

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday 10 November 2014

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Hayes (Vice-Chair), Altaf-Khan, Anwar, Brandt, Coulter, Darke, Fry, Hollick, Hollingsworth, Henwood and Upton.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Susan Brown.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Michael Crofton-Briggs (Head of City Development), Martin John (Electoral Services Manager), Sadie Paige (Policy, Culture and Communication), Jennifer Thompson (Law and Governance) and Paul Wilding (Benefit Operations Manager).

38. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Simmons (substitute Councillor Brandt) and Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan (substitute Councillor Hollingsworth).

The Vice-Chair took the chair for this meeting.

The Vice-Chair paid tribute to Val Smith's contribution to the scrutiny committee and her work on the Housing Panel.

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

40. UPDATES FROM SCRUTINY PANELS

Councillor Hollick gave a brief update on the work of the Housing Panel.

Councillor Fry gave a brief update on the work of the Finance Panel and proposals for scrutiny of the budget.

Councillor Upton reported on an informative visit to three council-owned parks: Blackbird Leys, Spindleberry nature reserve, and Florence Park.

41. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS - MONITORING REPORT

The Head of Customer Service submitted a report on the monitoring and expenditure of the discretionary housing payment (DHP) budget (previously circulated now appended).

Councillor Susan Brown and Paul Wilding, Programme Manager – Revenue and Benefits, introduced the report and asked the committee if they had come across cases where a DHP would be appropriate and knew how to refer these to the welfare team. They explained that the welfare team pro-actively contacted those who might be affected by caps or cuts to their benefits. The team liaised with Mind and Restore to support vulnerable people, and with housing and JobCentre staff.

They expected central government funding to decrease. The current funding of £515,000 was adequate provided there were no further changes necessitating larger numbers of awards, particularly long-term awards. The carry-forward should be retained to deal with future pressures. The policy was primarily aimed at providing short term support, awarding fairly and consistently, and not subsidising private landlords. Long-term awards to those affected by the bedroom tax would gradually decrease as recipients reached pension age; but there may be new awards to those newly affected by the caps. Those recently unemployed were more likely to require only short-term support. The welfare team comprised five staff, partly funded by grants, and European Social Fund grant for specific work.

The Committee noted the report and update and asked for:

- information on the interaction between housing top-up payments and DHPs; and
- officers to consider a performance measure related to the potential costs of not awarding a DHP.

42. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN 2014-17 - CONSULTATION RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The Head of Policy, Culture and Communications submitted a report on the results and analysis of the consultation on the community engagement plan.

Sadie Page, Consultation Officer, introduced the report and explained that an analysis of consultations in the last year and two pilot consultations would be presented to a later meeting.

A 'you said.... we did....' measure to show actions taken had been introduced. The overall profile of on-line respondents was measured against the profile of the city, and underrepresented groups then further encouraged to take part. It was harder to measure the profile of off-line respondents.

The Committee commented that:

- contact with Oxford Brookes student union should be established; and
- consultations should be tailored to the policy or questions.

43. INDIVIDUAL VOTER REGISTRATION

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report on individual electoral registration.

Martin John, Electoral Services Manager, introduced the report and outlined the actions taken to publicise individual registration and the outcome of on-going national discussions with the Electoral Commission and the Cabinet Office.

Government were anticipating a 10% fall in registration. This was likely to be higher in Oxford where 3rd party registrations primarily on behalf of students were high.

A substantial fall in electoral numbers automatically triggered a review of ward boundaries and it was anticipated this would affect Oxford as well as many other authorities.

Students may not wish to register in Oxford as well as at home, or receive notification to register. He was working with Oxford Brookes and building links with Oxford University colleges to draw up lists of pending voters and encourage registration, although unless students completed their registration and were able to provide identification they would remain pending. Other major university towns were experiencing similar problems with student registrations.

The people who failed the electronic data matching process were those most likely to be unable to provide prescribed identification, and there was no provision to use other means of verification.

Electors could register using city council customer service machines or over the phone if they had their ID to hand.

The pro-active work needed to encourage registration was necessary but costly and more staff were needed to manage the workload and publicity. Increased costs to date included £60,000 on postage because of the extra paperwork. The Cabinet Office had fully funded the additional costs to date. There may be pressure to increase registration, but this was unlikely to be a requirement. It was possible to impose fixed-penalty type fines for failing to register, but likely to be impractical and not cost-effective.

The Committee noted the report and the answers to their questions.

44. STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT 2014 REVIEW

The Head of City Development submitted a report setting out the draft Statement of Community Involvement to be discussed by the City Executive Board.

Lyndsey Beveridge, Senior Planner, and Michael Crofton-Briggs, Head of City Development, introduced the report.

For individual planning applications, letters to neighbours produced about a 2% response rate. These were replaced by site notices and online notifications with alert services. Participation rates were rising. There was no follow-up other than an automated acknowledgement of a comment.

Applicants were encouraged to undertake early consultations and should be including a record of this with their applications. Final reports contained a list of public consultees and their responses. Pre-application discussions with officers were not a matter of public record but could be released under the Freedom of Information Act unless there were reasons not to do so.

Three forums (Headington, Summertown and St Margaret's, and Wolvercote) were designated and working on their neighbourhood plans.

Officers would be evaluating the results of the recent online consultation about accessing planning applications online.

The Committee made one recommendation to the City Executive Board: that the statement should explain how to view printed copies of plans.

45. WESTGATE COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY

The Head of City Development submitted a report on proposals for Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) expenditure.

Michael Crofton-Briggs, Head of City Development, introduced the report and explained the principles of the CIL and agreeing expenditure as part of the Council's capital budget. Detailed planning conditions for this scheme would be agreed with input from Oxfordshire County Council to maintain adequate control over improvements to the public spaces and highways.

The Committee made no recommendations to the City Executive Board.

46. PERFORMANCE MONITORING - QUARTER 2

The Committee considered the performance monitoring report for quarter 2 and noted that areas of lower performance had recently come to the committee were scheduled for discussion at future meetings.

47. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Committee agreed to pre-scrutinise the following reports:

- Purchase of St Aldate's Chambers
- Discretionary rates relief for businesses policy

and noted

- the Housing Panel would pre-scrutinise noted the Housing Panel would pre-scrutinise the Aids and Adaptions Policy and the Exemption Policy for Repairs.
- the Finance Panel would pre-scrutinise the budget and the corporate plan.

The Committee noted the work programme.

48. INEQUALITIES PANEL - TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee noted these.

49. BUDGET SCRUTINY - TERMS OF REFERENCE AND TIMETABLE

The Committee noted these.

50. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee noted these.

51. MINUTES

The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 6 October as a true and accurate record.

52. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the meeting dates, and that an additional meeting was scheduled for 23 December at 10.00am to deal with any called-in decisions from December's Executive Board meetings.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.25 pm