



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30 p.m. - 7.50 p.m.

10 September 2009

Present: Councillors Stephenson (Chair), Watkins (Vice-Chair), Blower, Bradford, Cannell, Driver, Fairbairn, Jeraj, Little (A), Offord, Ramsay and Wiltshire

In Attendance: Councillors Arthur and Waters

1. MINUTES

A member expressed concern that the minutes of the last meeting did not include a response to a question asked during discussion on the corporate improvement and efficiency programme indicating that the council would not be seeking any redundancies. The chief executive officer said however that whilst the council would hope to avoid the need to make any staff redundant it was not certain that this would be possible.

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 27 August 2009.

2. HEAD OF LEGAL, REGULATORY AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

The chair welcomed Philip Hyde, the newly appointed head of legal, regulatory and democratic services to his first meeting of the committee.

3. HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The project co-ordinator - housing improvement plan presented the report and referred to progress made with the housing improvement plan since it was last considered by the scrutiny committee on 16 July. He referred to measures being taken to progress projects currently shown as amber or red on the project plan. A bid had been made for a national management trainee to spend a six month placement on the housing improvement plan. They were also looking to undertake a service review on the progress made to date through Housing East.

In reply to questions the chief executive officer said that at the last Housing Improvement Plan Board a representative of the Audit Commission had indicated they were very pleased with the progress being made by the council. On this basis there was an expectation that the Audit Commission would not re-inspect until the

end of the process. Consideration was however being given to the possibility of asking the Regional Improvement Agency for a peer review at the mid point of the improvement programme. Self assessment was being undertaken through the key lines of enquiry. It would also be necessary to submit a self assessment plan to any peer review.

The director of regeneration and development answered questions about the way in which the Housing Improvement Board was contributing to the development of the housing improvement plan and gave examples of specific areas where assistance had been provided.

Discussion took place on the costs of administering the housing improvement programme with particular reference to the costs of administering the Board, the costs of employing an independent market research company and the costs of hiring accommodation in the Assembly Rooms for a staff away day. The chief executive officer explained that there was no cost attached to the Housing Improvement Board itself. The implementation of the housing improvement programme was carried out by officers funded from the housing revenue account. The director of regeneration and development said he understood that the costs of employing Plus4 for market research work to date was in the region of £20,000 - £30,000. Councillor Arthur and the chief executive officer explained the reasons for using an external company for this work. Councillor Arthur referred to issues of capacity within the council. The chief executive officer referred to the benefits of using an independent organisation for this work. The head of regeneration and development said that the benefits of the work done by Plus4 would become evident in future progress reports. The project co-ordinator pointed out that the status of tasks A.2 and A.2.1 had both changed from red to amber since the report had been written. The new deadline for completing both tasks was the end of November.

The director of regeneration and development said that the Music Room in the Assembly Rooms had been used for a staff away day because it had the space to accommodate workshop sessions. He said that arrangements had been made to engage with almost 300 staff over a range of venues over the next few months. He would however provide members with information on the cost of hiring accommodation at the Assembly Rooms.

Members asked questions about the increase in void times. The director of regeneration and development referred to work being done to improve the position. It would however be likely to take a few months for any improvement to feed through into the statistics. He said that the tasks were not shown as red because improvement measures had been put in place. Councillor Arthur pointed out that there had been a backlog of properties in need of significant repair at the end of last year. A review of choice based letting systems was also due to report at the end of the year. In the meantime however there had been a reduction in void times this month.

Members discussed the possibility of putting procedures in place so that repairs and other support issues were picked up as early as possible rather than only when a property was vacated. The director of regeneration and development said that he would include information on additional work on voids, including the work being done through the neighbourhood officers to identify potential problems at an early stage, in his next project report.

In reply to a question the director of regeneration and development said he was satisfied that there was sufficient capacity to deliver the housing improvement programme. Additional managerial capacity had already been provided. He did not anticipate any more major changes to services from the review of the staffing structure referred to in the report .

A member expressed concerns about the accuracy of some of the information in the project plan. A large number of the finished dates had passed in the section on voids but it was impossible to tell from the colour coding whether the dates had been missed. Where dates had been missed it would useful to see revised targets.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the report;
- (2) ask the officers to ensure that the colour coding on the project plan fits to the information given and that revised completion dates are shown when original targets have not been achieved'
- (3) ask the officers to provide more detailed information on voids in the next progress report including information on the work being done through the neighbourhood officers to identify potential repairs and other support issues at an early stage; and
- (4) ask the director of regeneration and development to circulate details of the costs of hiring accommodation at the Assembly Rooms for a staff away day to all members of the committee.

4. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE DATA

The director of transformation presented the quarterly performance data for the period April to June 2009. He said that some minor changes had been made to the data since the draft information had been circulated to this committee. These changes were reflected in the final version of the performance data which had now gone out to the Executive.

He referred to progress on the council's 53 priorities. 14 were now completed, 19 were green, 18 amber and 2 red. The red priorities related to voids performance and the development of City Hall which had been put on ice for financial reasons. He anticipated that the council would need to revise its priorities in the light of the corporate improvement and efficiency programme.

In reply to a question the chief executive officer said that she anticipated that the agreement with the Homes and Communities Agency which, amongst other things, would provide funding for the restoration of the Memorial Gardens would be completed shortly. She and Councillor Waters explained the basis of the partnership agreement which would give both parties an assurance that they were receiving value for money. The chief executive officer said that both parties were keen to conclude the agreement which meant that the council was not at a disadvantage during negotiations.

The chief executive officer answered questions about the improved planning performance. Although the number of major applications had reduced minor applications were continuing. The director of transformation said that information in relation to NI 86 on the per capita reduction in CO² in the council area was collected on a countrywide basis. He would check when this information would be published. Figures released this week however showed that the council had reduced its carbon footprint by 5.6% during the past year. Work on this project had started halfway through the year and the reduction had been achieved simply through awareness raising without significant investment. He referred to a number of bigger initiatives currently in the pipeline which should help secure further reductions.

A number of members raised questions about NI's 191, 192 and 195. The chief executive officer said that she would arrange for more information on these targets to be circulated to members of the committee. The chair referred to the need for notes in the comments section to provide fuller explanations of the performance against targets including whether targets were city or county-wide.

Members then asked a number of questions about individual indicators. The head of legal, regulatory and democratic services said he understood that, to date, returns from the electoral registration canvass was slightly better than at the same time last year. The deputy chief executive officer explained the background to NI 14 on identifying contacts within the council that could have been avoided. In terms of equality level 2 the deputy chief executive officer said that the council's single status proposals had been submitted to Unison headquarters. Further information had however been requested which would take approximately 2 weeks to collate.

The deputy chief executive officer referred to work being done to improve performance in terms of reducing the length of time taken to answer external telephone calls. She undertook to investigate a complaint that a councillor ringing the council on the external line after repeated calls to the councillor hotline had been unanswered had received an automated message that all lines were busy and had then been disconnected. Callers should be given the options of either continuing to hold or calling again later. She said that it would be possible to include information on response times to letters and emails tracked through the customer services software in future quarterly reports. She did not however think that information was available on the length of time taken to answer the councillor hotline. The chief executive officer suggested that it might be appropriate to review the operation of the councillor hotline.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the report;
- (2) note that the director of transformation will find out when additional information on NI 186 will be available and inform members accordingly;
- (3) ask that further information on performance against NI's 191, 192 and 195 is emailed to members as soon as possible;

- (4) ask the officers to consider the possibility of including information on response times in answering emails and letters in future quarterly performance reports; and
- (5) ask that the operation of the councillors hotline is reviewed.

5. SCRUTINY PANELS

The chair expressed concern that this report did not provide the information requested in terms of the establishment of scrutiny panels. The committee already held themed meetings when appropriate. The suggestion in the report for themed meetings alternating with regular meetings did not address the fact that the committee did not have sufficient time to deal with their current workload in 12 meetings a year.

The head of legal, regulatory and democratic services referred to the need to consider how best to harness both member and officer resources to best resource the scrutiny function. The chief executive officer however referred to a particular issue of resourcing for the next 6-9 months whilst work was being undertaken to implement the corporate improvement and efficiency programme.

A member referred to the need for the options for managing the scrutiny function, including the establishment of scrutiny panels covering different service areas to be included in a future report. The establishment of a series of panels would help councillors to develop expertise in particular areas and therefore perform more effectively. The chief executive officer said that the governance and democratic arrangements of the council had still to be reviewed. Councillor Waters referred to the importance attached to the scrutiny function. It would be possible to review good practice and the different models available once the corporate improvement and efficiency programme had been introduced.

RESOLVED to note the position and review the options for undertaking the scrutiny function as part of the review of the work programme for the remainder of the current civic year in November.

6. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered the scrutiny work programme and the executive forward agenda. Members suggested additional subjects for scrutiny as follows:-

- the implementation of the new procurement strategy;
- the NELM Initiative with particular reference to the winding-up arrangements - to involve Wensum councillors;
- making the night-time economy safe in Norwich in terms of multi stakeholder work.

The deputy chief executive officer pointed out that the procurement team were currently fully committed on the re-provisioning of the CityCare contract. She suggested therefore that any scrutiny work on the Procurement Strategy should be deferred until next year.

A member expressed concern about the number of motions referred to executive from council which were listed as unallocated in the executive forward agenda. He suggested that a number of these topics might be suitable for pre-scrutiny.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the report;
- (2) consider the suggestions for additional scrutiny topics further when reviewing the committee's work programme in November.

7. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC

RESOLVED to exclude the public from the meeting during consideration of Item 8 below on the grounds contained in paragraph 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

***8. DRAFT CORPORATE EFFICIENCY AND IMPROVEMENT PROPOSALS (PARAGRAPH 4)**

The director of transformation circulated papers on the draft budget savings proposals for 2010/2011 together with a summary of the projected key milestones/decision points. The savings proposals would be considered by the executive on 16 September.

Discussion took place on the potential staffing implications of the proposals. Councillor Waters said that the aim was to find as many savings as possible without redundancies. The chief executive officer said that expenditure had been reduced as much as possible this year in order to take the pressure of next year.

A member referred to the need to show the risk element against the proposed savings. The chief executive officer said it was recognised that some savings would be more difficult to achieve than others. She said that the only option already rejected by the executive was around the externalisation of services.

Discussion also took place on the form of the consultation on the proposals. A member referred to the need for this to be as open and transparent as possible.

RESOLVED to note the report.

CHAIR