



**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
POLICY AND PERFORMANCE REVIEW COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY 19 MARCH 2013
COUNCIL CHAMBER, TOWN HOUSE, HADDINGTON**

Committee Members Present:

Councillor D Berry (Convener)
Councillor J Caldwell
Councillor J Gillies
Councillor J Goodfellow
Councillor F McAllister
Councillor P MacKenzie
Councillor J Williamson

Council Officials Present:

Mrs A Leitch, Chief Executive
Mr A McCrorie, Executive Director (Support Services)
Mr J Lamond, Head of Council Resources
Mr R Montgomery, Head of Infrastructure
Mr D Evans, Senior Environmental and Consumer Services Manager
Mr J Moffat, Enforcement/Trading Standards Officer
Ms G McMillan, Children's Services Development Manager
Ms L Young, Senior Manager, Adult Social Services
Mr K Christie, Revenues Manager
Mr P Vestri, Corporate Policy and Improvement Manager
Mr A Strickland, Policy Officer

Clerk:

Mrs F Stewart

Apologies:

None

Declarations of Interest:

None

1. CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTION PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Chief Social Work Officer had submitted a report giving an overview of the statistical information for Child and Adult Protection for Quarter 3 (2012 / 2013).

Linda Young, Senior Manager, Adult Social Services, presented the Adult Protection report. She advised that referrals continued to grow, increasing to 103 in January, 33% more than December 2012. Compared with January 2012, referrals had increased overall by 80%, with the volume of police referrals doubling. The geographical spread of the referrals was mostly clustered around the Musselburgh and Tranent areas and mainly involved vulnerable individuals and those with social problems.

Gill McMillan, Children's Services Development Manager, presented the Child Protection report. She advised that the number of children on the Child Protection Register had fallen to 57 children and young people in 45 families. The spread of registrations remained clustered in the Musselburgh, Tranent and Prestonpans areas and the predominant issues were parental alcohol abuse, domestic abuse and neglect. In January there had been 336 referrals to Children's Wellbeing, a 65% increase on January 2012. It was also reported that the recent Lime Survey results from Primary 6 and Senior 2 indicated that 36.7% of young people were taking on a carer's role across East Lothian.

The Chief Executive advised that this was a joint report compiled by the Chief Executives of East Lothian and Midlothian, Lothian Health Board and the Police. Previously, both authorities had produced statistics in a different way but were now closer together enabling more effective benchmarking and analysis. Joint East and Mid Lothian Adult and Child Protection Committees had also been established and statistics were being monitored at Officer level.

In light of a recent Scottish Government Consultation on Suicide, Councillor MacKenzie enquired if anyone concerned about an individual's mental health could contact the Adult Protection Team, or was this service only open to the elderly. Ms Young replied that there had been a significant rise in the number of Police referrals for people under 65 since the Police had changed their procedures. She acknowledged that there had been a significant rise in suicides in East Lothian and advised that her department was working with MELDAP (Midlothian and East Lothian Drug and Alcohol Partnership) with the aim of seeking intervention at an earlier stage in the referral process.

Councillor MacKenzie enquired if neglect was still the primary reason for children being placed on the child protection register and Ms McMillan replied that children suffering neglect were often in the same families where there was alcohol and drug abuse. Children were placed on the register because they were in danger and other factors increased the risk. She advised that 25 children were currently on the register and that the same children suffered as a result of domestic, emotional and alcohol abuse. Councillor Goodfellow requested further information on this matter and the Chief Executive agreed to explore what information could be made more widely available. She also proposed that a presentation on Adult and Child Protection could be given to Members at the next PPRC meeting.

Decision

The Committee agreed to note the contents of this report.

2. RENT ARREARS

The Executive Director (Support Services) had submitted a report to inform the Committee about how the Council is addressing the rise in Council house rent arrears and how the Council's rent arrears collection process and performance reporting compares to other Scottish Councils.

Kenny Christie, Revenues Manager, summarised the report stating that effective housing debt management was vital to moderate the risk of arrears to the Council increasing further. Early Intervention and a strong presence in the community were considered to be key factors in the arrears management strategy. A new Rent Arrears Policy had been formally adopted in October 2011, but the potentially detrimental impact of welfare reform could not be underestimated. Rent arrears currently stood at £1.3m and was still rising. Mr Christie outlined the changes to the staffing levels within the Rent Income team and advised that contracts for 3 temporary Rent Income Assistant posts would be extended for an initial period of one year. He also reported that new technology was being introduced into the Service with the purchase of mobile tablets and mobile chip and pin payment devices to allow visiting officers to take immediate payments from tenants in their homes.

Mr Christie reported that rent collection performance was below the Scottish average but research showed that not all Councils reported rent arrears in the same way, with legislation being interpreted differently. This made true performance comparison difficult, however, the Council's own trend analysis showed a decline in performance.

Improvement actions being taken forward included targeting resources into areas where arrears were higher, better use of flexible working and a review of direct debit payment frequencies. Other measures under consideration were a financial health check for all new tenancies and essential repairs only for tenants in serious rent arrears. His team would also work with those adversely affected by the welfare reforms.

Councillor Goodfellow hoped that the mobile chip and pin devices would be in operation without delay as payment of arrears was an important income stream for the Council. He also pointed out that no-one should be in arrears for a garage as garage rentals could be terminated if arrears accrued.

Councillor Williamson enquired if banks could provide basic bank accounts to those tenants who did not have a banks account and Mr Christie advised that tenants would be issued with bank accounts when, as part of the new welfare reforms, housing benefit would be paid direct to tenants.

Members also enquired about procedures for tenants who default on their rent in more than one tenancy agreement and Mr Christie outlined the relevant legislation.

The Chair pointed out that East Lothian rents were low compared to other authorities and much lower than in the private sector. It should therefore be made clear to tenants that arrears would not be tolerated. Mr Christie replied that there was no 'no eviction policy' and that evictions were being carried out.

The Chair also stated that it would be helpful in future to receive a breakdown of the numbers of tenants in arrears for each village and as a proportion of the total number for that area.

Decision

The Committee agreed to: -

- i. note the current position in relation to rent arrears in East Lothian and the positive steps being taken to manage rent collection.
- ii. note that a further performance update report will be presented at the mid-year point during 2013/14.

3. FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY AUDIT AND REVIEW OF OFFICIAL FEED CONTROLS OF NON-ANIMAL ORIGIN AND FEED ESTABLISHMENTS INCLUDING PRIMARY PRODUCTION OF FOOD AND FEED

The Executive Director (Services for Communities) had submitted a report to provide the Policy and Performance Review Committee with a summary of the recent Audit by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) on Official Feed Controls in East Lothian Council.

David Evans, Senior Environmental and Consumer Services Manager, summarised the report, advising that audits of Local Authorities feed and food law enforcement services were part of the Food Standards Agency's arrangements to improve consumer protection and confidence in relation to feed and food. The enforcement of feed law was a statutory duty on East Lothian Council discharged through the work of the Trading Standards Service.

The FSA had undertaken an Audit of the Council's feed enforcement arrangements in November 2012. The audit had lasted 3 days and involved interviewing management and operational officers involved in feed enforcement. A summary of this audit was circulated to Members. Overall, the audit had not highlighted any fundamental failings in the Official Feed Control work undertaken by Trading Standards. However, it did identify a need to review and refresh some procedures. Generally, Mr Evans believed that farmers were well aware of all regulations and where appropriate, had contract compliance schemes in place. Members of his team also conducted regular visits to farms.

Councillor Goodfellow enquired if the audit related to feedstuff sold to farmers or to farmers' own crops which were used to feed their animals. Mr Evans advised that it could be both. Trading Standards conducted a risk rating of feed manufacturers, but there were no such manufacturers in East Lothian.

Members sought further clarification from Mr Evans around the relevant legislation, Trading Standards procedures and the disposal of animal carcasses. Mr Evans added that more resources were needed at Government level to boost consumer confidence, especially in the light of recent revelations in the national press concerning horsemeat in supermarket products.

The Chair commented that feed control might only be a small part of the Environment team's remit, but, as East Lothian was a popular tourist destination with an acclaimed Food and Drink directory, it was nonetheless a very important function.

Decision

The Committee agreed to note the FSA Audit report and the content of the improvement plan developed by Trading Standards to address the issues identified.

4. ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME

Paolo Vestri, Corporate Policy and Improvement Manager, referred to the Annual Work Programme and highlighted the reports due to come to the next meeting. In relation to the report on transportation services, it was agreed that a scoping report would come to the April meeting. No new reports were added to the work programme.

Signed

Councillor David Berry
Convener of the Policy and Performance Review Committee