

SCRUTINY PROGRAMME BOARD
14 January 2010

37. THE FORWARD PLAN AND THE SCRUTINY FUNCTION

Further to minute 27 (4 November 2009), the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management provided an overview of the operation of the Forward Plan of Key Decisions, which was prepared by the Leader of the Council to cover a period of four months, beginning with the first day of any month. It was updated monthly on a rolling basis and it contained all of the Key Decisions of the Cabinet, a Committee of the Cabinet, individual Members of the Cabinet, officers, or under joint arrangements in the course of the discharge of Executive functions that were expected to be taken during that time. The Director set out the definition of a key decision and commented that, for the avoidance of doubt, any decision approving proposals for the making or amendment of a plan or budget which required the approval of the Council was regarded as a key decision.

At each meeting of the Scrutiny Programme Board, Members were invited to consider the Council's latest Forward Plan of Key Decisions published on the Internet and agree, in the light of the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme, whether to scrutinise any of the items listed for decision that fell within their remit, bearing in mind timescales and the resources available. However, Members were of the opinion that the nature and scope of key decisions to be taken were not always clear or obvious. Consequently, Members were sometimes in doubt as to what exactly was to be determined until after the determination had actually been made. The Director confirmed that he would explore ways to improve the Forward Plan and report back to Members.

The Forward Plan enabled Scrutiny Members to scrutinise Key Decisions listed in the Forward Plan before they were taken, allowing them to hold the Cabinet and Chief Officers to account for the decisions they were about to take, and to ensure that the decision making was robust and based on a sound footing. However, pre-scrutiny may be viewed as a barrier that could delay policy, when deadlines were already tight.

The Director referred also to the General Exception and Special Urgency Rules contained within the Access to Information Procedure Rules and outlined the circumstances when an overview and scrutiny committee could require the Executive to present a report to the Council in relation to a key decision taken, which was not included on the Forward Plan or the subject of the general exception procedure or the subject of an agreement with a relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chair, or the Chief Executive of the Council under Rule 15.

Members commented that a more informative narrative of the items contained within the Forward Plan would enable a better understanding of the decisions to be taken. In addition, more accurate timescales for decisions contained within the Plan would enable effective pre-scrutiny to be undertaken.

Resolved –

- (1) That the report be noted.**
- (2) That, in order to make the Forward Plan more user-friendly and to assist the scrutiny function, the Cabinet be requested to agree to the following –**
 - (a) That officers include within the Forward Plan a more informative narrative of the key decisions to be taken, together with more accurate timescales.**
 - (b) That, for a short trial period, Chief Officers be required to submit to the next appropriate Overview and Scrutiny Committee a brief explanation of new items included in the Forward Plan.**