

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
VALUE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Town Hall, Main Road, Romford
10 April 2013 (7.30 - 8.45 pm)**

Present:

Councillors Robby Misir (Chairman), Ray Morgon (Vice-Chair), +Clarence Barrett, +Wendy Brice-Thompson, +Garry Pain and +Frederick Thompson.

+Substitute members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ted Eden, Councillor Ron Ower, Councillor Billy Taylor and Councillor Damian White.

28 MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 24 January and 14 February 2013 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

29 WEBCASTING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS

Members of the Committee received a presentation on the webcasting of council meetings.

Members were advised that the Council used webcasting to encourage increased engagement with local people in decision making and to provide additional accountability.

Members noted that webcasting of council meetings had been introduced in July 2009 and was used to broadcast both Council and Cabinet meetings.

The webcasts were available to the public direct from the Council's website and could be watched live or at a later date as all webcasts were archived for six months.

Webcasts were promoted using social media including the Council's website, Twitter and Facebook.

The webcast service was provided by a company called Public-I, who provided a similar service across many local authorities throughout the country.

The service cost approximately £15,000 a year to run which provided the Council with 120 hours of coverage, webcast equipment and a high level support service.

A total of 12,216 viewings had been made of 64 webcasts. 10% of these had been watched live with the other 90% having been watched using the archiving service.

Each meeting had attracted between 100 and 250 views with Cabinet meetings attracting higher viewings than Council meetings.

The Council had a commitment to finding alternative ways of engaging people in local government decision-making and the webcasts were watched by more people than attend the committee meetings in person.

Members were advised that consideration was being given to possibly webcasting meetings of the Regulatory Services Committee.

During the debate members asked whether a survey could be placed on the site to gather information as to who was watching the webcasts and to perhaps advertising forthcoming webcasts in the Council's "*Living*" magazine.

Members also discussed the possibility of benchmarking with other local authorities to ascertain their viewing figures and patterns.

30 **COUNCIL TAX UPDATE**

Members received an update on the current position regarding the reclaiming of outstanding Council Tax arrears.

The report to the Council Tax topic group in February 2013, detailed the arrears position at the time, totalling £15,056,341.13

Following a subsequent request for additional information, additional details were provided which established the age of the debt.

Where a customer had multiple debts they would be counted in each year.

With the closing of year end accounts the current arrears were being assessed and would shortly be available through the Council Tax Year End Summary.

However, recovery action and account maintenance had been on-going and as requested by the Committee a detailed breakdown of the arrears was provided.

There were now a total of 52 cases with action being taken against them. Unfortunately as the majority of these accounts sat at deductions from on-

going benefit and the weekly deduction was less than £3.50 per week these would take some time to clear.

31 **HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFITS PRESENTATION**

Committee members received a presentation on the Council's Housing and Council Tax benefits system.

Members were advised that Housing Benefit to help individuals to pay their rent, both Council Tenants and Private Sector Tenants, was paid to over 14,000 residents at a total cost of £89,000,000 during 2012/13.

Council Tax Support was paid to over 19,000 residents at a total cost of £22,000,000 during 2012/13.

Members were given a detailed description of how new claims and changes to existing claims were processed.

Over the years the number of customers receiving HB / CTB (CTS) had increased. October 2008, saw the start of the recession and an increase in the number of customers claiming within Havering, particularly customers renting privately and claiming Housing Benefit. Between November 2008 and December 2009, Havering's Housing Benefit caseload increased by over 14%, the largest of all London Boroughs. With no improvement in the economy the caseload had continued to rise over the years as has the expenditure.

Despite the increase in caseloads over the years the number of Benefit Officers employed within the Service hadn't changed except where increased Admin (recession) funding was provided by Central Government for 2009 / 10 & 2010 / 11. During those two years, despite the recession, owing to the funding and the increased number of staff the Council recorded its best performance figures. Recession funding from the Government had since reduced and with it the number of Benefit Officers affecting performance.

The cause of the backlog in outstanding claims was due to a number of reasons. The economy wasn't improving and the number of claims being received continued to rise. In addition to the number of new claims being received there had been a significant increase in the number of records received from the DWP compared to 2011 / 12. In July 2011 the DWP started to automatically send the Council changes in customers Tax Credit entitlement ("ATLAS" records). From January 2012 the ATLAS records had increased to include changes to all state benefits and other changes the DWP have become aware of.

The end of February and throughout March were the busiest times of year due to "annual billing" as the new Council Tax Bills began to be received.

The Council have also introduced this year the new Council Tax Support scheme, replacing Council Tax Benefit and prepared for the other Welfare Reform changes including: Under occupancy rules within the Social Sector and the Benefit Cap.

Going forward funding had been secured to temporarily employ Liberata's resilience processing team to help clear the outstanding work. Existing staff would continue to prioritise new claims, urgent cases, more recent Change in Circumstances and correspondence received via the DWP. Overtime would also be provided. With the introduction of Universal Credit over the next 12 months, the Council would not recruit into vacant posts but would continue to use Serco staff as an extension of the Council's staff. New Initiatives implemented during 2012 / 13 including On line Claims and Risk Based Verification to increase the speed of processing should begin to be realised. During 2013 / 14 the Council intended on automating the assessment of the Atlas records received from the DWP.

32 **CORPORATE PERFORMANCE INFORMATION**

The report before members set out the performance of the Council's Corporate Performance Indicators for the third quarter (October-December 2012), against the five Living Ambition Goals of the Corporate Plan.

Members expressed concern that the four indicators that were viewed by the Committee were all in decline.

The earlier Housing/Council Tax Benefits presentation had gone some way to explaining two of the declining indicators but there was no information to advise as to why corporate complaints had failed to meet its target.

Members suggested that perhaps in future more Performance Indicators could be assessed by the Committee.

Chairman