

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 March 2014

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Sanders (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Abbasi, Altaf-Khan, Coulter, Darke, Fooks, Humberstone, Jones, Lloyd-Shogbesan, Pressel, Simmons and Upton.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer), Lois Stock (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), Helen Bishop (Head of Customer Services), David Edwards (Executive Director City Regeneration and Housing) and Robert Hetherington (Economic Development Manager)

74. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from:-

- Councillor Mills – Councillor Jones substituted;
- Councillor Campbell – Councillor Fooks substituted;
- Councillor Fry – Councillor Pressel substituted;
- Councillor Smith – Councillor Humberstone substituted.

75. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None made.

76. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Principal Scrutiny Officer presented the Work Programme and Forward Plan, and highlighted the following issues:-

Work Programme

- (1) The Community Engagement Strategy, which was requested by the Committee, has been delayed as the period of consultation has been extended;
- (2) An action plan concerning the employment of Council staff from BME communities is being developed;
- (3) Evaluation of the Leadership Programme (linked to educational attainment) will be presented to the Committee in April;
- (4) The Covered Market Group has asked to continue in order to see its recommendations through to implementation. This would focus purely on the recommendations that had been made, would not be a roving review, and could continue until the end of the Committee's work programme. The Committee AGREED to this request;
- (5) The Finance Panel has met and made recommendations on the Budget. It planned to meet again to discuss ethical investment.

Councillor Simmons had asked for further information on the downward trend in recycling targets. Geoff Corps (Service Manager) attended the meeting to

answer questions on this. A briefing note on the changes (which went to CEB) was also submitted for information.

Geoff Corps provided the following information:-

- Oxfordshire Waste Partnership will end on 31st March 2014 because the County Council will not fund it any more. The City Council will continue to work with partners;
- City Officers have visited a specialist plant in Essex to explore further uses for “sweeper arisings”. These are leaves, grass cuttings, litter, road dressings etc. Because Oxford does a lot of sweeping, it has more “arisings” than other places. A trial of recycling from sweeper detritus is ongoing at Ewelme. It is thought that there are recoverable items arising from sweeping, but it is too early to say at present;
- The matter of trying to persuade more people to recycle more things is part of a much wider issue. Dry recyclate is at its highest level across the City. A campaign, called “One More Thing” will begin next year, to encourage recycling;
- It is possible to map recycling across the City and identify which are the best and worst performing areas. North and central Oxford perform well, south and south east Oxford do less well.
- The City Council works with Brookes University Street Champions and Brookes Recycling Champions, and is well versed in engaging with students to encourage more recycling from them. There is scope to engage with individual colleges more;
- Oxfordshire County Council organises gulley emptying – noted that Councillor Abassi would like more information about this;
- Recycling at flats has begun. Social landlords must demonstrate an ability to recycle at a rate of 50%. There has been some positive engagement with landlords, but it is too early to judge the success of this and the impact on recycling rates;
- Waste collection crews now have data collectors in their wagons, so that the Council can be made aware of failures to recycle, mispresentation of wheelie bins, etc. The Council will visit people who do not engage with the Council about recycling to educate, inform and help them.

The Committee thanked the waste teams for all their hard work – they are doing a good job.

Resolved to:-

- (1) Thank the waste teams for their efforts and congratulate them on a job well done;
- (2) Seek further information about gulley emptying from Shaun Hatton.

Forward Plan

The Committee would like to see the following:-

- (1) Parking on HRA land – to go to the Housing Panel;

- (2) Fusion Lifestyle Service Plan – already agreed to look at how Fusion engages with under-represented groups within the City, however Councillor Simmons felt it would be useful to look at the wider plan if possible;
- (3) Oxford Strategic Housing Market Assessment – headline numbers will be available soon, so this should be considered for a future work programme.

77. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Principal Scrutiny Officer presented the report back on recommendations made by the Committee to the City Executive Board. The Committee had done well with its recommendations, as the majority of them had been accepted by CEB.

Resolved to note the current position.

78. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS - MONITORING REPORT

The Head of Customer Services submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP).

Helen Bishop (Head of Customer Services) and Councillor Susan Brown (Board Member for Benefits and Customer Services) attended the meeting to present the report to the Committee, provide some background and answer any questions.

Initial comments from Councillor Brown and Helen Bishop

- One issue with DHP is the uncertainty around year to year funding – the Council does not know how much funding it will be given from year to year.
- DHP is supposed to be a temporary measure, and that is why there is a policy on conditionality around it.
- It's not easy to find cheap housing to meet people's needs, and for some people, getting into work is a long and complicated process. Officers have worked to help and support many people;
- However, there is a concern that many of those affected have not applied for DHP, and that there are many people out there who either are, or soon will be, experiencing problems managing their money;
- The Council has commissioned some independent research to try to find out the scale of any potential problems, as it is interested to find out how people manage;
- There are many welfare reforms that are affecting people.

Comments and questions from the Committee

- Is it possible to do data matching with people who use food banks, and people who have rent arrears, to see if they may need DHP?
- What will happen to people who had DHP, but shouldn't have had it because they were not actually affected by the "bedroom tax"?

- It is concerning that there have been only 192 applications due to reductions in the Local Housing Allowance rates;
- It is also of concern that if the budget for DHP is not spent, the remainder will have to be returned;
- It is encouraging that the Council has been able to give multiple awards to some people;
- Can we be sure that the Council is promoting this in the right place please?
- Are new applications increasing or trailing off – is there increased pressure on the DHP grant?
- The Committee thanked the team for their hard work, noting that they had won two Staff Awards recently. However, the Committee also felt that it would like to monitor DHP on a regular basis.

Responses from Councillor Brown and Helen Bishop

- The Council has worked hard to establish who is affected by the “bedroom tax”, and Helen Bishop will prepared an informative note on this topic;
- Comments on the use of information about food banks and rent arrears will be taken back; but in the meantime Councillors can be assured that there are mechanisms to ensure the right clients are reached;
- Helen Bishop will come back to members on the issue of applications due to reductions in Local Housing Allowance rates;
- The Council wants to treat people fairly, but conditions are needed because DHP is not a long term solution upon which people can rely for considerable periods of time. It’s difficult to strike the right balance – hence the underspend – but it is agreed that more could be done to promote DHP in the right areas;
- Only the underspend on the Government grant would need to be returned to the Government – the additional money agreed by Council would not be affected;
- The Council is spending at a higher rate now, making 16 week awards as opposed to the previous 13 week awards. It was noted that the Committee suggested that it might be helpful for the Finance Panel to see the budget figures to help understand what the budget pressures were;
- The Council’s experience of helping people into work has been shared with other Councils.

The following information would be provided to the Committee:-

- Extra detail about the effect of the pre-1996 changes – people affected or not affected by the “bedroom tax”;
- Case numbers- are they rising or falling?
- Additional details of the 192 applications due to reductions in the Local Housing Allowance rates;

Resolved to:-

- (1) Note the current position;
- (2) Ask that the final end of year report on DHP be presented at the Committee on 6th May, and that this would include some feedback from the independent research that is currently taking place.

79. STRATEGIC ECONOMIC PLAN - PRE-SCRUTINY

The Executive Director, Regeneration and Housing, submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan. David Edwards (Executive Director, Regeneration and Housing) and Robert Hetherington (Economic Development Manager) attended the meeting to present the report to the Committee. Councillor Bob Price, Board Member for Corporate Governance, Strategic Partnerships and Economic Development, was unable to attend the meeting but had offered to attend a future meeting if the Committee so wished.

David Edwards introduced the report and provided some background and context to it. He explained that the process, structure and bidding for the Growth Deal was very similar to that of the City deal; however the timescale was compressed and the Council's bid needed to be submitted by the end of March 2014. It should be noted that Government focus would be on deals that were "ready to go" in 2015. The Strategic Economic Plan would be built around the four objectives of:-

- Innovation Enterprise – innovation led economic growth;
- Innovation Place – homes and quality of life;
- Innovative People – skills and employment;
- Innovative Connectivity – free movement of people, growing economy.

There was a summary report – and a much more detailed report – being prepared, but they were not yet completed. The Chair, Councillor Sanders, observed that the report that the Committee had before it did not provide very much to scrutinise, and that it would be important to circulate some further information to Councillors.

Comments from the Committee

- Concern was expressed about post-flooding infrastructure. There is a need to sort out existing problems before any further expansion;
- Noted comments about economic growth, but where are the proposed new workers to live? Shortage of housing could hinder enterprise;
- There is an issue about finding land upon which to build houses. Neighbouring local authorities have not been exceptionally receptive to the City Council's ideas, so how can this be progressed?
- Concern was expressed about the capacity of the utilities in Oxford. There have been problems with the water, sewage and energy supplies in the City, and this needs to be resolved as part of a review of the necessary infrastructure to support growth;
- Do partners include the two Universities, Culham and Harwell?

- It would be useful to explain how growth in Oxford can help address inequalities in the City;
- When talking about skills, apprenticeships and careers, it is important to consider the role of schools. It is vital that schools are able to give good career advice and support to their students.

Responses from David Edwards and Robert Hetherington

- There is a bid in for support for the proposed Western Relief Channel (to ease flooding in Oxford);
- Agreed that there needs to be a comprehensive assessment of where new housing can go, because it is unlikely that it all can be accommodated within the City boundaries. The City has a case for one or more urban extensions, and there is a need for intensive discussions between Council Leaders. Neighbouring local authorities have, in principle, agreed to work together to see how they can deliver more housing.
- Agreed that there is a need to involve the utility companies in any discussions. The City Council has had discussions with Thames Water, for example, for many years, but sadly this had not proved very productive and it is hard to engage with them. The situation is similar with Scottish and Southern electricity. It is quite difficult to persuade utility companies to work closely and constructively together.
- Partners will be similar to those involved with the City Deal. The Council would also like to include small end medium sized enterprises;
- Noted the comments about inequalities. This isn't just about housing, it is also about skills, access to employment and economic growth.
- This document will be one of a suite of documents (including City Deal and the European Social Investment Fund framework) that will work together to stimulate economic growth.

Resolved to make the following recommendations:-

- (1) For all members to see the finalised Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan as submitted to Government and to be kept in touch with the outcomes from this bid;
- (2) To provide a "governance structure" below the Board Member representative on the Local Strategic Partnership that can deliver on the aim of keeping all members of Council informed and engaged in the detail of progress against selected projects, and the likely outcomes for the City and its residents;
- (3) The Board Member and Officers to do all they can to reflect the City's ambition of reducing inequality in strategic planning for all themes;
- (4) The Board Member and Officers to do all they can within the Innovative Place theme to produce excellent links to schools at a very early stage, in order to support good quality advice on educational choices and career planning.

80. MINUTES

Resolved to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 4th February 2014.

81. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Resolved to note the following dates:-

1st April 2014;
6th May 2014

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.33 pm