

# SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**Tuesday 6 May 2014**

**COUNCILLORS PRESENT:** Councillors Mills (Chair), Sanders (Vice-Chair), Coulter, Darke, Fooks, Fry, Lloyd-Shogbesan, Smith and Upton.

**OFFICERS PRESENT:** Lois Stock (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer) and Paul Wilding (Benefit Operations Manager), Chris Harvey (Organisational Development and Learning Manager)

## **91. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor Campbell – Councillor Jean Fooks substituted.

As Councillor Campbell was not standing for re-election on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, Councillor Gill Sanders suggested that a letter be sent to him from the Scrutiny Committee, to thank him for all his hard work in scrutiny issues over his term of office. Councillor Campbell had been Chair of Scrutiny, and had always been very active, helpful and engaged in the scrutiny process. The Committee also sent him very best wishes for a speedy recovery.

## **92. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None

## **93. WORK PROGRAMME OUTCOMES AND FORWARD PLAN**

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning scrutiny outcomes for the Council year 2013 to 2014. Pat Jones (Democratic and Member Services Manager) introduced the report to the Committee.

### Scrutiny Outcomes

Pat Jones explained that this had been the first year of the new scrutiny structure and it had worked well, with some 60% of non-executive Councillors being involved with scrutiny work. The work programme had been very active and she thanked Councillors for all their input into it and their hard work on it. The Housing and Finance Standing Panels had worked hard, with Cllrs Sanders, Smith and Simmons taking leading roles. The Finance Panel's work on Ethical Investment had been noted in Municipal Journal and she would send a copy of that article to committee members.

It was pleasing that a very high proportion of recommendations to CEB had been accepted. Pat Jones felt that the operational arrangements had worked very well. Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan observed that the Committee had not done particularly well with involving local residents and inviting them to sit on the Committee on a non-voting basis, and it was agreed that this should be looked at by the new Committee when it was convened.

Pat Jones expressed concern that there had been a high level of substitution on the Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Fooks felt that this was partly because there was now only one scrutiny committee meeting monthly, and as a result those involved had a particularly heavy load put upon them. Councillor Fooks added that she felt that the constant repetition of the work programme in full on every agenda, as well as the Forward Plan, was unnecessary; and that Councillors did not need a copy of both every month. The Committee suggested that this should be considered by the new Scrutiny Committee when it was convened post-election

Having considered the work programme for 2013/14, the Committee agreed that the following issues should be rolled forwards for inclusion on the next work programme:-

- Thames Water investment to improve flooding issues in the City;
- Discretionary Housing Payments;
- Performance Monitoring;
- Council Tax exemption for students;
- Fusion Leisure Contract;
- Housing Standing Panel to continue;
- Finance Standing Panel to continue;
- Council investment in educational attainment;
- Enfranchisement and empowerment – this should not be forgotten.

The Committee would continue to call forward items from the Forward Plan. It did not want to pursue further the following items:-

- Scale of new buildings – evaluation of an agreed pilot scheme based on the practice in Swiss Cantons;
- Use of Social Media by the Council.

The suggested review topic to track the experience of a family on benefits, in order to explore the effects of benefit changes was not accepted by the Committee. Paul Wilding (Benefit Operations Manager) suggested that some research had been commissioned from the Research Unit for Financial Inclusion, and he would endeavour to forward this to members of the Committee for information.

The Committee noted that Pat Jones would no longer be actively involved with the Committee as a scrutiny officer. Pat Jones confirmed that a new scrutiny officer would be appointed in due course – interviews would be held on 15<sup>th</sup> May – but she would continue to manage the work programme and would always be deeply interested in scrutiny work.

The Committee also noted that Lois Stock (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer) was leaving the Council at the end of May; and members thanked her for her hard work over the years and wished her well for the future.

## Forward Plan

The Committee resolved to call from the Forward Plan the following items for consideration by Scrutiny:-

- Community Engagement Plan 2014-2017;
- Discretionary Housing Payments Policy Review;
- Housing Strategy Action Plan (to the Housing Panel);
- End of Year reporting on Finance and Performance (to the Finance Panel).

### **94. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS - MONITORING REPORT.**

The Head of Customer Services submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). Paul Wilding, Benefit Operations Manager, presented the report to the Committee and provided some background and context to it.

He explained that the DHP policy has been successful in that the Council has been able to support all those people who needed such support, and who in turn were prepared to work with the Council to seek a sustainable solution to their situation. In April 2013, the Council spent approximately £15,000 on DHP payments, but by April 2014 that had virtually doubled. The plan now is to do more work with people affected by the under-occupancy rules, and also to reach out to private tenants.

#### Questions and comments from the Committee

- Some excellent work has been carried out on this issue, and it should be extended to help more people if possible;
- Once information about DHP goes into general circulation – word of mouth – uptake should increase;
- DHP should be promoted heavily in and by advice centres;
- The Council could also reach out to nurseries and advice groups – for example, those dealing with mental health issues;
- It is important to remember people who were homeless and who are now seeking to move on from hostels;
- There is concern about our level of rent arrears;
- There is also concern that private landlords so often reject people who are on benefits, and thus they are excluded from private tenancies;
- Some disappointment was expressed that the whole DHP budget had not been used, however it does take time for the word to go out, and there have been huge efforts made to promote this in advice centres and services;
- Are the DHP application forms very complicated?
- If people are actively looking for smaller accommodation, how many have actually found it?

#### Responses from Paul Wilding

- CEB allocated an extra £100,000 in its budget to support DHP – this has been rolled forwards into the current budget;

- Potentially, the Council had a demand on the DHP budget last year of £1.3million., and had a budget of about half that to meet the demand. It focussed publicity on advice centres and partnership organisations to target the help at those who most needed it. This year, it will do something similar, and is looking to work with Children's Centres to help push the advice into the community;
- People in private tenancies are less likely to apply for DHP, when in reality there should be a lot of demand. A lot of private tenants do not seem to be aware that support is available from the Council, so it is intended to do more work with private tenants;
- Some people now have their rent paid directly to them (as opposed to the landlord) , and there has been an increase in rent arrears in this sector. However, rent arrears generally are quite small;
- A report is going to CEB in July, and this is currently with the Council's stakeholders for their views. It is anticipated that any changes made as a result of this will be mostly cosmetic and not substantial;
- The application form for DHP has been reviewed and the process changed. Those who apply can come in to see someone face to face and there is now a dedicated officer working on determination of claims. A shorter version of the form has been devised for repeat claims;
- Some people have managed to find smaller accommodation. Conditionality is about people engaging with the Council, and this may include looking for a smaller home.

Resolved to:-

- (1) Note the report;
- (2) Ask that this issue be kept under regular review by the Scrutiny Committee, with the receipt of regular reports about progress.

## **95. RECYCLING INITIATIVES - PANEL REPORT**

The Scrutiny Recycling Panel submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning recycling incentive schemes. Councillor James Fry presented the report to the Committee and provided some background and context to it.

Councillor Fry explained that there were recycling incentives in other parts of the country, but these were often used in conjunction with other incentives so that it was hard to identify their value. The Panel had noted that food waste recycling would be introduced in the Council's flats in the next few years.

The Committee noted that recommendation 3 of the report suggested that residents be encouraged to recycle for charity. This was felt to be a good idea. Recycling in flats was always going to be something of an issue, but people might be more willing to do it if they thought that a charity – especially a *local* charity – would benefit as a result.

The Committee was happy for the report to go to CEB, however it wished the following clarifications to be made to the recommendations:-

- (1) Recommendation 2 should be re-written to make it clear that the targeted education campaign should specially include flats. It should also make clear that the sum of £27,000 from the waste partnership board should be split between the educational initiative and the charity initiative;
- (2) Recommendation 3 should be re-written to make it clear that the choice of charity to benefit from recycling will be decided on an area basis.

With those amendments, it was resolved to present the report to CEB.

## **96. TALENT MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME - OPTIONS, WITH EMPHASIS ON BME GROUPS**

The Head of HR and Facilities presented a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning the Talent Management Framework. Chris Harvey, Organisational Development and Learning Manager presented the report to the Committee and provided some background and context to it. He stressed in particular the areas for Council focus:-

- Investment in Youth;
- Growing our Own;
- Future Leaders and Managers;
- High Potential.

### Questions and comments from the Committee

- At what level in the organisation are BME staff – are any managers or service heads? At what level is training given?
- Some staff are acting as mentors – what sort of training, and at what level, do they receive?
- Cuts to resources are sometimes perceived as hitting services targeted at the BME community first – is there any protection in the Budget?
- Has the Council thought of offering itself as a training venue for APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence), as doing so would mean that Oxford is offered free places on any training course it hosts;
- The Talent Management Strategy is good for all staff, and apprenticeships are a valuable way into the organisation;
- Does everyone in the organisation understand the reasons behind this strategy, or has there been any sort of “backlash” to it?

### Responses from Chris Harvey

- The Council does not have any senior managers from the BME community at present. The most senior is at Grade 10 (service manager level);
- Mentoring is done at a lower level owing to limited resources;
- Training is open to all staff, irrespective of level, with management development training aimed at newly promoted managers;
- Mentoring in schools is done in conjunction with Business in the Community. The Council always looks for the right mentors to meet the need;

- The budget used is that allocated for learning and development, however it is noted that there is additional funding in the budget this year for staff wellbeing as well and leadership and management development;
- Comment about APSE noted – Chris Harvey will contact them to explore this further;
- The Council has many good training packages of its own;
- There has been very little “backlash”, however some female members of staff have pointed out that women are under-represented in some areas as well.

The Committee was supportive of this strategy. It noted that it had already made recommendations to CEB about recruitment and was currently waiting to see the action plan for this.

Resolved to note the report.

#### **97. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

Resolved to note the future meeting dates. The next scheduled meeting is 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2014.

#### **98. MINUTES**

Resolved to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014.

The Committee also thanked Councillor Mark Mills for being Chair of the Committee for the past year, and wished him well for the future.

**The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.40 pm**