

FALKIRK COUNCIL

MINUTE of MEETING of the PERFORMANCE PANEL held in the MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS, FALKIRK on FRIDAY 26 SEPTEMBER 2014 at 11.00 AM.

CORE MEMBERS: Rosie Murray
Baillie Joan Paterson
Depute Provost John Patrick

MEMBERS

ATTENDING: David Alexander
Stephen Bird
Jim Blackwood
Gordon Hughes
Cecil Meiklejohn
Provost Pat Reid

OFFICERS: Fiona Campbell, Head of Policy, Technology and Improvement
Megan Farr, Policy Officer
Paul Ferguson, Revenue Manager
Nigel Fletcher, Joint Acting Director of Education
Jack Frawley, Committee Services Officer
Rose Mary Glackin, Chief Governance Officer
Gary Greenhorn, Joint Acting Director of Education
Elliot Roy, Trainee Committee Services Officer
Bryan Smail, Chief Finance Officer

PP6. MINUTE

Decision

The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 19 June 2014 was approved.

PP7. SERVICE SCRUTINY REPORT

The panel considered a report by the Joint Acting Director of Education Services setting out the performance for the service from April to July 2014. Nigel Fletcher gave an overview of the report.

Members asked why the new highers had not been implemented in all subject areas, Nigel Fletcher advised that the issue was linked to workload as some teaching departments present multiple courses. Head teachers and faculty heads discussed the best programme of implementation for their school. The implementation of the new highers in Falkirk fit with the national pattern and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) were happy with the phased implementation.

The panel asked if there was a particular issue causing the number of amber indicators for 'Increasing our efforts to tackle disadvantage & discrimination'. Nigel Fletcher stated that the 'named person' proposal of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 would create substantial work. This anticipated work had caused a number of indicators to be reported as amber, but the service was not behind in delivery.

The panel asked if there was benchmarking information available in relation to school inspections. Nigel Fletcher advised that a list of ratings was presented to the senior management team but was not reported to the panel. Nigel Fletcher stated that he would provide members with the information directly.

Members sought further information on the implementation of a single point of contact for all school and community hall lets. Gary Greenhorn stated that simplified charging had been introduced from August 2014. This ensured uniformity in charges for venues operated by Falkirk Community Trust, community learning and development and schools. Education services had supported a number of groups through the change, such as providing the Boys Brigade with information that it met HMRC criteria for VAT exemption. Gary Greenhorn advised that a letter would be sent to all groups who qualify for the VAT exemption.

The panel sought clarification on the charges previously applied to Boys Brigade groups. Gary Greenhorn advised that charges had varied and that there had been some free lets. Previously, more free lets were provided in the Falkirk area than was the national average; the position had been reviewed following the publication of Audit Scotland's 'Charging for Services: are you getting it right?' report. Gary Greenhorn stated that with rises to energy costs, free lets were unsustainable. He stated that the Council had introduced a fair and equitable charging regime which compared favourably with other local authorities. Further, a review of the charging system would be carried out in December 2014 and feedback from organisations would be taken into account. The panel highlighted that support should be provided to groups in non-affluent areas to prevent discrimination and disadvantage.

The panel asked how the anti-bullying policy was being taken forward. Nigel Fletcher advised that each school has an anti-bullying policy and that education services liaise with head teachers to continually refresh the policy, which keeps the policy prominent in the mind of teaching staff.

The panel asked for clarification in regard to pupils being moved schools due to bullying. Nigel Fletcher advised that education services aim to never move pupils because of bullying, although parents can request moves. Nigel Fletcher stated that bullying was challenged and addressed in schools and that education services work to meet the needs of young people who are affected by bullying.

The panel asked about the cost of repairs due to vandalism. Gary Greenhorn advised that repairs are carried out as soon as possible to ensure the safety of all school users. However, it is difficult to retrospectively define whether repair work had arisen from vandalism or wear and tear. Education services liaise with the resource manager to identify vandalism and then take action. Further challenge is present in community use schools as these facilities are open out with school hours and the cause of a repair cannot always be identified. Gary Greenhorn referenced the success of devolving energy budgets to schools and stated that devolving vandalism budgets was being looked at.

The panel asked about the decreased number of people who achieved an accreditation award or qualification. Nigel Fletcher advised that external funding had been reduced which led to the decrease shown from 2012/13 to 2013/14. However, it was also stated that up to July 2014 there had been 59 awards and that if that pattern of awards continued then the current year's figure would be the highest achieved.

Members challenged the relevancy of the targets provided in the report. Members felt that there were a number of targets which were not specific or measureable. The panel also questioned the validity of some of the ratings, especially where targets were perceived not to be challenging enough.

Members referenced the outcome 'We will be greener' as lacking specificity and challenge. The panel asked if the service's energy bill was known. Gary Greenhorn advised that he could not provide the total bill but that the service has 113 properties. The service was committed to carbon reduction and had implemented spend to save initiatives such as replacing ordinary lighting with light-emitting diode (LED) lighting. Gary Greenhorn highlighted pupil involvement such as green champions and eco-committees challenging staff in primary schools to reduce electricity use. Nigel Fletcher stated that Rannoch Nursery had introduced litter police as a method of pupil involvement. Gary Greenhorn stated that there had been a challenge in maintaining pupil enthusiasm at high school but that progress was being made. The devolution of energy budgets had been received positively and the effect was shown in the monthly corporate figures.

The panel asked for information about the amount of developer contributions education services received from Section 75 agreements and how this money was spent. Gary Greenhorn advised that education and development services work together in this regard. For developments where a marginal impact is expected the contribution level is known in advance through the guide on expected contributions. For more major developments, services have direct dialogue with developers to calculate the level of contribution required. Further, Section 75 agreements detail the way in which the finance gained through developer contributions can be used.

The panel asked about the ambiguity of the target 'Continue to monitor' in relation to the outcome for the occupancy rate of primary schools. Gary Greenhorn advised that it was difficult to set targets in this area due to the variance of birth rates and the number of families moving in and out of the area. He also highlighted the annual census of pupils and teachers in publicly funded schools carried out by the Scottish Government, advising that this data would drive resource allocation.

The panel asked about the use and cost of the community learning development (CLD) service. Nigel Fletcher described the work of CLD in relation to youth clubs, detached youth work and summer schools. The number of young people using CLD services in 2013/14 had dropped but if the performance of the current quarter was maintained then usage would exceed previous levels. Gary Greenhorn stated that one part of the cost was providing youth workers and that approximately 60 part time youth workers were based at community centres. The total annual cost of CLD was around £4m.

The panel discussed that Langlees Boys Brigade was previously not charged for the use of facilities. The group had calculated that their costs for the year, based on 52 weeks hire, would be £5,300. Gary Greenhorn advised that the figure was incorrect as charges would be made for only 30 weeks per year, as that was the actual usage. Education services had provided the correct information to the group in an e-mail and this would be provided to members.

The panel expressed concern that as the Boys Brigade did not receive any grant funding they would need to charge their members to cover hire costs. Fiona Campbell stated that she would look into the availability of external grant funding and provide this to members.

The panel asked what recourse was available to the Council if developers appeal to have Section 75 agreements removed. Gary Greenhorn advised that if the developer was successful then the capital programme would be affected.

The panel asked about capacity at Larbert High School and the effect of building Carronrange Primary School. Gary Greenhorn stated that Carronrange would come on stream for 2016/17. It was stated that capacity pressure at Larbert High School had not affected attainment. In the previous year the roll at Larbert High School had dropped by 75. The roll would increase for five years consecutively from when the current primary 5 cohort reached high school. Education services were taking action to ensure that appropriate accommodation would be provided.

Members asked about improvements made at Airth Primary School prior to a follow through visit from the inspectorate. Nigel Fletcher advised that the inspectorate were impressed during their follow through visit and that he would make details of the improvements available to members.

The panel sought information on the Psychology of Parenting Project (PoPP). Nigel Fletcher stated that PoPP was aimed at families experiencing difficulties and provided parenting classes which children and parents attend. Nigel Fletcher stated that he would provide members with background and statistical information relating to PoPP.

The panel expressed concern that joint working agreements could prevent the building of a strong sense of community and of relationships between CLD and community organisations. Gary Greenhorn advised that joint working agreements were necessary to meet key outcomes and to measure resources. However, he recognised the challenge in ensuring that joint working agreements were implemented with common sense. Gary Greenhorn advised that management committees had worked through the joint working agreements and they would be fine tuned to meet local needs. For organisations within the following the public pound framework, joint working agreements are required.

The panel asked about the work targeted to meet the needs of S3 and S4 pupils at risk of not progressing to a positive destination. Nigel Fletcher made reference to the skills based approach which is emphasised at leadership meetings with all head teachers. It was stated that CLD plays an important role in reaching some young people who schools struggle to engage. To help support at risk young people Nigel Fletcher stated that close links between CLD and schools were important.

The panel asked if the Detached Youth Work team were carrying out evening street work. Gary Greenhorn advised that at the start of the year there had been difficulties maintaining an on street presence in the evenings due to staff absence. It was stated that this issue has been addressed and resources had been redirected to support this work.

The panel asked about temporary accommodation provided at Maddiston primary school. Gary Greenhorn advised that both Kinnaird and Maddiston primary schools had experienced significant catchment area growth. At both schools the temporary accommodation was being used to create ancillary space for music and drama teaching, parent councils had been consulted and were happy with the arrangements. There was recognition in the capital programme of the need to extend these schools within the next five to seven years and bids had been submitted.

The panel asked for information about the Early Years Collaborative (EYC) in terms of the amount of resources dedicated and outcomes achieved. Nigel Fletcher stated that EYC and the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) agenda were well matched and could be brought together. Reference was made to the 'named persons' proposal and the large amount of work which would be created. Nigel Fletcher stated that EYC began as a health initiative and that education services are one of a number of agencies involved.

The panel sought comparison figures to show longer term trends, for example in relation to attainment, Nigel Fletcher stated that historical figures were available in a number of areas. Nigel Fletcher highlighted a number of areas in regard to improved attainment. School leadership had improved and the Council had invested significantly in recruiting the best teachers, which was important as teachers lead attainment. In secondary schools, tracking individual pupil's progress had enabled early intervention where difficulties arose and led to sustained improvement. Further, Gary Greenhorn stated that improvements to the physical learning environment had ensured that schools were fit for purpose.

Decision

The panel noted the performance statement.

Councillors Blackwood and Meiklejohn left the meeting during the following item.

PP8. CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICE SCRUTINY REPORT

(i) Chief Executive – Finance Services

The panel considered a report by the Chief Finance Officer setting out the performance for the service from April to July 2014. Bryan Smail gave an overview of the report.

The panel asked what the main issues were in maintaining projected levels of income, Bryan Smail suggested that business rates and pressure on disposable household income were two main issues. The panel asked what actions were in place to improve this area. Paul Ferguson advised that the use of direct debit, text message reminders and home visits had been implemented.

The panel asked about the support in place for people who were struggling to maintain payments. Paul Ferguson stated that 13 tenancy support officers provide help and support in financial management to people in low level arrears.

The panel asked if benchmarking data was available for benefit overpayment collection. Paul Ferguson advised that no benchmarking data was available. However, having liaised with colleagues in other local authorities he stated that most local authorities targeted 60% benefit overpayment collection, which was the break even mark, while the Council's target was 65%.

The panel discussed the impact of the welfare reforms and stated that a flexible commonsense approach should be used in terms of collection, providing people with support where needed. Bryan Smail stated that the service was aware of and sensitive to the serious challenges facing people. The service target early intervention in debt situations and through engagement with customers create realistic payment plans.

The panel asked about the speed with which cases of arrears were referred to sheriff officers. Paul Ferguson stated that delays in clearing arrears can be built into repayment schedules but that on-going charges needed to be kept up to date. Further, it was stated that the service was proactive in managing arrears and that having people engage with the service allows for the best solution to be found. As well as this the service works with third sector organisations to ensure that appropriate support is available for all.

The panel asked a question in relation to e-procurement and e-invoicing at Callendar Square. Paul Ferguson advised that from 2009 all communication had been stored electronically. In 2010 a document management system had been procured for council tax and since 2012 all applications had been processed electronically. From April 2016 it was expected that there would no longer be paper records held in relation to council tax, while housing benefit would be stored entirely electronically by 2017/18.

The panel sought information on the speed of processing Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). Paul Ferguson advised that funding from the Scottish Government had been confirmed on 16 September 2014 and would allow a more proactive approach with people who had not yet applied. Paul Ferguson advised that applications which had been received had been processed.

The panel asked for information about the time taken to serve customers at Callendar Square. Paul Ferguson advised that the target of serving customers within fifteen minutes was not currently being met and that this was caused by the loss of experienced members of staff. It was stated that it had been difficult to develop and retain knowledge due to high staff turnover.

Decision

The panel noted the performance statement.

(ii) Chief Executive – Governance

The panel considered a report by the Chief Governance Officer setting out the performance for the service from April to July 2014. Rose Mary Glackin gave an overview of the report.

The panel asked about the availability of mobile devices for members, Fiona Campbell stated that before implementing new technologies a number of conditions needed to be met, such as Public Services Network compliance. Tablet devices had been issued at the proof of concept stage in order to demonstrate security compliance. The cost of software and infrastructure requirements would be calculated before mobile devices could be rolled out. Fiona Campbell stated that a report would be submitted to the corporate management team and members advised in due course.

The panel asked how many parades and processions had taken place locally. Rose Mary Glackin stated that there had been 94 parades and processions last year. Further, she stated that the implementation of a policy framework for public processions would ensure a consistent approach.

The panel asked what work was being done to increase the amount of in-house business being sent to Printworks. Rose Mary Glackin stated a print policy was being developed to formalise that Printworks was always the first port of call for services. Schools had been contacted to ensure that any large volume printing was done by Printworks; the printing of homework diaries was already carried out by Printworks. It was stated that an analysis of the business was on-going. The panel asked for further information on the analysis, Rose Mary Glackin advised that after it had been through the stage of service review it would be submitted to a future meeting.

The panel asked how officers throughout the Council check that written responses to members' enquiries were sufficient. Rose Mary Glackin stated that officers should check with members that responses are meaningful and include the information sought.

The panel asked about the pressures on the licensing section. Rose Mary Glackin advised that there had been a period of settling into new roles following the planned loss of a senior member of staff. Over the summer a number of significant pieces of work had been carried out including personal licence refresher training.

The panel asked if training for members could be improved, making particular reference to the lack of engagement during sessions. Members stated that they would prefer interactive sessions rather than being given power point presentations.

The panel discussed that actions arising from the training needs analysis exercise needed to be moved forward. The panel asked for detail on the new system for logging members' complaints. Rose Mary Glackin stated that a briefing session on the CRM system had been run for members and that it could be provided again, possibly in October.

The panel discussed communication between members and officers, highlighting situations where enquiries are raised by e-mail but letters are sent in response. The panel requested that where possible officers reply in kind using e-mail due to the speed of this form of communication.

Decision

The panel noted the performance statement.