



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30pm to 7:05 pm

26 September 2013

Present: Councillors Stephenson (chair), Bradford, Button (substitute for Brociek-Coulton), Haynes (substitute for Brimblecombe), Galvin, Carlo, Grenville, Howard, Manning, Maxwell, Sands (S), and Storie

Apologies: Councillors Brimblecombe and Brociek-Coulton

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 18 July 2013.

3. WORK PROGRAMME

Members were reminded that the session on welfare reform being held at the October meeting of the committee was to examine the wider work the council has been undertaking in response to welfare reform working with different partners. Some of the detailed implications were known, but others less so, owing to uncertainties regarding roll-out dates for implementation of some elements of the government's welfare reform programme.

In light of the forthcoming establishment of the greater Norwich growth board it was decided to hold a pre-scrutiny discussion of the cabinet report regarding the terms of reference of the new board. It was agreed that this would take place as part of the 24 October 2013 meeting of scrutiny.

RESOLVED to include pre-scrutiny of the cabinet report on the formation of the greater Norwich growth board terms of reference on the work programme for the 24 October 2013 meeting of the scrutiny committee.

4. REVENUES AND BENEFITS PERFORMANCE: LGSS

Christine Reed, Local Government Shared Service (LGSS) director and Robin Bates, head of revenues and benefits LGSS were in attendance for this item with Anton Bull, the city council's executive head of business relationship.

The executive head of business relationship introduced the report and informed the scrutiny committee of the progress and improvement being achieved by the service. It was noted that there had been a reduction in both the number of new claims and also the changes in circumstance cases outstanding.

In response to member questions, the executive head of business relationship said that the level of changes of circumstance cases outstanding was reducing at a steady pace and it was hoped that they would be under control and operating at a 'business as usual' average in the foreseeable future. It was explained that quite often the 21 day target was missed due to claimants not presenting the correct documentation or that the correct documentation was not being received in a timely fashion. Although this was often out of the service's control, work was underway to improve the issue so that claimants presenting directly to the council were better prepared at the beginning.

Members noted that the service received in the region of 150 new claims each week and were informed by officers that the current outstanding level of new claims as demonstrated in the table on page 32 of the agenda papers represented around two weeks worth of claims. Resources have remained flexible to manage the rise and fall in the number of claims. He also informed the committee that staffing levels within the service were up to a more adequate level, which was important if a continued improvement in the performance of the service was to be achieved. This would also allow the service to respond to any future fluctuations in demand.

Robin Bates, head of revenues and benefits LGSS responded to questions from the committee around the proportion of change of circumstance cases received via electronic transfer from the DWP and from the benefits service (directly from claimants). Of the 1500 to 2000 changes of circumstance received each week, a significant number of cases were received through either ETD's or ATLAS transfers. In due course this was to be done via a single transfer from the DWP which would mean less duplication. Currently the service estimated that the duplication rate was around 60%. Members noted that work had been completed to automate the ATLAS transfers. The result of this was that over 80% of the changes now received were via this route and imported into the LGSS benefits service system which made automatic changes to benefit. The benefits service continued to receive separate ETD files despite having been told by the DWP that when ATLAS transfers were introduced that the two files would be combined and that the ETD's would be switched off. There were indications from DWP that the EDT files were to stop in April 2014. In response to a question from a member of the committee, it was explained that although all change of circumstance claims had to be assessed, not all would lead to a change of benefit.

In response to a member's question, Christine Reed said that the primary reason for the turn around was due to all the improvement work and also the success in filling vacancies had improved.

Discussion then took place around the appropriateness of the current targets that the service was being measured against. The executive head of strategy, people and democracy reminded members that the scrutiny committee was proactively involved in setting targets as part of its involvement in reviewing the corporate plan. Members were keen to look at benchmarking for the service as a way of evidence gathering before targets were set. Further to this, the chair suggested that it would assist the council if a further column could be included to the reporting tables on the performance of the benefits service in regards to the different numbers of days for processing change of circumstances.

Members requested a letter be drafted and sent to the LGSS benefits team thanking them for the hard work undertaken and the progress that had been made in improving performance.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) the scrutiny committee notes the improvement in performance within the benefits service and thank the staff for the work done towards this, and that this be conveyed in a letter to the teams involved;
- (2) the scrutiny committee reviews the situation and performance in 6 months time and (to include discussion of benchmarking);
- (3) as part of the benchmarking exercise, targets that are in operation are considered;
- (4) as part of the LGSS benefits performance monitoring reports received in future, the number of staff/resources be included within the tables and a further column included in regards to the different numbers of days for processing change of circumstances.

CHAIR