



## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30pm to 7.05pm

24 October 2013

Present: Councillors Stephenson (chair), Boswell (substitute for Howard) Bradford, Brociek-Coulton, Brimblecombe, Galvin, Carlo, Grenville, Manning, Maxwell, Sands (S), and Storie

Apologies: Councillor Howard

### 1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

### 2. MINUTES

**RESOLVED** to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2013.

### 3. WORK PROGRAMME

Having considered the work programme circulated with the agenda it was;

**RESOLVED** to note the work programme.

### 4. WELFARE REFORM

Adam Clark from NCAN (Norfolk Community Advice Network) and Derek Player from St Martins Housing Trust were present for this item.

The cabinet member for resources introduced the report. He stressed that the work currently being undertaken on welfare reform was mitigation work in response to government policy.

Adam Clark spoke to the committee about the work currently being undertaken by NCAN on welfare reform. He said that the large amount of money which had been taken out of welfare resources had led to a rising demand for advice. He agreed that agencies were unable to replace the money which had been lost but highlighted the importance of advice services which would help those who were entitled, to claim the benefits they should. He said that NCAN had identified that locally the council might wish to look into the policy that made decisions on the under occupancy ruling unappealable and that students who were in halls of residence were being treated

differently with regard to the subsidy than those who were in private rented accommodation.

Derek Player spoke to the committee about the work of St Martins Housing Trust. He said that they engage with around 500 people per year who had a housing crisis and also with 50 – 100 rough sleepers for whom they tried to make a bed available for at Bishop Bridge House. He also said that as St Martins tried to help people to move into independent housing, there was a need to manage their expectations as many went onto live in shared housing as one bedroom properties were in demand. He explained that as more sanctions were being imposed on those who wanted to claim benefits, staff were spending more time on helping people to go through the correct procedure for claiming benefits.

The Policy, performance and partnerships manager highlighted some additional points to the report circulated with the agenda. He said that the Norwich city council housing stock was approximately 15,000 properties of which 2,500 were 1 bedroom properties. In April 2012, there were around 1700 people, who needed to downsize to a one bedroom property alone, in order to avoid a loss of benefit which meant that there were few options for those who wanted to move on from living in assisted housing.

In response to a member's question, Adam Clark explained that the spare room subsidy could be appealed against with relation to what constituted a bedroom, people having a disability and other exceptional circumstances. He said as the impact of these sanctions evolved, new cases were coming to light every day across the country. He clarified that with regards to students; the regulations stated that if a person was absent temporarily for up to 52 weeks, the extra bedroom at the student's home address may mean that their parents lose a percentage of their housing benefit. The Executive head of business relationship management agreed to look at the council's policy on this with regards to students and would bring information on this back to the scrutiny committee, via the tracker, at a later date.

A member expressed concerns that young people under 35 would only be entitled to the equivalent benefit for shared accommodation. She said that this was restrictive and could be dangerous, for young parents who may have their children visiting them. The Executive head of strategy, people and democracy reminded the committee that part of the housing needs assessment work was to look at the current demographic of Norwich and to consider current needs when building new accommodation.

A member asked Adam Clark and Derek Player what Norwich city council could do to help with their work. Both said that their organisations had a good relationship with the Council and that the public and private sectors needed to work closely together to ensure people had access to appropriate advice services. Adam Clark said that specialists were needed to help people navigate the claims system and that leaflets and websites were no replacement for face to face advice. The Policy, partnerships and performance manager said that the council was working with partners to encourage people to claim what they were entitled to, especially take up of Working Tax Credits for households without children. As many people as possible had been contacted with information and some people in the private rented sector had been visited personally about the total benefit cap.

In response to a comment from a member, Derek Player said that St Martins Housing Trust put their volunteers through a specific training programme. He said that it would be helpful if the Council promoted a wider volunteer training programme to ensure the volunteers were equipped to deal with specialised queries.

A member sought clarification on the council's policies surrounding bailiffs and evictions. The Executive head of strategy, people and democracy explained that as a public body, the council had a duty to collect money owed but debt collection policies were regularly reviewed.

Responding to further comments from members, the Executive head of business relationship management said that Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) could be used to help someone secure a privately rented property; however, there was no provision for the tenant to pay the council back. The cabinet member for Resources added that putting families into bed and breakfast accommodation was expensive and not always high quality. Bed and breakfast accommodation was only used in extreme circumstances and he said that 108 families have been helped to not be homeless due to intervention from the council.

**RESOLVED** that:

- (1) The Council reconsiders the spare room subsidy being appealable,
- (2) To ask that the Executive head of business relationship management look into current policy with regards to students and the spare room subsidy and ensure that both students living in halls of residence and private rented accommodation are treated equally,

And to:

- (3) To request that the council investigate with partners to see if any creative solutions with regards to flexible accommodation and ensuring single fathers are able to safely have children to visit and to record progress with this on the tracker,
- (4) To request that the council take into consideration resident's opinions
- (5) To request that the council work to encourage private landlords to take on tenants on housing benefit
- (6) To request that the council look at the housing need survey to ensure the council is meeting demands of the current demographic
- (7) To recommend that when the council sends letters to tenants, ensure that the tone is clear and will not cause them any distress
- (8) To note that children's clothes can be received and distributed by Homestart

- (9) To note the council's policies on evictions and using bailiffs
- (10) To support the work that encourages people in claiming the benefits that they are entitled to
- (11) That the Scrutiny committee welcomes the continuations of work around the living age
- (12) To note the role of the council in signposting and providing advice services; and
- (13) To ask the council to help with advertising volunteering opportunities.

(Councillors Bradford and Brociek-Coulton left the meeting at this point)

## **5. GREATER NORWICH GROWTH BOARD**

The Deputy chief executive (operations) introduced the report. A copy of the Proposal for dissolving the Greater Norwich Development Partnership was also circulated to members. He explained that Cabinet would be receiving the report which would include comments and observations from the Scrutiny committee.

In response to a member's question, he said that a business plan would be agreed by the constituent authorities and agreed by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and this would set the framework for how the new Greater Norwich Growth Board (GNGB) would operate. A single voice for Greater Norwich would allow the area to be properly represented within the framework of growth. He emphasised that the business plan would be very important to ensure collaborative working. There was a good track record of these local authorities working together and reminded members that the GNGB would focus on delivery and not policy. The cabinet member for Resources said that there was a higher chance of getting investments needed in place if the area has a united voice.

(Councillors Grenville and Maxwell left the meeting at this point)

A member expressed concerns that the delineation between the council and the GNGB needed to be very clear. The Executive head of strategy, people and democracy reminded members that the powers and responsibilities of Norwich City Council would remain the same and there would be no provision to delegate powers to the board. The GNGB would take the business plan and manage the delivery of it.

A member asked that the quorate for the board be raised from three members to five to ensure that every local authority had a say in the decisions made and that the timescales for objections to decisions were not long enough to allow a role for scrutiny or for full cabinet to discuss them. The Deputy chief executive reminded the members that the joint working agreement, including the timescales for decisions, was only a draft and more work was needed on this.

In response to a question from a member, the Deputy chief executive (operations) explained that if a matter within the business plan needed to be changed, this would be referred back to the local authorities to be approved. He said that the business

plan was a framework for local authorities to talk about cross boundary issues and the GNGB, when in operation, had no powers to override a local authority.

A member expressed concerns that a small group would be handling a large amount of funding and they felt that the role of cabinet or full council in developing the business plan was unclear. The Executive head of strategy, people and democracy explained that the most appropriate process, based upon local government legislation and decision making rules applied as usual, This meant that if something needed to go before cabinet it would or council, based on law. The member also asked for the public to be able to ask questions at the meetings and to ensure that there was not a lack of diversity or scrutiny within the process. The cabinet member for resources agreed that these points were useful to test the transparency of the process and would be taken away and considered carefully.

(Councillor Manning left the meeting at this point)

**RESOLVED** that the following points be taken forward for cabinet consideration:

- (1) To note that the scrutiny committee welcomed that the meetings of the Greater Norwich Growth Board would be held in public and would be subject to a consensus,
- (2) To ask that all local authorities were represented when decisions were made, possibly by raising the quorate of the meetings to five from three,
- (3) That the GNGB processes should allow adequate time for the scrutiny of decisions made and for the cabinet to respond, and at the appropriate time, to detail the input of scrutiny arrangements and the pre-scrutiny of constitutional arrangements,
- (4) To ask that the public be able to ask questions at the meetings of the Board
- (5) To note the concerns raised by some members that a small number of people were responsible for large amounts of funding and their regret that this money would arrive through the LEP which was an unelected body,
- (6) To ask that the annual business plan goes to full council or cabinet, whichever is most appropriate
- (7) To recommend that stakeholders were consulted at every possible opportunity and that appropriate consultation was carried out as the business plan was drawn up
- (8) To recommend that the Greater Norwich Growth Board be constituted in a way that complied with the Aarhus convention
- (9) To ask that the scrutiny committee were given all possible information on the business plan

The chair asked that scrutiny members send any further comments to the Scrutiny officer for collation. She reminded the members that additional comments would not be recommendations but would be forwarded for consideration.

CHAIR