

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 24 JUNE 2015 at 7.00pm

Present: Councillor A Dean – Chairman.
Councillors G Barker, P Davies, M Felton, T Goddard, B Light, E Oliver and G Sell.

Also present: Councillor S Barker – Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services and Mr T Young, Scrutiny and Policy Advisor.

Officers in attendance: R Auty (Assistant Director Corporate Services), R Dobson (Principal Democratic Services Officer), J Game (ICT Officer), V Taylor (Business Improvement and Performance Officer) and A Webb (Director of Finance and Corporate Services).

SC1 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chairman welcomed all those present and asked that everyone introduce themselves as this was the first meeting of the committee in the new council year.

SC2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor H Asker.

SC3 SCRUTINY TRAINING

Members received scrutiny training from Tim Young.

SC4 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2015 were received and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

SC5 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minute SC59 – Local Plan Review

Councillor G Barker referred to the Planning Advisory Service presentation. He said it had been his intention following the presentation to put a question to an officer, which would have necessitated the meeting moving to Part II in order to exclude the public. There were occasions when in order to understand matters in

full the committee should be able to question officers on business which required the public to be excluded from the meeting. He therefore sought clarity on when matters might be considered in Part II.

Councillor Dean asked officers to provide an explanation of the circumstances in which the committee could move to exclude the public.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said this advice would be provided.

Councillor Sell said there should be a presumption of openness at meetings of the Committee.

Councillor Dean said that as the local plan process was to be scrutinised at the September meeting, members should start now in considering the questions they wished to ask.

The Assistant Director of Corporate Services said the Planning Advisory report considered at the March meeting of the committee was available on the website, and this provided a good starting point for members who were new to the committee. He would circulate the report by email.

SC6

CABINET FORWARD PLAN

Members considered the Forward Plan.

The Assistant Director of Corporate Services said this was a standing item to make the committee aware of what was coming up and to identify possible items for pre-scrutiny.

Councillor Dean suggested the committee consider whether it wished to pre-scrutinise any of the business listed on the Forward Plan, as follows:

Local Council Tax Support Scheme

Regarding the Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTS), Councillor Dean said it had been agreed at Cabinet that consultation would take place on this scheme.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said the LCTS was scheduled to come before the committee in November as part of the budget setting process, and that this timing would enable members to consider the outcome of the consultation and the recommendations which were to be made to Cabinet.

Councillor S Barker said this was the third year of the LCTS programme. The Cabinet was now looking at proposals for 2016-17 and then soon after would have to look at costs for 2017-18.

Councillor G Barker said one aspect of the LCTS was the cost of running the scheme against the cost of the budget from the government, so the only possible scrutiny would be to examine the level of the percentage being charged. The Council was meeting the cost of 87% of Council Tax which beneficiaries of the scheme would otherwise pay.

Councillor Dean said it would be useful to receive information on the different costs if a different level of Council Tax support were to be provided, and to understand the background information, in readiness for the November meeting.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said in November consideration of the LCTS would essentially be looking at the outcome of the consultation, whereas in order to carry out pre-scrutiny of the scheme, the Committee could schedule it for consideration at its meeting in March 2016.

Housing strategy

Councillor Dean invited views on whether members wished to scrutinise the Housing Strategy.

Councillor G Barker said members did not have the papers so could not form a view on whether to do so.

Councillor Dean said he was aware that the housing revenue account programme of works was subject to continuing slippage. Councillor G Barker said the committee should remind itself of the importance of its aim in scrutinising the reasons for work to be behind schedule.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said the slippage in the housing strategy was for the most part caused by a delay to the works to Mead Court in Stansted. There were two main reasons, one of which was delay on the part of the utility company in locating the water mains, and the other was the discovery of house martens in one of the buildings. He reminded members this item had been discussed at the meeting of Cabinet on 18 June, and that the discussion was available to listen to on Audiominutes. Issues relating to Mead Court would be addressed at forthcoming meetings of the Housing Board, which was chaired by Councillor Felton, a member of this committee.

Essex Building Control

Councillor Oliver said this item would be considered in Part II at the Cabinet meeting on 23 July 2015. The reason for exemption of the consideration of the item in public was because of the financial information which would

prejudice this council's interests in competition with the private sector if made public.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said the area of building control was one which the committee might wish to consider scrutinising. This was a service to which the council found it very difficult to recruit, due to pay scales which lagged behind those in the private sector. Whilst there were few partnerships between councils in Essex, this partnership was progressing rapidly. Partnership working was becoming more important, and therefore scrutiny of this venture was potentially productive.

Councillor Dean asked what value the Committee could provide to this initiative at this stage.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said members might wish to understand the principles before the pre-scrutiny stage, whilst avoiding as much as possible consideration of sensitive financial information.

Councillor Light said the Forward Plan gave only limited information on which members could form a view about whether to scrutinise matters listed, as it contained little detail: for example, the documents section was blank. She felt there was a need for key points to be included.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said including extra information was likely to be feasible, and officers would report back on how to accede to the request. That information would in the normal course of the year become apparent to members, as the committee's work would involve discussions with officers where that information could be examined prior to committee meetings. Therefore this meeting, as the first of the year, was unusual in that members and officers had not yet met to discuss the work programme beforehand.

Ongoing items

Members noted two items, development plans and the Localism Act 2011, had been included as "ongoing" business on the Forward Plan, but that it was when key decisions under these categories were listed on the Forward Plan that they would come forward to particular Cabinet meetings.

Councillor Dean asked if there were other items which the committee ought to consider within its programme of scrutiny.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said a further two reports had come forward since the forward plan document had been taken to Cabinet, a report on write offs, and the car park review.

Write Offs

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said this report was for information to report to members on the positive outcome in a case where monies had been recovered post-write off. The council had on occasion in the

past been challenged about recovery of monies in such circumstances, and this case was a good example of the council's practice of continuing to pursue debtors even where there had been a decision to write off their debts.

Car Park Review

Scrutiny Committee would receive an update on this item at its September meeting. Councillor Dean invited Councillor S Barker as the portfolio holder to attend that meeting.

Councillor Dean asked if there were other items for scrutiny.

The Assistant Director for Corporate Services said further items would come forward throughout the year, so capacity for additional scrutiny work should be allowed for.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said a realistic agenda in his view would be two substantive reports and one scoping report.

Councillor Dean asked whether if there were a system of task and finish groups these could make recommendations to another body, other than the Scrutiny Committee.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said recommendations would come to Scrutiny Committee and it would be for the Committee to then make any recommendations to Cabinet.

Councillor Sell said a further item for scrutiny could be the way in which the Council engaged with its residents.

Councillor Oliver said the Constitution Working Group had set up a task group to report on community engagement, to be chaired by Councillor Davies, a member of this committee.

Members noted the agenda for the September meeting would address the substantive issues of the local plan review and car park review, with an update on the building control partnership.

Councillor G Barker said he wished to make three comments regarding the forthcoming scrutiny programme.

First, the day centres report undertaken by the previous Scrutiny Committee could be carried forward. The committee had not addressed the reason why the Council provided day centres since such provision was not one of the Council's statutory functions.

Secondly, he wished to ensure the new committee was aware of the fact that the last committee had obtained from officers a list of functions which were statutory and non-statutory. This information could be used to compile a list of areas for scrutiny.

Thirdly, he would like to look into the robustness of the statistics provided by the Food Bank set up in the district, to which the Council had given money.

Councillor Dean asked officers to obtain further information.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said officers would bring further information to the Chairman and Vice Chairman to the next pre-meeting.

The meeting ended at 9.35pm.