

Scrutiny Committee
11 April 2012

IRVINE, 11 April 2012 - At a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of North Ayrshire Council at 10.00 a.m.

Present

John Hunter, Anthea Dickson, Matthew Brown, Jean Highgate, Pat McPhee, and Alan Munro.

In Attendance

I. Mackay, Solicitor to the Council and H. Lauder, Information and Records Manager (Corporate Services); Y. Baulk, Head of Finance (Finance and Infrastructure); J. Montgomery, General Manager (Policy and Service Reform), M. Adams and A. Todd, Policy and Performance Officers and A. Little, Committee Services Officer (Chief Executive's Service).

Also In Attendance

Divisional Commander J. Thomson, Strathclyde Police and Area Commander H. Kerr, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue.

Chair

Councillor Hunter in the Chair.

Apologies for Absence

Jim Montgomerie.

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest by Members in terms of Standing Order 16.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 26 March 2012 were signed in accordance with Paragraph 7 (1) of Schedule 7 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.

3. Best Value Reports

Submitted report by the Solicitor to the Council on the Audit Report on the BV2 Assessment of Strathclyde Police and Strathclyde Fire and Rescue.

Since 2004, Audit Scotland has been undertaking audits of public bodies as part of the Best Value process in terms of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. This includes Local Authorities, Police and Fire and Rescue Services.

Work is being undertaken to facilitate the establishment of a National Police Service for Scotland and National Fire and Rescue Service in terms of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill which is currently passing through the Committee stage at the Scottish Parliament.

3.1 Strathclyde Police

A combined audit by both Audit Scotland and HM Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland was undertaken. The BV2 Report on Strathclyde Police and Strathclyde Police Authority was submitted to the Accounts Commission in the summer of 2011 and the final report published shortly thereafter. The report was attached as an appendix.

Divisional Commander J. Thomson provided an overview of the BV2 Report on Strathclyde Police and Strathclyde Police Authority.

Members asked questions and received further information on the following:-

- a reduction in civilian staff through voluntary redundancy and the redistribution of back office tasks to ensure officers remain available for front-line duties;
- areas for improvement that had been highlighted in the Police Authority in terms of governance and scrutiny and community engagement; and
- the participation of the Council as a Pathfinder on the Local Scrutiny and Engagement Implementation Network in preparation of the new single Scottish Police and single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and reports to the new administration on progress.

Noted.

3.2 Strathclyde Fire and Rescue

During November, 2011 Audit Scotland carried out a Best Value Audit of Strathclyde Fire and Rescue Service. The findings were presented to the Accounts Commission on 15 March, 2012 and the report has now been published. The report was attached as an appendix.

Area Commander Kerr provided an overview of the BV2 Assessment of Strathclyde Fire and Rescue Service.

Members asked questions and were provided with information in relation to:-

- the low rate of applications to the Fire Service from women;
- the correlation between the number of fire incidents and areas of social deprivation;
- the introduction of a new Home Fire Safety Visit policy that focuses on higher risk households; and
- the development of station plans and local ward based assessments as part of the corporate approach to the Integrated Risk Management Plan.

Noted.

4. Performance Management Strategy 2012/15

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on the refreshed Performance Management Strategy 2012/15 and Action Plan 2012/13.

On 21 June 2011, the Executive approved the Performance Management Strategy 2011/14 and endorsed the ambitious vision that, by 2014, the Council will have sector-leading performance management systems and a supporting culture in place.

The Strategy has been implemented by an annual Action Plan setting out planned changes and improvements to the performance management arrangements. For 2011/12, these actions were incorporated into the BV2 Improvement Plan.

The key details of the self assessment strategy were outlined in the Performance Management Strategy 2012/15 (Appendix 1). The Action Plan 2012/13 provided more detail of what the Council needs to do, and will be reported six monthly to the Executive and Scrutiny Committee.

Members asked questions and were provided with information in relation to:-

- EFQM training for those services who do not have EFQM Accredited Assessors; and
- the development and implementation of a Reducing Burdens Portal that will create a secure area within the Intranet to store information required for audit purposes.

Noted.

5. Covalent Project: Status Report as at 31 March 2012

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on the implementation and completion of the Covalent computerised performance management system project.

The Council's Best Value 2 Improvement Plan 2011/12, approved by Council on 13 April 2011, contained a number of actions relating to the further development and wider use of the Covalent system that contributed to the plan's high level objective to "Embed performance management arrangements", and to the vision in the Council's performance management strategy.

A project status report was attached as an appendix and showed that the Covalent project is now complete. Phase 3 was completed on the 31 March 2012. From the 1 April 2012 the use of covalent becomes business as usual. The report provided details of phase 3 of the project, populating the Covalent system, training, reporting from the Covalent system and the Covalent Users Survey.

Members asked questions and were provided with information in relation to:-

- the Covalent Users Survey that received 75 responses from the 150 users who have been accessing Covalent on a regular basis;
- continued difficulties that had been experienced by Members in accessing and using Covalent via Council encrypted laptops; and
- the establishment of a Research Information Performance and Evaluation Group, chaired by NHS Ayrshire and Arran that will identify and manage performance indicators.

Noted.

6. Freedom of Information: Annual Review

Submitted report by the Solicitor to the Council on the outcome of the annual report on the Council's compliance with the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (FOISA) and the Environmental Information (Scotland) Regulations 2004.

FOISA came into effect on 1 January 2005. From that date any person or organisation has the right to request and receive information which the Council holds. FOISA sets out timescales for responding to these requests along with categories of exemption, which may apply, whereby the Council is not required to disclose that information.

In 2011, the Council received 814 FOISA requests, an increase of 16% on 2010. Of these requests, 96% were responded to within the appropriate timescale. Corporate Services and cross service requests received the highest volume of requests during 2011 being 122 and 136 respectively. Details of the review and appeals process for those challenging the decision of the Council, to refuse to disclose information, was provided in the report.

Members asked questions and were provided with information in relation to:-

- the increasing complexity of FOI requests that impacts on the timescale for responding to applicant;
- the pro-active approach now taken to publish information which should assist in the future management of FOI requests and in time reduce the costs to the Council; and
- difficulties in determining the costs to the Council in managing FOI requests as a result of the variety of staff that can be involved in providing information for any one request.

The Committee agreed to (a) note the report; and (b) receive further annual reports at future meetings.

7. Understanding and Tackling Domestic Abuse Investigation: Progress Update

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on recent developments in tackling domestic abuse in North Ayrshire.

On 17 May 2010, the Scrutiny Committee approved the final report on its investigation into understanding and tackling the high levels of domestic abuse in North Ayrshire. The Final Report was approved by the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) Board on 24 June and the Council on 30 June 2010. The report informed the draft Violence Against Women Strategy and Action Plan 2010/13 which was being developed at the same time. The main recommendations from the investigation were incorporated into the North Ayrshire Violence Against Women Partnership's Strategy and Action Plan 2010/13. Annual progress reports are produced by the Partnership on the implementation of its action plan.

Further progress has been achieved in relation to:-

- the preventative work recommended by the Committee through the Prevention project in two secondary schools to challenge young people's attitudes about domestic abuse;
- the national White Ribbon campaign which has been supported by the Campus Police Officers attached to schools and by local Junior Football and rugby clubs;
- Further work with perpetrators through the Caledonian System; and
- an extension to the contract for rape counselling services delivered by Break the Silence.

The Committee was advised of the establishment of a Multi-Agency Domestic Abuse Team. The Team will be established by June 2012 and will include a Social Worker, Housing Officer and Administrative Officer, with a Health Visitor being attached to the Team one day a week. It will be located with the Police's Domestic Abuse Response Team in Kilmarnock. In addition, Women's Aid has applied successfully to the Scottish Government's Violence Against Women Fund 2012/15 for an Advocacy Worker who will assist in supporting the work of the new Team.

North Ayrshire Women's Aid has also been successful in applying for Big Lottery funding to allow the CEDAR (Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery) Project to be run in North Ayrshire. CEDAR is an initiative for children who have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties as a consequence of experiencing domestic abuse. The project will be delivered in partnership with the Council and NHS Ayrshire and Arran. The programme is due to begin later this year.

Members asked questions, and received clarification, on the undernoted:-

- the award of Lottery funding of £117,000 each year to North Ayrshire Women's Aid for an Advocacy Worker for 3 years to introduce the CEDAR Project.

Noted.

8. Investigation into the Impact of Unregistered Landlords and Owners

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on a future investigation into the social economic and environmental impact of unregistered landlords and owners in North Ayrshire.

A proposal for investigation has been received from Councillor John Hunter requesting that the Committee considers the social economic and environmental impact of the properties of unregistered landlords and owners. The investigation would consider the extent to which such properties contribute to antisocial behaviour as well as any measure of economic detriment through uncollected taxes.

The proposed investigation would take evidence from relevant council services; Police, external agencies including Housing Associations and registered landlords; and tenants/residents. Given the imminence of Council Elections, it is proposed that the investigation should be remitted for the attention of the new administration post 3 May 2012.

The Committee agreed that the investigation be remitted for consideration by the successor committee in the new administration.

9. Chair's Remarks

The Chair noted that this was the last meeting of the Scrutiny Committee in the current administration and took the opportunity to record his thanks to Elected Members and to former and current Officers for their contribution to the work of the Committee.

.
The meeting ended at 11.30 a.m.