

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
PERFORMANCE, AUDIT AND REVIEW COMMITTEE

MINUTES

**Meeting held at the Council Offices,
Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City, on Thursday 12 October 2006 at 7.30 p.m.**

PRESENT: *Councillors: J. Cunningham (Chairman), D. Miller (Vice-Chairman),
Monica Bloxham, David Levett, Bernard Lovewell, L. McNamara,
Deepak Sangha, Derek Sheard and Mrs C.P.A. Strong.*

IN ATTENDANCE: *Chief Executive, Head of Strategy and Support Services,
Head of Financial Services, Head of Planning and Building Control,
Head of Policy, Partnerships and Performance,
Performance Manager and
Member and Committee Services Officer.*

52. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

53. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors: Lawrence Oliver, Diane Proudlove, A.F. Hunter, Marilyn Kirkland and M.E. Weeks and the Strategic Director for Customer Services.

54. MINUTES – 7 SEPTEMBER 2006

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 7 September 2006 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chairman.

Minute 48 – LP 124 – MONITORING OF APPRAISALS

The Chairman advised Members that it had been decided to provide an Information Note (rather than a report) which would provide the most up to date information on the receipt of completed staff appraisals from managers within NHDC.

The Committee noted the data provided in the Information Note, the note had only been provided to PARC on the day of the meeting and it was evident that the data was not up to date. Concern was expressed at the lack of clarity in the presentation of the data presented on page 2 specific to managers, when the object of the request made at the meeting of PARC on 7 September had been advice on the completion of outstanding appraisals. The Chairman calculated that 53 appraisals had yet to be delivered to Human Resources which equated to 12 per cent of the total staff complement. Members were unanimous in their disappointment at this shortfall and as staff were considered to be one of the most important assets to any organisation it was clear that staff had been let down by the lack of completion of appraisals, which then had a detrimental effect on the identification of training and development. It was also considered that this shortfall of 53 was unacceptable considering the original deadline had been 31 July 2006 and at 12 October 2006 there were still outstanding appraisals. Whilst the Committee accepted that some employees might be reluctant to 'sign off' an appraisal and long term absence would have an affect on 100 per cent completion there should be no reason why this task could not have been completed much sooner.

RESOLVED: That the Chief Executive be requested to take whatever action is necessary in conjunction with the Head of Human Resources and Managers to ensure 100 per cent completion of staff appraisals as soon as possible and that PARC Members be apprised of completion before the date of the next meeting of PARC to be held on 7 December 2006.

55. SUBSTITUTION OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The Chairman confirmed that there were no substitutions.

56. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP DIRECTIONS

No Declarations of Interest had been made.

No Party Whip directions had been made.

57. MONITORING REPORT FOR THE CORPORATE PLAN – HALF YEAR

The Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships (HPPP) confirmed that this was the first monitoring report for the current financial year and that the Corporate Plan would now be placed on a quarterly monitoring programme.

The (HPPP) reminded the Committee that the NHDC Corporate Plan for the period 2005-2015 had been produced in March 2005 and referred the Committee to Appendix A for details of the agreed plan and the individual actions for a given service area to support the Corporate Plan. The HPPP also advised that the short term actions listed at Appendix A were primarily short term and covered the current 2006 – 2007 financial year.

Whilst the Corporate Plan had set actions and objectives there had been the opportunity to introduce a new action e.g. The review of CCTV effectiveness which was an outcome of the Streetscene Fundamental Service Review. Also the Committee noted that the results of the District Wide Survey would be an important measure of the perception of the Council by the general public leading to an appreciation of the impact of the long term actions within the Corporate Plan.

The HPPP confirmed that the Corporate Plan sub – group had met on four occasions (last on 10 October) to discuss the development and implementation of service plans for each area which underpinned the overall action plans for the Corporate Plan. The sub group agreed that the terminology of actions and objectives should be retained with the vision and mission to be refreshed to promote the sense of North Herts as a distinct place.

The sub-group also agreed that the performance measurement of the plan had to be relevant and capture the impact of the actions undertaken so far. The HPPP confirmed that the Performance Team would report on new measures of success as well as new priorities and actions for the Corporate Plan up to 2015.

The Committee proceeded to review the six Strategic Objectives as set out at Appendix A and the HPPP confirmed that the Customer Service Centre had been formally opened by the Chairman, Councillor Mrs C.P.A. Strong on 6 October 2006. Amongst suggestions made by Members was a request for the number of dwellings built under the affordable housing objective to be listed, that the 3Cs process be promoted more in order to assess user satisfaction and complete user 'happiness' records. Comment was made as to the composition of the Hitchin Youth Council and did those attending represent the youth in Hitchin and North Herts and specifically that success or lack of success of the Youth Council could reflect on this authority.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the progress to date on the Corporate Plan actions for 2006-2007 be noted.
- (2) That the Head of Policy, Partnerships and Performance be requested to present the revised Corporate Plan to the next meeting of PARC to be held on 7 December 2006.

REASON FOR DECISIONS

The recommendations had been made in accordance with the declared policy of North Hertfordshire District Council.

58. NEW COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

The Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships (HPPP) reminded the Committee that in August 2006 the Audit Commission had published a new CPA framework that was specific to District Councils and intended to: continue to encourage improvement; developed in keeping with the perspective of service users; provide value for money; be target risk based and be delivered in partnership with others.

The HPPP referred the Committee to Appendix B which gave details of the Audit Commission analysis of NHDC service performance information at August 2006. The report concluded that 32 per cent of performance indicators were in the best quartile and that 50 per cent of NHDC indicators had improved in the period 2002 to 2004 with unaudited figures of 67 per cent of indicators improved since 2002-2003.

The HPPP advised the Committee that from 2006 District Councils would not be required to undertake corporate assessment at regular intervals. Re-assessment would take place if performance was falling significantly or if performance had improved dramatically and would be a decision for the local authority to take with the agreement of their Relationship Manager from the Audit Commission. Should there be re-assessment then the corporate assessment would include: five corporate themes (was 10); or assessment undertaken by a Council peer and a web based stakeholder survey. The Committee noted that a peer challenge would be undertaken on the 'harder test' process.

The HPPP recommended to the Committee that following approval by CMT that in order to prepare for a CPA re-assessment or any other inspection an internal officer 'improvement' working group should be set up and chaired by a senior manager with nominees from each directorate. The Committee welcomed this proposal and that the aims of the group would *inter alia* be the promotion of a performance and continuous improvement culture in NHDC. The HPPP proposed and the Committee agreed that a peer challenge was the most appropriate method of corporate review for NHDC and confirmed that The Improvement Group would play an important part in preparing for a Corporate peer challenge early in the next Civic Year.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the contents of the new Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework, including timings and requirements got re-assessment be noted;
- (2) That the performance improvement achieved to date following the outcomes of the first Comprehensive Performance Assessment be noted;
- (3) That the Head of Policy, Partnerships and Performance be requested to present the revised Corporate Plan to the next meeting of PARC to be held on 7 December 2006;
- (4) That the proposal to establish an Officer Improvement Group within NHDC in order to prepare for the next round of Comprehensive Performance Assessment as well as other inspections, accreditation and continuous improvement opportunities be agreed.

REASON FOR DECISIONS:

The recommendations had been made in accordance with the declared policy of North Hertfordshire District Council.

59. DEVELOPMENT OF A LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT FOR HERTFORDSHIRE – PROGRESS UPDATE

The Head of Policy, Partnerships and Performance (HPPP) provided a brief summary of the background to Local Area Agreements, stretch targets, pump priming money, reward grant funding and advised the Committee that approximately 50 per cent of the reward grant would be used to sustain the four main target 'blocks' with the remaining 50 per cent awarded equally to the ten Local Strategic Partnerships which could provide up to £1.5M for each LSP.

The HPPP confirmed that applications for grant by this authority must follow clear lines of audit and accountability and should be endorsed by the LSP before presentation to PARC and then to Cabinet and vice versa to ensure the retention of democratic accountability. The HPPP reminded the Committee that should a stretch target not be achieved up to a minimum of 60 per cent then the grant for that specific target would not be secured, and that on a target of 61 per cent or more the grant would be paid on a pro rata percentage. The Committee noted that community safety funding to each local authority would be dependent on each bid meeting one of the Local Area Agreement community safety targets. As a follow up to the information on grants the HPPP confirmed that it was not essential or mandatory for a local authority to commit to a specific target and accordingly officers were investigating areas where targets would meet and match the NHDC corporate and partnership objectives. The HPPP advised the Committee that the Performance Team would review all targets and that the Communication Strategy was key element in a funding application for the LSP.

The HPPP referred the Committee to Appendices A, B and C which detailed Stretch Targets (and comments regarding NHDC participation), Self Assessment of the Audit Commission Inspection and the Local Area Agreement bulletin update respectively. The HPPP identified Appendix C as a good example of the improvements made to advise key partners of progress where this first bulletin would ensure communications are improved across Hertfordshire.

During the discussion on the LSP, Members questioned the value of LSP to this authority, and whether the targets were realistic as the numbers quoted were small and more importantly stressed that no action should be taken if a grant was for a set scheme and did not have continued financial support beyond the end of any grant application. Any targets which could have long term implications in terms of corporate funding must be considered through the usual Service and Financial Planning process by Cabinet.

In conclusion the HPPP advised that the Scrutiny Committee had requested that the monitoring of performance of the Hertfordshire LAA should be through PARC on a six monthly basis as the overall performance would be monitored through the 'block' leads at County level.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the progress to date on the Local Area Agreement for Hertfordshire be noted;
- (2) That the development of targets identified as a contribution by this authority be noted;
- (3) That the outcome of the self-assessment carried out by the Hertfordshire Local Area Agreement group and the outlined areas for development in the future be noted;
- (4) That the advice made at Paragraph 5 concerning the governance of Local Strategic Partnership and potential liability be noted;

- (5) That the Head of Policy, Partnerships and Performance be requested to present the next updating report on the Local Area Agreement for Hertfordshire to the meeting of PARC to be held on 19 April 2006.

REASONS FOR DECISIONS

To provide PARC with the assurance that this authority will only develop targets which it believes can be delivered against and as a benefit to this authority and not to its cost.

60. HIGH LEVEL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – JULY AND AUGUST 2006

The Head of Policy, Partnerships and Performance advised the Committee that at the end of August 2006 there were 12 indicators at 'green', 3 indicators at 'amber' and 4 at 'red'. The Committee noted that currently there were no rescue recovery plans for any performance indicator.

Two indicators had moved from amber to red i.e. BV 12 Sickness and BV170b Museum visits in person, with all other indicators remaining at the same status during this reporting period.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the performance information for the period July 2006 to August 2006 be noted;
- (2) That the areas of under-achievement as well as good performance be noted;

REASON FOR DECISION:

The recommendations contained in the report had been made in accordance with the declared policy of North Hertfordshire District Council.

61. REVENUES AND BENEFITS: BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATOR – 79b (i), (ii) and (iii)

The Head of Financial Services (HFS) reminded the Committee that no reporting on this Best Value Performance Indicator had been possible due to problems with the appropriate software to compile these indicators, and that PARC had requested at its meeting held on 7 September 2006 (Minute 47 (5) refers) an updating report to be presented at this meeting.

The HFS confirmed that the supplier was progressing work to remedy the faults concerning the reporting suite for the three indicators and the subsequent completion of two Government returns: STATS 124 and 124A. The HFS confirmed that the supplier would be reporting back to NHDC via 'Full Release of Software' in the week beginning 18 December 2006. The HFS advised the Committee that despite these severe delays there had not been any increase in complaints from benefit claimants.

The Committee expressed their concern at the very long delays in achieving a solution to this software problem and whether any compensation could be obtained from Northgate. Accordingly the Committee considered that it would be appropriate for the Chief Executive to approach the Chief Executive at Northgate with the concerns of PARC.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the contents of the report be noted;
- (2) That the Chief Executive be requested to write to the Chief Executive of the main software supplier Northgate with the concerns of this authority strongly expressed as to the lack of and inadequacies with software provision and enter into negotiations for compensation;
- (3) That the Chief Executive be requested to advise PARC Members of the outcome of his communication with Northgate before the next meeting of PARC on 7 December 2006.

REASON FOR DECISIONS:

To ensure that PARC are regularly informed of measures taken to meet the targets of Best Value Performance Indicator BV 79b (i), (ii) and (iii) Housing Benefit Overpayments.

62. PLANNING AND BUILDING CONTROL: BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATOR 109 a, b and c - UPDATE

The Head of Planning and Building Control (HPBC) advised the Committee that following the concern expressed in 2002-2003 and to a lesser extent in 2003-2004 there had been significant improvements to the performance of the Planning Control Service which now met and exceeded the requirements of this BVPI 109. The HPBC reminded the Committee that HNDC had not been designated as a Standards Authority for 2006-2007 and on present performance the targets would be met or exceed for 2006-2007.

Despite these steady improvements two cases of long term absence due to sickness, problems in arranging maternity cover, staff reduction and an overall increase of 4 per cent in applications had resulted in a reduction in the overall performance after the recovery after 2002-2003. The Committee noted that the measures taken to date – including the recruitment of two Planning Officers would meet the targets for BVPI 109 as amplified in the graph presented at Paragraph 4.5. The Committee were pleased to receive confirmation that there had been significant improvements to the booking in of planning applications, all applications were logged within 2-3 days of receipt which included the scanning and uploading of all documents.

The HPBC advised the Committee that BV109a stood at 68 per cent, BV109b at 65 per cent and BV109 at 82 per cent as identified in the graph at Paragraph 4.5.

The HPBC was pleased to report that the Council's success rate at appeal had increased with only 14 per cent of appeals allowed against the national average of approximately 35 per cent allowed, and that the DCLG had recently commended the NHDC planning control department on its work as a Standards Authority.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the updating information in the report be noted;
- (2) That the proposed measures to maintain and improve performance related to budget restraints as a key feature in service delivery be agreed.

REASON FOR DECISIONS:

To ensure that the Best Value Performance for BV 109 meets or exceeds the national targets as set out in Public Sector Agreement 5.

The meeting closed at 9.03 p.m.

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Chairman