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Late Item for Scrutiny Board (Central and Corporate), 6th July 2009

Request for Scrutiny (Councillor Illingworth)

Request for Scrutiny: Record Keeping & Public Access to Information

I am seeking a Scrutiny Inquiry into the deplorable state of the Council's paper and computer records, and the difficulties faced by the Council's officers, elected members and the general public in obtaining reliable information that should be freely available to them, as of right.

Poor quality, inaccurate, biased information is widespread throughout the Council. Many important public records have apparently been destroyed, discarded or simply lost. At best, these deficiencies result in slow, unresponsive and wasteful administration, while at worst they could provide a cover for wholesale bungling or even fraud. I can produce instances where the Council has apparently created "synthetic" documents, which are not the original papers, and where key information seems to have been altered. It does not require genius to see the dangers in this.

I am told that West Yorkshire Archive Service has offered to look after the Council's older records. These overtures have apparently been rejected by the Council. I cannot understand the reasons for this decision. At a time when public anger is rightly directed against perceived deficiencies in our political system, it behoves the Council to put its own house in order, and ensure that our administrative practices and record keeping are beyond reproach.

Committee records: the minimum legal retention period is six years, but the Council can and should retain records for very much longer than this. Major capital schemes, PFI contracts and large developments such as EASEL or Kirkstall Forge often extend over much longer periods than six years. It may become very important to know what was decided several years ago, and the reasons for the decision.

In reality, it is already difficult to locate material from 2004: many paper records have been discarded "to save space" and surviving electronic copies could soon be inaccessible as older equipment becomes obsolete. If action is taken quickly (and by combining information from several different sources) it might still be possible to reconstruct an almost complete record back to "modernisation" around 2000. This could soon become impractical if retrieval and archiving is delayed.

Planning records: In theory, the basic information in the planning register should be retained indefinitely. Many years later it may be important to maintain a consistent policy and to know exactly what was previously agreed.

Anybody who has studied Leeds planning files knows that our records are often muddled and incomplete. Drawings may not be numbered or dated. Bundles of papers frequently go astray. It can be particularly difficult to follow amendments to an application and to know when they were made. Some of the information on the public computer system is incomplete or wrong.

It seems to me indefensible that elected members and the general public are obliged to use an inconvenient "cut down" computer system to search the planning register, when the Planning Department internally uses the full CAPS system, which is much more flexible and has many useful features. I took this up with our suppliers, who were amazed that Leeds had selected such a poor system for public use, when they could have provided us with a much better solution at no additional cost.

Land records: The Council retains deed packets for land acquisitions, and maintains a land terrier system to identify land in public ownership. Some of these records go back for over 100 years and may have historical value. The land terrier is now held in electronic form.

There seems to be no good reason why this information should not be routinely available to elected members, researchers and the general public. It could inform political debate. There is nothing secret about the ownership of public land. This information is already available from the Land Registry, but it is inconvenient and expensive to obtain. The Council already holds these records electronically, and could publish them tomorrow in the Leonardo building or on the Internet at no additional cost.

Financial records: In theory, it is possible for electors to demand to see invoices and receipts as part of the Council's audit processes. There is only a narrow window of opportunity to do this, although some electors have also managed to obtain this information under the Freedom of Information Act. Elected members can see these records, although in my experience one has to ask several times, and be prepared to argue, and the process is slow.

On occasion members have agreed to keep price information secret, succumbing to the story that a supplier had quoted Leeds a "special price" or "loss leader" to gain entry to the market place. I doubt that such stories have ever been true. As far as I can discover the Council often pays over the odds and is simply being "ripped off". Financial information may be "exempt" when contract negotiations are in progress, before the decision has been taken. It is rarely exempt after the money has been paid. The idea seems to have grown up in Leeds that prices are always "below the line". There is no legal basis for this, and the primary legislation makes it clear that this information should normally be released.

Members in their casework will often receive complaints that a particular repair has not been done, or done to a poor standard, but the contractor has still been paid. I am not convinced that such over-charging is commonly refunded.

I propose that the Council should routinely publish price information, as a matter of course, and that this should be incorporated into our publication scheme. It should be easily possible for a council tenant, looking at a dubious repair, to quickly discover how much the Council was charged. This would be a good discipline for us, better than random audits. Our electors' hearts would be in it, and we could rely on them to ferret out waste and inefficiency if we gave them the chance.

Common Purpose: The Council has a bizarre relationship with a supplier called "Common Purpose". Common Purpose does not take part in competitive tendering exercises, but has nevertheless received considerable sums of public money to provide "leadership training" for promising Leeds officers. Candidates are selected in secret to attend these courses by a local "Advisory Committee" but no minutes are published. I have asked to see these minutes, but access has been refused. It is claimed that Common Purpose is a private organisation, but if this is the case, why does it meet secretly on Council premises, why do senior officers attend these meetings, and why is significant public money being spent? How can this be consistent with the Officers' Code of Conduct, Council Standing Orders and Financial Regulations?

Officers who attend "Common Purpose" training courses receive a password to a database of similar individuals who have also been selected by a local advisory committee and similarly trained. This is to encourage "networking". There seems to be no requirement to declare membership of Common Purpose when candidates are interviewed for promotion, although it is possible that some candidates and interview panel members are in contact via the database. Common Purpose holds private meetings where information is shared on a non-attributable basis called the "Chatham House Rule". Members seem to include many individuals whose professional responsibility is to audit and monitor the Council and ensure probity in public life. The Council should publish full details of its relationship with Common Purpose, and membership of this organisation should be declared, as is required for Freemasons.

The Leeds Advisory Group

Paul Rogerson
Chair
Chief Executive
Leeds City Council

Charlotte Britton
Chairman, IoD Young Directors Forum,
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Malcolm Cowing
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Martin Dean
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Geoffrey Dodd
Divisional Commander
Chief Superintendent
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Murray Edwards
General Manager
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Chris Green
Managing Director
Yorkshire Post
Newspapers Ltd

Paul Kelly
Head of Assets
KPMG

Gary Lumby
Head of UK Retail
Yorkshire Bank

Tom Morton
Chairman
PKF Accountants

Martin Patterson
Director of Fundraising
St George's Crypt

Maxine Room
Chief Executive
Park Lane College

Ros Vahey
Deputy Chief Executive
Education Leeds



Common Purpose Alumni in Leeds

Sharon Allen, Director, St Anne's Community Services
Jaz Bangerh, Group Human Resources Manager, Chevin Housing Group
Irena Bauman, Managing Director, Bauman and Lyons
Maggie Boyle, Chief Executive, Leeds Teaching Hospitals
Ian Brown, Artistic Director, West Yorkshire Playhouse
Gordon Carey, Chairman, Carey Jones Associates
Alistair Conn, Site Manager, Syngenta
Charlotte Cooke, General Manager, Refugee Council
Jean Dent, Director, Leeds City Council
Stephen Durrans, Managing Director, Jay-Be Ltd
Murray Edwards, Executive Director, Wakefield Theatres
Jenny Eugene, Managing Director, Jeep Productions
Keith Evans, Managing Director, CIDA - Creative Industries Development Agency
Dr Margaret Faull, Chief Executive, National Coal Mining Museum for England Trust Ltd
Paul Fox, Director, HSBC
David Gent, Regional Director, Sport England
Nadio Granata, Managing Director, PNG Marketing Consultants Ltd
The Venerable Jonathan Greener, Dean of Wakefield Cathedral, Diocese of Wakefield
Jo Haigh, Corporate Finance Director, The Media Management Group
Mark Hallows, Regional Account Director, Fujitsu Services
Christopher Hudson, Associate Dean, Faculty of Health, Leeds Metropolitan University
Rob Hutching, Partner, Pinsent and Mason
Zulfi Hussein, Director, Global Synergy
Carol Jordan, Director Integrated Children Services, Education Leeds
John Kaye, Director, Voluntary Action Networks

Mike Love, Director, Together For Peace
Marian Mahoney, Deputy Governor, HMP Leeds
Hanif Malik, Director, Hamara Living Centre
Mark Milsom, Divisional Commander, West Yorkshire Police
Jonathan Morgan, Managing Director, Morgan City Living
Nick Morgan, Chief Executive, Citizen Advice Bureau
Claire Morrow, Chair, Yorkshire Tourist Board
Bishop John Packer, Diocese of Ripon and Leeds
Wayne Parkinson, Operations Director & Group Facilities Manager, Club LS1
Martin Patterson, Fundraising Director, St George's Crypt
Sheena Pickersgill, HR Director, West Yorkshire Passenger Executive
David Prior, Manufacturing Director, NPIL Pharmaceuticals (UK) Ltd
Seamus Quinn, Managing Director, Chem Resist Group Ltd
Mark Rides, Commercial Controller - Sales, Fox's Biscuits
Maxine Room, Chief Executive, Park Lane College
Jenny Sergeant, Regional Organiser - West Yorkshire, Federation of Small Businesses
Zafar Siddique, District Crown Prosecutor, Crown Prosecution Service
Adrian Spawforth, Managing Director, Spawforths
Christine Springthorpe, Director of Clinical Services/Joint Chief Executive, Kirkwood Hospice
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Ian Tod, Partner, Allen Tod Architecture Ltd
Helen Thompson, Head of Communities, Yorkshire Forward
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