



Minutes of the meeting of the PERFORMANCE REVIEW PANEL held on WEDNESDAY 25 OCTOBER 2006 at 7.30 pm

Present: Councillor Wilson (Chair)
Councillors Barry, Carruthers, Eastman, Hoyle (substitute for Morris), Long and Tunney

Officers: J Boothroyde (Overview and Scrutiny Manager), P McCourt (Head of Legal Services), D Moore (Head of Commissioning and Customer Care), L Ellen (Tenancy Services Manager), and P Taylor (Committee Manager)

Also Present: Councillors Crooks and Tallack

Apology: Councillor Morris

PR10 MINUTES

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Performance Review Panel held on 6 September 2006, be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record, subject to Councillor Long being added to the list of those present.

PR11 COMPLAINTS HANDLING

The Panel received a report on the range of complaints procedures in operation across the Council. To investigate the issue, the Panel was assisted by the Cabinet Member responsible for Corporate Performance, the Head of Legal Services, the Head of Commissioning and Customer Care and the Tenancy Services Manager.

Councillor Tallack, as the responsible Cabinet Member, commented as follows:

- 21 days was too long to allow a full response to a complaint to be issued. This timescale should be reduced to a more appropriate time, such as 14 calendar days.
- The complaints procedure was a formal process that was followed when someone was unhappy with an aspect of the Council and had submitted a formal complaint. Not all complaints, as defined by members of the public, would have been recorded by 'React', the Council's complaints handling

system. This was most likely to be due to the differences of interpretation over what constituted a complaint.

The Head of Legal Services raised the following points:

- Complaints handling was decentralised with each Directorate taking responsibility for its own complaints. The overall process was monitored by Legal Services. It may be beneficial to appoint a Member with responsibility for Complaints.
- It was important that complaints were viewed as a positive thing by all Officers and that the Council cultivated this attitude throughout all Directorates. There was no longer a dedicated session on Complaints as part of the Corporate Induction Programme.
- Not all complaints could be resolved within 21 days. Cases that revolved around a factual discrepancy required thorough investigation that, if done properly, would normally require a longer resolution time.
- At present there was no system to monitor if customers were happy with the complaints handling procedure. It would be beneficial to seek feedback from a sample of people who had complained and identify where problems were occurring within the system.
- Vexatious complaints had led to individuals having their access to the Council restricted. Officers had expressed relief that this was a measure that could be invoked and many were unaware that this option existed.

The Head of Commissioning and Customer Care brought the following issues to the Panel's attention:

- 'Complaint Champions' (Heads of Services) did not meet together in this capacity to discuss complaint related issues. This would have limited use given the specific nature of complaints within each department, although there was the possibility that cases of good practice could be imitated across the Council.
- Where statutory services were concerned, there was less discretion about whether or not an issue qualified as a complaint.

The Tenancy Services Manager informed Members of the following:

- Many housing complaints were actually service requests. The Housing service received the highest number of Councillor enquiries and it was suggested that this may be because a significant proportion of customers were unable to articulate their problems effectively in the first instance.

- Most problems in dealing with complaints occurred when a complaint crossed over service areas and a question arose concerning whose responsibility it was to resolve the situation.
- Where a case required thorough investigation attempts were made to keep the person who made the complaint updated with the investigation's progress. However, this was not always easy due to the confidential nature of some investigations.

Comments from Members included the following:

- Information regarding potentially antagonistic members of the public was not shared between Officers and Members and posed a potentially serious risk to both parties.
- There was a discrepancy regarding the number of complaints logged by the 'React' system as a percentage of the population of Milton Keynes, and the percentage of a sample of people surveyed in 2003 who indicated they had made a complaint to the Council. This discrepancy was most likely to be caused by the differences in opinion concerning what constituted a complaint.
- A better way of incorporating Councillors, MPs and other organisations, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, into the complaints handling procedure should be found. Councillors had developed their own system of raising issues with Officers and whilst the majority of these cases involved advocacy, those that Councillors deemed to be complaints would not, at present, be recorded by the complaints procedure.
- The Council's guidance document for staff on handling complaints was too cumbersome and the overall message that the Council wished to instil in Officers was lost within the details.
- Several Members had struggled to find the on-line form for Customers to submit a complaint to the Council. This document should be made easier to find.
- It was not clear whether the number of complaints included services contracted out by the Council. This was important as to the public anything that displayed the Council logo was a Council issue. Thus, their complaint would be directed toward the Council, whether or not the service had actually been provided by the Council.
- It would be useful to know what percentage of complaints came through the different methods for registering a complaint with the Council. The acknowledgement time for complaints received via all methods should be shortened.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Panel be provided with corrected output reports from the 'React' complaints handling system.
2. That the following points be raised in the Performance Review Panel's Report on Complaints Handling:
 - a) That a positive complaints procedure should be part of the Council's Culture. It was clear that at present not everyone viewed complaints as a positive thing.
 - b) That the number of systems through which a complaint could be made, and the devolved nature of complaints handling, be questioned.
 - c) There was no Member champion. The Panel might be able to set up a system and perform the role.
 - d) There could be a need for a system that logs requests for service as well as actual complaints.
 - e) The complaints procedure should include Members, MPs and other organisations. It was important that Members and Officers worked together to improve the way in which complaints were handled.
 - f) Complaints information should be made available in the languages in use in Milton Keynes, including Eastern European languages.

PR12

PERFORMANCE INFORMATION MONITORING

The Panel received an update on arrangements to receive and to respond to performance information.

Members noted that Councillor Wilson, as lead Member for the monitoring of performance information, would maintain regular meetings with the Performance Team and feedback queries and comments from the Panel.

Members asked to be provided with copies of the Monthly Performance Review produced by HBS for them to decide whether they wished to receive it regularly.

Councillor Long stated that at the Group Leaders' Meeting there had been a discussion concerning the information protocol to govern the announcement of performance information before it is published. The Head of Legal Services informed the Panel that this issue was currently being investigated.

RESOLVED –

That the update on arrangements to receive and to respond to performance information be noted.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 10.00 PM