

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - VALUE FOR MONEY &
CUSTOMER SERVICE - 30 OCTOBER 2017

(To be read in conjunction with the Agenda for the Meeting)

Present

Cllr Mike Band (Vice Chairman)
Cllr Nicholas Holder
Cllr Stephen Mulliner

Cllr Nabeel Nasir
Cllr Jeanette Stennett
Cllr Stewart Stennett

Cllr Jerry Hyman (Substitute)

Apologies

Cllr John Williamson, Cllr Peter Martin and Cllr Libby Piper

Also Present

Councillor Andrew Bolton was present and spoke on Item 5, Universal Credit Update.
Councillor John Gray was also present.

23. MINUTES (Agenda item 1.)

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 September were confirmed as a correct record and signed subject to the following amendment:

Cllr Holder requested that in the penultimate paragraph of minute item 21 the words 'Town Councils' be changed to 'Town and Parish Councils'.

24. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTES (Agenda item 2.)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors John Williamson, Peter Martin and Libby Piper. Cllr Jerry Hyman attended as a substitute.

25. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Agenda item 3.)

There were no declarations of interests in connection with items on the agenda.

26. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Agenda item 4.)

There were none.

27. UNIVERSAL CREDIT UPDATE (Agenda item 5.)

The Committee received an update on the roll-out of Universal Credit, which would be going live for all new working age applicants from July 2018. Members' main concerns related to how the roll-out would impact on residents, as well as how Waverley would support the transition in terms of staffing and budgets.

The committee was concerned about the potential delay under the new system between a claimant applying and their benefit being paid to them as this had recently been highlighted in the press. Officers advised that there were provisions in

place to assist residents facing hardship, such as being able to request a 50% payment in advance. Members felt that these options needed to be well publicised as they didn't want residents to miss out due to being unaware.

It was noted that under the current plans, only new claimants would go onto Universal Credit and Cllr Mulliner queried when existing claimants would be transferred over. Officers responded that currently there was no date set for this, and that the government still had not set out their plans for pension age claimants. Nevertheless, Graeme Clark, Strategic Director – Finance and Resources, assured members that the council would do all it could to provide transitional support to those who needed it.

There was also some concern about the financial inclusion aspect of Universal Credit, which meant that claimants would have responsibility for paying their own rent rather than it being paid directly to their landlord. This could potentially lead to private landlords being less willing to accept benefit claimants as tenants. Members felt that this new financial responsibility could be difficult for some residents to manage, and that the council needed to support people to prevent them slipping into debt. Graeme Clark responded that the council was monitoring the situation both in terms of itself as a landlord and also to support residents in the private rental sector. The Committee was pleased to hear that the Housing Rents Team and Don't Lose Your Home Officer were preparing to assist residents through the transition, and Members emphasised that the council should promote the message that it is here to help people.

The Committee also noted that the Council was currently in receipt of a grant from DWP to administer housing benefit, and that this would be reduced as more claims were made under Universal Credit. Members acknowledged that the Benefits Team would still endeavour to support residents through the transition, and asked for details of the budget planning that had been done in relation to the ongoing service delivery. Peter Vickers, Head of Finance, agreed to provide this at a future meeting and also informed Members that the Benefits Team had recently undergone a 'systems thinking' review, making the team more flexible and responsive to changes.

The Committee therefore asked officers to bring a report to the next meeting which would clearly set out the measures that Waverley would be putting in place to support residents applying for Universal Credit, as well as a financial model showing how the budget would be managed through the transition period.

28. STRATEGIC REVIEW UPDATE (Agenda item 6.)

The Committee received an update on the progress that had been made with implementing the Strategic Review Action Plan. Members noted that the actions were divided into two main areas; 'Strategic Vision' and 'How the Council Works'. Some good work had been done in relation to how the Council works, but the Committee felt that the strategic direction was still not clear.

Some Members found the Consultants' report confusing and felt that it didn't provide sufficient direction or practical implementation ideas. Additionally, Members felt that several of the actions identified were things that would have been done anyway by the Council. Graeme Clark responded that some of the findings may not

have been directly tailored to a two-tier system, but that the report had given officers a good steer as to what needed to be done.

Members felt that the Council needed to be clear about which direction it would be taking, whether this be through being more commercially focused, developing more partnership working, or generating savings through reducing discretionary services. The Committee agreed that radical changes would be needed in order to address the challenging financial situation facing Waverley. However Cllr Stewart Stennett suggested keeping areas where the Council had more expertise and was wary of relying too heavily on property investment for the solution. Officers reported that the Executive was currently working on its strategic vision, and that this would be presented to Overview and Scrutiny members at a series of workshops in November.

Cllr Mulliner suggested looking at other Councils in similar situations to see if any learning could be gained. Graeme Clark responded that he had looked both within Surrey, and outside to East Hampshire and Chichester so see what approaches were being taken and how this might add value to Waverley.

Some members had further queries relating to some of the specific actions, and Louise Norie, Corporate Policy Manager, invited members to contact her after the meeting with any additional questions.

The Committee concluded that it was disappointing that the strategic proposals were not more developed at this stage, but looked forward to seeing the Executive's proposals in due course. Members also asked for clear timeframes for when the strategic vision would be in place and all actions would be implemented.

29. BUDGET STRATEGY WORKING GROUP PROPOSAL (Agenda item 9.)

Peter Vickers introduced a report outlining proposals to establish a working group to assist with longer term budget issues. He acknowledged that there was no obvious answer to the financial issues facing the Council, and invited members to use their expertise to help Waverley identify the preferred way forward.

Cllr Mulliner asked whether any calculations had been done to estimate the amount of savings that could be delivered by cutting discretionary services. Officers responded that it would be difficult to calculate this, as many statutory and discretionary services were intertwined and the same members of staff often delivered both types of service. Nevertheless, there was a simplistic breakdown of services contained within the budget book and this could be accessed online.

The Committee also discussed the HRA, and Graeme Clark explained that there was a statutory ring fence around this, meaning that it couldn't be used to cross-subsidise the General Fund. The Council continued to build new homes, but the 1% rent cut imposed by government had had a significant impact on the 30 year business plan. Cllr Jeanette Stennett asked how many new homes the council had built; officers didn't have the specific numbers to hand but agreed to circulate these after the meeting.

Members agreed in principle to the establishment of a budget strategy working group. However, as previously noted, the Committee felt that it was important to have sight of the bigger picture, and needed know the strategic direction of the

Council before looking at the budget in more detail. This would enable Overview and Scrutiny to add value by focusing on areas that aligned with strategic priorities, whether this be income generation or efficiencies and savings.

The Committee therefore asked officers to identify specific topics that could be presented to Overview and Scrutiny for further investigation in the context of an overall strategy.

30. CUSTOMER SERVICES REVIEW (Agenda item 7.)

The Committee received an update on the progress that had been made with the customer services review since the last update to Corporate O&S in November 2016. David Allum, Head of Customer and Corporate Services, explained that the ongoing work, led by an organisation-wide officer group covered four key areas.

The first area was the channel shift programme, the aim of which was to move transactional functions to more automated services; a pilot would be taking place in housing. Officers explained that a reduction in face-to-face and telephone contacts would generate savings for the Council, but that these routes would still remain available to those who needed them.

The second was a customer service pilot also taking place in housing, the aim of which was to collect data in order to assess the viability of amalgamating individual contact teams within the service.

The third area related to customer service system technology, the aim of which was to improve the management and effectiveness of customer call groups, such as displaying real time data in terms of caller numbers and waiting times.

The final area covered by the review was the corporate infrastructure, which would involve refreshing all relevant strategies, policies and service standards.

Cllr Holder commented that many organisations used an automated telephone system where callers would select the numbered button on their phone that corresponded with the service they wished to speak to. Officers responded that due to the wide number of services delivered by the Council, the list of options would be very long. However they noted that around 80% of calls were directed to certain key services, so there was the potential to refine the list, and then have an 'other' option to speak to the switchboard if necessary.

The Committee was generally pleased with the progress of the review, and the potential for savings of £75,000 - £125,000pa to be generated once all of the proposals had been implemented over the next 18 months. However members also emphasised the importance of taking into account the demographics of Waverley, and ensuring that the older, and less IT literate residents of the Borough still had access to key services.

31. BUDGET REVIEW (Agenda item 8.)

The Committee received a document that provided details of the budget spend and income relating to the service areas falling within the remit of Value for Money and Customer Service. Members noted that discussion on this item had been

incorporated into the Budget Strategy Working Group Proposal item above and noted the figures contained in the report for information.

32. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda item 10.)

Alex Sargeson, Scrutiny Policy Officer, explained that format of the work programme had been amended to make it more user-friendly. It now presented the items for consideration in chronological order although Alex added that the anticipated committee date was flexible.

The Committee felt that some of the proposed dates may be optimistic, and emphasised the importance of not rushing these pieces of work. As agreed during the meeting, items coming to the January meeting would include an update on Waverley's plans and budget for supporting the roll-out of Universal Credit; details of specific topics that could be considered by a Budget Strategy Working Group; as well as updates from the Property Company and Capital Expenditure Working Groups.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and concluded at 8.49 pm

Chairman