



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16:30 to 18:15

15 October 2015

Present: Councillors Wright (chair), Maxwell (vice chair), Bogelein, Herries (substitute for Coleshill), Grahame, Haynes, Manning, Packer, Peek Raby, Ryan, Sands (S) and Schmierer

Also present: Councillor Waters

Apologies: Councillor Coleshill

1. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 17 September 2015.

3. Scrutiny committee work programme 2015 -2016

The chair updated the committee on the work programme. Discussion ensued, during which the following points were made:

- There would be a chance for the committee to have some input into the neighbourhood model as a part of the update on the recommendations from the scrutiny review of building social inclusion and capital in Norwich – which would be taken at the meeting on 12 November.
- Interest was expressed in setting up a task and finish group to examine creative ways to develop income streams for the city council. It was stressed that this would need to be member-led, but support would be received from the organisation.
- Discussion of income generation led to the suggestion of involving co-operatives in this work. The idea was to hold a half-day seminar for senior staff and officers to provide clarification around the way in which they work.

- It was agreed for a seminar to be arranged around cooperatives and that the chair and Councillor Bogelein would develop this.
- It was suggested that it may be worth inviting Lambeth, Oldham or Plymouth councils to the meeting to discuss their work around cooperatives.
- The government housing programme was also raised; in particular, concern was mentioned around a lack of detail regarding the ways in which it could affect local authorities.

RESOLVED to:-

- a) note the scrutiny committee work programme 2015 – 2016
- b) consider members convening a task and finish group to develop ideas around income generation
- c) arrange a seminar around cooperatives, with Councilors James Wright and Sandra Bogelein taking the lead.

4. Assessment of the corporate plan against the programme of the new government

The leader of the council explained that he would be discussing the central government legislative programme with the MP for Norwich North. He added that anything the scrutiny committee could tease out for examination at this meeting would be welcomed. The aim would be to provide an understanding of the fluid situation in which local government currently found itself.

Russell O'Keefe said that the picture of local government was changing all the time and that whilst central government had committed to their model of deficit reduction, many policy changes were still in development.

He added that the 1% annual decrease across four years regarding the housing revenue account would have a huge impact, changing the programme within the corporate plan. He added that full options would be available in the coming weeks.

Members raised concern regarding future funding of council housing and maintenance schedules. It was felt that any assistance to lessen the effect of any reductions would be very welcome.

Suggestions were then made by members regarding ways in which to deal with the potential for cuts affecting the availability and quality of council and housing association housing:

- The potential of giving social housing tenants the option to buy further services at an additional cost

- Extend the timescales over which improvement work would take place, thus spreading the cost
- Invite individuals impacted by any changes to attend the scrutiny committee meeting to gain some understanding of the effect that this may have upon their lives

He went on to add detail to proposed government plans for local devolution, explaining that an entirely different funding model had been structured around business rates. He added that the Treasury would, however, ensure that this would be cost neutral.

One member suggested that to mitigate concerns regarding a possible housing bubble, proper warnings would need to be given to those considering using the right to buy scheme.

Concern was raised regarding the localisation of business rates insofar as the introduction of local discretion could lead to a race to the bottom – as authorities may see reducing business rates as a prime political opportunity to attract new businesses. It was felt that as a national agreement via the LGA was highly unlikely, it would be vital for local authorities to work closely together around this issue. A member suggested that local partnership working was more likely to succeed.

The vice-chair said that given the scale of concern around the housing issue, it clearly required further work. She suggested this work would be best informed if it followed the spring budget announcement when further information from government would be available.

All members agreed that it would be useful to convene a briefing session for all councillors when further information became available.

RESOLVED to

- a) Invite constituents of Norwich to attend a future meeting of the scrutiny committee to explain the impact on their lives of the changes to housing funding
- b) Convene a briefing session (after the spring 2016 budget) for all councillors regarding the issue of housing funding cuts

5. Exclusion of the public

RESOLVED to exclude the public from the meeting during consideration of item *6 (below) on the grounds contained in the relevant paragraphs of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

***6. Draft new blueprint (operating model) and transformation programme**

A member suggested that it was important to engage the public to reach possible solutions in relation to the transformation programme. It was felt vital to encourage participation in public consultation and it was also suggested that the scrutiny committee have a view of the consultation document prior to its release.

The leader of the council said that the consultation represents an opportunity to widen the debate and allows individuals to suggest potentially better alternatives.

Russell O'Keefe explained that the consultation document was in the process of being finalised by the communications team and was due to go live in the week following the meeting. As such, he stressed that it was unlikely that the scrutiny committee could have sight of it prior to its release.

In response to a member's question Russell O'Keefe explained that the consultation was the start of a discussion with the people of the city regarding the role of the city council. He added that it was an initial gathering of views and that further engagement opportunities for public response would be examined beyond this single consultation.

Members agreed that it was important that all councillors engage in the conversation with their constituents and encourage them to look at specific reports, attend meetings, and engage at every level. It was felt essential that councillors clearly communicate all opportunities available to members of the public to attend meetings and potentially shape policy.

It was suggested that Citizen Magazine be used to explain tough choices facing the city council to allow the people of the city to understand what is happening in the face of cuts from central government.

RESOLVED to ask the city council's communications team to publish articles in citizen magazine which highlight and explain the many tough choices the council faces in light of continued cuts.

CHAIR