

Notes of the Regeneration and Neighbourhoods OSC
Task Group – Performance/downsizing of Environment and Highways
Tuesday 12th August 2014

Present: Cllrs Surve, Roberts, Daley, Whittle, Entwistle and Casey

Also Present: Sayyed Osman – Director of Environment, Housing & Neighbourhoods, Simon Butt – Head of Highways, John Addison – Principal Scrutiny Officer & Sonya Palmer- Scrutiny Officer

The Vice Chair, Cllr Roberts, welcomed everyone to 1st Performance/downsizing of Environment and Highways task group.

Sayyed Osman, Director of Environment, Housing & Neighbourhoods provided Members with a brief overview of his portfolio and the budget pressures within each area. Sayyed confirmed that because of the size of his portfolio additional task groups would be arranged to provide members with information relating to Environment and Public Protection.

Simon Butt, Head of Highways, circulated to Members a copy of his presentation, 'Delivering Highways Maintenance Efficiency Savings'. Members were provided with background information relating to the implementation of the Highways Asset Management Integrated Service (HAMIS).

Simon explained that the partnership between Capita Symonds and the Council provided the full range of highways and property services with the traditional consultancy (white collar) services sitting within Capita Symonds; and operations (blue collar) elements of the service being retained by the council and delivered through their Direct Services Organisation (DSO).

Members were told that the consultancy and operational services teams have not always had the best of relationships, with communication between them often strained and in need of improvement. The partnership between Capita Symonds and the Council alone did not resolve the problems between the consultancy and operational teams. However, in the summer of 2008 Capita Symonds was volunteered to undertake a review of the entire service to understand how the structures, processes and relationships affected the service outcomes.

This review identified issues in the end to end delivery process, but most importantly highlighted that the ultimate goal of improving the condition of the network would not be achieved unless the historic problems and barriers associated with the consultancy and operational teams were resolved. With this in mind, Capita Symonds set out the concept of an integrated service which would, for the first time, bring the consultancy and operational teams together under the banner of HAMIS (Highways Asset Management Integrated Service). The team would have a common approach with a focus on risk, efficiency, quality assurance and growth.

Simon told Members that a number of other options were considered including outsourcing the operational teams but these were quickly discounted since it was felt

that the extent of the inefficiencies would have inflated the price charged by the private sector.

Simon informed Members that in relation to budget cuts Highways had to find a 20% saving for 2015/17. Members were informed that due to the nature of certain services only a third of the portfolio could be looked at for potential savings.

Simon highlighted some of the services that could not be looked at for potential savings:

Road Inspections – Members were advised that road Inspections were in place to reduce insurance claims and provide the Council with a strong defence should a claim against the Council be made. Simon told Members that in 2006 £1 million pound was spent on insurance claims and legal costs, now the Council set aside a reduced amount of £400k. Simon explained that the Councils defence needed to be robust and without regular road inspections insurance claims and legal costs would increase.

Carbon Tax – Members were advised that the Council have to pay a carbon tax and £260k had been set aside. Simon explained that the biggest contribution to the carbon tax bill was the Council buildings which are mostly inefficient for lighting and heating.

Simon highlighted to Members the current budget position and revenue budget for 2014/15 as outlined within his presentation. Members were informed that from a £5 million budget £270k was ring fenced for winter maintenance, £407k for 3rd party insurance claims, £835k for energy & lighting, £790k for statutory services that have to be provided, £2 million is income generated and £700k for all other maintenance costs.

Members were informed that the current work streams included:

- Routine Maintenance - Pothole repairs, street light repairs, gully cleaning.
- Capital Highways projects – Guide Roundabout, Pennine Reach and J5 M65
- LED Retrofit Project
- DeFRA (Department for Environment), EA (Environment agency) and UU (United Utilities) flood resilience works
- Public Utility Management (Gas, BT etc.)
- Developer and Internal Council projects

Simon explained that the substantial cuts to street sweepers had increased the amount of blocked gully's which are mainly being blocked by leaves especially in autumn. Members held a discussion regarding educating residents on how to keep gully's outside their properties tidy through your call: your community and ward solution meetings.

Members were told that as well as the current budget pressures there were ongoing issues:

- The current capital programme of works is unsustainable; however, this now supplements revenue work and the budget
- There are a number of potholes to repair to continue to maintain the Councils insurance defence.
- The average age of the workforce is 50+
- Poor Health limits capability for certain operatives
- Outputs/efficiency not what they could be
- Quality of work can be poor at times
- Reliant on ageing vehicles

Simon explained that the average age of the workforce ranges from 52-54 with the majority of the role involving manual work. Simon added that the workers work ethos had changed since single status had been introduced. At the last round of cuts 5 members of staff requested early retirement but was turned down due to costs.

Members commented that whilst early retirement can carry substantial costs, in the long run it could be more cost effective.

Members were told that sickness levels were high with 3 members of staff on long term sickness and 6 other members of staff absent with ongoing historic issues. It was added that due to the equipment needed for many of the roles workers who had been in the job for a number of years suffer effects from using hand held vibrating tools.

Simon informed Members that previous budget cuts had resulted in the workforce not completing work to a high standard and explained that the quality of work at times was poor due to quantity over quality demands. Members were told that workers now need to be re-educated to make sure all work carried out was to a high standard regardless of the budget pressures/cuts.

Members were advised of what officers felt was needed to be done to improve the service:

- Continual monitoring of key outputs (KPIs): HAMIS monthly board has now been established – (Members requested a copy of the KPI's and volumetric data for April 2014)
- Evaluations on productivity needed – benchmarking private contractors V's in-house outputs
- Bring in apprentices/younger staff as older staff retire
- Quality of work needs to be monitored and improved
- Look to utilise more innovative techniques/plant/materials

In response to questioning from Members regarding the experience and knowledge of older workers and whether this could be put to use to train young apprentices, Simon explained that the Council are looking at a training scheme to take on apprentices, however, in the current climate with budget cuts it could prove difficult.

Members held a discussion regarding potholes and road re-surfacing and expressed concerns that members of the public do not know when a pothole is being fixed or if it has been brought to the attention of the Council. It was felt by Members that there was a lack of knowledge within the community on road improvements.

Simon told Members that the public could report potholes via the Council's website and the safety inspection procedure was also available to view. Members were also advised that potholes are identified by Officers walking around the borough.

Members also held a discussion regarding the winter maintenance programme and the issues that members of the public had around grit salt and the availability of it during the winter months. Members agreed that in some areas of the borough the use of grit salt was misused. Suggestions were made that ward Members could work with the Council to speak to local residents about the correct usage of grit salt.

It was noted that the winter maintenance Facebook page was very popular amongst residents of Blackburn with Darwen and that maybe something similar could be introduced around the re-surfacing/dressing of roads to keep the borough informed.

As a result of discussions regarding the dressing/re-surfacing of roads Members requested the following information from Simon:

1. How the Council's road surfacing, in terms of quality, measures up to previous years?
2. How the Council's road surfacing, in terms of quality, measures up to other authorities?
3. Have we improved our standards compared to previous years?

It was agreed that two additional task groups would be arranged, which have now been set up to:

1. Receive information from Tony Watson & Steve Morris in relation to Environment on Monday 15th September 2014 at Bank Top Neighbourhood Learning Centre at 5pm.
2. Receive information from Tony Watson & Gary Johnson in relation to Public Protection on Tuesday 30th September 2014, Members Meeting Room, 5pm

It was also agreed that two site visits would be arranged:

1. For Members to view dressing/re-surfacing of roads
2. For Members to view the new LED street lighting that the Council were implementing throughout the borough (to be arranged in winter).