



## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**3.00 p.m. - 5.00 p.m.**

**21 January 2009**

Present: Councillor Stephenson (Chair), Blower, Bradford, Cannell, Driver, Fairbairn, Jeraj, Little (A), Lubbock (substitute for Councillor Watkins), Offord and Ramsay

Apologies: Councillors Fisher and Watkins

Also Present: Councillors Arthur, Brociek-Coulton, Morpew and Sands

### **1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Jeraj declared an interest in the item on Greyhound Opening/Goldsmith Street as a member of the Panel who would be hearing the associated personnel appeal.

### **2. GREYHOUND OPENING/GOLDSMITH STREET**

(Councillor Jeraj, having previously declared an interest in this item, left the meeting at this point).

(Mr Phil Watson, CBE, attended the meeting for this item).

The Chair explained that this meeting had been called to give the Scrutiny Committee the opportunity to consider Mr Watson's report on Greyhound Opening before it was submitted to the Executive later in the day. The Scrutiny Committee would however still be able to look at the issues further when ongoing investigations and any Audit Commission review had been completed.

The Chief Executive Officer introduced the report and Mr Watson presented the findings from his independent review of the Council's investigations into the Greyhound Opening/Goldsmith Street sheltered housing decommissioning and explained the reasons for his further recommendations.

Mr Watson then answered a number of detailed questions about his findings and the information on which he had relied in preparing his report. He also explained how he had tried to reconcile contradictions in the recollections of different people. Considerable discussion took place on his findings as to whether the Chief Executive and Senior Officers or members knew or should have known about the issue at an earlier stage. He said however that it was only important that they knew if they also knew that this was against Council policy. A member expressed concerns that the report did not refer to the fact that some Councillors did in fact know that staff were being allowed to move into accommodation at Greyhound Opening. The Monitoring Officer pointed out that these allegations were the subject of separate investigations by the Standards Committee. As with issues relating to the ongoing disciplinary action it was not appropriate for such matters to be pursued further at the present time. He referred to written advice provided to all members of the Council on the risks associated with discussing matters relating to the role of the Council as an employer.

The Chief Executive Officer answered questions about the current plans for filling key vacant posts in the Housing Department. The Council was currently seeking the support of recruitment consultants to advertise the vacant posts. However they could not fill the post of Head of Strategic Housing until the ongoing appeal process had been completed. She would ideally like to fill the posts with permanent staff although the proximity of local government reorganisation in Norfolk meant that it might be more appropriate to look at secondments. She said that there were currently no plans for any further restructuring until unitary.

A member referred to the importance of clarity in the political/managerial responsibilities within the Council at any time. The Chief Executive Officer pointed out however that the Executive was appointed at Annual Council. The names of portfolio holders and shadow portfolio holders were published on the Council's website. The decision making process through Executive was transparent and open. Corporate Management Team met weekly and also recorded decisions. Any changes to Corporate Management Team were reflected in the organisational structure on the website.

A member said that the report indicated that the Council acted promptly once aware of the issue at Greyhound Opening. She was however concerned that no-one was asking questions about progress on a project of this size over an eighteen month period. It appeared that there had been a political and managerial failure to monitor this scheme. Mr Watson's report simply reviewed evidence already held by the Council and did not throw up any new information. This meant that discrepancies and unanswered questions still remained. In the circumstances, irrespective of the possible Audit Commission review, it was still important for the Council to commission a full independent enquiry once the ongoing investigations had been completed. Other members however felt that more information was required on the scope of the Audit Commission Review before a decision of this nature was made. It was possible that the Audit Commission review would provide the full independent investigation still required.

Councillor Lubbock moved and Councillor Fairbairn seconded that the Executive should be recommended to commission a full and independent public enquiry into the issues leading up to the use of Council properties by Council staff, the adoption of an unapproved lettings policy for decommissioned sheltered housing and, in particular, the responsibilities of officers and portfolio holders.

Two members voted in favour and five against and the Chair declared the motion lost.

Some members considered that it would be premature to make a decision on the need for a further enquiry until more information was available from other ongoing investigations. The Chair reiterated the comments made at the start of the meeting about the Committee's ability to review the issues and commented that they would form part of the future work programme of the Scrutiny Committee.

**RESOLVED** to inform the Executive that this Committee generally endorses the recommendations made by Mr Watson subject to the identification of further areas of concern as follows:-

- a lack of evidence in some areas partly due to other ongoing investigations;
- some lines of enquiry, again partly because of other investigations, have not yet been followed up;
- the investigation has been carried out under a limited timescale;
- the process for communication within the Council including recording of meetings and conversations needs to be reviewed;
- the need for the monitoring of Council communications, whether electronic or paper to be reviewed;
- endorse the Executive decision already taken to cease the use of Council property for relocating staff;
- communications between portfolio holders and officers needs to reviewed.

CHAIR