

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 13 December 2012

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Les Marriott (Chair), Councillors Tony Ansell, Elizabeth Gowen, Phil Larratt, Lee Mason, Beverley Mennell, Nilesh Parekh, Suresh Patel and Winston Strachan

Witnesses Councillor John Caswell- Cabinet Member for the Environment
John Farrell – EMS Assets Director

Officers Steve Elsey Head of Public Protection
Tracy Tiff Scrutiny Officer
Joanne Birkin Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors Mick Ford, Danielle Stone and Matt Lynch– Councillor Winston Strachan substituting for Councillor Stone.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2012 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

3. DEPUTATIONS/PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES CONTRACT

There was an Independent report commissioned in May 2012 to undertake a detailed review of the contract for environmental services across the authority. The report had identified a number of key issues that needed addressing. It was also noted that the contract had achieved a number of goals. The contract is a joint one with Daventry District Council but the review focussed on Northampton only.

It was established that there was agreement on all sides regarding the report recommendations. All recommendations were accepted. Actions have now been agreed to address the issues and have been assigned to relevant operational groups for action.

The Committee were informed that there had been a change in the management structure at Enterprise- Dave Martin was now the new Regional Director and John Farrell, the EMS Assets Director, had been in post for a month.

The actions required fall broadly under two headings. One regarding operational mechanisms, the other relating to the supporting administrative paperwork.

Those administrative processes would not have any direct effect on the operational procedures.

The Committee were assured that all parties have been involved in the process so far and have committed to supplying the resources required to complete the changes.

The Action Plan shows that issues have been prioritised and are being worked through. The administrative actions regarding supplying documentation have been assigned to EMS and will be supplied by Enterprise working to a timetable to be agreed.

Protocols and communications systems are now in place throughout the management process. It is accepted that Enterprise has not been as robust as it should have been in monitoring the contract issues. Members queried why this did not seem to have happened as Enterprise run similar contracts in other places and should be aware of good practice. It was felt that because of the speed in which the contract was put in place and the need to quickly deliver savings then Enterprise lost sight of the fact that the way to actually deliver a good service is to put the correct structure in place.

Members emphasised that they had had many complaints from members of the public during the initial introduction of the contract. These had been divided into the following main areas of concern:-

Missed Bins
Grounds Maintenance
Staffing Profile

Missed Bins

The contract had missed performance targets considerably. This has improved. The biggest improvement being that even if a bin is missed on the initial collection round then virtually all of them are now being collected on the same day.

There has been a change to a six day working week- which now includes Saturdays. There has also been a reduction in the percentage of agency workers with the figure now being around 41% with the aim being around 20%. There is a pool of agency staff of around 10-15 people a day who are used as day labour on an as and when required basis.

Members were assured that when agency staff are used they are used in a team in conjunction with established members of staff. It was emphasised that operatives should be made aware of the need to treat bins and recycling boxes with care and that leaving them in inappropriate places is not acceptable. It was agreed that adequate training was required and an audit programme was being introduced setting out the timeframe within which supervisory staff should be required to visit every operative. £150,000 is also being invested in providing cameras on vehicles to record crew activity; this will be followed up and reviewed.

Members were particularly concerned that residents should not have to pay for replacement bins/boxes if theirs had been damaged by operatives. It was emphasised that

every week 750,000 container movements are made; it was inevitable that there would be some accidental damage but negligent damage would not be tolerated.

The use of black bags for refuse collection is considered inadequate, leading to more rubbish spillage and rubbish being strewn about by wild animals foraging. With regard to reducing the use of black bags some money has been identified to replace them with bins. £192,000 has been obtained from government for a three year programme, this will not be sufficient to introduce bins to all areas, and any allocation of new bins will need to be prioritised.

Recycling facilities for flats were also an area of concern. Members felt that as much recycling as possible should be encouraged. Members should also take every step available to them to encourage recycling.

Grounds Maintenance

There have been a number of problems highlighted with regard to grounds maintenance.

One of the key aspects to resolving these is communication. If people know when work is scheduled, even if they have to wait for it then they will be less likely to make a complaint. EMS and NBC are agreeing operational plans – commencing with the winter maintenance programme which could then be made available to the Contact Centre so that enquiries by the public could be dealt with quickly.

Members felt that it would be very useful to have details of the grounds maintenance programme so that they could advise people who contacted them about grounds maintenance issues when works were likely to be scheduled.

This year has been particularly difficult in terms of scheduling works such as grass cutting - with long spells of wet weather meaning that the grass has grown too long and then when it is cut the results are not good.

A new operational module for grass cutting will be implemented and in some areas frequencies have been adjusted upwards, in other downwards. There are not sufficient resources to deliver everything that the public would like to see but communicating schedules will help to manage expectations.

There have also been complaints about leaf clearance. Members felt that build up was both dangerous because of creating a slip hazard and also contributing to blocked drain gullies causing flooding problems.

Members felt that blocked gullies were a problem and asked whether street maintenance crews were reporting problems such as blocked gullies. Members also asked whether areas around sheltered housing complexes were given a priority regarding leaf clearance, whether there were agreed service levels setting out acceptable levels of leaf accumulation. They also raised questions about responsibility for tree and shrub maintenance.

Some concern was expressed over the frequency of street cleansing in certain areas; Members were urged to provide specific details to EMS of any areas that they felt had not been cleaned to a satisfactory level.

Members also queried levels of cleansing standards of the skate park, whilst it was appreciated that it was a relatively new facility and that usage levels had probably been higher than anticipated it was considered that the current cleansing statements were not acceptable.

It was agreed that it would be helpful if Members could be supplied with a list detailing where responsibilities lie for various aspects of highways maintenance, clarification of this would make it easier for them to advise the public when they raise concerns. In general Members felt that they needed clarification on who was responsible for several aspects of public open space maintenance and asked if there would be a contract manual available so that they could direct queries.

In response to a request for clarification of blocked gully clearance programmes the Committee was advised that there is work on going on the production of an operations manual. When this is complete service operatives should be reminded of how to report matters. Overall, it was felt that there should be more clarity on responsibilities between County and Borough Councils and better partnership working to achieve the best results.

There have been changes to the County Council gully cleansing contract frequency which is not based on a rota of frequency of visits but on an "outcome" based assessment. Members therefore felt that they needed to be made aware of what were acceptable cleansing levels, and considered that it would be more difficult to resource the service needs. There are output specifications which it was agreed needed to be more defined. EMS do want information on areas that members feel do not meet acceptable standards, and would prefer to be able to introduce a programmed approach rather than reacting to problems in a scattergun way.

Members also felt that the role of the Contact Centre was vital and asked if there were any issues regarding training. They were advised that there is a group looking at Contact Centre issues, but that it needed to be made clear what was being expected of the Contact Centre. Agreed operational manuals will improve the information which is available to the Contact Centres. Enterprise operates national call centres and the experience derived from them could be used to develop the process.

Members thanked Councillor John Caswell, John Farrell and Steve Elsey for their attendance at the meeting.

AGREED- that the Cabinet Member for Environment, Director of Environment and Culture and Head of Public Protection, NBC, and the Asset Director, EMS, be invited to attend a meeting of the Committee in six months' time so that progress on the Action Plan can be reviewed .

The meeting concluded at 7:45 pm