



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30 p.m. – 7.00 p.m.

09 April 2009

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

Apologies: Councillors Cannell, Gihawi, and Offord

Also Present: Councillors Arthur and Brociek-Coulton

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED to –

- (1) agree the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2009 subject to it being noted that some of the declarations of interest on the item on Earlham High School had related to employment with Norfolk County Council rather than employment/association with the UEA;
- (2) agree the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2009; and
- (3) note that a street meeting on the Castle Gardens is to be held between 12 noon and 3.00 p.m. on Saturday 18 April.

2. DRAFT POLICY ON DECOMMISSIONING COUNCIL HOUSING

(Terry Adkin, Alison Lowe and Geoff Lowe of the Citywide Board attended the meeting for this item.)

The Senior Development Officer (Enabling) presented the report and referred to the draft policy for the decommissioning of council housing which had been considered by the Executive on 4 March 2009. He also outlined the suggested amendments being put forward by the ad hoc working party of the Citywide Board.

The Senior Development Officer and Director of Regeneration and Development answered a number of detailed questions about the practical application of the list of factors to be taken into account when making a decision to decommission a property(s). The majority of sites that came forward for decommissioning were likely to be identified through the asset management strategy which was one of a number of documents that related to the decommissioning policy.

A member referred to the need to ensure that adequate arrangements were made for coordinating any decommissioning scheme. The Senior Development Officer said that a lead officer would be appointed to coordinate/project manage all decommissioning schemes. A dedicated Resettlement Officer would also be identified for all schemes although the exact arrangements would differ depending on the individual decommissioning proposal including the number of properties involved. The Resettlement Officer might be someone from within existing staff or from another area.

A member suggested that it might be useful to include more detailed information on the amounts of the various compensation payments available to persons affected by decommissioning schemes. The Senior Development Officer pointed out however that the amounts involved were changed on an annual basis. He would however look into the possibility of incorporating this additional information in a glossary to the decommissioning policy.

A member raised concerns that whilst tenants underoccupying their homes would be encouraged to move to smaller properties on a voluntary basis they would still be able to bid for or be allocated a property of the same size and type as that already occupied. The Senior Development Officer said that the choice based letting system agreed by the Greater Norwich Housing Partnership made provision for someone being decanted to bid for a property of the same type and size as that already occupied. He would need to check whether this could be unilaterally amended in Norwich. Members expressed mixed views about whether a change in property was, in any event, appropriate.

RESOLVED to support the proposed decommissioning policy subject to the following comments:-

- (a) asking that the section on the appointment of a Resettlement Officer is clarified to avoid giving the expression that an appointment might not be made if resources did not allow;
- (b) suggesting that a glossary is added to the policy to provide more detailed information on the levels of compensation payments available to persons affected by decommissioning; and
- (c) recording that some members have reservations about the policy of allowing tenants underoccupying properties to bid for a property of the same size and type as that already occupied if being decanted.

3. COUNCILLOR WILTSHIRE

The Chair welcomed Councillor Wiltshire to his first meeting of the Committee.

4. FUTURE BURIAL PROVISION FOR NORWICH

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services presented his report and referred to some of the options for meeting future needs for burial provision in Norwich. He was assuming that today's meeting would scope how the Committee wanted to tackle the issue.

A member referred to the emotive nature of this issue and suggested that it might be appropriate to establish a small working party of three or four members to look at the options in more detail. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services confirmed that he could provide Officer support to facilitate a Task and Finish Group on this issue. A member referred to the need for any Task and Finish Group to take account of the different needs of different religious groups and the environmental implications of the options. Other members commented on the need for the Task and Finish Group to consider the possibility of using land outside of Norwich. The Group should also consider the preparation of a Management Plan for the cemeteries in terms of utilising assets to their best advantage.

The Committee then discussed the four operational proposals for maximising the limited space available at the Earlham and Rosary Cemeteries in terms of Option A which were to be considered by the Executive on 22 April 2009. A number of members expressed concerns about the proposal to reduce the period for the exclusive right of burial from 50 to 25 years. This could result in additional emotional and financial stress to families in terms of renewals. In reply to a question the Head of Legal and Democratic Services said that it would, subject to the agreement of the Executive, be possible to defer this decision for a few months to allow for the issues to be considered by the Task and Finish Group.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the report;
- (2) establish a Task and Finish Group comprising Councillors Bradford, Driver, Ramsay and Wiltshire, to look at the wider issues relating to future burial provision in Norwich; and
- (3) ask the Executive to defer a decision on the proposal to reduce the period for the exclusive right of burial to 25 years to allow the issue to be considered by the Task and Finish Group taking into account the concerns raised by this Committee.

5. COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services presented the report and referred to the proposed protocol for dealing with Councillor Calls for Action in Norwich. He pointed out however that there were already a number of ways Councillors and members of the public could raise issues with the Council. The Councillor Call for Action was intended to be used only as a last resort when all other avenues had been exhausted.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services together with Councillor Waters, Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance, then answered a number of questions about how they would expect the protocol to operate in practice. A member expressed concerns about the potential implications in terms of the Scrutiny Committee's workload. Councillor Waters said however that he would not expect the power to be used much in practice because of the alternative avenues available. It was likely that it might be best used in the context of issues relating to Council partners.

RESOLVED to endorse the Councillor Call for Action protocol for submission to the Executive.

6. REPORTS BACK FROM TASK AND FINISH GROUPS

The Committee received reports in respect of the following Task and Finish Groups:-

Allotments

The Chair said that Councillor Bearman, Chair of this Group, was concerned about a lack of progress. She understood that requests for information were still outstanding. The Director of Regeneration and Development undertook to pursue the matter.

Cycling

Councillor Jeraj reported on the work being undertaken by this Group. They would be meeting again in two weeks time when they would be looking at an Action Plan for improving cycling provision in the City.

City Centre Toilet Provision

Councillor Bradford reported on the work being undertaken by this Group. One of the major issues was a lack of budget provision. They were however examining what could be done in the short term within the maintenance budget.

RESOLVED to note the reports.

7. NORFOLK COUNTY STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL

The Chair said that the next meeting of this Panel would be held on 20 April 2009.

RESOLVED to note the position.

8. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED, having considered the future Scrutiny work programme to -

- (1) cancel the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee scheduled for 21 May 2009; and

- (2) ask that the quarterly performance data, otherwise due to have been considered at this meeting, is emailed to members of the Scrutiny Committee for comment prior to its submission to the Executive.

CHAIR