

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

TUESDAY, 26TH MARCH 2013 AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors P. Lammas (Chairman), R. A. Clarke (Vice-Chairman), C. J. Bloore, Dr. B. T. Cooper, Mrs. R. L. Dent, Mrs. J. M. L. A. Griffiths, R. J. Laight, P. M. McDonald, S. P. Shannon, L. J. Turner and C. R. Scurrall (Substitute)

Observers: Councillors M. A. Bullivant and Mrs. M. A. Sherrey JP

Officers: Ms. J. Pickering, Ms. A. De Warr, Mr. M. Hanwell, Mr. D. Taylor, Ms. J. Bayley and Ms. A. Scarce

100/12 **ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN**

RESOLVED that

- (a) Councillor P. Lammas was elected as Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Board for the remainder of the municipal year; and
- (b) Councillor R. A. Clarke was elected Vice-Chairman for the remainder of the municipal year.

101/12 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J. S. Brogan, K. A. Grant-Pearce and Mrs C. J. Spencer.

102/12 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS**

There were no declarations of interest or whipping arrangements.

103/12 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 25th February 2013 were submitted.

Concerns were expressed about the inclusion of the term “bedroom tax” in the minutes, which had been discussed by Members when considering an update on homelessness grants. Members commented that “spare room subsidy” was a more appropriate term and agreed that future references to this process in minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board should use this title.

RESOLVED that the minutes be approved as a correct record.

104/12 **TELEPHONY PROBLEMS - PRESENTATION FROM HEAD OF CUSTOMER SERVICES**

The Board received a presentation from the Head of Customer Service on the subject of the telephony problems that had been experienced by Bromsgrove District Council's Customer Service Centre in October 2012 (Appendix A).

Members also discussed the following issues in detail:

- The cause of the telephony problems which occurred in October 2012 had never been identified. The potential to identify the problem had been complicated by the fact that multiple organisations were involved with the system including: Bromsgrove District Council, Worcestershire County Council, British Telecom and Vodaphone.
- The Cisco Voice telephone system technology utilised by Bromsgrove District Council was 13 years old. This aging equipment, which underpinned the Worcestershire Hub Service in the district, would need to be updated at a future date.
- Officers had originally been advised that in the event of telephony problems, it would be relatively easy to achieve a switchover to a system utilised by another partner in the Worcestershire Hub. Unfortunately, the temporary switchover to Redditch Borough Council's system had not been straight forward and the Council had required assistance from British Telecom.
- The Council's risk management procedures and Business Continuity Plan had worked well and enabled Officers to continue to provide a service to local customers.
- Further problems with the telephony system had been experienced in March 2013. The Council had learned from previous difficulties and had resolved the problem quickly.

RESOLVED:

- (a) that Community Service Centre staff working at Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council be thanked for their response to the problems with the telephony system and for the service they provided during that period; and
- (b) that the report be noted.

105/12 **HARDSHIP FUND PAYMENTS AND CRITERIA - PRESENTATION**

The Board received a presentation from the Benefits Services Manager on the subject of the Essential Living Fund (Appendix B).

Members were advised that the Essential Living Fund had replaced community care grants and crisis loans. The fund had been allocated by the Government to the County Council in two-tier authority areas such as Worcestershire and was due to come into effect from 1st April 2013. However, delivery of the process in the district had been delegated to Bromsgrove District Council.

Local knowledge and accessibility would underpin management of the fund by the Council. As part of this process Officers would be taking into account applicants' eligibility to apply for other local grants and benefits when determining whether to provide support to an individual using the Essential Living Fund.

During the course of considering this item Members discussed the following points in detail:

- To ensure funding was used to provide the services required by recipients an emphasis would be placed on providing goods rather than cash.
- Members commented that there were various grants available at the local level. It would take time to identify all of these grants and to clarify the eligibility criteria.
- Young people leaving care were entitled to apply for a number of grants. This included a grant to purchase white goods (the Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Resources to clarify the age range for care leavers eligible to apply for this grant).
- A number of Parish Councils provided endowment and charitable funding to people in need. Members suggested that all Parish Councils in the district should be contacted to enable the Council to identify support available to residents at the parish level.
- The potential impact of the spare room subsidy on local families was discussed. Some of the residents affected by the subsidy would be entitled to access a hardship fund, though the support required would be provided on a case by case basis.
- Concerns were expressed with regard to the potential impact that the spare room subsidy could have on foster parents who cared for more than one child at a time. These carers were more likely to have multiple rooms for siblings from the same family to use (and which would not always be in use) and Members were keen to ensure that children remained with their siblings wherever possible. It was understood that there was 12 foster parents in Worcestershire which could be affected, but there was some uncertainty as to whether any were based in the District.
- The amount of funding allocated to the Essential Living Fund was equivalent to the level of funding that had been allocated to crisis loans in 2006 (£101,000). There was the potential that, if there was high demand for assistance using the fund, the budget would be spent before the end of the financial year. Officers would be monitoring expenditure and would report to Cabinet if it appeared likely that this would occur.
- The Board noted that the introduction of the fund would have implications for residents living in the district and Members would need to be familiar with the subject. A briefing on the Essential Living Fund for all Members of the Council was discussed and it was agreed this would be set up in the near future.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Resources introduced the report, which covered the period April – December 2012. The following salient points were discussed in detail:

- Expenditure by the end of December 2012 had exceeded expectations for the period. To address this Heads of Service had been tasked with ensuring that spending was reduced in the first three months of 2013.
- £2.032 million had been saved in spending on the Council's capital budget during the period.
- Funding on the public realm works in the town centre would be carried forward to 2013/14. It was understood that the work on the new branch of Sainsbury's supermarket, as part of the regeneration programme, would not begin until the Co-operative's lease on the building had ended.
- The delayed works to the cemetery toilets were discussed by Members and it was commented that procurement issues had impacted on delivery of the project. (The Head of Environmental Services to provide an explanation for the causes of this delay).
- Members noted that £200,000 had been carried forward by Community Services to 2013/14 for the affordable housing programme with BDHT. (The Head of Community Services to provide an update in respect of how this funding would be utilised.)
- Sponsorship income had been lower than anticipated at the beginning of the year. To address this situation Officers were aiming to identify further opportunities to obtain income through sponsorship and promotions. (The Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Resources to clarify the financial targets that had been set for income from sponsorship).
- There had been a shortfall in income for Planning and Regeneration Services, due to lower than anticipated revenue from planning applications and land charges. (The Head of Planning and Regeneration to produce a briefing note on this subject for the consideration of the Board).
- The Cabinet had recently approved £30,000 capital expenditure on the purchase of new computer equipment as well as the Treasury Management Strategy for the year.
- Capital receipts valued at £1.8 million would be carried forward to the new municipal year, though it was anticipated that in subsequent years there would be an overspend on the Capital Programme.

RESOLVED that the April – December (Quarter 3) Finance Monitoring Report 2012/13 be noted.

107/12 **WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

The Chairman invited Councillor Dr. B. T. Cooper, as the Council's representative on the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) to provide the Board with an update on the work of the Committee.

Members were advised that the latest meeting of HOSC had been cancelled. There had been an informal meeting, focusing on the local health watch. Whilst Councillor Dr. Cooper had been unable to attend this meeting the notes would be made available for Members' consideration once they had been finalised.

108/12 **QUARTER 3 WRITE OFF OF DEBTS REPORT**

The Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Resources presented the quarterly monitoring report concerning write offs in the third quarter of 2012/13 and highlighted the following salient points:

- £213,502 of Council tax had had to be included in write offs for the period 1st April 2012 – 31st December 2012. This included £7,861 classified as “statute barred”, which applied to outstanding debts that had not been paid after six years had lapsed, and £23,348 classified as “uneconomical to pursue”, which related to debts valued at a relatively small level.
- £400,731 of unpaid non-domestic rates, mainly due from companies that had ceased trading, had also been included in the Council's write offs.
- A significant portion of the unpaid debts from sundry debtors were unpaid car parking fines. When determining whether to write off these fines Officers considered the amount owed by an individual and how much it would cost the Council to recoup the debt.
- Part paid debts from sundry debtors, valued at £8,299.49 had been written off. These largely comprised funds that had been provided in the rent support scheme, which helped people into accommodation, which had not been paid back. To minimise the potential for similar problems in future years a review of the scheme would be carried out.
- Sundry debts of £633,895.79 had been due on 31st December 2012. The invoices for garden waste collections had been issued shortly before this date which had influenced the figures. The majority of customers had paid for their garden waste collection service by March 2013.
- Officers had been in contact with local companies to find out whether bespoke payment arrangements could be negotiated in order to enable those businesses to pay outstanding non-domestic rate arrears.
- The Council had written off £46,956.26 in overpaid housing benefit during the period. Members were advised that generally, overpayments had been made in cases where individuals had secured employment but had failed to declare their employment status immediately or in cases where the individual had moved away from the area.

An internal audit report that had recently been presented to the Audit Board on the subject of sundry debts was discussed by Members during consideration of this item. The report had contained a number of appendices, including confidential appendices, on the subject of those debts. The reasons why these appendices had been considered in confidential session were discussed and Members debated whether the entire report should have been made available for the Board's consideration alongside the quarterly update report.

Some Members believed the report contain pertinent information which could have facilitated scrutiny of the subject. However, the Board was advised that

the report had already been considered by the Council's Audit Board, which had responsibility for considering information on this subject. In this context Members were advised that the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was to consider the Council's policy in relation to the matter as well as the level of debts overall that had been written off by the Council.

RESOLVED that the report on the Quarterly Monitoring of Write Offs for the period 1st April – 31st December 2012 be noted.

109/12 **JOINT SCRUTINY PROPOSAL FROM WYCHAVON DISTRICT COUNCIL - WORCESTERSHIRE REGULATORY SERVICES**

The Board considered a proposal, which had been received from Wychavon District Council, to participate in a joint scrutiny review of Worcestershire Regulatory Services. Members were advised that all of the local authorities in Worcestershire, with the exception of Worcestershire County Council, had expressed an interest in participating in the review. Worcester City Council and Malvern Hills District Council had already endorsed the proposed terms of reference.

Members were advised that under the terms of the joint scrutiny protocol, which was endorsed by the Board in 2011, Bromsgrove District Council would be required to host the review because it was the host authority for the shared Worcestershire Regulatory Service.

The review was not due to start until the 2013/14 municipal year. For this reason appointments would not be made to the review until the first meeting of the Board in the new municipal year.

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the proposed terms of reference for the joint review of Worcestershire Regulatory Services be agreed;
- (b) that Bromsgrove District Council host the joint scrutiny investigation; and
- (c) that Bromsgrove District Council's representatives on the Joint Worcestershire Regulatory Services Task Group be agreed at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 17th June 2013.

110/12 **YOUTH PROVISION TASK GROUP**

The Chairman of the Youth Provision Task Group provided an update on the work of the Task Group and informed Members that there had been three meetings of the group since the previous meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board.

During this period the Task Group had visited the Stoke Parish Youth Club, which had been an interesting example of a community run project. The youth club had been established by a member of Stoke Parish Council and was successfully managed by the community, though they had received no professional assistance.

The Task Group had held a number of interviews. This had included an interview with pupils from Haybridge High School, about a survey they had undertaken at the school. Ms. TC Peppercorn, the Outreach Co-ordinator from the Artrix, and the Council's Head of Leisure and Cultural Services had also been interviewed.

The Group's next meeting was due to take place on 27th March. During this meeting Members would be interviewing the Operations Manager from the Basement Project and the Chairman of Bromsgrove Rugby Club. Members were also planning to review the evidence they had collected and progress that had been made in their review.

The Chairman explained that the Task Group's final report was due to be presented during the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting on 17th June and subsequently, if the group's recommendations were accepted, to Cabinet on 3rd July 2013. However, the Chairman commented that, whilst she was keen to present the group's report, she was due to be on leave on 3rd July. Members were therefore asked to consider extending the deadline for the review.

RESOLVED that the deadline for presentation of the Youth Provision Task Group's final report to the Overview and Scrutiny Board be extended to 15th July 2013.

111/12 **AIR QUALITY TASK GROUP**

The Chairman of the Task Group advised Members that the last meeting of the group had taken place on 5th March 2013. During this meeting the group had considered the information that had been received from representatives of Worcestershire County Council and Worcestershire Regulatory Services in respect of the actions that had been taken to implement recommendations made by the Air Quality Task Group in 2007. Some concerns were expressed about the progress that had been made since completion of the previous review to address air quality issues. The group was aiming to address these issues in more detail and had invited these Officers to attend another meeting to discuss the matter further.

The group had received a number of responses from residents on the subject of air quality, following coverage of the review in the local press. Members had also received information about the approaches that had been adopted by Birmingham City Council and Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council to manage air quality problems.

The group was due to interview a number of expert witnesses at forthcoming meetings. The Council's Head of Planning and Regulatory Services together with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, the Core Strategy, Regulatory and Strategic Housing Services, Councillor C. B. Taylor, had been invited to attend a meeting of the group. A representative of Worcestershire Primary Care Trust (PCT) had also been asked to provide further information about the health implications relating to air quality.

112/12 **CABINET WORK PROGRAMME 1ST APRIL TO 31ST JULY 2013**

Members considered the latest edition of the Cabinet Work Programme. The Board noted that information about the Playing Pitch Strategy had already been reviewed by the Youth Provision Task Group.

113/12 **ACTION LIST**

Members noted that information about the Night Assessment Centre, which had been requested at the previous meeting of the Board, had been circulated for Members' consideration on the morning of Tuesday 26th March. Officers had requested information in response to all outstanding issues and would provide Members with all responses once these had been received.

114/12 **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Board was advised that the Head of Regulatory Services had arranged to attend the following meeting of the Board to deliver a presentation on the subject of Worcestershire Regulatory Services. This would provide useful background information that could be used by Members when hosting the Joint Review of Worcestershire Regulatory Services in the new municipal year.

A request had also been received from Officers for a presentation to be delivered on the subject of service transformation to the Board. The content of this presentation remained to be clarified, however Members suggested that the inclusion of information on targets, costs, outcomes and achievements would be useful.

RESOLVED that the Work Programme be noted subject to the above amendments.

The meeting closed at 8.15 p.m.

Chairman

**Presentation to Overview and
Scrutiny Board
Telephony Issues – October
2012**

Amanda de Warr



**Bromsgrove
District Council**
www.bromsgrove.gov.uk

Telephony Issues – October 2012

- **Diary of events**
 - **Thursday 18th October**
 - **9:00**
 - Problem still on line.
 - Staff continue to provide personal message to each caller.
 - Message went out to all managers and staff and also alerts on web and Twitter
 - **12:48**
 - With no solution in sight HOCS advised Leader, Portfolio Holder and Leader of Opposition
 - **17:00**
 - No resolution and no closer to identifying the problem despite the involvement of WCC, BT, BDC and Vodafone

Telephony Issues – October 2012

- **What was the problem?**
 - At approximately 16:50 on Wednesday 17th October a fault occurred on the phone lines into the BDC Customer Service Centre.
 - Customers could hear the CSA but the CSA could not hear the customer.
 - The matter was reported to IT and the staff gave information to each caller to alert them to the problem and asking them to call back



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Telephony Issues – October 2012

- **Friday 19th October**
 - **9:00**
 - No resolution despite work until late the previous night
 - HOCS and IT manager start exploring options to enable the provision of limited service
 - As some direct dial lines are working at this time CSA's start giving out DD numbers to customers – who can still hear us at this time.
 - Further communications to customers, and updates to Managers, staff and key Members



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Telephony Issues – October 2012

– Friday 19th October

- 9:47
 - HOCS takes decision to instigate the Business Continuity Plan as there appears to be no sign of a resolution and at this stage the technical teams were no closer to identifying the fault
 - Business Continuity Plan is for the system to be switched over to another CSC in the County to enable the taking of calls and provide a limited service.
 - Request made to WGC to switch to RBC
 - Staff mobilised to relocate



Telephony Issues – October 2012

– Monday 22nd October

- BDC CSA's working at RBC Town Hall.
- All calls for both RBC and BDC going through to 64252.
- Extra switchboards opened up to cope with demand.
- Calls taken by operator, establish Council required then transfer call to relevant CSA team.
- RBC calls dealt with as normal.
- BDC calls dealt with if possible, or call back details taken, or call transferred to back office phone line.
- All BDC Members advised.
- All RBC Members advised.



Telephony Issues – October 2012

– Friday 19th October

- 15:00
 - Establish that the switchover won't work. BT agree to transfer lines.
 - Update Managers and key Members that we will be offering a service from RBC from Monday morning latest.
 - Advise RBC Leader, Portfolio Holder and Leader of Opposition that the BDC Business Continuity Plan has been instigated and provide information about how this will affect RBC customers.
- 16:17
 - Lines transferred and we start taking calls for BDC at RBC, using BDC staff but access to only limited systems

Telephony Issues – October 2012

– Monday 22nd October....

- Extremely high demand due to BDC lines being down for 2 days
- Plans put in place to remove upfront Hub messages from system to reduce customer confusion and improve speed of answering
- Total of 1,078 calls handled for RBC and BDC on 64252 line. Compares to average of 766, total for both authorities (40% increase in call traffic).
- 354 calls abandoned
- Average wait time 77 seconds
- 3 calls waited between 10 and 20 minutes to be answered.
- Majority of abandoned calls between 30 seconds and 1 minute wait.
- Customer complaints – 1



Telephony Issues – October 2012

– Tuesday 23rd October

- Call volumes still high – 36% above average
- 1,046 calls handled
- 197 abandoned
- 60% of calls answered in less than 30 seconds
- Average speed of answering 44 seconds
- 2 calls waited between 10 and 20 minutes to be answered.
- Majority of abandoned calls between 30 seconds and 1 minute wait.
- Customer complaints – 0
- Still unable to identify fault



Telephony Issues – October 2012

– Thursday 25th October

- Benefits of a shared team starting to show in calls handling statistics
- Implemented changes to routing of calls to improve call handling and reduce transfers
- Call numbers stabilise from here on
- 740 calls handled
- 13 abandoned calls
- Average wait time 6 seconds
- 95% of calls answered in less than 30 seconds
- 2 calls waited between 2 and 3 minutes to be answered



Telephony Issues – October 2012

– Wednesday 24th October

- Number of calls returning to nearer normal
- 915 calls handled
- 112 abandoned
- Average wait time 29 seconds
- 69% of calls answered in less than 30 seconds
- 11 calls waited between 5 and 10 minutes to be answered.
- No further customer complaints
- Updates provided to all Members, managers/staff and press.
- Reviewed routing of calls to further improve call handling and reduce transfers
- 4pm – DD lines into BDC re-instated. CSC lines routing to Redditch Town Hall



Telephony Issues – October 2012

– Friday 26th October

- With fault not identified so no solution in sight HOCS agrees two part plan with IT Manager
- 1. Re-create contact centre service at Council House
- 2. Bring forward implementation of Shoretel Contact Centre solution (scheduled for early 2013)
- Call statistics stable
- No access to BDC systems so some calls being passed to services to deal with



Telephony Issues – October 2012

- Tuesday 30th October
 - Work carried out to enable switch back to Council House
 - All Members advised of the plan and expected timescales
- Wednesday 31st October
 - Calls switched to Council House at 12:21.
 - Near normal service provided
- Tuesday 6th November
 - Fault on original lines resolved and all calls switched back to CSC

Telephony Issues – October 2012

- What are we doing to avoid it happening again?
 - Implement simpler solution.
 - Already planned but this has proven another driver
 - New system will be part of Bromsgrove's own Shoretel system and although will link to WCC will not be reliant on their system.
 - Can't guarantee that nothing will ever go wrong – because technology does go wrong and the reality is we are all dependent on it.
 - But we will have greater control when things do go wrong.
 - Less reliant on external providers.
 - Even better business continuity.



Telephony Issues – October 2012

- So... what was the problem and why was it so difficult to resolve?
 - Over complex and ageing solution.
 - Call Centre solution is WCC and links to our systems.
 - Fault could be in any number of places in the configuration of those links and was not readily apparent through all the testing.
 - Some pieces of equipment are also used to do multiple tasks, not just telephones, and tracking the problem required resource from Bromsgrove & Redditch ICT, British Telecom, County ICT team and their 3rd party telephone support team, and a company that specialise in Cisco Voice over IP (the type of telephone system used).
 - Having so many different people involved in the solution = very time consuming and difficult to fault find
 - Required multiple devices to be restarted and at the same time, a configuration change to one of these devices.

Telephony Issues – October 2012

Questions?



Overview & Scrutiny Essential Living Fund 26th March 2013

David Taylor
Benefits Manager

Welfare Reform Act 2012

- Replaced Community Care Grants & Crisis Loans
- Non Ringfenced Grant to County Council (reduction in funding)
- Approval to provide through District Council
- Effective from 1st April 2013

Benefits of a Local Scheme Provision – Essential Living Fund

- Officers have local knowledge
- Access to local arrangements (local charities etc)
- Local decision making
- Flexible use of resources

Activity within Bromsgrove 2011/12

- Crisis Loans
 - 540 Successful applications
£31k
- Community Care Grants
 - 180 Successful applications
£83k

Funding for 2013/14 £101k + £18k for
administration of scheme

Activity within Bromsgrove

Items most commonly requested under Crisis Loans:

- Rent in advance – moving home (families security relevant) and leaving
- care.
- Lost or stolen giro
- Capital not realisable
- Reconnection of fuel supply
- Benefit spent
- Benefits disallowed or sanctioned (to remain with DWP as hardship awards)
- Disaster

Activity within Bromsgrove

Items most commonly requested under Community Care Grants:

- Beds and bedding 38%
- Clothing 14%
- Kitchen/dining utensils 13%
- Carpets/Curtains 8%
- Other 8%
- Cookers 8%
- Seating 5%
- Washing Machines 3%
- Fridges 2%
- Removal Expenses 1%

Overall Principles of Scheme

- Clear
- Responsive
- Minimise Cash where possible
- Target most vulnerable
- Work with partners

Essential Living Fund – Delivery

- Face to face delivery
- Benefits officers used to ensure that income can be maximised
- Only available to residents of Bromsgrove
- All other options for funding available to be considered
- Working with charities eg NewStarts