1077 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 22 May 2013 were agreed as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1078 FINANCIAL RETURN ON THE COUNCIL’S INVESTMENT PROPERTIES

The Deputy Chief Executive introduced the report which had been prepared in response to members’ concerns about the way in which information concerning the Council’s investment property portfolio was presented to Cabinet. Members were reminded of the different approach the Council had in respect of its cash investments compared to property investments, where priorities around property investment were the return on the investment and the capital value in the longer term – but with cash investments the priorities were security, cash-flow and then returns.

The Chairman thanked officers for the clear and comprehensive report.

Cllr G Wheatley, Cabinet portfolio holder for Finance and Resources, concurred with the Chairman that the report before the Committee was helpful and comprehensive. Members were informed about two recent changes affecting the way in which the Council dealt with its property investments. Firstly, a new post had been created and filled through an internal transfer – the Commercial Property and Conferencing Manager. Part of this role included...
the management of the Council’s property interests. Secondly an Asset Management Group had worked to manage the Council’s existing property assets. The Group was chaired by the Council’s Head of Asset Management and made up of specialist officers and the Cabinet portfolio holder. Other members were invited to attend when ward specific matters were to be discussed.

It was noted that there was a slight error on the figures contained in the spread sheet at Appendix 1 (relating to Unit 13 Wymondham Business Park) but that this did not alter the net investment yield figure total which was 5%.

There was some discussion as to the cost of insuring properties and whether this was borne by the tenant or the Council. The Council’s Head of Finance confirmed that the general position was that when a property was occupied it would be the tenants responsibility to insure the property whereas empty properties would be insured by the Council. Members suggested that information relating to insurance costs be included in reports concerning property investments and the Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that he would consider the best way of providing this information. It was also suggested that Appendix 1 would benefit from an additional column giving the acquisition cost of each property.

Cllr Weeks queried the position regarding empty properties and wondered whether the Council regularly assessed its marketing strategy. Cllr Wheatley confirmed that the Asset Management Group looked at empty properties in detail and sought professional advice where appropriate.

Responding to member questions the Deputy Chief Executive advised the Committee that the costs involved in administering the Council’s property investments overall was very similar to the costs involved in treasury management of the Council’s cash investments. Members were assured that when Cabinet was considering the purchase of a particular property, members of the Cabinet had the benefit of detailed and thorough reports. Members were reminded that any decision made by the Cabinet to buy a property could be ‘called in’ to Scrutiny Committee. The Deputy Chief Executive added that the Council was now looking to develop rather than buy property.

Cllr K Kiddie advised the Committee that as a Cabinet member he was satisfied with the report in its revised format and considered that it presented the information well.

RESOLVED

Scrutiny Committee recommends that the revised format for presenting information, as provided at appendix 1 of the report, be used when reporting property returns going forward to aid understanding of the true return generated by the portfolio, with the inclusion of additional information concerning insurance and acquisition costs for each property.

1079 REVIEW OF LOCALISM DELIVERY IN SOUTH NORFOLK

Cllr M Wilby, the Cabinet portfolio holder for Communities and Localism presented the report which gave members the opportunity to scrutinise the delivery of localism in the District.
Members were advised that the report before them was a fair representation of the current position following the Your Neighbourhood, Your Choice (YNYC) pilot year, and that officers and members had found the experience to be very positive with much learnt from the experience. The Committee was reminded that following the peer review the Council had been recognised nationally for its innovative, bold and ambitious approach to the delivery of localism to the people of South Norfolk.

Members were given an example of localism working for the good of the community in Starston where a local charity purchased an area of neglected land with the aid of funding from South Norfolk Council and Norfolk County Council. Due to a huge effort and additional fundraising by local people the land had been transformed into an attractive community garden with most of the work carried out by the local community. This had given local people a sense of pride in their area as well as strengthening relationships within the community and they had achieved national recognition for their efforts.

Cllr A Pond congratulated Cllr M Wilby as portfolio holder for Communities and Localism for the success of the Your Neighbourhood Your Choice scheme so far.

There was some discussion regarding applications to the Neighbourhood Fund. The Communities and Active Life Manager confirmed that very few applications were flatly rejected at the first stage. Where applications needed more work the Communities Team worked alongside applicants to give help and guidance. Approximately 50% of applications were successful as first submitted for approval.

Cllr P Allen pointed out that there was still a lack of clarity regarding the different types of funding available to members of the public and community groups. Cllr Allen had concerns regarding whether there had been an underspend from the 2012/13 pilot scheme funding budget and also with regard to the decision-making process for funding applications. She suggested that all members of the Neighbourhood Boards should be involved in decisions, rather than just the Neighbourhood Board Chairmen and the portfolio holder.

Responding to Cllr Allen’s concerns the Communities and Active Life Manager advised the Committee that there had been an underspend but described the process as a ‘rolling programme’ of funding that would be brought forward to Cabinet at different stages and that the Council was still spending on the 2012/13 Plan. He advised members of the benefits of this approach which included applicants not being restricted by short ‘cut-off’ timescales and allowing a constant flow of funding and enhancements enabling the most effective and beneficial process for all concerned. Members were advised that officers would be reporting fully and regularly to the Growth and Localism Committee to ensure members were kept abreast of the latest position.

Members discussed the different methods of delivering localism. Cllr M Gray expressed concern that Neighbourhood Boards were not fully engaging with the local community, and that as a consequence, the Council may not have been fully aware of its communities’ needs. Cllr M Wilby reminded members that it was members’ collective responsibility to talk to local people and community groups and be the ‘eyes and ears’ in their community. Cllr Allen noted that at the beginning of the YNYC pilot scheme local people were very excited by the scheme and large numbers had attended Neighbourhood Boards. She was concerned that this excitement had waned, reminding the Committee that all members needed to get fully involved with the process to regenerate their local communities’ interest.
Cllr Allen suggested that those members who were not a member of any Neighbourhood Boards could still take a proactive role by affiliating themselves with the Board representing their ward and also suggested that members of the Boards could visit each other’s Boards.

Members were generally in agreement that the key to the success of localism delivery was to strengthen both member and community engagement.

With regard to the report, a number of members felt that it would have benefitted from the inclusion of detailed finance and performance information and it was suggested that these could be prepared and presented to the Growth and Localism Committee for consideration.

Members were reminded that the ‘successes’ referred to in the report related to all localism delivery within the District and not just YNYC, demonstrating the many different routes to the delivery of localism.

The Communities and Active Life Manager informed members that a mini-conference had been organised for 5pm on 3 October to share and discuss with Neighbourhood Board members the initial proposals arising from YNYC Year 2. Cllr M Wilby confirmed that all members were welcome to attend.

Members briefly discussed the recently developed Needs Assessment Tool Kit and were advised that some ‘drop-in’ training sessions would be available for members to learn about it shortly.

RESOLVED

1. To endorse the Council’s approach to localism

2. To recommend that financial and performance figures relating to the delivery of localism be presented to the Growth and Localism Committee periodically

3. That all members and staff should be encouraged to participate in localism delivery and information be communicated more widely to all members

1080 2012-13 PERFORMANCE

The Business Improvement Manager presented the report, confirming that although this was not the full report received by Cabinet, the intention was to give Scrutiny members a ‘flavour’ of the issues arising and the overall performance for 2012/13.

Members were pleased to note that there was only one red indicator. This related to staff sickness. The Business Improvement Manager confirmed that the Council had ‘benchmarked’ the Council’s sickness statistics against that of other local authorities. Members were advised that the Staff Forum was encouraged to take the lead on initiatives to improve the health and wellbeing of the Council’s staff. Further, sickness figures were linked to individual staff members’ Performance Reviews and fed into the yearly Directorate Plans.

Cllr T Lewis was of the view that measuring sickness levels was a health check on general staff attitudes and he confirmed that given the change process recently undertaken he was satisfied with the attendance level.
The Chairman confirmed that she felt the report had been useful in only drawing members attention to the red indicators and advising how these have been dealt with.

The Business Improvement Manager reminded the Committee that a Directorate Planning Workshop would be taking place on 18 December (after the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee) and that all members were encouraged to attend.

RESOLVED To note the performance reported for 2012/13

1081 THE WELFARE REFORM AGENDA – THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

The report was presented by the Revenues and Benefits Manager who gave members an overview of the impact the changes have had on residents after the first six months.

The Committee was advised that overall the majority of residents in the District were coping well with only relatively small numbers of households being affected to any significant degree.

The Council’s Revenues and Benefits team was working with a focus on preventing problems before they arose, liaising with outside agencies such as social landlords and Job Centre Plus to intervene early in cases of the most vulnerable families. Working in this way had enabled the teams to be more proactive in the cases of those most affected, putting resources in place before difficulties were experienced by residents, further aided by the teams working generically which had made the process smoother and easier for applicants.

Responding to members’ questions, the Housing and Public Health Manager confirmed that the Council had been forward-thinking regarding the allocation of housing in the past, identifying smaller affordable housing units where appropriate. Additionally, the Council had a commitment to an ongoing building programme of affordable homes in the District which would increase the number of one and two bedroom homes available to tenants in the future. Members were advised that the Housing and Public Health teams worked closely with colleagues in Development Management with the aim of ensuring that the local needs identified for affordable housing were delivered through planning negotiations and agreements.

Cllr Y Bendle, portfolio holder for Housing and Public Health, confirmed that the Council had received a 600% increase in applications for discretionary hardship payments to help with rent payments due to the reduction of Housing Benefit. These payments were funded through the Department of Work and Pensions. The Council funds its own discretionary payments to help with Council Tax.

80% of these had already been processed with the teams concerned performing well. Members were advised that in total approximately 700 families had been affected by the ‘spare room subsidy’, which was proportionately a fairly small number.

Cllr Bendle reminded members that further challenges would be faced in the next year with the introduction of Universal Credit and the Council Tax Support Scheme.

Members welcomed the report and the fact that the impact on the District’s residents had not been as bad as had first been feared, due to the Council successfully planning ahead.
RESOLVED

1. To note the work done by the Council to support residents in the District and the plans to strengthen this work further

2. That a further update regarding preventative work and Universal Credit be brought to the Committee in June/July 2014

1082 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME, RECOMMENDATIONS TRACKER AND THE CABINET CORE AGENDA

Members noted the Scrutiny Committee work programme.

The Scrutiny Officer drew members’ attention to the tracker document at page 45 of the Agenda and advised that all recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee would be recorded here. Progress and outcomes would be updated for members’ information.

Members were reminded that training for Scrutiny members would be taking place on Friday 18 October at 9.30am in the Colman Room.

(The meeting concluded at 12.20 pm)

Chairman