SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council held at South Norfolk House, Long Stratton on 13 November 2013 at 9.30 am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors M Dewsbury (Chairman), V Bell, T Blowfield, L Hornby, B McClenning, A Pond, S Thomson, K Weeks and J Wilby

Apologies: Councillors T Lewis and K Tilcock

Substitutes: Councillor M Gray (for T Lewis)

Cabinet Members in Attendance: Councillors Y Bendle and G Wheatley

Non-appointed: Councillors D Blake, F Ellis and L Neal

Officers in Attendance: The Deputy Chief Executive (A Radford), the Scrutiny Officer (E Nangle), the Compliance & Risk Manager (L Mickleborough), the Head of Business Improvement (P Kearsey) and the Marketing Officer (J Pyle)

1083 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr B McClenning declared an ‘other’ interest as his son was an employee of South Norfolk Council.

1084 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 25 September 2013 were agreed as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1085 MATTERS ARISING

Arising from minute 1079 Cllr M Gray drew members’ attention to the issue raised by a number of members who felt that the report would have benefitted from the inclusion of detailed finance and performance information regarding the amount spent on the Your Neighbourhood, Your Choice scheme. He confirmed that the total amount spent through the scheme in the first 18 months was approximately £219,000 which was less than the amount budgeted for. The Chairman confirmed that members were aware it had been agreed to allow the funding to roll over to the next financial year.
The Compliance and Risk Manager introduced the item, advising members that the purpose of the report was to review and evaluate the effectiveness of the Policy Committees. There were a number of suggestions for improvement included in the report and members were invited to comment on these and offer any additional suggestions. The chairmen of three of the policy committees (Cllrs Blake, Ellis and Neal) were also in attendance to provide information and respond to members’ questions.

Cllr D Blake (Chairman of the Environment, Regulation and Planning Policy Committee) congratulated the Compliance and Risk Manager on the comprehensive report. He considered that the Environment, Regulation and Planning Policy Committee was working well, despite the large workload although he agreed that members would benefit from some training to increase expertise. He felt that the policy committee chairmen should be involved and informed about new issues arising at an early stage and always prior to a report appearing in an agenda.

The Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that through the policy committee structure officers were now able to bring issues to members much earlier in the decision-making process, enabling input from members long before formal reports were being prepared for Cabinet. He confirmed that one measure of success was whether Cabinet went on to endorse the approach recommended by the policy committees.

There was some discussion regarding the formal and informal meetings of the policy committees and to what extent other members should be involved and/or invited. Some members suggested that there should be minutes taken at informal meetings however the Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that the reason the informal meetings were so effective was because they were able to be fluid and flexible, tailored to what those members wanted to discuss in a free and frank exchange of views, in a confidential setting. These were not decision making meetings. Formal minutes would be taken at the formal meetings of the policy committees as this was where formal recommendations to Cabinet were made, with the public present allowing full transparency. The Compliance and Risk Manager suggested that policy committee chairmen had scope to invite additional members to informal meetings as he/she considered necessary, and likewise, all members were able to advise officers if they were particularly interested in certain issues/areas of work. In addition, the Chairman suggested that the informal policy committee meetings could be renamed to avoid confusion however the Compliance and Risk Manager advised that the policy committees were constituted meetings and this suggestion would need further consideration.

Cllr L Neal (Chairman of the Housing and Public Health Policy Committee) informed the Committee that through informal meetings members had received training from outside bodies which had increased members’ knowledge and expertise in the areas which come under consideration. She confirmed that she had a very good working relationship with the lead officer (M Swann – Housing and Public Health Manager) and that informal meetings had worked well to prepare and inform members about relevant issues and subjects.

Cllr F Ellis (Chairman of the Localism & Growth Policy Committee) confirmed that the informal meetings were beneficial, particularly as there were so many changes to the area of localism and growth, the informal meetings served as a way of clarifying the current issues and priorities for members.
Cllr Y Bendle (portfolio holder for Housing & Public Health) and Cllr G Wheatley (portfolio holder for Finance and Resources) both confirmed their support for the policy committees, confirming that they were very effective in supporting and suggesting to Cabinet.

**RESOLVED**

1. To endorse the recommendations in para 3.24 of the report.

2. To recommend that the Compliance and Risk Manager meet with the chairmen of the policy committees to discuss the way in which communication could be improved between policy committees and other members, particularly with regard to informal meetings. Following this, a short paper with findings/suggestions to be considered at a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

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**1087 ENGAGEMENT AND MARKETING REVIEW**

The Head of Business Improvement presented the report which gave members the opportunity to assess the value added by the engagement and marketing activity through the various different marketing channels, which incorporated a joined up approach, tying up digital media with more traditional printed media.

Members were advised that one of the key marketing successes had been informing members of the public about the use of the Council’s online facilities. As a result there had been a significant increase in residents paying for brown bins by direct debit and the use of the ‘My South Norfolk’ tool to access information.

The Committee was informed about significant staffing changes within the Marketing team, who had coped well whilst covering for vacant positions. It was hoped that remaining vacant positions would be filled shortly.

The team had also focussed on more traditional methods of communication such as the Link magazine and this had been redeveloped to make it more contemporary in design.

The Chairman confirmed that she had been impressed by the Festive Fusion leaflet found within the Link magazine and members were generally in agreement that this was of good quality.

There was some discussion about the amount of printing that was done in-house, with the Head of Business Improvement confirming that the Council’s printing equipment was not able to do the more sophisticated type of printing which was necessary for some of the Council’s publications. Members were assured that the Council had procured a good service with external printers locally and that most of these were based within South Norfolk. A large number of poster and other publications were still printed in-house for Leisure Centres and other locations. It was confirmed that the Council no longer carries out printing for any other organisations.

Members discussed the small numbers of residents who seemed to be using social media and questioned whether a presence here was worthwhile. The Head of Business Improvement confirmed that although the numbers were still fairly small, the people using social media should not be ignored, and that messages put on South Norfolk Council’s Facebook page had been picked up and broadcast on Radio Norfolk, benefitting a wider audience than just those directly using social media.
Cllr B McClenning expressed his approval that the Council was rejoining ‘Visit Norwich’. Cllr Ellis confirmed that she was the Council’s representative.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Business Improvement and confirmed that members needed to get involved with the promotion of Council events and marketing.

RESOLVED To endorse the contents of the report.

1088 REVIEW OF NPLAW: UPDATE

The Compliance and Risk Manager presented the report which gave members an update one year on from the review of the nplaw service in December 2012.

Members were reminded of the benefits to the Council of using the nplaw service such as cost savings, access to additional expertise and skills through nplaw, the provision of some free training to officers and profit sharing with other Councils. The Compliance and Risk Manager confirmed that nplaw users within South Norfolk had given the service an overall rating of ‘satisfactory’, and that she was aware of some areas in need of improvement which were being worked on. Members were asked to assess the update and make recommendations.

Members queried the meaning of the overall rating of ‘satisfactory’ and it was suggested that it may be desirable to rate the service on a sliding scale in future for added clarity.

The Deputy Chief Executive pointed out to members that the business benefits to the nplaw arrangement were clear, but that some of the other benefits had been slower to manifest. In particular the Council still remained reliant on a few individual staff (former SNC employees) for advice and support whereas one of the reasons to move to nplaw was that it had been considered preferable to be receiving advice from a broader base of staff. This issue had been raised at nplaw board meeting by Cllr Wheatley and improvements to the situation were expected.

Members were advised that response times were very good, particularly for urgent advice, and that the nplaw business itself was doing very well with new clients coming on board all the time including most recently councils in Tendring and Oxford. Further, Norfolk County Council had confirmed in recent plans its intention to continue to grow and expand the business further.

Cllr K Weeks raised concerns about the performance of the Development Management Team with regard to the determining of major applications within relevant timescales and the impact this may have on the formalising of Section 106 Agreements. The Compliance and Risk Manager confirmed that communications between the Development Management team at SNC and nplaw were being improved, and nplaw had increased the level of resources involved in the preparation of Agreements. The speed of agreement had been targeted as a key area for improvement.

With regard to the survey results, when questioned about the credibility of the collated responses given the small number of officers that had given feedback in respect of the nplaw service, the Compliance and Risk Manager advised members that there was a low number of key service users, and she considered it to be quite positive in that if officers chose not to respond they were likely to be satisfied with the service they were receiving.
RESOLVED

1. That the Committee is aware of the issues which the Council and nplaw are working to resolve.

2. That the Committee is encouraged to note that nplaw are working towards extending the business further

3. To review the issue again in 12 months

1089 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME, RECOMMENDATIONS TRACKER AND THE CABINET CORE AGENDA

Members noted that a Directorate Planning Workshop would take place on Thursday 12 December at 10am.

Members were advised that the report on Individual Electoral Registration would come before the Scrutiny Committee on 18 December 2013 instead of 22 January 2014.

It was noted that although the Council Funding review would still be dealt with on 18 December as planned, the Service Level Agreement element to the report would be brought to the Committee separately on 12 February 2014.

Members noted the updated Recommendations Tracker.

(The meeting concluded at 11.35 am)

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Chairman