

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2 – RESOURCES, ENVIRONMENT AND HIGHWAYS held at 7.30 pm at the COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 12 OCTOBER 2005

Present: - Councillor S Flack – Chairman.
Councillors V J T Lelliot, M J Miller, D J Morson

Officers in attendance: - R Chamberlain, J Dear, J Dyson, V Harvey, S Martin, M Perry, J Sayer & T Turner

SC2.1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H D Baker, P Boland, E Gower, M A Hibbs, S V Schneider and F E Silver.

SC2.2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 July 2005 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

SC2.3 BUSINESS ARISING

Councillor Flack informed the Committee that Essex County Council would not be sending a representative to present on Local Government Pension Schemes.

SC2.3 INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

The Principal Audit Officer presented the Committee with highlights from work completed by the Internal Audit section during 2004/05.

Twenty audits were carried out during 2004/05. In total 98 recommendations were agreed to improve the Council's audit control environment, which equated to 4.9 per audit. This number contrasted with 4.3 recommendations per audit for 2003/04, 3.7 for 2002/03 and 2.6 for 2001/02.

The Code of Practice set out organisational and operational standards for internal audit in Local Government. The following are levels of compliance:

- Scope of internal audit
- Independence
- Audit committees or equivalent
- Relationship with management, other auditors and other review bodies
- Staff training and development
- Audit strategy

- Management of audit assignments
- Due professional care
- Reporting
- Quality assurance

The annual audit opinion fell under the key management recommendations, which would be followed up.

The Principal Audit Officer then spoke specifically on the four internal reports.

Emergency Planning

The Executive Manager (Corporate Governance) informed the Committee of the current status of the points in the action plan. He stated that points 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6 had all been completed. 1.7 was being worked on, 1.8 had a process in place for bomb alerts, which would be live by end of November this year. 1.9 had been completed, and finally 1.11 was currently being worked on jointly with Essex County Council.

Housing Rents

The Housing Services Manager told the Committee that an ad-hoc check was being undertaken to ensure that rents were being collected from the right properties and right tenants. Item 1.4 on the action plan was being looked at; 56 tenancies were involved as well as a working partnership with Barclays bank, this was proving to be successful.

Council Tax

The Principal Revenues Quality Officer said that this report would be updated by the Emergency Planning Officer

Refuse and Recycling

Councillor Flack brought attention to item 1.4 on the action plan. She said that this had been superseded by events. As the service came in-house the system would improve.

Councillor Morson asked about the risks in 1.2 and why it was not consistent and the Executive Manager (Strategy and Performance) said that a written response would be provided.

RESOLVED that Members note the report content.

The Executive Manager (Strategy and Performance) put forward a report to the Committee on the need for a more strategic and structured approach in the way the Council reviews its fees and charges.

The Council's total income from fees and charges was approximately £3.5m per annum, with the main sources coming from car parking, building surveying, refuse collection and recycling, leisure activities, planning applications and licensing.

The report proposed to set up a scrutiny investigation that would:

- Establish and review the current policies
- Develop guidelines and timescales for future reviews of fees and charges
- Consider the current levels of fees and charges
- Consider the comparative charges from other councils and incorporate ongoing comparisons into guidelines developed
- Consider the scope for new fees and charges for services

It was proposed the Group would meet 4-6 times in the next two months. Councillor Morson thought that this was too much, to which Councillor Flack (Chairman) agreed, depending on the nature of research. She suggested the Task Group should report back to the next Resources Committee. Research would need to be done on current fees.

The Chief Accountant said that identifying charging policies for the future would be very beneficial.

It was agreed that all Councillors present, Councillors S Flack, V J T Lelliot, M J Miller and D J Morson would be members of the group.

RESOLVED that the Committee set up a scrutiny investigation on Fees and Charges as detailed in the Fees and Charges report.

SC2.5

PERIODIC ELECTORAL REVIEWS

A report was written by the Electoral Services Officer about the eight-year programme of Periodic Electoral Reviews (PERs) concluded in October 2004, with the completion of 386 reviews covering 35 county councils and 351 district councils in England. The Electoral Commission was undertaking a fundamental evaluation for the policies and processes used to guide the PERs. The closing date for responses to the consultation was Friday 25 November 2005.

The Electoral Commission intended the evaluation process to examine:

- How statutory criteria and rules had been applied
- The approach taken by the Electoral Commission on such matters as number of councillors, consultation

with interested parties in PER, timetabling reviews and warding

- When PERs should take place and how often
- The evidence required to support proposals and decisions
- Commissioning appropriate research and analysis

Councillor Flack suggested that members comment directly to the Electoral Services Officer to feed into a paper for the Resources Committee.

SC2.6

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor Flack suggested that there be no November meeting of the Scrutiny 2 committee, just a meeting of the scrutiny fees and charges investigation.

The meeting ended at 8.20pm