

At a meeting of the MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY, 15TH SEPTEMBER, 2011 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Tate in the Chair

Councillors Anderson, G. Miller, Mordey, Oliver, Rolph, Stewart, S. Watson and Wood.

Also Present:-

Councillor Speding, Cabinet Secretary (item 4 – Response from Cabinet – 22nd June 2011 – Policy Review – Smarter Working).

Welcome and Introductions

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited both Members and Officers to introduce themselves.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Walker and Wilson.

Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Committee held on 14th July, 2011

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 14th July, 2011 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no interests declared.

Response from Cabinet – 22nd June, 2011 – Policy Review – Smarter Working

A joint report of the Chief Executive and Cabinet Secretary was submitted (copy circulated), providing feedback from the Cabinet meeting on 22nd June, 2011 which considered the Management Scrutiny Committee's Policy report into Smarter Working.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Chairman advised that the Cabinet Secretary had been invited to attend for this item of business.

Ms. Sue Stanhope, Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development reported that all actions detailed within the Action Plan were underway and on track with the relevant due date.

In relation to action (g) Ms. Stanhope advised, in response to Councillor Miller, that none of the redundant properties had been marketed as yet however an update would be presented to the Committee as and when appropriate.

In response to the Chairman, Ms. Stanhope advised that there had been a significant increase in the number of staff working flexibly and mobile working. The second of the touchdown zones was now up and running. Ms. Stanhope added that the exact numbers could be made available to Members if required. Ms. Stanhope added that sickness absence was reducing and that the Authority was on course to be under 10 days per annum per employee which was the lowest for a number of years. This had been achieved by a combination of operating different ways of working and the provision of significant support to assist staff stay at work/return to work to reduce sickness levels within the Council.

In response to a number of enquiries from Councillor Rolph, Ms. Stanhope advised that she would ensure Helen Townsend captured the views of Elected Members as part of the evaluation process of the impact of smarter working on the organisation and its staff.

Ms. Stanhope advised that in relation to action (f), the Equality Impact Assessment that was to be undertaken was in respect of employees and this would not pick up the point that was being made in respect of the accessibility of the Council's buildings. However Ms. Stanhope advised that she would raise this issue with the Head of Land and Property to enquire what Equality Impact Assessments were to be made in respect of buildings.

With regards to the rationalisation of buildings, Ms. Sonia Tognarelli advised that there was a global resource to support this however it was key to ensure that the minimum resource was used to refurbish or reinstate any building or site until it was understood what its future use was going to be and that financial expenditure was capped and not allocated to individual projects.

Full consideration having been given to the report it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the proposed actions detailed within the Action Plan appended to the report as Appendix A be noted.

At this juncture Councillor Speding left the meeting.

Policy Development and Review 2011/12: Approach to the Review and Setting the Scene – Money Lending

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) seeking agreement from the Committee in relation to the final terms of reference for the Policy Review into Money Lenders and Illegal Loan Sharks and also looking to establish background information and set the scene for the investigation that is to follow.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer briefed the Committee on the report and highlighted the facts and figures regarding UK Debt as detailed in paragraph 8 of the report and the types of loans and borrowing. Mr. Cummings circulated a copy of a proposed timeline for the review.

In response to Members' comments, Mr. Richard Reading, Principal Trading Standards Officer advised that there had been a review into high cost lending carried out and the outcome was that there would not be a change in the legislation in relation to it. The review had concluded that the markets for high-cost credit worked reasonably well. However one of the recommendations of the review conducted by the Office of Fair Trading was to promote best practice among suppliers.

In response to Councillor Oliver who enquired why Credit Unions had not become more popular, Mr. Reading stated that in his opinion, it was because those people that have some money they want to save, want the best return for their pound which a Credit Union would not give and those that have less money, are looking at the day to day expenditure and can not afford to save any of their income in order to build up a saving history to enable them to get money out at a later date.

Councillor Miller added that to his knowledge, more people were wanting to borrow from the Credit Union rather than save with it. The fact was that the credit charges from the Credit Union were not much lower than other credit providers as the costs of running the Credit Union were too high.

Members commented that the report was very informative and the topic was very appropriate in the current financial climate. It would be an interesting issue for the Council to look at in terms of the impact on the City.

Councillor S. Watson commented that most people were desperate when they went to loan sharks for money and that it was important that the Committee look at alternative options that could be put in place in order to help people if these were no longer available.

Following some discussion it was:-

3. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the title of the review be approved as 'At Any Cost: The Effects of High-Cost Credit and Illegal Loan Sharks on Local Communities'; and

- (ii) arrangements be made for the Committee to meet 1 hour prior to the formal meetings of the Committee in order to focus on the work of the policy review.

Policy Development and Review 2011/12: Approach to the Review and Setting the Scene – Self Regulation

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) seeking agreement from Members in relation to the final terms of reference for the policy review into Self Regulation and looking to establish background information and set the scene for the investigation that is to follow.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Mike Lowe, Head of Performance Improvement briefed the Committee on the report highlighting the objectives of the review, the workshop approach and the timetable of meetings as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, to which Members would be invited to attend in order to give them the knowledge of emerging issues.

Mr. Lowe also drew attention to the summary of current inspection and assessment detailed at Appendix 2 and to the tools available in the seven point offer from the Local Government Group to support improvement.

In response to Members' questions, Mr. Lowe advised that the Local Government Group did not tell Councils what they should deliver or how it should be done but instead it was designed to help Councils improve accountability in ways which were most appropriate to them.

Mr. Lowe added however that not all external inspection processes had been stopped as there were some processes that would remain around vulnerable adults and children. The Council was also working on a peer review around Safeguarding to complement the self regulation process.

Councillor Rolph commented that the Audit Commission Four Star inspection process meant little to local people and self regulation gave the Council the opportunity to provide meaningful information and statistics to residents of the City.

Mr. Lowe confirmed that self regulation and improvement would provide the Council with the opportunity of determining its own priorities and shape the agenda to what was appropriate to Sunderland. One of the key principles was about being accountable to local people and how the Council could demonstrate it was engaging and listening to local people through the priorities it set.

Ms. Sonia Tognarelli, Head of Financial Resources advised that even with the disbanding of the Audit Commission, the Value for Money Assessment would still be retained and there would be an independent check in place and therefore it was important to have the processes in place to justify this.

In response to Councillor Oliver, Mr. Lowe advised that there were numerous activities and mechanisms the Council currently used to listen to local people such as for example the budget setting process where the Council's spending priorities were set, the State of the City Debate and ongoing intelligence and customer impact which it obtained on a daily basis through the Customer Service Network. Mr Lowe stated that this information was used to redesign and develop appropriate measures to understand and review services currently being provided.

Councillor Anderson highlighted the important role for Scrutiny in the self regulation process to examine the services and ensure they were of good quality.

Mr. Lowe added that the increased role for Scrutiny had been recognised by the Local Government Group and that this would be explored and the current performance reporting framework would be enhanced.

4. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the title of the review be approved as "Demonstrating Local Accountability: A Look at the Emerging National Self Regulation Framework and Implications for the Council"; and
- (ii) the proposed timetable for the review be approved.

Performance Report Quarter 4 (April 2010 – March 2011)

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing a performance update relating to the period April 2010 to March 2011 including a summary of progress in relation to Local Area Agreement targets and progress in relation to other national and local indicators relevant to the Management Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Mike Lowe, Head of Performance Improvement reported that comments and issues raised at the meetings of the other Scrutiny Committees held earlier in the month had been pulled together into one paper. Officers had provided answers to some of the issues at the meetings and it had been agreed in some cases that further information would be sought and the relevant individual Scrutiny Committee advised at a later date. Mr. Lowe stated that in closing the loop the issues raised could be submitted to the Management Scrutiny Committee to add value to the process.

Mr. Lowe referred the Committee to the summary of the report which stated that the Council continued to perform well in respect of the percentage of Council Tax collected and timeliness of payment of invoices and in respect of the time taken to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. He highlighted the performance in relation to the corporate indicators for equality.

The Chairman advised that the performance issues arising from the Scrutiny Committees would be shared with the Members of the Management Scrutiny Committee.

Councillors Miller and Wood once again expressed real concerns over the continual poor achievement of Looked After Children in relation to NI 101 5A*-C GCSEs (or equivalent) at KS4 (with English and Maths).

Councillor Stewart assured members that this issue had been raised at the Children, Young People and Learning Scrutiny Committee and as a result a Task and Finish Group had been set up to look at the consistently poor results in relation to GCSEs for Looked After Children and what could be done to improve performance. The Scrutiny Committee had also asked for additional detail to be included in the Children and Young People's Plan with regard to this issue when a draft had been considered at a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee and comments to this effect had been submitted to the Cabinet for consideration.

Councillor Anderson commented that the Council had a statutory duty to undertake Equality Impact Assessments and sought assurance that they were being carried out on all Local Authority decisions and policies.

Mr. Lowe commented that he was aware that they were being undertaken but that he would make enquiries with the relevant Officers and ensure that a response was provided on this issue and circulated to all Members of the Committee.

Councillor Rolph enquired as to the impact of E-Readers for example Kindles, on the number of active borrowers from the City's libraries.

Councillor Stewart advised that the Children, Young People and Learning Scrutiny Committee had received a report on this issue a few months ago which showed that the majority of people using libraries were children in schools and the elderly. The issue of electronic books had been raised. There were pilots going on and the Scrutiny Committee had been pressing to get involved as this was the way things were going.

Councillor Rolph expressed a sense of shock at the performance in relation to performance indicators BV011c, BV016a and BV017a and queried how the Council's Level of Equality could be measured as 'achieving' taking this performance into account. Councillor Rolph suggested that the criteria used was questionable in these cases.

Councillor Rolph also commented that the Civic Centre building itself poorly supported anyone working here who had a disability.

Mr. Lowe undertook to speak to colleagues working in the aspects of performance management raised by Councillor Rolph in relation to employees with disabilities and equality issues and seek information and an explanation as to how the rating had been evaluated for Members. Mr. Lowe stated that he would raise the issue of disability access in respect of the Civic Centre building with the Head of Land and Property and seek a response on this issue.

Full consideration having been given to the report; it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the continued good progress made by the Council and the Sunderland Partnership and those areas requiring further development to ensure that performance is actively managed be noted and that the further information requested by Members as detailed above, be provided.

Scrutiny Committees Work Programmes for 2011-12

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for information the variations to the Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2011/12 and providing and opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2011/12.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

6. RESOLVED that the variations to the Scrutiny Committee's programmes for 2011-12 and to its own work programme be noted.

Forward Plan – Key Decisions for the Period 1st September, 2011 – 31st December, 2011

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing Members with an opportunity to consider those items in the Executive's Forward Plan for the period 1st September, 2011 to 31st December, 2011 which relate to the Management Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

7. RESOLVED that the Executive's Forward Plan for the above period be received and noted.

Urgent Item

In accordance with Section 100(B) of the Local Government Act 1972 in order to ensure that the Management Scrutiny Committee are in a position to secure the most cost effective charges in relation to attending and travelling to the Conference, the Chairman determined that the report requesting the Committee to nominate delegates to attend the Local Government Chronicle's Overview and Scrutiny Annual Conference be considered at this meeting as a matter of urgent business.

Request to Attend a Conference – LGC Overview and Scrutiny Annual Conference

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) requesting the Committee to nominate the Chairman of the Management Scrutiny Committee and the Head of Scrutiny and Area Arrangements to attend the Local Government Chronicle's Overview and Scrutiny Annual Conference to be held on 8th November, 2011 at Greater London House, London and to report back to a future meeting of the Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

8. RESOLVED that the Chairman of the Management Scrutiny Committee and the Head of Scrutiny and Area Arrangements be authorised to attend the above Conference at a cost of £399 per delegate to be funded from the budget of the Scrutiny Committee.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting.

(Signed) R.D. TATE,
Chairman.