

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday 9 December 2002

PRESENT:

Councillor LACEY O.B.E (Chairman), and Councillors SKILTON, SLATER, STANLEY, STEVENS (as substitute for BELSEY), Mrs TESO and WILLIAMS.

(An apology for absence was received from Councillor Belsey).

31. MINUTES. The minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2002 were submitted and approved and the Chairman was authorised to sign them as a correct record.

32. CLOSURE OF THE SOVEREIGN CENTRE CRÈCHE. The Chairman reported that a member of the public had expressed the wish to 'call in' the issue of the closure of the Sovereign Centre Crèche, due to be discussed in confidential session at Cabinet on 5 December 2002.

The Chairman advised the Committee that the closure had subsequently been considered in open session, and that this had therefore meant that the member of public had not been able to address Cabinet in objection to the proposal.

The Members agreed that members of public should be able to have the opportunity to put their case to a special meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 16 December 2002.

RESOLVED: That the decision to close the Sovereign Centre Crèche should be called in to allow members of the public to state their reasons for objection to the proposal at a special meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 16 December 2002.

33. BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - 1ST QUARTER. Members were advised that following the submission of the Performance Indicator report to Members on 12 November 2002, no questions had been put forward for response. The Committee was informed that the next quarterly report for Performance Indicators would be in January 2003.

NOTED.

34. BEST VALUE REVIEW OF HOUSING MANAGEMENT PART II. The Committee considered the report of the Housing Management Best Value Review team advising Members of the outcome of the Review due to be reported to Cabinet on 9 January 2003. Councillors Mrs Pooley and Elkin were in attendance to answer members' questions.

Members were advised that the Best Value Review of Housing Management followed a two-stage process. Part I covered the strategic review of stock options. Part II sought to review the Housing Management function, from an operational perspective.

The initial finding of the Part I Review Team was to explore the feasibility of pursuing Large Scale Voluntary Stock Transfer. However, as this work progressed, it became clear that this option would not assist in the delivery of a further supply of affordable new homes. Therefore, the concept of making an application under the next ALMO programme was recommended, as this option would offer the best opportunities to offer quality services, and meet decent homes standards, over the long term.

The areas of review covered by Part II were those, which would apply to the Tenant Management services, which would operate under an ALMO arrangement. Indeed, those particular services would need to be provided, monitored and have appropriate service standards, regardless as to who fulfilled the actual landlord role.

The other functions relating to the Housing Management Division were those provided by the Property Services Team and covered the maintenance and improvement of the Council housing stock and Lifeline and Retirement Housing Service. Property Services was the subject of a 'Quality Review' undertaken in 1999, and set within the parameters of best value principles. This service area was due to undertake a further Review in Year 5 of the Council's Best Value Review Programme, though this was likely to be aligned with the requirements of any ALMO application and undertaken in 2003/04. Retirement Housing's review was completed in Year 1 and Cabinet had recently considered Lifeline's review.

Those services provided by the Housing Needs and Strategy Division were scheduled for year 5. Those services were likely to fall outside those that would be directly provided by an ALMO.

The Review Team made a variety of recommendations, which were detailed in full, within the Improvement Plan in section 12 of the report. In summary these cover:

- Establishing robust target setting and performance management systems
- Improvements to the system for setting and collecting Leaseholder service charges to allow the team to be self financing
- Improving ways in which we consult and involve Tenants in the services we provide
- Establish introductory tenancies
- A rent collection service which emphasises income maximisation and negotiation on debt repayment
- The development and introduction of a corporate debt recovery policy
- Improvements to the reletting of our properties, making them ready for people to live in more quickly
- The continuance of working in partnership with the Police, Youth Service and other agencies operating in the area.

The Committee praised the Street Wardens scheme and hoped for a continuance of the funding for the scheme for the forthcoming years.

The Chairman thanked the Officers and Members for their efforts in conducting the review, on behalf of the Committee.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet be recommended to approve the Improvement Plan as set at Section 12 of the report.

35. SERVICE AND FINANCIAL PLANNING 2003/2004. The Committee considered the report of the Director of Finances and Corporate Services updating Members on Service and Financial Planning for 2003/04.

Members were advised that a revised planning template had been developed in consultation with Heads of Service and lead Members for resources. All services are now in the process of completing templates and these would provide the basis for discussions about priorities and budgets for 2003/04 over the coming weeks. A copy of the template was attached at Appendix A. It was intended that this process would enable Members to reach decisions about all aspects of the Councils budgets. Specifically it would cover general fund revenue, housing revenue, capital (housing and other) and Partnership working.

Members noted that it was intended that budget options would be presented to Cabinet on 9 January 2003, following meetings between Cabinet Members and all Heads of Service in December. Following further consultation and confirmation of resource position, Cabinet and Council would consider final proposals in February 2003.

Members commented on the proposals within the report. Members were advised that the DEFRA bid for the Cleansing Contract had been unsuccessful. The Committee discussed the possibility of making representations regarding the failure to secure the bid, appealing against DEFRA's decision.

NOTED.

The meeting closed at 6.34 p.m.

R M LACEY O.B.E

Chairman