

SCRUTINY BOARD (CENTRAL AND CORPORATE)

MONDAY, 7TH FEBRUARY, 2011

PRESENT: Councillor P Grahame in the Chair

Councillors S Bentley, D Blackburn,
B Chastney, M Hamilton, A Lowe,
N Taggart, J Hardy, K Groves, J L Carter,
R Wood and A Gabriel

68 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

69 Minutes - 10 January 2010

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2011 be confirmed as a correct record.

70 Void Properties

The report of the Chief Asset Management Officer provided the Board with information about the processes and issues relating to the disposal of surplus property.

The Chair welcomed the following to the meeting:

- Martin Farrington, Acting Director, City Development
- Chris Gomersall, Head of Property Services
- Anne Chambers, Head of Property Management
- Christine Addison, Acting Chief Asset Management Officer

It was reported that the Council was the largest property owner in the City and also owned over an eighth of the land in Leeds. The way in which this was managed had a significant impact on the economy of the city and how it looked and felt. Due to the changing priorities of the Council, there was a challenge to make sure the best use of resources and it was reported that the Council had received £410 million from the sale of surplus land and properties since 1990 which had been reinvested in meeting priorities.

When land and properties became surplus to requirements, consultation would take place with relevant Ward Members and Executive Members and the Council would consider all legally available options. Due to the diversity of the surplus properties, different options for disposal would be considered.

Further issues highlighted included the following:

- Sale by auction – this was a quicker way than others of selling land and properties and less intensive on staff time. Disadvantages of auction sale included the lack of choice over who the land/properties were sold to but planning regulations could limit the future uses of any sold properties.
- Inevitably, the Council had some void properties – a number of factors led to this including the current economic climate and the condition of the properties concerned.
- Until 4 years ago, management of properties used to be dealt with by the individual departments concerned and this was now undertaken by Corporate Property Management. Disposal of property had always been undertaken by Development/Asset Management.

In response to Members comments and questions, the following issues were discussed:

- Arena development plots – these included the former Elmwood Road car park, The Brunswick Building and other surrounding vacant land
- The potential use of vacant properties for short term leases.
- Future use of school buildings – it was reported that school buildings were not always suitable for alternative use.
- Concern that properties were becoming empty before being considered for re-use – each property that became vacant had unique circumstances and issues such as the lettable condition of the building had to be taken into consideration. Improvements were being made to the system to try and re-use properties where possible and departments were encouraged to inform Property Management and Members before properties became vacant in an attempt to speed up their re-use where possible .
- West Park Centre – concern was expressed that potential users were not being allowed to hire vacant rooms at the West Park Centre. It was reported that the centre was not in a good state of repair and would require considerable investment to make it fit for purpose and for ongoing maintenance. The building had not been declared surplus, but Members would at some stage have to make a decision on its future.
- Charging organisations peppercorn rents to enable use of empty properties – a number of properties were rented out at ‘less than best’ rates under varying circumstances. Issues discussed in relation to this included the Council’s wellbeing powers and the balance of priorities between a building’s value and the provision of services.
- Registration of land and properties with HM Land Registry.
- Monitoring of leases that were due for renewal and consideration as to whether these should be renewed. These were monitored on a monthly basis and influencing factors included issues such as the costs of returning buildings to their pre-leased condition.
- Planning Issues.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the report and discussion be noted
- (2) That the Scrutiny Board recommend that the functions undertaken by Corporate Property Management be brought under the management of City Development.

(Councillors M Hamilton and N Taggart joined the meeting at 10.25 a.m. and Councillor Blackburn at 10.30 a.m. during the discussion on this item)

71 Once Council Communications Project

The report of the Head of Communications updated the Board on the progress of the 'One Council Communications' project, which sought to develop a new approach to the delivery of communications, marketing and PR functions at Leeds City Council.

The Chair welcomed Andy Carter, Acting Head of Communications to the meeting.

It was reported that the project would bring a corporate consistency to communications across the Council and a more co-ordinated approach. Members attention was brought to the progress update detailed in the report and the following issues were highlighted:

- An assessment of the Council's communication needs had been carried out. There were a few gaps which would require further investigation.
- A list of staff involved in communications work across the Council had been produced and trade unions had been consulted.
- A benchmarking exercise had been carried out with other local authorities and had provided a useful insight into their communication arrangements.
- The development of a model for communications and design principles.

In response to Members comments and questions, the following issues were discussed:

- The project would see communications across the Council led by a corporate team and with a structure of approximately 50 to 55 staff. There would still be some staff based in the individual directorates responsible for communications and they would receive dedicated support from the corporate team.
- The use of social networking sites such as facebook and twitter.
- Marketing Leeds – a piece of work would be undertaken to ensure that there is an effective relationship with Marketing Leeds to prevent duplication of activity.
- Accountability issues for Members and officers.
- Taking a proactive role in promoting success.
- Communications and marketing activity spend – the Board requested further information regarding this.

RESOLVED – That the report and discussion be noted.

(Councillors Groves and Blackburn left the meeting at 11.30 a.m. and 11.35 a.m. respectively during the discussion on this item)

72 Work Programme

The report of the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development outlined the Board's Work Programme and also included recent Executive Board Minutes and a copy of the Council's Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

The following issues were discussed:

- Request from Councillor K Wakefield to investigate the role of the Contact Centre and how queries regarding refuse collection were resolved – it was agreed to set up a Task and Finish Working Group to do this. Environment and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board would be invited to contribute.
- There would be a future update on the One Council Communications Project
- It was requested that the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development invite The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for Local Government and Communities to a future meeting.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the report be noted and work programme be updated accordingly.
- (2) That the Forward Plan and Executive Board minutes be noted.

73 Date and Time of Next Meeting - 7 March 2011

Monday, 7 March 2011 at 10.00 a.m. Pre-meeting for all Board Members at 9.30 a.m.