



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30 pm - 6.30 pm

12 November 2009

Present: Councillors Stephenson (Chair), Watkins (Vice-Chair), Bradford, Driver, Fairbairn, Gihawi, Jeraj, Offord, Ramsay and Wiltshire

In Attendance: Councillors Arthur and Waters

Apologies: Councillors Blower, Cannell and Little (A)

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the scrutiny committees held on 15 and 22 October 2009.

2. HOUSING AND IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME - PROGRESS

The project coordinator - housing improvement plan presented the report. He said that further to the committee's discussion at a previous meeting work to develop outcomes was being undertaken in consultation with tenants and leaseholders. This information would then be incorporated into future reports. He outlined the progress made to date against each of the Audit Commission's key recommendations. He said that progress was also being made with the self assessment of different service areas. The key lines of enquiry would be used as a tool to assess progress towards achieving a one star service by April 2010. It was also hoped that a peer review of progress would be undertaken in March 2010.

The project coordinator - housing improvement plan together with the acting neighbourhood services manager and the project manager for improvement then answered a number of questions about individual aspects of the work being done. The project coordinator - housing improvement plan said that the three tenant and councillor workshops held to date had been very successful and a fourth was already being planned. Feedback from the workshops held to date was being collated and would be circulated to staff and councillors. He would like to see the workshops continued in the future as part of the continual improvement process. He explained that the knowledge cafés would function on a similar basis to a focus group.

The head of neighbourhood and strategic housing explained the proposals to bring call-outs to the home options team. This would enable prospective tenants to be better informed about a property before they visited. She also explained the outreach service being developed for vulnerable tenants. This work was however still in its initial stages. She would be happy to investigate any specific problems.

The project manager for improvement said that about 150 tenants had been visited to date in the initial phase of tenancy audits on tenants who had not been in contact with the housing service over the past five years. These had identified approximately 6-8 tenants in need of additional support. The director of regeneration and development said that additional information on vulnerable tenants would be obtained through the new housing repairs and gas servicing contracts.

The project coordinator - housing improvement plan answered questions about the work being done to provide information to people whose first language was not English. Housing advice information was already provided in three key languages other than English. Work on tenant profiling would help to identify a need for information to be provided in further languages. Additional support was also available through INTRAN. Councillor Fairbairn expressed surprise that tenants were being asked questions on race and sexual orientation. The chief executive officer said however that these were two of the six strands of equality information the council was legally obliged to collect. Tenants were not however obliged to provide this information. She said that the council had just appointed a training agency to work with both staff and councillors in terms of the council's equality requirements.

Councillor Arthur paid tribute to the work done by staff in the housing department in achieving these improvements in such a short timescale. Some members of the scrutiny committee referred to evidence of the improvements in terms of a reducing number of housing enquiries within their wards.

RESOLVED to note the report.

3. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE DATA

The policy and performance manager presented the report on the council's performance in the second quarter of 2009/10 in terms of short term priority actions and projects detailed in the corporate plan 2009/2010, important national, local and best value performance measures and the CityCare and Steria contracts. He outlined areas of strength and areas for improvement against each of the main themes.

Councillor Waters commented on the need to revise the corporate plan to take account of the current economic climate. The revised plan would have supporting people through the recession as a strong thread.

In reply to a question the policy and performance manager said that the figures for NI187 on tackling fuel poverty were calculated once a year. Councillor Driver referred to the need for residents to be given information on the energy efficiency of the properties they occupied. Councillor Jeraj pointed out that private landlords were required to provide a SAP certificate for their tenants. The director of regeneration and development said that the warm homes initiative related to private sector properties. The council had an investment programme in respect of its own residential properties covering things like loft and cavity wall insulation and window and door replacement. Energy ratings were carried out when properties were vacated. The chair pointed out that this information would be useful for prospective tenants when considering whether to bid for a property under choice based lettings.

Councillor Jeraj expressed concern that the warm homes scheme was shown in amber in terms of under-funding. The director of regeneration and development said that funding for part of the staff resource for this scheme had ceased in October. The post of warm homes officer was however funded until 2011. The council was currently in discussions with Renewables East for additional funding for the scheme and he hoped that positive news would be available by the next report.

The director of regeneration and development answered questions about the sports pitch review. He said that this was looking specifically at very low demand facilities and would cover options for changed management arrangements. In some cases grounds would be retained but would not be maintained as sports pitches. He also answered questions about the allocation of new monies from the partnership with the Homes and Communities Agency. He said that the agreement was robust and there was no risk to the council in the event of a change of government.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) note the report;
- (2) ask that energy ratings on council homes are provided to prospective tenants bidding under the homes options scheme; and
- (3) note that information on the outcome of negotiations with Renewables East on future funding for the warm homes scheme will be included in the next quarterly report.

4. CORPORATE IMPROVEMENT AND EFFICIENCY PROGRAMME

The chief executive officer reported progress with the corporate improvement and efficiency programme. Consultations with staff including formal consultations with the trade union had commenced. Consultation with the public and stakeholders would start the following week. A report would be submitted to the executive in December either modifying the current proposals or recommending their adoption and implementation.

In reply to a question the chief executive officer said that there was no legal requirement to report the proposals to the full council. The issue would however be discussed with group leaders. She pointed out that full council would have the opportunity to set the council tax and budget in February.

The chief executive officer said that the proposals for a refund in respect of concessionary bus fares was currently out for consultation but related to the next financial year only. It would not be appropriate to amend the current proposals for costs savings until a number of other variables had been determined.

RESOLVED to note the position.

5. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED to note -

- (1) the scrutiny work programme;

- (2) the arrangements for a pre meeting at 4.15 pm prior to next week's meeting on academy schools.

CHAIR