SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council held at South Norfolk House, Long Stratton on 18 December 2013 at 9.30 am.

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

Apologies: Councillor K Tilcock

Cabinet Members in Attendance: Councillors Y Bendle, D Bills, J Fuller and K Kiddie

Non-appointed: Councillors P Allen, D Blake, M Edney, F Ellis, C Gould, C Kemp, J Mooney, L Neal, R Savage

Officers in Attendance: The Deputy Chief Executive (A Radford), the Scrutiny Officer (E Nangle), the Head of Business Improvement (P Kearsey), the Electoral Services Team Leader (J Tovee-Galey), the Director of Growth and Localism (T Horspole) and the Funding Manager (N Cunningham)

Also in Attendance: Angela Holden (IER Regional Delivery Manager for East of England and London)

1090 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs McClennning and Thomson declared an ‘other’ interest in item 6 as members of ‘Friends of John Innes’.

Cllr Bell declared an ‘other’ interest in item 6 as a family member was employed at the Norwich Research Park.

1091 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 13 November 2013 were agreed as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Cllr Lewis suggested that with regard to minute 1086 the minutes as approved had not satisfactorily recorded comments made by Cllr Gray at the meeting and further suggested that consideration be given to the style of minutes adopted by the Committee. The Chairman confirmed that the matter would be discussed with officers after the meeting.
The Chairman welcomed the IER Regional Delivery Manager for East of England and London, Angela Holden to the meeting. Members received a presentation on the proposed Individual Electoral Registration process, the work done to date and the timetable for implementation. Members were invited to ask questions.

Members sought clarification on the Red Amber Green status and were advised of the type of customer address matches that would produce the different type of status.

Cllr Lewis asked whether data used in the clarification of a person’s status (particularly where discrepancies were found) would be used by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to investigate issues of fraud. Ms Holden confirmed that data would not be retained by the DWP for any such purpose.

There was some discussion as to the reliance on National Insurance (NI) numbers and a number of members expressed concern particularly as there were many NI numbers in existence in excess of the adult population. Cllr Pond suggested that the Council’s concern about this issue should be fed back to the government. Members were advised that 78% of the adult population had a valid NI number and that this additional data was matched to the customer alongside other information supplied, as an ‘extra’ check.

Responding to questions Ms Holden confirmed that the IER legislation had the benefit of cross-party support and that the purpose of the new system was to improve the integrity of the register and reduce any perception of fraud in the electoral process. Members were advised that a national media campaign to raise public awareness about the changes would commence in 2014, and that each local authority would have its own engagement strategy. The Electoral Services Team Leader confirmed that the Council would launch its own campaign.

Cllr Allen raised the issue of confidentiality, expressing concern that data could be exposed to other parties. Ms Holden confirmed that all staff involved would be trained in data protection and that the data collected would only be going to the DWP and back to the local authority. The Head of Business Improvement confirmed that the Council had completed its Public Sector Network (PSN) compliance.

Cllr Fuller asked what would happen if a prospective elector applied for registration up to 11 days before an election but was given a red or amber status. Members were advised that in this case the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) would carry out further investigations to attempt to clarify the customer’s identity by checking additional records held by the Council, such as Council Tax. If further information was needed the customer would receive a letter from the ERO seeking additional data. As long as this information was received (and was satisfactory) by close of poll, the customer would be entitled to vote.

The Committee was informed that the procedure for applying for an absent vote remains unchanged and was a separate process from the changes being implemented for electoral registration. Similarly, it was confirmed to members that the nomination process for electoral candidates would remain unchanged.

With regard to a query about the reporting of potential fraud or impersonation, the Head of Business Improvement reminded members that the Council already had procedures in
place, with such incidents being very rare in South Norfolk. It was confirmed that there would be additional training for staff.

Cllrs Blowfield and Weeks queried the cost to the Council of the new registration process, both in the setting up and the ongoing costs. Ms Holden confirmed that the Government was committed to the provision of grant funding up to 2015/16 but was unable to confirm the position after that date. The Electoral Services Team Leader confirmed that, at this early stage, she did not envisage the need to employ additional staff in the short term but would review the position again towards the end of 2014, particularly as district elections were due to be held in 2015 and online registration may reduce costs in the longer term.

Cllr Fuller advised members that the local authority strength came from the sanctity and legitimacy of the democratic process and that in some areas of the country the integrity had been called into question, which undermined democracy for all. To introduce a better system with more integrity would be essential for a fair democratic process throughout the country.

It was suggested that the progress of the implementation of IER could be reviewed by the Electoral Services Task Group and it was agreed that the Scrutiny Officer would discuss the way forward with officers and the Chairman after the meeting.

RESOLVED To endorse the report

1093 REVIEW OF FUNDING FROM EXTERNAL SOURCES

The Funding Manager presented the report drawing members’ attention to the external funding secured for the Council and district as a whole as well as the Council’s successes in supporting partners to enable them to secure their own funding.

Members thanked the Funding Manager for the comprehensive report.

Responding to a question from Cllr Blowfield the Funding Manager confirmed that she had not been involved in any unsuccessful applications throughout the past year.

Members were advised that it was crucial for the Council to unlock growth, by supporting new businesses and employment. She confirmed that there were funding streams available to provide support for new businesses, and innovation schemes and other grants to support and encourage growth in various sectors within the District. The Funding Manager informed members that this was a very exciting time for South Norfolk.

The Committee was informed that the key feature of the Funding Manager’s role was to attract external funding to the District both for the Council and local communities. The Director of Growth and Localism concurred that this was a key aspect to the role and advised members that the Funding Manager was in a position to be ready to act on initiatives quickly and without unnecessary delay.

Cllr Weeks sought clarification on the City Deals initiative, and was advised by the Director of Growth and Localism that the scheme would give the Council an £80million borrowing
capacity at preferential rates, with a revolving fund for smaller projects and up to £60million for larger projects, with repayments made through Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) payments.

Clarification was also sought with regard to the Translational Proof-Of-Concept fund. The Funding Manager explained that the funding of £1.7million (of which the Council put forward £20,000) would be used to engage and support researchers with innovative business ideas in the setting up of new businesses.

With regard to the Diss and Thetford Citizens Advice Bureau the Director of Growth and Localism confirmed that the bid-writing support given to this organisation was a good example of how the Council benefits from the Funding Manager’s role. The debt and housing advice would be received by South Norfolk residents and therefore the CAB was fulfilling a role that otherwise would have to be provided by the Council. Cllr Bendle supported this view, confirming her support for the help the Council gives to the CAB and in return the good work done by the CAB for Council residents.

There was some discussion as to the help needed by small businesses in the District and the Funding Manager confirmed that there were grants available. She advised members that the Council’s Market Town Initiative would provide much help to small businesses in market towns in the district.

Cllr Ellis commended the Funding Manager for her hard work in building relationships and giving advice.

RESOLVED To endorse the contents of the report and note the funding secured over the last twelve months.

1094 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME, RECOMMENDATIONS TRACKER AND THE CABINET CORE AGENDA

Cllr Thomson suggested that the funding review take place in a further twelve months.

Members noted the updated Work Programme and Recommendations Tracker.

(The meeting concluded at 11.10 am)