



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30 pm - 6.35 pm

15 October 2009

Present: Councillor Stephenson (Chair), Watkins (Vice-Chair), Driver, Fairbairn, Gihawi, Jeraj, Little (A), Offord, Ramsay and Wiltshire

In Attendance: Councillors Arthur and Waters

Apologies: Councillors Bradford, Blower (other council business) and Cannell

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the scrutiny committee held on 10 September 2009.

2. CORPORATE EFFICIENCY AND IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME - PROGRESS

The director of transformation updated members on progress with the corporate improvement and efficiency programme. He said that work done to achieve savings against the current year's budget had resulted in a reduction in the estimated future savings targets. It was now estimated that the savings required for next year would be in the region of £6.5 - £7 million.

He referred to the timetable for consultation on the savings proposals. Work to prepare the formal consultation pack was underway. Staff consultation on the proposals had however been put back to the first week of November in order to avoid half-term week at the end of October.

The director of transformation also referred to discussions with Improvement East on issues such as the housing improvement programme, the council's use of resources and the capacity of the organisation to manage the transformation programme. The council had been awarded £200,000 to support this programme of work. He would be meeting with representatives of Improvement East the following day to discuss exactly how the money would be spent. The council was looking to use the money to support the peer review of the housing service, continuing programme management, implementing a corporate management performance system and member and officer training on financial and information management.

In reply to questions about the implications of the savings proposals on staff the chief executive officer said that members would be briefed on this issue at the same time that briefings were held for staff. She referred to various ways in which the council would support affected staff including redeployment, the staff assistance scheme and training provision.

RESOLVED to note the report.

3. DISCRETIONARY CHARGING

The director of regeneration and development presented the revised report and pointed out that the council received income of around £18 million a year from discretionary charges. This committee was being asked to comment on the emerging draft policy and to consider the extent to which it wished to be involved in reviewing specific charges.

The committee discussed the various issues to be taken into account when setting charges. Whilst it was necessary to be aware of the market rate there were circumstances in which the council might be looking to charge a reduced rate to Norwich residents. A member said he understood that some councils applied a cross service discount for their own residents. It might be worth investigating the introduction of a similar scheme in Norwich. The director of regeneration and development said that broader issues could be considered following the initial review of charges.

Members also discussed the future role of the scrutiny committee in considering discretionary charges. In reply to a question the director of regeneration and development said that there were some 525 discretionary charges imposed by the council although in some cases volumes were very low. It would however take a few weeks to assess the market rate for all areas.

Members generally considered that a small task and finish group should be established for a single meeting to decide which of the charges needed to be considered by the full committee. This consideration would take account of issues such as market rates, service volumes and the potential impact of the charges on Norwich residents where this information is available. The director of regeneration and development answered questions about the timing of any increases. This would depend on the nature of individual contracts on a case by case basis.

The planning development manager then explained the proposals for charging for pre-application planning advice. Detailed options were currently being worked up. It was however intended that charges would only apply to significant developments.

RESOLVED, 9 members voting in favour and 1 against, to -

- (1) ask the director of regeneration and development to circulate the full list of discretionary charges to all members of the committee;
- (2) establish a task and finish group comprising Councillors Driver, A Little, Stephenson and Wiltshire to consider existing discretionary charging areas where major changes are proposed and decide which of the charges should be considered by the full scrutiny committee;

- (3) consider the discretionary charges identified by the task and finish group together with the options for imposing charges for pre-application planning advice at a meeting of the full committee before the end of the year.

4. HOUSING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME - AUDIT COMMISSION REVIEW OF THE ALLOCATION OF COUNCIL HOUSES

The director of regeneration and development presented the report and, together with the head of the home options scheme, referred to the progress being made against the audit commission recommendations in relation to the allocation of council houses.

Some members expressed concerns that the report did not include detail of the outputs from the work done. The head of the home options scheme gave examples of outputs from individual actions. The director of regeneration and development said that the audit commission had indicated that they were happy with the progress being made to date. They had no proposals for a general re-inspection at this time although they were able to undertake spot inspections if they had any concerns. The council was however considering the possibility of commissioning a peer review to look at all aspects of the landlord service. He would however, in the meantime, be pleased to demonstrate the improvements to any interested members of the committee.

RESOLVED to note the report and congratulate the officers concerned on the improvements achieved to date.

5. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered the scrutiny work programme. The chair referred to a number of additional requests for scrutiny reviews as follows:-

- draft financial inclusion strategy and action plan;
- highways agency agreement;
- safety of the night-time economy in Norwich

She pointed out however that the safety of the night-time economy could be looked at when reviewing the Safer Norwich Partnership performance data.

RESOLVED to -

- (1) consider the safety of the night-time economy when reviewing the Safer Norwich Partnership performance data;
- (2) include provision for a review of the draft financial inclusion strategy and the highways agency agreement in the work programme for February/March 2010;
- (3) consider discretionary charging at the meeting scheduled for 10 December 2009 and ask the scrutiny officer to re-arrange the scrutiny training previously to have been undertaken on that date to an alternative date in December or early in the new year; and

- (4) ask the scrutiny officer to consider the possibility of moving some of the items currently scheduled for 19 November to 10 December in order to spread the workload more evenly between the two meetings.

CHAIR