

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: 24 September 2012

Venue: East Northamptonshire House, Cedar Drive, Thrapston

Time: 7.30 pm

Present: Councillors: -Phil Stearn (Chairman)
Sarah Peacock (Vice Chairman)

Peter Baden
David Bateman
Tony Boto
Michael Finch
Sylvia Hughes

Barbara Jenney
Brian Northall
David Read
Pam Whiting

180. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 June 2012 were approved and signed by the chairman.

181. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies received.

182. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST & QUESTIONS UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 10.3

There were no declarations of interest and no questions received.

183. QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORTING - QUARTER 1 - 2012/13

The committee received a report which detailed high level performance information from across the council in relation to agreed performance indicators, internal audit recommendation progress and risk actions, and other statistics that supported the monitoring of performance.

The purpose of the report was to assess how service areas were progressing towards delivering key priorities and outcomes, the identification of problem areas, to provide peer challenge and to identify and record good performance.

The committee were satisfied with the overall level of performance across the council and indicated that officers who had supported and delivered specific areas of achievement should be commended for their efforts.

RESOLVED:

- (1)** That the performance of the Council for the first quarter of 2012/13 be noted.

- (2) That the officers referred to within the report who have contributed to specific areas of achievement be commended for their efforts.

184. WELLAND INTERNAL AUDIT CONSORTIUM – QUARTERLY REPORT OF INTERNAL AUDIT

The committee considered a report submitted by the Welland Internal Audit Consortium which detailed the progress made by the Consortium on the delivery of the Annual Audit Plan for 2012/13 and associated measures of performance. The report also provided members with an overview of key audit findings and recommendations from the audit reports that have been issued.

Members noted that the performance information analysed was up to the end of week 21 (i.e. 26 August 2012), which was the latest date practical for reporting to the committee. As members had previously been advised, the consortium had been suffering from long term staffing vacancies. Members were told that two candidates had now been interviewed and offered positions. Work carried out so far had provided a sound level of assurance and no issues of concern were highlighted on work undertaken.

RESOLVED:

That the reported progress and performance of the Consortium in 2012/13 be noted.

185. COUNTERING BENEFIT FRAUD - QUARTERLY REPORT

The Senior Benefit Officer submitted a report detailing the current activities and progress made in countering benefit fraud and recovering over-claimed benefits.

Members were provided with figures highlighting the current recovered benefit figures for 2012/13 compared to those for the two previous financial years. It was noted that the Government recommends 70% of the over-claimed Housing Benefit be recovered within three years of the debt being raised, ENC have currently recovered 80.04%. ENC was currently seeking to maximise recovery but this was becoming increasingly difficult due to the financial climate.

Members noted that the total amount of overpayments created so far in 2012/13 was on par with 2011, but the overpayments were larger per case. Monitoring of old debts was continuing although it was noted that a small number of old debts have to be written off when all recovery attempts are exhausted. An increase in bankruptcy rates had led to a slight increase in the write off rate.

The committee was advised that with the introduction of Universal Credit and the changes as a result of Welfare Reform and benefit cut, it was anticipated that fraud and claimant error would be on the rise in future. A single fraud investigation service would be in place by April 2013. Further information on this subject would be available in December, but the timescales involved were a cause for concern for the benefit team.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

186. CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AUDIT - FINAL REPORT

Members were presented with a report which sought to provide an update on the outcomes of the audit of the council's Corporate Governance Arrangements which had been finalised in June 2012.

It was noted that overall the audit achieved a 'Sound' level of assurance as a number of very positive aspects were identified, and only minor areas for improvement were noted.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

187. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

The Scrutiny Committee had agreed to review, and make suggestions for improvement of, relations with Town and Parish Councils as part of their work programme for 2012/13 Quarter 3. The report sought to clarify how ENC had previously engaged with Town and Parish councils, the types of engagement required in future and how value could be added to the services currently offered by ENC.

Members considered at length whether the proposed engagement of Town and Parish councils was worthwhile and achievable. Members concluded that the initial step of engagement should come in the form of information gathering, to establish what the Town and Parishes councils expected from ENC, especially with the advent of the Localism Bill and changes in planning regulations.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the whole committee be involved in scoping the project, with a questionnaire for Town and Parish Councils to be produced by the next committee meeting in December.
- 2) Two presentations be given immediately prior to the next committee meeting on the topics of Localism and issues relating to planning that may affect Town and Parish Councils.

Chairman