



Shetland Islands Council

MINUTE

A & B

Scrutiny Committee
Council Chamber, Town Hall, Lerwick
Tuesday 12 September 2006 at 10.30 a.m.

Present:

J P Nicolson R G Feather
L G Groat I J Hawkins
T W Stove

Apologies

B Cheyne F B Grains
F A Robertson

In attendance (Officers):

W Shannon, Assistant Chief Executive
J R Smith, Head of Organisational Development
P Peterson, Performance Management Co-ordinator
A Cogle, Service Manager – Administration

Circular

The circular calling the meeting was held as read.

Mr Nicolson welcomed representatives from Audit Scotland to the meeting.

Minute

The minute of meeting held on 21 June 2006, was confirmed.

15/06	<p><u>Statutory Performance Indicators and Public Performance Reporting arrangements for 2005/06</u></p> <p>The Committee considered a report by the Head of Organisational Development (Appendix 1).</p> <p>Members discussed in detail variations in performance outturns.</p> <p>Members noted the considerable improvement in the figures relating to Benefits Administration and noted also that Sickness Absence rates among Craft Operatives were remaining at a comparatively high level and this might need to be explored further.</p> <p>During discussions, Members requested that the Head of Organisational Development seek further information on the following:</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate Management - Council Tax: Reference was made to the significant variation in the figures from previous years in relation to collection costs. Explanation for these variations to be sought. • Roads and Lighting: Members noted that the absence of figures for previous years was not helpful in terms of monitoring improvement or otherwise. Reasons for failures to report (FTR) to be sought. • Waste Management: Presumption that increased costs due to landfill costs, but reasons for significant variations to be sought, including an explanation for the increase in complaints. • Adult Social Work – Staff Qualifications: Information to be sought as to the cause for the fall in percentage of qualified staff, and how this compares with other Councils. • Housing – Response Repairs: Information to be sought regarding the fall in performance – to be discussed at meetings with Housing Management. <p>Members agreed that the statutory reporting method, whilst necessary, was not easily understood. It was noted that Services were being encouraged to develop local performance indicators within Service Plans as these would be more relevant to the Council.</p> <p>The Committee also agreed that the calendar issued last year was well received by the Public, and Members supported the proposal to issue another calendar later this year.</p> <p>Members agreed that a follow-up visit with the new Head of Planning and his staff should be arranged.</p>
16/06	<p><u>Gender Balance Investigation</u></p> <p>The Committee considered a report by the Head of Organisational Development (Appendix 2). Members noted that this was a second stage report which provided an overview of the data available and proposed a series of interviews with relevant officers and Members, which would inform a more detailed report for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee with a view to presenting recommendations or advice to the Council.</p> <p>Mr J P Nicolson referred to paragraph 5.3 of the report, and asked whether dissatisfaction with the level of political support was simply by Members not agreeing with policy recommendations, or how the disagreement was being expressed. Mr Nicolson also asked what exit opportunities had existed, as referred to in paragraphs 5.4 and 5.5.</p> <p>The Head of Organisational Development explained that exit opportunities were provided by officers who were retiring or moving on to other jobs, and the main threads coming from the interviews were to do with relationships.</p>

The issues which arose included the tasks that sometimes were given to senior officers to evaluate particular policy options, and officers had to recommend which of those options were the most desirable. Officers assumed a particular responsibility of doing that and bringing the recommendations to politicians. Whilst it was recognised that managers have to provide objective evaluations, and provide advice to politicians, it was noted that they can also become exposed as being thought to be making the political decisions, particularly on issues which were regarded as controversial. In these cases, the officers felt that whilst Councillors had instigated a set of changes to service delivery or policy, when it came to the political debate, officers felt that they were not being backed up. The Head of Organisational Development added that, on a similar point, officers were of the view that when straight and simple political priorities are applied, they are easier to follow, rather than a complex set of choices. In the absence of such priorities, officers felt that they were appearing to give political leadership, which was not intended.

Mrs I J Hawkins said that whilst these comments were noted, it had to be realised that sometimes officers had to make recommendations which would not always be supported when it came to debate, and that was how democracy worked.

Mrs Hawkins went on to ask how many staff were interviewed. The Head of Organisational Development advised that 4 or 5 exit interviews were held, and a similar number of existing senior staff, and they included male and female participants. In response to further questions, the Head of Organisational Development advised that the indicators being used had senior teaching staff removed, as such staff were predominantly female, as well as removing senior marine staff, which were predominantly male, and this made it easier to judge against comparative figures from other local authorities.

Mr L G Groat suggested that part of the problem lay with the changes in the decision making structure, and said that the introduction of a executive structure, removed some of the discussion and decision making away from the majority of Members.

Mr J P Nicolson referred to paragraphs 5.11 and 5.12, and asked whether officers had any suggestions as to how to improve dialogue and professional relationships. Mr Nicolson said that there had to be an expectation that professional people would help with that process.

The Head of Organisational Development said that it appeared that officers and Members had similar themes which centred around a general issue regarding cultural relationships, and the challenges of being in a senior position within the Council. He agreed that responsibility for leadership had to be shared, but also recognising that the role of a Councillor had changed over time, and was becoming more demanding and time-consuming. The Head of Organisational Development said that improvements were being applied in this area, assisted by the introduction of regular and responsive performance management communication methods, and a combination of

	<p>issues, including decision making structures, would ensure development of the effectiveness and efficiency of the Council</p> <p>Mr Nicolson reiterated that it was important that to reach a more professional relationship demanded, in his view, an input from senior management. The Head of Organisational Development said that this was being developed, and would be included as part of the proposals for a substantial induction and development programme for Councillors.</p> <p>Mr L G Groat welcomed this, emphasising the important role that senior management had at the start of a new Council, and forming professional relationships with Members at an early stage. The Assistant Chief Executive agreed to take this matter forward to the Executive Management Team to progress.</p> <p>Mrs I J Hawkins said that a visit to departments would be useful for new Councillors, as well as visits to developments which the Council was involved in. Mr R G Feather agreed, adding that he had found his time on the Council very difficult in terms of understanding and support, especially from other Members.</p> <p>Mr L G Groat said that one of the problems, in his view, was the amount of responsibility being delegated to officers. He said that fewer decision were being made in the Chamber, and he felt that delegation to officers had gone too far, to the extent that it was inevitable that people felt officers were taking the decisions, and it was the relationships between paid officers and Members that was suffering because of it.</p> <p>The Committee agreed that the investigation proceed to the next stage, including the list of interviews contained in paragraph 8.1.</p>
17/06	<p><u>Housing Voids Investigation</u></p> <p>The Committee considered a report by the Head of Organisational Development (Appendix 3). Members noted that this was a second stage report which provided an overview of the data available and proposed a series of interviews with relevant officers and Members, which would inform a more detailed report for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee with a view to presenting recommendations or advice to the Council.</p> <p>Mrs I J Hawkins referred to the “long term” voids, and said that 257 days to re-let property was a long time. She also said that these figures showed how the statutory performance information was gathered, and perhaps this needed to be addressed. Mrs Hawkins referred also to paragraph 7.7, and expressed concern at the length of time that properties were remaining empty, and queried whether these properties were being maintained and heated during those periods. Mrs Hawkins suggested that consideration should be given to choice based letting, such as that operated by Hjaltland Housing Association, in an effort to improve the timescale for letting. She added that whilst it was noted that a number of reviews were underway or planned, with regard to</p>

allocations and housing management areas, these perhaps needed to move forward more quickly in order to ensure that the Council could provide context to the performance figures due to be published in January 2007.

The Performance Management Co-Ordinator said that the planned timetable for the review of policies was mainly due to staffing resources. He said that there was a requirement to have the new Voids Management Policy in place by April, and it took officer time to devote to these matters.

Regarding maintenance and heating of void housing, the Performance Management Co-ordinator said that he would follow up on this matter with the Housing management team. He added that it was recognised that the figures for re-letting were being swayed by the long term voids. He pointed out that owing to the Council's statutory duty to deal with homelessness, a lot of effort was being made to re-let temporary accommodation - this had resulted in 63% of temporary housing being let within 4 weeks.

The Head of Organisational Development said that these statutory figures were another example of the importance of providing local indicators. He advised that the questions and comments from the Committee would be passed on to the Housing management team, before they provided a response at interviews.

Mr T W Stove referred to Table 4, and the reasons that some were refusing housing offers. He suggested that some consideration should be given to regularly reviewing the waiting list. Mr Stove agreed that lettings should be made even if planned refurbishment was due.

The Committee noted that a review of the Allocations Policy was underway, and consideration was being given to a choice-based lettings system. However, it was also noted that the Council had a statutory duty to be inclusive, and that not all prospective tenants would be aware of the advertising in the local paper.

Mr L G Groat said that Housing Services' staff did an excellent job. He said that the only issue seemed to be with the void housing figures, and suggested that an improvement to the turnaround times for housing repairs be considered. The Committee agreed that this would be a further issue to discuss with the Housing management team.

Mr R G Feather said that some consideration should also be given to selling off those properties which were very long term voids, which were in areas where some young people were willing to buy. He cited the example of the North Roe school house.

The Committee noted the comments made, and agreed that these be taken forward to the Housing management team for consideration prior to interview with the Scrutiny Committee at a later date.

18/06	<u>Service Recognition Scheme</u> The Committee considered a discussion paper regarding the development of an Awards Scheme (Appendix 4). The Committee agreed that the scheme should be aimed at departments or services, rather than individuals. The Committee agreed that an employee/management team be formed to progress this matter, and that Mr T W Stove represent the Scrutiny Committee on the team.	
19/06	<u>Consultation Prior To and During DLO Contracts</u> Mr L G Groat intimated that he had asked for this item to be considered. He said that it related specifically to problems being caused where road works are being undertaken in areas, and in housing schemes in particular, where residents were not being consulted or advised in advance about the works. Mr Groat said that in some cases, residents were not being advised about restricted or no access to garages, driveways, etc, and this had caused considerable disruption and inconvenience. Mr Groat said that a system needed to be put in place whereby residents were told in advance about road works in housing schemes, how long the works were expected to continue for, and who to contact for advice or more information. The Head of Organisational Services agreed to follow up on this matter with management and report back to the Committee.	
20/06	<u>Scrutiny Committee Matters</u> Mr J P Nicolson concluded the meeting by asking that, if between now and the next meeting of the Committee, anyone had any issues which the Committee could look into further, that this be communicated either to himself, Mrs Hawkins, or to the Head of Organisational Development.	
The meeting concluded at 11.39 a.m.		
<hr/> J P Nicolson Chairperson		