pm. Staff at Derby Direct varied their working patterns to cover these opening hours.

Councillor Chera asked if customers were given a response time if they leave a message on an automated system. The Head of Customer Services stated that an important part of the service was now to manage customers' expectations. To do this every automated response provides a response time.

Resolved to note the update and congratulate officers on improvements to the performance of the service.

10/10 Remit and Work Programme 2010-11

Members were asked to reflect on the previous year's programme and suggest new items for inclusion on the 2010-11 work programme.

Resolved to consider including the following items in the work programme for 2010-11:

- 1. The impact of how the Council can manage the effects of any reduction in grants from the Government currently received;**
- 2. The allocation of housing benefit and when it is appropriate to give it directly to landlords;**
- 3. The Capital and Revenue Budget proposals;**
- 4. The administration of housing benefit and council tax; to investigate if the authority has sufficient finances and procedures in place to be sustainable;**
- 5. The electronic reporting of risk management, bad debt and financial services and any improvements which can be made to the existing system; and**
- 6. The Chair and the Vice Chair will meet with Directors to discuss possible areas where the Commission can add value.**

11/10 Matters referred to the Commission by Council Cabinet

There were no items referred to the Commission by Council Cabinet.

12/10 Retrospective Scrutiny

There were no items of retrospective scrutiny.

13/10 Council Cabinet Forward Plan

There were no items on the Forward Plan relevant to the Commission's remit.

MINUTES END