



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30pm – 5.50pm

26 May 2011

Present: Councillors Stephenson (Chair), Bradford, Grahame, Jeraj, Kendrick, Lubbock, Sands (M), Stammers and Storie

Apologies: Councillors Driver, Fisher, Gayton and Gee

1. INTRODUCTION FROM LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The leader of the council addressed the committee and said that she hoped scrutiny and cabinet would work collaboratively in the future. The council faced large challenges ahead including finding efficiencies in service delivery. Scrutiny would be a vital critical friend during this time.

RESOLVED to circulate copies of cabinet members and CLT / management structure charts to scrutiny members.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR

RESOLVED, with seven members in favour (Councillors Stephenson, Bradford, Grahame, Kendrick, Sands, Stammers and Storie) and one abstention (Councillor Lubbock), to appoint Councillor Jeraj as Vice Chair for the ensuing civic year.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED to approve the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 17 March 2011.

4. QUARTER FOUR PERFORMANCE REPORT

The head of strategy and programme management introduced the report which set out the council's quarter four performance 2010-11 and provided a set of headline areas that members could consider within the work programme.

In response to a member's concern regarding the fall of the planning service performance, the head of planning explained that challenging performance targets were set for the entire year and that the service was close to achieving them. There had been a dip in performance due to a reduction in resources but also an increase in workload and complex applications, for example Anglia Square. He also explained that performance was measured by national indicators which dictated that

planning applications should be determined within set timescales. These indicators could sometimes exaggerate service performance.

In response to a member's question, the head of strategy and programme management explained that regular surveys were used to compile customer satisfaction figures. He would look into the process which had caused concern when the member had attempted to make an online complaint.

A member raised concerns that void times were still high. She acknowledged that there were some exceptional properties which were difficult to re-let, however delays resulted in people waiting for a home and that it would cost the council in lost rent. She suggested that attention should be focused on how to help the voids service. The director of regeneration and development explained that there had not been a contractor in place to do major structural repairs. The voids figure remained high because there had been a core group of properties that remained empty until the major structural repairs could be completed. A new contractor was now in place and achieving nil days on some voids. This was achieved by carrying out any necessary work during the four week notice period (i.e. whilst the property was still occupied). He said that they were starting to see real changes and applauded the voids team and contractor.

A member said that it was important to match people to appropriate housing, for example allocating an adapted property to a disabled tenant where appropriate. This would reduce the number of adaptations made to properties, which previously resulted in duplication of investment. The director of regeneration and development informed members that this was often a result of the separate responsibilities held by Norwich city council and Norfolk county council. A recent secondment had been made from the county council to the city council to help reduce this problem and to align properties.

In response to a member's query regarding an apparent rise in antisocial behaviour cases, the director of regeneration and development informed members that a team was analysing the information available to understand why numbers had increased and the nature of the cases.

RESOLVED to

- 1) note the contents of the quarter four performance report; and
- 2) ask the head of strategy and programme management to review any specific problems with the online complaints process.

5. PROPOSED PROCESS FOR THE CONSULTATION ON THE PRIORITIES AND FUTURE SHAPE OF THE COUNCIL

The head of strategy and programme management provided a presentation to members on the proposed consultation exercise on the savings programme and suggested items for inclusion on the work programme. The presentation covered the current financial position; a range of workstreams to identify savings throughout the authority; and the proposed consultation timescales.

In response to members stating that the consultation should include hard to reach groups and young people, and that a 'participation threshold' could be applied, the

head of strategy and programme management said that officers were trying to make the consultation process as proportional as possible, without incurring significant expenditure. The head of communications and cultural services said that where specific proposals affected specific groups, they would be contacted directly.

A member suggested that the process should not be referred to as a consultation 'exercise' because it inferred that the council was just going through the motions. She also suggested that the principles set out on page 60 of the report should include active listening; encouraging people to put forward their ideas; and ensuring participants will know how their input will be used. The head of communications and cultural services said that a similar approach to gathering ideas was used in the last round of consultation and that proposals had been amended accordingly.

A member raised concerns regarding the cost of the consultation; whether including proposals would prevent people from putting forward new ideas; and whether a continual cut to services could lead to loss of validity of certain services. The head of strategy and programme management said that the expected cost of the consultation would be approximately £10,000 (including the cost of the citizens panel). He confirmed that a specialist research company would be used to co-ordinate the consultation and calculate the demographic weighting on the returns. A similar function would not deliver value for money if it was retained in-house. He also said that proposals would be put forward but that open questions would enable people to feed in their ideas; and that various options for service delivery were being developed (including new ways of working).

A member suggested the inclusion of text, referring to the consultation, within correspondence sent out from the council, as well as during phone calls with customers. Similar messages could be integrated into the answer phone message whilst customers were waiting to be connected. The head of communications and culture that the consultation would be promoted throughout the council's outlets such as the customer contact centre and tourist information centre. A member stated that the council's website would need to be fit for purpose to support the consultation.

Members said that the proposals should be simple, realistic and practical. It was considered important that the council should explain the budget constraint as well as the different roles and responsibilities of the city council compared to the county council.

In response to a member's suggestion to explore participatory budgeting, another member said that the role of the elected was to ensure that everybody was represented during decision-making.

RESOLVED to –

- 1) recommend that the following points are considered as part of the proposed consultation process:
 - to ensure that the process enables the consultation of as many people as possible - including hard to reach groups and young people
 - to consider the use of a 'participation threshold'
 - to avoid referring to the process as a 'consultation exercise'

- to ensure participants are informed of how their data will / has been used (to provide feedback on how the council came to the final choices, as well as to publish the outcome of any changes)
 - that proposals should consider whether they would result in loss of experience and experts in the future
 - to gather ideas and not just 'yes' or 'no' answers
 - to include electronic links to the consultation on emails and letters sent out as part of council's everyday business
 - the consultation should be simple, honest, practical, realistic and admit that it is driven by cuts
 - to be clear about the role and responsibilities of Norwich City Council and that of Norfolk County Council
 - ensure that the website is adequate to support the consultation
 - to learn from county council consultation
- 2) to view the consultation document at an additional meeting week commencing 4 July 2011; and
- 3) that all council members should receive a briefing on the consultation.

6. SETTING THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

(A copy of the draft work programme was tabled at the meeting)

The scrutiny officer introduced the report and explained the need to consider items for inclusion in the work programme.

RESOLVED to continue development of the work programme at the next meeting.

CHAIR