

**PERFORMANCE SELECT COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 17 NOVEMBER 2009**

Present: Councillor H S Rolfe - Chairman
Councillors S Barker, J E N Davey, A J Ketteridge,
R M Lemon, J Salmon and P A Wilcock.

Officers
in attendance: R Auty (Head of Community Engagement),
S Bronson (Audit Manager), P Evans (Business
Improvement and Performance Manager), J Mitchell
(Chief Executive), T Norton (Business Improvement and
Performance Officer), R Procter (Democratic Services
Officer) and A Webb (Director of Central Services).

Also attending: P King - District Auditor, Audit Commission.

PS42 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors T P Knight and A C Yarwood. There were no declarations of interest.

PS43 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2009, having been received, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

PS44 BUSINESS ARISING/ACTION LIST UPDATE

09-PS35 Provision of affordable housing

The Chairman said he would like the Committee to receive a half yearly update of performance against plan. Councillor Barker asked what effect a recovery in the economy would have on affordable housing provision. She queried whether figures were absolute or expressed as percentages, and said it would be helpful to know which sites were rural exception sites.

The Chief Executive said the figures involved were actual, rather than a proportion. The issue was being considered by the Housing Initiatives Task Group, and would be the subject of a report to this Committee. He said Uttlesford was doing well in provision of affordable housing during the present economic climate. Uttlesford's reputation as a housing authority was very good, although in terms of present housing need there was more to be done.

The Chairman asked whether the Council had a role to play in stimulating rural affordable housing schemes, in terms of finding sites. The Chief Executive replied that officers were working with Housing Associations and Parish Councils, particularly with regard to opportunities for funding.

Councillor Wilcock referred to the Rochford Nurseries site, and asked for clarification of a point regarding funding. The Chief Executive gave a brief explanation. In response to further questions, he said there were circumstances where affordable housing was being built in advance of market housing, but it was also sometimes necessary to wait for the rest of the development to 'catch up'.

Councillor Barker said she was concerned at confusion amongst parishes about exception sites, which in her view had not been helped by the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment. There was a problem in that people were not offering land for affordable housing, as a result of assuming land identified in SHLAA had market value. It was agreed that the Chairman would write to the chairman of the Housing Initiatives Task Group to ask for reassurance that monitoring of the figures was being carried out and to clarify policy on exception sites.

09-PS37 Procurement

The Director of Central Services gave a brief summary of current work on procurement options. In view of the conclusions of the external auditor, as set out in the Minutes of the last meeting, officers had considered the procurement options available. It had been decided that the proposal from Essex County Council would not be appropriate for this council. The other Essex councils had been approached regarding IT working, and proposals had been considered with Chelmsford. Following officer meetings, this possibility had been rejected on the grounds of cost. Meetings had also taken place with the Procurement Hub at Braintree, which had been very positive. It had been decided to enter into a three year term with the Procurement Hub. A report would go to the Finance and Administration Committee in February, to include a recommendation that an officer group with a Member champion be set up to work with the Hub and monitor progress. The group would develop a new procurement strategy and procedures. The Performance Select Committee would receive monitoring reports.

The Chairman put his name forward for the role of procurement champion, in view of the experience he could offer as Procurement Director of the East of England NHS Collaborative Procurement Hub.

Members agreed with the measures outlined. Having been invited to comment, the District Auditor said the proposals sounded encouraging, and would be taken into account during the next audit. However, he was slightly disappointed at the lack of an outcome with the County.

The District Auditor said he envisaged in the audit of 2010/2011 that if the Council had in place the proper processes and strategy, it should attain level 2, and that level 3 would be gained by incremental improvement.

09-PS39 Pension fund deficit

The Head of Community Engagement said that whilst Essex County Council had declined to attend a meeting of this Committee, they had invited

Uttlesford representatives to a forum in January 2010. Those interested in attending should contact him or the Chief Finance Officer.

09-PS33 Landsbanki

Councillor Barker asked for an update on the situation regarding investment with Landsbanki. The Director of Central Services said an update would be available tomorrow when the Agenda papers for the next Finance and Administration Committee meeting would be available.

PS45

QUARTER 2 2009/10 PERFORMANCE REPORT

Members considered the report of the Business Improvement and Performance Officer, and agreed that the new format was very helpful. Aspects of the report were discussed, including the importance of including benchmarking information. Officers advised that performance indicators for planning should be seen in the context of system improvements currently being adopted by the planning service, which was also moving accommodation this week. Members would be kept informed of these improvements by means of a report in six months' time, by which time it was envisaged the performance indicators for this service would have improved.

The Business Improvement and Performance Manager said she would be making recommendations for improving the housing voids process, which should have a corresponding beneficial effect on rent collection.

Members then asked various questions. Councillor Ketteridge said he had for some time been concerned about whether the reason the performance indicator for voids was consistently below target was connected with Choice Based Letting. Specifically, he sought an answer to the question, would Choice Based Letting ever succeed in reducing the level of voids? The Business Improvement and Performance Manager said a report was being prepared for presentation to the Strategic Management Board that would not only include the findings from the under-performing PI review currently being conducted on the indicator, but also a number of recommendations for improvement. She would ensure investigations covered any impact the Choice Based Letting scheme might have on the voids process. If it subsequently became apparent to SMB that that Choice Based Letting had no identifiable effect on the performance of the voids indicator, then they would refer the issue to Community and Housing Committee.

In reply to a question regarding SI 12(d), Museum users, the Head of Community Engagement said the indicator was based on collated figures for visitors, website visitors and those attending talks and displays. Website visits had not been as high as anticipated, and there had been a dip in the number of website visitors at the time of the redesign. Another factor was the delay in filling the post of Outreach Worker, pending construction of the Heritage Quest Centre.

Councillor Wilcock said, in connection with the planning indicators NI 157 a b and c, that if the planning service did not achieve its targets by the next

quarter, he would like a report to come to the Committee. The Chief Executive explained in further detail the reasons why the planning targets had not been met. There was a combination of factors, which included shortage of key staff for various reasons, and the submission of several large planning applications. He said planning performance should not be judged solely on speed of dealing with applications, but on the quality of decisions made and officers had been working hard with the support of Development Control Members to ensure high quality of decisions.

Councillor Wilcock said he would be content if improvement started to be apparent during the next quarter, but that otherwise it would be reasonable to enquire further. If performance in fact went down next quarter, he would regard that as a serious problem. The Chairman agreed that it would be legitimate to require the appearance of an officer in those circumstances, and that this Committee needed to know when the problem would be dealt with.

As a general point, Councillor Barker said it would be useful for the report to show benchmark outturn figures, to enable realistic comparisons to be made. The Chief Executive said this would only start to 'complicate' the PI spreadsheet again. The Business Improvement and Performance Manager said there might be an opportunity to provide some meaningful benchmarking data in summary form through the work being progressed as a member of the Essex Policy & Performance Network. She said she would investigate this further and provide any relevant information when reporting Quarter 3 data.

Councillor Barker added that she wished to congratulate officers on the achievement of 98.25% of up to date staff appraisals, and Members agreed this was a very good result.

Regarding indicator SI04, the accuracy of processing Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims, Councillor Barker said it was good that accuracy seemed to have improved. However, she sought clarification on two points, first, how accuracy could be guaranteed simply by a second officer carrying out checks; and secondly, what was meant by the reference in the report to 'potential benefit subsidy implications', as this might mean either overpayment or underpayment. She suggested Member training in this area.

The Director of Central Services said this was a complex area for staff, and accuracy checks were intended to identify the processes where further training was needed.

PS46

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENTS 2008/09 AND 2009/10

Members considered the report of the Audit Manager, which set out a timetable for review and monitoring of the significant control and governance issues identified in the 2008/09 Annual Governance Statement and for preparation of the 2009/10 Statement. Two outstanding issues relating to Financial Regulations and Use of Resources had been implemented, as set out in the appendix to the report. The Partnership Working issue was to be implemented by 31 March 2010.

The Chairman asked for a verbal indication of any areas of governance which officers or Members felt might not achieve Level 3 next year. The Chief Executive said that regarding some areas it was more realistic to think that Level 3 might be achievable the year after.

The Chairman referred to asset management, as an outstanding issue. The Director of Central Services said the partnership with Essex County Council was up and running, and that the Council was aiming to improve from a Level 1 this year. The Chairman asked for an agenda item to be prepared for the next meeting on the three areas of asset management, procurement and risk management.

Having been invited to comment, the District Auditor said expectations should be realistic, with the first priority to move up from a Level 1 in particular areas. Level 3 was very challenging, and at this point it would be mathematically unrealistic to try to attain it in some areas. He advised the Council should consolidate and improve its Level 2 areas, and then aspire to Level 3.

PS47

INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT

Members considered the report of the Audit Manager on internal audit work and noted the recommendations.

Brief discussion took place around waste collection, regarding the use of identifying tape for cardboard to be collected. In reply to a question regarding monitoring of diesel usage, the Audit Manager said officers were to meet with the Director of Operations to discuss appropriate measures.

With reference to the appendix setting out recommendations not implemented at 31 October 2009, the Chairman asked officers to identify those where a timely conclusion was unlikely. The Audit Manager said she was satisfied that all recommendations were being progressed. She would be meeting the Chief Finance Officer tomorrow to discuss forthcoming internal audits and any outstanding recommendations assigned to him.

The Chairman asked that future internal audit reports highlight any recommendations where the Audit Manager considered there was 'no end in sight', to assist Members.

PS48

INTERNAL AUDIT REVIEW OF HOUSING RESPONSIVE MAINTENANCE

The Committee considered the report of the Audit Manager, which was prepared as a 'spot check', in accordance with Members' request for random checks to be carried out on one audit at each meeting.

Regarding replacement of four vans, the Audit Manager confirmed that the vehicles had been ordered.

The Chairman said the progress shown in this report was very satisfying.

PS49

RISK MANAGEMENT

Members considered the report of the Chief Executive, which gave an update on the planned approach to a review of risk management.

The conclusion provided by Councillor Yarwood was noted, that the proposed approach was achievable within a very short timescale. The Head of Community Engagement asked for his thanks to be minuted for Councillor Yarwood's invaluable input to date.

The Chief Executive said performance against the steps outlined in the report would be reviewed at the next meeting.

The meeting ended at 8.50 pm.