



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30pm to 6.45pm

6 December 2012

Present: Councillors Stephenson (Chair), Bradford, Brimblecombe, Button, Galvin, Gee, Lubbock, Manning, Sands (M), Stonard and Storie

Apologies: None

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED to approve the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2012, subject to the following changes to the recommendations on item 4:

1) Recommendation a) to read:

the council develops a scheme of accreditation with employers in the City who sign up to 'a living wage' **as part of the scheme currently being developed by the Council;**

and:

2) Recommendation e) to read:

within the Healthy City Programme the council **makes a priority of working** with partners evidence based solutions to address health inequalities in Norwich.

2. WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered and noted the committee's work programme and the forward agenda.

In response to a request from a constituent, Cllr Lubbock raised ongoing problems with the lifts at Normandie Tower as an item for possible inclusion on the work programme. The Head of property services was present and answered members' questions to clarify work that had already been carried out on the lifts and that future works had been planned. He confirmed that an independent consultant had been engaged alongside the fire service to provide recommendations toward resolving the

difficulties. It was clarified that whilst the equipment on site had been of the right specification, the problems stemmed from the installation not being up to standard.

Lift contractors Omega have undertaken to complete all recommendations and that manual winding gear had also been installed to allow the fire service to assist in the event of people becoming trapped. Once all recommendations have been carried out by Omega, the contract for ongoing maintenance is to be taken up by Otis lifts. Otis has local engineers aimed at responding to any emergency within acceptable timescales.

In response to further member's questions, the head of property services explained that a completion of works certificate had not been signed off and would not be until the remedial works had taken place to the satisfaction of the city council. During this time, retention monies were being held and the costs of the independent consultation would be recouped from Omega.

RESOLVED to ask the head of property services to provide an update of the works to scrutiny members to assist with any decision as to whether to explore the issue in future.

3. BENEFITS CLAIMS PROCESS

A role-play session then took place in which the executive head of business relationship management and the revenues and benefits manager played out a scenario typical of a first time applicant.

Following the session, the executive head of business relationship management explained that they had illustrated the process experienced by a person calling the council directly. This accounted for around 50% of claims, the other half being received via the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The revenues and benefits manager said that whilst the information contained in new claims from the DWP were of good quality, small changes of details were not so good, resulting in up to three hundred extra pieces of information received per day. As a percentage of that three hundred, approximately 75% result in recalculation of benefits.

In answer to a member's question, the revenues and benefits manager explained that many different options are open to customers when providing evidence for a claim, so as to make it as equitable a process as possible.

It was also explained that although decisions have always been made on the best information available at the time, lessons have been learnt from the backlog and as part of an ongoing process of continual improvement. It was highlighted that delays in processing can also occur as a result of customers who do not return documents etc. in a timely way and that this is difficult to factor into calculations.

Weekly meetings currently take place to monitor waiting times. These meetings will become fortnightly once times are below thirty days. Once the twenty one day target is being reached, meetings will be monthly.

The revenues and benefits manager said that initially the aim had been to clear the claims backlog through the use of additional staff, employed whilst the core team were training. Unfortunately the training took too much time away from the processing (three months is needed to be able to properly gain expertise) and as such was

suspended to allow all team members to concentrate on clearing the backlog. A system of 'lean processing' was then implemented, allowing new claims to be dealt with within target, whilst also reducing the backlog of older claims.

In response to a member's question, the revenues and benefits manager explained that assistance for people with filling in the claim forms was available face to face within City Hall and via two home visitors – although the aim to channel shift by encouraging use of an on-line application which was now in development.

The chair then suggested that recommendations arising from the meeting should be based around risk. The executive head of business relationship management said that risk management already takes place, but that it would be possible to make this work more visible to members. The executive head of strategy, people and democracy added that new risk management strategies and equality impact assessments have been put in place following the backlog.

RESOLVED :- that officers

- 1) provide comparative costs of contractors in clearing backlog versus employed staff if the team was resourced to the numbers that include the number of contracted staff;
- 2) provide detailed explanation of the specific issues that caused the backlog;
- 3) provide regular member updates from benefits board meetings;
- 4) provide monitoring feedback to members on the effectiveness of the face to face model
and further to;
- 5) review the process that developed the improvement plan and then further review the imp plan to see if it requires adjustment to sustain continued improvement

3. ROLE OF THE WARD COUNCILLOR – PRESENTATION

Given the time that had already been committed to the previous item, it was:

RESOLVED to take the ward councillor presentation at a later meeting of the scrutiny committee.

CHAIR