
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON MONDAY 2 NOVEMBER 2015 AT 7.30 P.M. IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNCIL OFFICES WEELEY

Present: Councillors Griffiths (Chairman), Ferguson (Vice-Chairman), Fowler, Hones, Miles, Pemberton and M Skeels (Jnr).

Also Present: Councillor Hughes (Portfolio Holder for Revenues and Benefits) Councillor Turner (Portfolio Holder for Coastal Protection) and Councillor Watling (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration)

In Attendance: Democratic Services Manager (Colin Sweeney), Revenues and Benefits Manager (Harry Bates), Fraud, Counter Fraud and Compliance Manager (Clare Lewis), Parking and Seafronts Manager (Ian Taylor) and Democratic Services Officer (Janey Nice).

14. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Yallop.

15. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the special meeting of the Committee, held on 5 October 2015, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

The Chairman altered the remainder of the business as recorded in these minutes.

17. RESIDENTS IN TENDRING BEING CONTACTED BY TENDRING DISTRICT COUNCIL OVER THE MAKE-UP OF THEIR HOUSEHOLDS

The Portfolio Holder for Revenues and Benefits and the Council's Revenues and Benefits Manager were in attendance having been invited to attend the Committee to answer concerns raised by the Chairman over the Council's practice of phoning single-person households during the evening.

The Chairman announced that he would be permitting former Councillor Dave Bolton to address the Committee on this issue.

Mr Bolton informed the Committee that he and a number of neighbours had been concerned about the phone calls being received by residents in the evenings, between 6.00pm and 9.00pm and that the questions being asked concerned whether the resident was living on their own in order to verify that their claim for single person discount for Council Tax was still valid.

The Benefits and Revenues Manager (Harry Bates) informed the Committee that the calls were being made to that particular group of residents who were claiming single person discount on their Council Tax as it was believed there were a number of residents who may have been claiming the allowance to which they were not entitled or that their circumstances had changed and these had not been notified to the Council.

Members expressed concern about the first of the set questions being asked, which set out to ascertain whether the resident lived on their own, as this was causing alarm and confusion particularly older people, however Mr Bates informed the Committee that the callers always identified themselves as calling from Tendring District Council before

asking questions. In response to a Member's question about the time such calls were made, Mr Bates informed him that the Council was phoning at these times as a large number of residents were not available in the daytime to answer the calls. He added that the department had no way of knowing if a resident was living on their own or not and periodically it was necessary to challenge the single person claims as previously there had been a low rate of response to changes in circumstances. Mr Bates went on to say that the phone calls were not necessarily the best way to get information and they were trying to find a more effective way of finding information.

The Revenues and Benefits Portfolio Holder (Councillor Hughes) said that the phone call initiative had arisen as the Revenues and Benefits Department had realised a number of residents were not declaring their change of circumstances when this had occurred. He added that the amount of money in question was significant and the phone calls were considered the best way of contacting residents.

Mr Bates said that at the moment data matching residents against other information held on residents was not available to his department however this was something to be pursued in the future. When asked about data matching with electoral roll information, Ms Lewis said that this was another source of useful data, which was available to the Council to support the information currently held.

A suggestion from a Member was that if the single person discount claimant was given an actual renewal date, then if it was not actually renewed by that date, the discount should cease with the onus then being put on the claimant.

Members also discussed other ways of checking out the single person discount, with questions being asked about staff resources and the amount of time phone calls took compared with sending out letters. Mr Bates informed the Committee that he was trying to control the peaks of workloads, one of the ways being through customer contact. He also informed the Committee that the exercise of contacting residents was being funded by the Department for Work and Pensions and was not costing the Council any money.

The Committee **RECOMMENDED TO CABINET** that:

- (a) Revenues and Benefits give consideration to a two-yearly renewal rate in which residents had to inform the department whether they wished to retain the single-person discount and, if this was not done, the single person discount would revert back to the full Council Tax charge;
- (b) As a means of retraining staff, the set questions to residents be rebranded, especially the 'are you on your own?' question, which could cause alarm and worry as to whether the call to them was genuine; and
- (c) When residents were completing the application for single occupancy discount, that there be an area where the resident could advise the Council of the best time that they could be contacted, if required.

The Chairman thanked Mr Bolton, Mr Bates and Ms Lewis for attending.

18. ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AT THE PUBLIC TOILETS AT MAGDALEN GREEN, CLACTON-ON-SEA

The Portfolio Holder for Coastal Protection and the Council's Parking and Seafronts Manager were in attendance having been invited to attend the Committee to answer concerns raised by the Chairman in respect of ongoing antisocial behaviour at the Public Toilets situated at Magdalen Green, Clacton-on-Sea.

The Chairman informed the Committee that he had put this item onto the Committee's agenda as it had been discussed at a Pier Forum meeting where residents had expressed concern at antisocial activities being carried out at the public toilets in Magdalen Green, which was close to a Primary School. He read out a letter he had received on this matter, which highlighted alleged aggressive behaviour to the Council's cleaners and reported homeless people living there. He added that the Police had been informed by residents but that no action appeared to have been undertaken and that discussions had taken place with the Coastal Protection Portfolio Holder and the Council's Parking and Seafronts Manager about the future of the site.

Councillor Turner informed the Committee that he was happy to attend the meeting of the Committee, along with Mr Taylor, however he believed that this particular item should have been reported to Cabinet first as a report and not to the Service Development and Delivery Committee as he believed that the subject was not within the remit of the Scrutiny Committee. At the request of Councillor Turner, the Council's Democratic Services Manager clarified that the matter did indeed fall under the Committee's remit and, in doing so, read aloud (Article 6.02 (ii)) to the Council's Constitution.

Councillor Turner said that those particular public toilets had been a problem since they had been built with drug users causing problems, however when it had been suggested that the toilets were closed, he had been asked that the toilets remain open.

Councillor Turner informed the Committee that a Strategy for the Council's 44 public toilets had been produced and would be made available to the Committee to scrutinise it and to put any questions to Councillor Turner at that time.

The Chairman pointed out the problems at Magdalen Green with homeless people sleeping in the toilets, syringe needles being dropped, customers being prevented from using the facilities and the cleaners being frightened to enter the toilets.

The Parking and Seafronts Manager (Mr Taylor) said that this matter was an operational issue and that he fully shared the Committee's concern about the antisocial behaviour at the toilets which was a well-known problem and had been for a number of years. He said that on 29 August 2015, the Cleaners there had raised their concerns, with the effect that the toilets were closed on 2 September and were reopened on 5 September and this had been done to preserve the safety of customers. He had spoken to the Police who informed him they were unable to provide sufficient Officers to give adequate security.

Mr Taylor added that criminal behaviour was a matter for the Police and not the Council but that the Council was obligated to keep the toilets open,

In response to a Member's question, Councillor Turner responded by saying that while the Council had the authority to provide public toilets it was actually under no obligation to provide them. Councillor Turner added it was difficult to get cleaners in to clean the toilets and when the contract was up for renewal, it would be more expensive to renew. When asked about bringing the cleaning service in-house, Councillor Turner said it would probably not reduce overheads.

Members discussed the issue of public toilets in some depth, including the opening hours being reduced in certain areas and form part of the forthcoming Strategy.

Members were advised that the Strategy was already in place and Councillor Turner said it would be put on the Council's Forward Plan in order that the Committee could scrutinise it.

The Committee **RECOMMENDED TO CABINET** that the Strategy on Public Toilets be brought back to the Service Development and Delivery Committee for scrutiny by its Members.

19. ANY NEW ITEMS TO BE ADDED TO THE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee requested that the Council's Beach Huts Strategy be put forward for inclusion within the Committee's Work Programme.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chairman confirmed that the next scheduled meeting of the Committee was to be held on Monday 25 January 2016 but reminded the Committee that a special meeting would be arranged to further consider the issue of Universal Credit in April 2016.

The meeting was declared closed at 9.10pm.

Chairman