

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MONDAY, 26 NOVEMBER 2012

PRESENT:- Councillors Kevin Small (Chair), Peter Heaton-Jones (Vice-Chair), John Ballman, Toby Elliott, Claire Ellis, Richard Hurley, Des Moffatt, Maureen Penny, James Robbins, Robert Wright and John Haines

Councillor Dale Heenan, Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Sustainability, was also in attendance.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Brian Ford, Colin Lovell and David Wood

38. Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting.

39. Public Question Time

No questions were asked under Standing Order 28.

40. Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 22nd October 2012 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

41. Law and Democratic Services - An Overview

The Committee received a report of the Director of Law and Democratic Services providing a review of the services provided by, and the performance of, the Legal Services and the Committee and Member Services teams within the Law and Democratic Services Department.

The Director was in attendance and introduced the report, providing an overview of the Department's services, both its direct, customer facing operations and support to Councillors and other Council directorates, an assessment of the performance of the Legal and Committee and Member Services' teams in relation to its Business Plan objectives and details of issues continuing into the 2012/13 Municipal Year and new issues to be addressed in 2012/13. It was noted that the Department, part of the Transformation and Strategic Projects Directorate, was divided into four main divisions (Electoral Services; Conveyancing, Environment and Contracts (Legal); Litigation and Personal Services (Legal); and Committee and Member Services (including Swindon Registration and Celebratory Service)) but that, in order to limit the scope of the review to a manageable size, the Electoral Services team had been excluded from the scope and much of the detail of the review.

Following his introduction of the report, the Director, supported by the Committee and Member Services Manager, the Head of Conveyancing, Environment and Contracts

and the Head of Litigation and Personal Services, responded to members' questions and observations on the following matters:

- resources and staffing within each team
 - staff numbers and the total number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) posts across the Department
 - comparative numbers for previous years
 - the reduced staffing level within Committee and Member services from 30 November 2012
- the balance to be struck between the cost of providing a service and maintaining a high quality service that provides value for money
- legal services' support to other service areas in relation to parking, street trading and waste disposal offences
- legal services' support in relation to the Council's development control function
- the number of questions received by the Council over the period of a year that were registered as Freedom of Information requests
- Legal Services' Lexcel Accreditation
- the "call-off" arrangement with other firms of solicitors for the discounted "bulk purchase" of legal services
- support for the town twinning network and the Council's town twinning grant budget and application process
- the continued drive for cost efficiencies and the exploration of the enhanced use of on-line systems and alternatives to Royal Mail
- the opportunity for analysis of the recent disappointing voter turnout for the Police and Crime Commissioner election and the impact of the council by-election in Highworth
- the role of the Council's Returning Officer in relation to the Electoral Ward Boundary Review of the Borough
- the status of the Parliamentary Constituency Review and the Community Governance Review of parishes and parish electoral arrangements
- the estimation of costs associated with responding to public questions put at meetings
- the reclamation by the Council of costs incurred in carrying out works to the Mechanics Institute to ensure the safety of the building

Resolved – (1) That the report be noted and that the Director of Law and Democratic Services, and his support officers, be thanked for their attendance at the meeting and for their full and open responses to members' questions.

(2) That the Committee commends the work of the Electoral Services team and congratulates the team on its positive assessment by the Electoral Commission in relation to the successful completion of Borough, Referendum and Parliamentary elections in 2011, coming top of local authorities in the South West and achieving above standard in all areas.

(3) That Mrs Helen Harris, Committee Officer, be advised of the Committee's best wishes to her for a long and happy retirement.

42. Question and Answer - Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Sustainability

Councillor Dale Heenan, Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Sustainability, was in attendance to introduce this report. Following a position statement in which he

summarised performance in respect of the various service areas within his portfolio of responsibility, including his assessment of what he felt had been done well, what might have been done better or differently and what challenges his portfolio would face over the next year, Councillor Heenan, supported by the Council's Head of Planning Services, responded to members' specific questions and observations on the following topics:

- the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and the criteria under which Section 106 monies can be secured
- the strategic transport policy and the delivery of the requisite infrastructure to support the future anticipated growth of the borough
- public consultation on the revised draft Local Plan, the anticipated timeframe for collating and reviewing responses and the management of the progress of the Plan following the consultation exercise
- Swindon's Heritage sites and their importance in promoting Swindon as a "place of destination"
- the draft protocol for the development of neighbourhood plans and their alignment with the Local Plan
- the likelihood that the electrification of the Great Western Railway will evidence an increased population in Swindon and the possibility of some provision being made in the Local Plan for a local rail network
- Government designated Enterprise Zones and the possibility of introducing a "Swindon version" of an Enterprise Zone
- the Planning appeal process and the lack of accountability of the Planning Inspectorate to the Council and local residents
- the Planning Inspectorate's timeframe for a decision in respect of Ridgeway Farm
- Jubilee Woods and the views of local residents that tree planting should not take place alongside Akers Way

It was agreed that information requested by members during the course of the Committee's consideration of this item be forwarded to members via the Committee Clerk.

Resolved – That Councillor Dale Heenan, Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Sustainability, and the Head of Planning Services, be thanked for attending the meeting and for their full and open responses to members' questions on service areas and issues within the Cabinet Member's portfolio of responsibility.