



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30 pm - 8.50 pm

10 December 2009

Present: Councillor Stephenson (Chair), Watkins (Vice-Chair), Blower, Bradford, Fairbairn, Jeraj, Little (A), Offord, Dylan, and Wiltshire

In Attendance: Councillors Bremner, Waters, Little (S), Read and Wright

Apologies Councillor Driver

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the scrutiny committee held on 12 November 2009.

2. CITY CENTRE TOILET PROVISION

The committee considered the final report of the task and finish group on city centre toilet provision. The head of asset and city management pointed out that since the report had been written the toilet block at the bottom of Prince of Wales Road had been severely damaged by fire. He was currently looking into the possibility of an insurance claim. It was however possible that some of the money saved from the closures of facilities elsewhere could be directed to rebuild these toilets to an improved standard linked to the needs of the night-time economy.

Councillor Bradford and Watkins, chair and member of the task and finish group respectively, explained the background to the report and the reasons for the recommendations. They had concluded that current provision was not satisfactory. The council did not however have a statutory obligation to provide public toilets and there was currently no money available for improvements. On this basis they had recommended that the facilities at St Saviours and Tombland should be closed from the end of the current financial year in order to release monies to bring other facilities up to a better standard.

Councillor S Little commented that the Norwich Access Group were concerned that "changing places" toilets were provided for people with a wide range of disabilities unable to use standard toilets.

Councillor Bremner, executive member for community safety and cohesion, expressed concerns about the recommendation to close the toilets at Tombland. They stood in the centre of the triangle used for taxi marshalling and the taxi marshals had indicated that the men's toilets were well used on Saturday nights. Although the ladies facilities were less well used they were available on request. Councillor Bradford said that if these facilities were to remain open it was important that standards were improved. It would however be necessary to check the extent to which the toilets were currently used. The head of asset and city management said that the information that the toilets were little used was based on discussions with the city centre management partnership and the two security companies operating the taxi marshalling scheme. The cleaning company had also reported relatively low use. He did not however have any hard evidence of footfall into the toilets.

In reply to questions the head of asset and city management said that an officer group was already looking at the night-time economy. He suggested that this group should be used to look at the need for toilet facilities in relevant areas of the city. Any recommendations would then need to be submitted to the executive. He said that a further officer group would need to be established to look at the remaining city centre facilities against the new British standard. Details of the new standard had however still to be announced.

RESOLVED to recommend the executive that:--

- (1) with 4 members abstaining, the facilities at St Saviours are closed from the end of the current financial year;
- (2) the officer working party currently looking at the night-time economy be asked to undertake an urgent review of the toilet facilities in relevant areas with options being considered to include both temporary and permanent facilities and the ways such facilities could be funded, with recommendations being submitted to the executive for implementation as soon as possible;
- (3) establish a separate officer group to review the remaining city centre facilities against the new British standards when they are announced with schemes developed to make all facilities fully fit for purpose for inclusion in the future capital programme with appropriate revenue budget reserve. This review to include an examination of charging via private partners operating the schemes together with supervision and revisiting the community toilet scheme to re-test the benefits of that option. It was recognised that as part of this review the current siting of the Chapelfield provision might not be sustainable and alternative options may need to be considered.
- (4) in the interim the council should improve advertising of facilities;
- (5) the council should actively continue to publicise the availability of public sector provision through the parking planner and suitable signposting within the city centre;

- (6) the council should focus on reducing the anti-social issues that impact on the public conveniences;
- (7) the council should also ensure that some of the savings realised from the closure of facilities should in the short term be used to ensure that the remaining facilities have improved maintenance.
- (8) ask that the outcome of the review of the remaining city centre facilities against the new British standard is referred to this committee for comment prior to submission to the executive.

3. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL POSITION STATEMENT, CAPITAL FUNDING POSITION STATEMENT AND REVISED CITY COUNCIL AIMS AND PRIORITIES 2010 - 2012

The director of transformation presented the report which set out the context of the current savings proposals. He said that in terms of the general fund revenue budget although there had been some good news on the financial settlement there were still considerable risks at overall it was still necessary to save approximately £8.4 million pounds over the next three years and approximately £6.3 million pounds over the next financial year. The deputy chief executive commented on the capital funding position. She said that although the partnership arrangement with the HCA had provided capital funding there was still a small gap which needed to be funded over the next two years.

The director of transformation referred to the need to review the council's priorities in the light of the current financial position. A revised corporate plan would be considered by the executive in December. There would then be the opportunity for consideration by full council as part of the budget debate in February. The aim would be to publish the new corporate plan by the end of March 2010.

The chief executive officer answered a number of questions about the approach taken to identifying the current savings programme. This included a review of cost and staffing profiles over the council as a whole and benchmarking with other local authorities. Future cuts in public spending meant that it was necessary to explore all options including that of the shared services. The deputy chief executive said that the proposed level of reserves was based on a recommendation from the Section 151 officer taking account of the level of risk in the budget and the size of the budget. She referred to examples of risk in the current year including the first bus appeal. The position would be updated as the risks were determined.

A member pointed out that a number of the current budget savings proposals were irreversible. Given that the council's financial position could prove healthier than anticipated he queried whether the proposed savings went too far too fast. The deputy chief executive said however that further savings would be required in 2011/12 and 2012/13. Additional savings made now would reduce the requirement for savings in future years.

RESOLVED to note the report.

4. DISCRETIONARY CHARGING

The director of regeneration and development presented the report and circulated details of the current and proposed charges for those areas which the task and finish group had agreed should be considered by the full committee.

Council Rooms Hire

The halls manager referred to charges for the hire of St Andrew's and Blackfriars Halls compared to similar private sector venues such as Dragon Hall, The Assembly Rooms and the Open Venue. His gut feeling was that currently the halls were being used to between 40% and 50% of capacity. Not all events were however compatible. He said that one of the problems in letting the halls was the licensing restriction preventing amplified music. He would consider the possibility of making an application for amplified music earlier in the evenings. He also answered questions about income from bar takings in relation to hire fees. He said that the hire tariffs were used as guidelines.

The head of asset and city management said that there had only been 16 fee paying bookings for committee meeting rooms in the last 6 months. This was because the rooms were already well used for council meetings. The policy was that charges only applied where the organisation using the room was not affiliated to the council.

RESOLVED to accept the proposed charges.

Pest Control

Some members suggested that there was scope for a more dramatic increase in charges bearing in mind charges made in the private sector. The head of citizen services pointed out however that the proposed charges were already on the high side of those charged by other local authorities.

RESOLVED to accept the proposed charges subject to the outcome of discussion on the savings proposals for this area later in the meeting.

Dog Control

Discussion took place on the possibility of differential charging for non-city residents. The head of citizen services said however that there was rarely a need to return dogs to people living outside the city. Councillor Dylan said that he would prefer to see a dramatic increase in charges rather than reduce service levels. The chief executive officer said however that there was a possibility increased charges would be self defeating. The savings proposals were trying to make the service more viable by reducing the hours.

RESOLVED, 5 voting in favour and 4 against, to accept the proposed charges subject to the outcome of discussions on the savings proposals for this area later in the meeting.

Graffiti Removal

The head of citizen services said that this work was undertaken for private buildings on request. The proposed charges equated to a charge of approximately £30 per hour.

RESOLVED to accept the proposed charges.

Bulky Waste

In reply to a question the head of environmental services said that there was no evidence that an increase in charges for this service resulted in additional fly tipping. He said that WRAP had recently done a report indicating that the true cost of collecting bulky items was approximately £19 per item. The council would cover its cost with the proposed charges.

RESOLVED, 7 voting in favour and 2 against, to accept the proposed charges.

NCAS

The director of regeneration and development said that these charges had been the subject of detailed assessment by the executive approximately a year ago. An increase of approximately 10% had been imposed at that time. Charges would then be reviewed on an annual basis. The chief executive officer said that the executive were keen that charges should be affordable for local people and that any increases should be made on a gradual basis.

The NCAS manager answered questions about the age profile of current service users. She said that as far as she was aware very few units had been returned on cost grounds.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) accept these proposed charges;
- (2) ask that information on the number of people returning their alarms on cost grounds is emailed to members of the committee.

Housing Garages

The director of regeneration and development said that differential charges were already made for high and low demand areas, council and private tenants and people living outside of the city. In reply to a question the senior development officer said that a number of garages in high demand areas were currently empty because the sites had been earmarked for housing developed.

It was generally felt that charges for non-city residents should be increased beyond the 33% currently proposed to take account of the cost of car parking in the relevant areas.

RESOLVED to recommend that charges for out of city tenants are set at approximately 10% less than the comparable car parking charge in that area.

Pre-Planning Application Fee

The planning team leader explained the current charges for pre-application advice. The chief executive officer referred to positive feedback on the service from developers. Councillor A Little referred to the need to ensure that the council had the resources to continue to deliver the service when the recession ended.

RESOLVED to accept the charges.

5. COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The chair pointed out that councillor Dylan had replaced councillor Ramsay on the committee. She welcomed councillor Dylan to the committee and expressed her appreciation of councillor Ramsay's past contribution to the work of the committee.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED to note the future scrutiny workprogramme.

7. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC

RESOLVED to exclude the public from the meeting for consideration of items 7 and 8 below on the grounds set out in the relevant paragraphs of schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

***8. CORPORATE EFFICIENCY AND IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME - PROPOSED SAVINGS FOR 2010/11 (PARAGRAPH 4)**

The director of transformation referred to the draft report to executive on the savings proposals for 2010/11. He explained that consultation on the proposals was still ongoing and it was therefore not possible at this stage to make final recommendations on any amendments to the original savings proposals. The large majority of the original proposals were however likely to remain unchanged.

Councillor A Little expressed concern about the nature of the external consultation process. He felt that giving people a blank piece of paper on which to comment seemed to have led to a skewed response and he was not sure it would carry much weight in terms of what people actually thought.

At the request of the Chair the director of transformation tabled briefing notes on a number of the specific savings proposals which the committee considered as follows:-

Economic Development

Some members expressed concerns about how economic development would be resourced in the future and the mechanisms through which it would be delivered. A loss of 2½ staff from a section of 5 raised issues in terms of future capacity. There

was a need for a clear contingency plan for dealing with any unexpected problems arising in the future.

The assistant director city development said that future working at neighbourhood level would help align services. The chief executive officer explained the reasons for moving the marketing post to the overall communications function. The director of regeneration and development gave examples of how specific issues would be addressed in the future. Economic development work would be co-ordinated at assistant director level.

Sports Facilities

The head of community service explained the background to this review which had been started before the transformation programme. Consultation had been undertaken with sports clubs.

Councillor S Little expressed concerns about the position in Lakenham which had already lost the Lakenham Sports Centre. Overall this seemed a backwards step in the context of the 2012 Olympics and the tackling obesity agenda. The assistant director neighbourhood development said however that some facilities were being closed so that others could be provided to a better quality.

Operation Services/Pest Control

The assistant director neighbourhood development explained the proposals for this service. Councillor Read expressed concern about the proposal to discontinue the pest control service for rats. He felt that this was effectively privatisation of the service. He would prefer to see other pest control charges increased in order to fund a continuing service in respect of rats. The assistant director neighbourhood development said that other local authorities had previously discontinued this service and he was not aware of any negative impact in terms of public health in their areas. Councillor Read said that he was aware of problems in two London boroughs with inferior pest control services.

Cashiers

The deputy chief executive officer explained the proposals for removing the cashiers function. She said that people would however still be able to pay by cash at pay points or post offices.

She answered a number of questions about the help that would be given to people currently paying at the cashiers office. If approved the change would be well advertised including articles in Citizen and information provided through the billing process for council tax. Consideration was being given to reducing opening hours on a phased basis until the service was completely removed. It would be possible to look to increase payment facilities for some parts of the city if necessary.

Councillor S Little expressed concern about the whole process for developing the savings proposals. The information provided to this committee was incomplete and some papers had not been tabled until the meeting. This did not allow for proper scrutiny. A final decision was to be made by the executive the following week but the report was marked "to follow" on their agenda and was still not available.

Councillor Waters, executive member for corporate resources and governance, pointed out however that this was part of a longer term process and the timetable had been constrained by circumstances. The chief executive officer said that the only information still awaited was the modifications to the original proposals which were relatively few.

The chair commented on the limited resources allocated to scrutiny which had made it difficult to scrutinise the savings programme. The whole issue of discretionary charging should have been dealt with at a task and finish group if resources had been available. A lot of information had been provided during the meeting which had made scrutiny more difficult. In addition a number of members did not feel they had been involved in the process. This had not been helped by the decision not to allow a representative of the scrutiny committee to be a member of the corporate improvement and efficiency programme board.

The head of legal regulatory and democratic services said that the savings proposals were a matter for the executive subject to overview and scrutiny by this committee. The decision made by the executive would however set parameters for the budget proposals to be considered by full council in February. This would provide an opportunity to challenge the pre-conceptions but not the operational decisions.

RESOLVED to ask the executive to take into account the following comments when making a decision on the savings proposals:-

- (1) this committee is concerned about the implications of the proposed savings proposals on the provision of the economic development function in the future with particular reference to the need for a contingency plan for responding to any unexpected events;
- (2) the committee is concerned about the proposal to withdraw the pest control service in respect of rats and would like to receive conclusive evidence that this would not have a detrimental impact on public health before a final decision is taken. They would also like consideration to be given to the possibility of increasing charges for other pest control services in order to fund a continued service in respect of rats.

***9. SAFER NORWICH PARTNERSHIP SIX MONTHLY PERFORMANCE DATA**

The head of community services presented the report and referred to the work being done by the Safer Norwich Partnership. Overall there was good news in terms of levels of crime within the city. He commented on a proposal to restructure the Safer Norwich Partnership with the City of Norwich Partnership in order to involve a greater range of partners in some of the more stubborn crime areas.

He updated members on the effect of targeted work undertaken to date to address issues of anti-social behaviour in the Castle Gardens. The latest information from the police indicated that problems had reduced. Proposals for some physical works in the gardens were currently being developed in conjunction with partners and young people.

In reply to a question the head of community service said that hate crime was still monitored by the council and he could provide information on request. He said that

the executive had recently endorsed a multi-agency protocol and appropriate training would be provided to staff.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the report;
- (2) note the information on current SNAP priorities and ask the head of community service to include information on performance in dealing with these priorities in his next report.

CHAIR