

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: 4 February 2013

Venue: East Northamptonshire House, Cedar Drive, Thrapston

Time: 7.30 pm

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

Derek Capp Brian Northall
Richard Gell David Read
Sylvia Hughes Jake Vowles
Barbara Jenney Pam Whiting

368. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2012 were approved and signed by the chairman.

369. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillors Tony Boto, Michael Finch, Sylvia Hobbs, Peter Wathen and Colin Wright sent their apologies.

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

There were no declarations of interest or questions under council procedure rule 10.3.

371. COUNTERING BENEFIT FRAUD – QUARTERLY REPORT

The Benefits Manager presented a report detailing the current activities and progress made in countering benefit fraud and recovering over-claimed benefits for the period to 31 December 2012.

Members were provided with figures highlighting the recovered benefit figures for 2012/13 compared to those for the two previous financial years. It was noted that the council had currently recovered 81.59% of over-claimed housing benefit, which was significantly above the government's recommended level of 70%.

Whilst seeking to maximise debt recovery, it was noted that this was becoming increasingly difficult for the council due to the current financial climate, and an increase in workload was referenced as being the result of an increase in the number of over claimed benefits. Monitoring of old debts was continuing although it was noted that a small number of old debts had to be written off when all recovery attempts were exhausted. An increase in bankruptcy rates had led to a slight increase in the write off rate.

Members noted that the investigation of fraudulent claims was a significant area of work, and a number these cases had recently been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. It was also reported that progress towards the introduction of a Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS) was on-going, with the Department for Work and Pensions remaining in consultation with local authorities. National rollout of SFIS was anticipated for 2014/15 following evaluation of four pilot schemes currently underway at Corby Borough Council, London Borough of Hillingdon, Glasgow City Council and Wrexham Borough Council.

The council's work to publicise the counter fraud activity was highlighted to the meeting, with 39 calls being received on the fraud hotline by 31 December 2012, of which 28 had led to investigations.

Members welcomed the progress highlighted within the report and noted the improvements that had been made following previous recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee. Recognising the changes which would come as part of the government's welfare reform agenda, the committee considered that this would be an on-going area of interest.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

372. DEVELOPMENT CONTROL DECISIONS REVIEW - UPDATE

The committee received a report which provided an update on progress made against actions agreed at the Scrutiny Committee meeting in December 2011, regarding the corporate impact of Development Control Committee (DCC) decisions.

Members were supplied with the original report that had been tabled in December 2011, which focussed on the resource implications to ENC with regard to decisions made by the DCC. As a result of that report, members had recommended a series of five "actions" to the DCC which could help mitigate potential impacts, and the officer report outlined the progress of implementing these recommendations.

The committee were advised that of the five actions, all had been implemented to some degree, with planning officer presentations prior to complex applications being fully implemented. An extensive training programme was proposed for 2013 which would extend briefing and training sessions on material planning considerations to a wider audience than just members of town and parish councils.

Members heard that a recent review of the Planning Service had identified a range of areas for improvement and a number of recommended changes would be carried forward with improvement projects. Members and officers would be involved in these projects, and it was believed that Scrutiny Committee involvement would provide an understanding of the impact of previous recommendations made.

Having regard to the timescale since the last time such matters had been reported to the committee and the importance of making progress in a number of the review areas, Members requested that a further update report be submitted to the meeting scheduled on 3 April 2013.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the report be noted.
- (2) That an update report on the improvement projects within Planning Services be submitted to the committee meeting scheduled for 3 April 2013.

Chairman