

INVESTIGATION & REVIEWS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
13TH APRIL 2005

PRESENT: The Chair (Councillor Hubbard)
Councillors Cowles, Edwards, Fryer, Harris, Houseman,
Pacey, Rodgers, Snartt, Tormey and Yardley

APOLOGIES: Councillors R. Kershaw, Moore and Slater

38. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 9th February 2005 were confirmed as a correct record and signed.

39. DISCLOSURES OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No disclosures of personal interest were made.

40. DECLARATIONS – THE PARTY WHIP

No declarations of the existence of the Party Whip were made.

PART 2 (DELEGATED)

41. CUSTOMER SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL – CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE

In accordance with the Committee's Work Programme, a report of the Customer Service Centre Panel was submitted outlining the progress of the Customer Service Centre.

The Chair of the Panel, Councillor Hubbard stated that the report outlined a number of priorities rather than recommendations for the Cabinet to consider. The report in its entirety formed the recommendations of the Panel. The Cabinet Lead Member for Environmental Services had been consulted during the final drafting of the report.

A member of the Committee expressed concern regarding the seating in the reception area. She stated that there currently appeared to be a problem with the seating available for elderly and disabled visitors as the chairs were all the same height and size and it was difficult for some customers to use them.

In response to the issue raised above, the Assistant Chief Executive (Change Management) stated that the matter would be raised with the Senior Change Manager and a written response would be sent to councillors.

RESOLVED that the Customer Service Centre Panel report be recommended to the Cabinet.

42. CABINET FEEDBACK

The item had been included on the agenda to enable feedback to be given from the meeting of the Cabinet on 3rd March 2005 in respect of the following three Scrutiny Panels:

- Introductory Tenancies;
- Development of Leisure Facilities;
- Street Cleansing.

The Chair stated that at the Cabinet meeting on 3rd March 2005, the three reports had been subjected to robust questioning by members of the Cabinet and had not been well received. At a subsequent meeting between the Chair of the Committee, the Chief Executive, the Assistant Chief Executive (Change Management) and the Leader of the Council, a protocol for the submission of reports had been agreed.

The Assistant Chief Executive (Change Management) stated that future reports would be reported to the Cabinet by the Chairs of each Panel, the report would be received by the Cabinet and then referred to the Cabinet Lead Member and officers to draft a response to the recommendations of the Panel. The Cabinet would consider the Lead Member's response to the recommendations and a decision would be reported to the Committee.

The following issues were raised and comments made by members of the Committee:

- (i) It was encouraging to note that a protocol for the submission of reports had been agreed. The response of Cabinet to the three previous Panel reports had been disappointing and it was hoped that that would not occur again.

- (ii) Providing a Panel report contained sufficient evidence to justify the recommendations it made, the Cabinet should not be disputing the validity or viability of that evidence. The Panels had been given a remit, undertaken the work and produced a final report which the Cabinet should consider and decide to either accept or refuse to agree for reasons specified. If that procedure was not followed the validity of the Panels was brought into question.
- (iii) In the light of evidence being called into question by the Cabinet, it was essential that in future reports nationally recognised statistics and data were used to produce accurate evidence to substantiate recommendations.
- (iv) The possibility of receiving input from the Cabinet Lead Member before a report was finalised should be considered.
- (v) The Cabinet Lead Member would be involved in the drafting of future reports under the new protocol. Once the report has been finalised and agreed by the Committee it would be submitted to the Cabinet to consider the viability of the recommendations made. No alterations to the report would be made by the Cabinet once it has been agreed by the Committee.
- (vi) Although the presence of the Cabinet Lead Member would be helpful during the drafting of the report it would be inappropriate to have any input from them at an earlier stage unless they were called as a witness.
- (vii) It was of concern that despite the urgent nature of the work undertaken by the Panels and the recommendations made which required immediate action in some cases, the Cabinet was being given three months to respond to the reports. The effectiveness of the Panels appeared to be compromised and in future if a matter was considered to be urgent the report should request an urgent response from the Cabinet.
- (viii) When the Panel system was introduced there was concern that there appeared to be a lack of officer support to service the Panels. The three months deadline for a response from Cabinet had been recommended by officers because of the problem with staff workloads.

- (ix) The role of the Scrutiny Panels was to examine various policy issues through careful investigation over time. Timescale was a matter for the Cabinet to consider.
- (x) Timescales would depend on the issue a Panel was considering. The Customer Service Centre Panel report was urgent as it had identified areas of concern in respect of the Phase 2 scheme which was currently underway and the Cabinet should be made aware of the situation.

RESOLVED

1. that the report be noted;
2. that the Chair be requested to make the Cabinet aware of the urgent nature of the Customer Service Centre report when it was considered on 28th April 2005.

43. SCRUTINY PANELS

The item had been included on the agenda to enable reports to be given on the current position with the work of the two Scrutiny Panels.

Councillor Houseman stated that a meeting of the “Difficult to Let” Properties Panel had initially been held to determine who should be interviewed in respect of the matter. A further meeting was held and the Principal Housing Officer and the Voids Co-ordinator had attended to explain issues related to the data provided. The draft report was being finalised and another meeting would be held on 11th May 2005 to consider that report. However, it was of concern that the Panel did not appear to have covered the remit thoroughly. The possibility of obtaining information from other councils had been raised but not pursued.

The following issues were raised and comments made by members of the Committee:

- (i) There appeared to have been some confusion in respect of the draft terms of reference. At its meeting on 15th December 2004, the Committee had received clarification from the Performance and Management Scrutiny Committee in respect of what aspect of “Difficult to Let” Properties required scrutinising. The Panel had been requested to focus on the Council’s Sheltered Accommodation and why it was

undesirable. However, when the Panel had met on 3rd February 2005 the draft terms of reference had been agreed and reference to the Sheltered Accommodation had been omitted in error. Those terms of reference had been agreed by the Committee on 9th February 2005 and the Panel had subsequently met to undertake the task. It was hoped that at the next meeting of the Panel the issue of Sheltered Accommodation would be addressed before the final report was drafted.

- (ii) It was of concern that the terms of reference for the Panel now appeared to be incorrect. In future it was essential that the wording for the terms of reference was clear to avoid wasting councillor and officer time

In response to the issue raised in (i) above, the Assistant Chief Executive (Change Management) stated that the additional information in respect of the Sheltered Accommodation would be reported to the next meeting of the Panel.

RESOLVED that the current position with the Panel's review be noted.

Councillor Pacey stated that the Parking Issues in Charnwood Panel had met to consider the terms of reference and possible timescales for future meetings. A minor amendment had been made to the terms of reference previously agreed by the Committee on 9th February 2005. The amendment broadened the remit to ensure that the Borough as a whole was covered.

A member of the Committee expressed concern that reference had been specifically made to Loughborough when other areas in the Borough, including Syston also had particular problems.

Councillor Pacey stated that although Loughborough had been referred to specifically it was acknowledged that other areas in the Borough had problems and the Panel would address those issues.

RESOLVED that the terms of reference for the Parking Issues in Charnwood Panel be agreed as follows:

Terms of Reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine the Borough Council’s approach to and policies for providing off street parking facilities for motor vehicles in Charnwood, in particular with regard to; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Council owned Car Parks; b. Problems specific to Loughborough. • Consider if the service provided by the Council is that which is required by users and stakeholders? • Consider what effect the decriminalisation of parking might have on on-street parking generally and the implications for off-street parking.
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44. WORK PROGRAMME

Details of the current position with the Committee’s Work Programme was submitted for consideration.

The Chair stated that the Performance and Management Scrutiny Committee had recently reviewed performance information in relation to the Housing Revenue Account and in doing so had been presented with a summary of the position with rent arrears which showed an increase in arrears of £38,000 compared to the corresponding period for the previous year, although the sums for each year were similar in terms of a percentage of the total rent payable. The issues identified were considered to be a cause for concern and the Committee had suggested the establishment of a Panel for a more in depth scrutiny of the matter. At its meeting on 29th March 2005, the Scrutiny Commission had subsequently requested that the Committee establish a Panel to consider Rent Arrears as soon as its Work Programme would allow. The Chair suggested that as this issue was urgent a Panel should be established as soon as possible and the Chair and two Vice-chairs should be given delegated authority to prepare the terms of reference. A meeting would be held before the end of the Council year and the draft terms of reference would be brought before the Committee at its first meeting on 1st June 2005.

The Chair stated that at its meeting on 15th February 2005, the Scrutiny Commission had requested the Committee to include the issue of Decriminalised Parking Enforcement within the remit of the Parking Issues in Charnwood Panel.

However, the issue was already included within the terms of reference agreed earlier in the meeting and no additional amendment was required.

The Chair stated that at its last meeting the Scrutiny Commission had referred to the list of issues not yet brought forward for consideration by a Panel which followed the Committee's Work Programme. It was noted that many of those issues were no longer current and the list would require revision. It was essential that the topics covered by Panels were in context with current Council and Borough issues. The Scrutiny Commission had requested that the Committee consider deleting the current list and beginning a new list in the next Council year in conjunction with a review of the Forward Plan, the Forward Programme and the Strategic Risk Register. It would be appropriate to retain the two issues of Housing Allocations and Refuse Collection and Recycling on the Work Programme and programme them for the following Panels providing no urgent issues were identified.

A member of the Committee stated that it would be appropriate to defer the issue of Refuse Collection and Recycling until a later date to allow the recently introduced collection and recycling services to be fully operational and for feedback to be received on those services.

The Chair stated that at its meeting on 1st June 2005, the Committee would identify which issues required most immediate attention and if it was considered to be too premature the issue of Refuse Collection and Recycling would be deferred to a later date.

RESOLVED

1. that the issue of Rent Arrears be included in the Committee's Work Programme and the Chair and two Vice-chairs be given delegated authority to prepare the draft terms of reference and for those to be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee on 1st June 2005;
2. that the list of issues not yet brought forward for consideration by a Panel be deleted from the Committee's Work Programme;
3. that the Scrutiny Commission be informed that the Committee wishes to proceed on the basis of the following work programme:

“Task and Finish” Panels

ISSUE	QUESTION	POSITION
Customer Service Centre.	Progress of the Customer Service Centre.	Report agreed by Committee 13th April 2005. Agreed report to be submitted to Cabinet.
Difficult to Let Properties (Referred from Scrutiny Commission).	How can properties (Sheltered Accommodation) be made more suitable for prospective occupiers and be brought back into use as quickly as possible. Draft report to be considered at next meeting.	Last meeting held 23rd March 2005. Next meeting to be held 11th May 2005.
Parking Issues in Charnwood, including decriminalised parking control.	Draft terms of reference and membership agreed at meeting on 3rd November 2004. Revised terms of reference agreed at meeting on 9th February 2005. Further revisions agreed at meeting on 13th April 2005.	First meeting held 7th April 2005. Next meeting to be held 28th April 2005.
Rent Arrears	Draft terms of reference to be submitted to meeting on 1st June 2005.	First meeting to be held following meeting on 1st June 2005.
Decent Homes Standard.	What is the “Charnwood Standard” and the implications for the Council in reaching that standard?	
Housing Allocations	Draft terms of reference and membership to be agreed.	
Refuse Collection & Recycling	Draft terms of reference and membership to be agreed.	
Any issue which arises and requires speedy consideration.		

Committee

Monitoring the outcomes of Panel studies – To be programmed.

Issues not yet brought forward for consideration by “Task and Finish” Panels:

To be considered at meeting on 1st June 2005.

Note:

No reference may be made to these minutes at the Council meeting on 27th June 2005 unless notice to that effect is given to the Democratic Services Manager by five members of the Council by 5pm on Wednesday, 4th May 2005.

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