



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30 p.m. - 7.40 p.m.

13 November 2008

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

Also present: Councillors Morphew, Arthur and Sands

Apologies: Councillor Bradford and Gihawi

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Jeraj declared a personal interest in Item 11 below - Economic Development Partnership Working with the UEA - as a student at the UEA. Councillor Watkins declared a personal interest in the same item as an employee of the UEA and Councillor Fairbairn declared a personal interest in the item as an employee of the Institute of Food Research.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 9 October 2008.

3. HOUSING RENT ARREARS

The Arrears and Rents Manager presented the report and referred to the progress made to date in reducing rent arrears. He answered a number of detailed questions about the current improvement plan and other initiatives. He referred to liaison with other organisations in relation to the provision of money advice.

A member asked whether it was worth considering re-opening the Area Housing Offices to make it easier for tenants to pay their rents. The Arrears and Rents Manager said however that the rent arrears figures did not indicate any direct correlation between the closure of the Area Housing Offices and increasing rent arrears. The Deputy Chief Executive Officer pointed out that there were a number of ways in which people could pay their rent. Consideration was currently being given to the possibility of providing more opportunities for people to pay online.

A member said that, whilst he welcomed the progress to date in reducing rent arrears, he would have liked to have seen more detailed/specific outcomes, including broad figures, shown against the completed actions listed in Appendix 1.

Discussion also took place on the work being done to identify people likely to fall into rent arrears, including hard to reach groups, so that preventative action could be taken. A member commented on the costs of undertaking eviction proceedings. It was necessary to try and avoid the need for re-possession proceedings wherever possible.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the work undertaken to reduce rent arrears and congratulate the officers involved on their achievement;
- (2) ask the Head of Neighbourhood and Strategic Housing to submit a further report in six months to include:-
 - information on the ways in which people are able to pay their rent;
 - the work being done to identify people at risk of falling into arrears before arrears occur;
 - more detailed/specific outcomes, including broad figures where appropriate, in relation to previously completed outcomes.

4. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

The Head of Neighbourhood and Strategic Housing presented the report and answered a number of questions about the impact of Choice Based Lettings on void times and the work undertaken to ensure the accessibility of the Home Options Scheme to all applicants. She said that the scheme had been subject to a full Equality Impact Assessment. It was the first scheme to go live on digital TV and work was being undertaken to promote this facility to the elderly. A quarterly newsletter was being produced and customer satisfaction surveys would be undertaken.

The Head of Neighbourhood and Strategic Housing said that there was no limit to the number of properties a person could view. Information on the criteria for the gold, silver and bronze categories of applicant were included in the scheme user guide. This information was also included in the Guide for Councillors which could be re-issued if required.

A member said that he was aware of cases where applicants had been shortlisted for several properties but not had been offered housing. He was concerned about the demoralising impact of this experience on potential tenants. The Head of Neighbourhood and Strategic Housing said that normally people eventually obtained a property. Multiple lettings were arranged in order to reduce void times. She would however look into the issue.

Councillor Arthur pointed out that the Council Homes Option Service had recently been cited as good practice nationally and had just been nominated for an E Government Award.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the report and welcome the reduction in void turnaround times in Council houses;
- (2) ask the Head of Neighbourhood and Strategic Housing to -
 - re-issue the Councillor Guide on the Home Options Scheme;
 - look into the extent of the problem of people continually just losing properties and report back to a future meeting.

5. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE DATA

The Director of Transformation presented the report and referred to the performance data for the second quarter of 2008/09 which was to be considered by the Executive on 26 November. He said that there had been some updates since the report had been prepared for this Committee. The format of the report was still being developed and any comments from this Committee would be welcome. He said that of the 53 performance indicators 6 were currently assessed as red, 25 as amber and 22 as green. He commented on the emerging impact of the economic downturn which was starting to have an impact on the Council as well as the City.

The Director of Transformation together with the Deputy Chief Executive Officer and the Director of Regeneration and Development then answered a number of detailed questions about current performance in different areas and the action being taken where problems had been identified. The Deputy Chief Executive Officer said that a number of the capital projects currently shown as red would become amber or green once funding had been identified through the Asset Disposal Programme. The Director of Regeneration and Development explained the current position in respect of the projected overspend on the Memorial Gardens.

A member said that it would be useful for anticipated finish dates to be shown against projects shown as amber or red. The data should also indicate where projects shown as green had already been completed. The Director of Transformation said that he would also look to include information on proposed remedial action on projects shown as red. He would also ensure that the data on missed refuse collections by CityCare included in future reports indicated whether the data related to the missed collection of a single bin or the missed collection for a whole street.

RESOLVED to note the report and consider further the impact of the economic downturn and the data for missed refuse collections in the context of the next quarter's report.

6. SAFER NORWICH PARTNERSHIP

The Head of Community Services presented the report and referred to the work being done by the Safer Norwich Partnership at both neighbourhood and citywide level. He answered a number of questions about the area covered by the Partnership and the strategy partners. The joint RAP arrangement with Broadland and South Norfolk was however currently under review now that the Police were operating on a district basis.

The Community Services Manager explained how the Safer Norwich Partnership targets were set. Some targets were set nationally and baseline information had still to be confirmed. The national targets were supplemented by locally agreed targets where baseline information was already available.

The Head of Community Services circulated a paper setting out possible options for more detailed review of the Safer Norwich Partnership by the Scrutiny Committee. A member suggested that it would be appropriate for this Committee to look at specific issues where problems were continuing despite interventions. A possible example of this would be the forthcoming review of the Castle Gardens. The Scrutiny Officer pointed out that whilst this type of issue might be identified through the Councillor Call for Action the Councillor Call for Action was a separate requirement and did not only relate to crime and disorder issues. He suggested that the Committee should also consider whether it wished to monitor performance data on a regular basis.

The Chair queried the possibility of monitoring SNAP priorities. The Head of Community Services suggested that it might be sensible to review recurring priorities.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the report;
- (2) review the audited Safer Norwich Partnership performance indicators on a six monthly or annual basis and ask the Scrutiny Officer, in liaison with the Head of Community Services, to timetable this work into the Scrutiny work programme.

7. NORFOLK COUNTY STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL

RESOLVED to note that a training event for members of this Panel was to be held on 28 November 2008.

8. NORFOLK HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

RESOLVED to note that Councillor Bradford had nothing to report from this Committee.

9. WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED to agree the Scrutiny Work Programme subject to the inclusion of provision for the further report on Rent Arrears and the review of the Safer Norwich Partnership performance indicators.

10. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED to exclude the public from the meeting during consideration of Item 11 below on the grounds contained in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

***11. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP WORKING WITH THE UEA (PARAGRAPH 3)**

(Professor David Richardson, Dean of the Faculty of Science and Dr. John Carter, Head of Enterprise and Commercialisation attended the meeting for this item).

Professor Richardson gave a presentation on the proposals to establish a GAC on the Norwich Research Park and how this would link to the Enterprise Centre proposed for Earlham Hall. He answered a number of questions about the type of research to be undertaken at the GAC. This research would focus on plants and small organisms and would not involve animal experimentation. The Centre would be looking to use natural bio-diversity rather than genetic modification. The research would then drive job creation through the Enterprise Centre. Dr Carter referred to the types of jobs to be created. The provision of more skilled graduate employment would release unskilled jobs currently occupied by graduates. The Centre would also provide an opportunity to offer more entrepreneurial support to students.

Professor Richardson and Dr Carter also answered questions about the proposals for using Earlham Hall to house the Enterprise Centre. They confirmed that public access to the Hall would be maintained. The School of Law would be relocated to an alternative site closer to the Education Faculty.

(Professor Richardson and Dr Carter left the meeting at this point).

The Director of Regeneration and Development presented his report and referred to the two proposals to be considered by the Executive on 26 November 2008. He explained the potential benefits to the Council of disposing of Earlham Hall to the UEA for use as an Enterprise Centre. It would also provide the opportunity for engagement with the local business community through one focal point and maximise the chances of the research being developed locally and the creation of local jobs. Councillor Morphew said he accepted the need to ensure that the proposals were properly explained to the public. He said that he would ensure that as much of the item as possible was taken in public at the Executive.

RESOLVED to support the recommendations to the Executive relating to the potential disposal of Earlham Hall to the UEA for the development of an Enterprise Centre and the provision of capital funding from the LEGI programme to provide grant aid to the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council for the GAC.

CHAIR