

VALUE AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday 28 January 2013

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Mills (Chair), Rowley (Vice-Chair), Abbasi, Canning, Fooks, Fry, Gotch, Kennedy, Malik, McCready, Simmons and Van Nooijen.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Mathew Metcalfe (Democratic and Electoral Services), Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer), Helen Bishop (Head of Customer Services), Jarlath Brine (Equalities and Diversity Business Partner), Sarah Claridge (Trainee Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), Simon Howick (Head of Human Resources and Facilities), Nigel Kennedy (Head of Finance), Ian Wright (Environmental Development) and Tim Sadler (Executive Director Community Services)

34. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Mick Haines.

35. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

36. STANDING ITEM: WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated and now appended) updating the Committee on the work programme for the current year.

Pat Jones from Law and Governance introduced the report.

Councillor Simmons said that he could not see the Corporate Plan consultation listed. In response Pat Jones said that this had been taken at the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor Fooks felt that the Constitution Review should be seen by the Value and Performance Scrutiny Committee. She also asked why there was the need to have all of the past history of the Work Programme etc. included in the agenda papers. In response Pat Jones said that the past history provided an update on the recommendations and reports that the Committee had not always seen. The Constitution Review item was the annual update of the Constitution and was not connected with the Governance Review currently underway.

Councillor Simmons suggested that instead of the Constitution Review coming to the Committee that the Governance Review report did instead.

The Committee also noted that the Complaints Monitoring Report was scheduled to be considered by the City Executive Board at its meeting on 21st March 2013.

Sarah Claridge from Law and Governance attended the meeting and gave a verbal update on the work of the Covered Market Review Panel. She said that the Panel had met and a further meeting would take place in February 2013. In terms of the Covered Market Strategy the Corporate Property Team was drafting this and a consultant was being appointed. The Strategy would cover three areas:

- (i) Vision and Future
- (ii) Plan to revitalise the short/medium term performance of the Market
- (iii) A long term strategic outlook

She said that the Panel Members would be participating in workshops with the consultant, who would take away the comments/points raised in these workshops.

Councillor Simmons was concerned that traders were under pressure due to the current economic climate and action was required now.

Councillor Canning felt that it was important to get the engagement with stakeholders right to move things forward.

Councillor Malik said that the Council had a duty on the development of the City and it was important that the character of the Covered Market was retained. Councillors Fooks added that the Market was a unique selling point in Oxford.

In response to comments concerning leases and a leasing strategy, Sarah Claridge confirmed that a leasing strategy was part of the overall Covered Market Strategy.

The Committee agreed:

- (a) To hold a special meeting of the Value and Performance Scrutiny Committee to consider two items:
 - (1) Complaints Monitoring
 - (2) Governance Review
- (b) To receive a further update from the Covered Market Review Panel at its meeting in April 2013, noting that the work of the Panel was unlikely to be completed by this date and the Panel would rollover into the 2013/14 Work Programme.

37. STANDING ITEM: REPORT BACK ON THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CITY EXECUTIVE BOARD AND ON MATTERS OF INTEREST TO THE COMMITTEE

As the City Executive Board has not received any reports from the Committee since its last meeting, there was nothing to report under this item.

38. FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE PANEL BUDGET REVIEW - UPDATE

The Chair of the Finance and Performance Panel, Budget Review Group, Councillor Mike Rowley informed the Committee that the Group had met with Directors and would be meeting on 31st January 2013 to finalise its report. He thanked Councillors Fooks, Fry and Simmons for their help and support during the review.

Councillor Simmons said that the process was very useful and he thanked Officers for their input.

Pat Jones said that she would supply Members with copies of the questions that the Review Group had put to Officers, along with the responses received.

The Committee agreed:

- (a) To thank Councillor Rowley for his update and the Members of the Review Group for their work, along with Officers;
- (b) To note that Pat Jones would circulate to Members copies of the questions and answers from the Review Group.

39. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE: DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS PILOT SCHEMES

The Head of Customer Services submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) which provided an update on the Council's implementation of two pilot schemes being run in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions, namely the Direct Payment Demonstration Project and the Local Authority role in the Universal Credit.

Helen Bishop, Head of Customer Services attended the meeting along with Councillor Van Coulter who had temporary Board Member responsibility for Customer Services.

Helen Bishop informed the Committee that the rent arrears within the pilot Group on the Direct Payment project stood at £135k (6%) as of 31st December 2012. In comparison the total rent arrears for all Oxford City Council tenants stood at 2.2%. She said that of the tenants in the pilot who had signed up to Direct Payment, 900 plus had a credit rent balance, 100 had decreased their rent arrears and 160 had gone into rent arrears. As part of the support to tenants in the pilot, Officers had written to all the tenants asking them for information to enable their risk to be assessed. She added that during this process the most successful engagement with tenants was via the phone rather than by letter due in some part to tenants not understanding the letter etc. She further added that the Council had been successful in obtaining extra funding from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for a Tenancy Sustainment Officer.

Helen Bishop with regard to the Local Authority Pilot informed the Committee that approximately 177 customers had been contacted who would be affected by the benefits cap, to ascertain their circumstances. A further 600 plus tenants had been written to concerning the new Under Occupancy Regulations that would affect them and support packages were being developed to support them.

Councillor Coulter said that there would be a huge transition and it was important that it was successful as nine separate benefit changes would affect our tenants. He added that Councillors and Officers were working hard to get the message out that the Council was there to help.

Councillor Rowley asked if the 1600 tenants were representative. In response Helen Bishop said that the City had been split into six patches, GreenSqaure who the Council were in partnership with for the pilot predominately covered the Blackbird Leys area, so the Council covered five patches.

Councillor Rowley asked what was being done to work with the other advice providers. In response Helen Bishop said it was hoped that focus groups would be held, not just with advice providers but with tenants affected by the changes as well as those not.

In response to further questions Helen Bishop said that the pilot had been a large logistical exercise with 1600 tenants and officers had worked hard between May and October 2012 collecting information, contacting tenants etc.

Councillor Fry asked questions on the staffing requirements and collection rates for rent. In response Nigel Kenney, Head of Finance said that a provision of £500k had been put into the Housing Revenue Account to cover rent arrears. The collection rate target had also been changed to 97%.

In conclusion Helen Bishop informed the Committee that the DWP had commissioned Sheffield Hallam University to conduct a detailed study of the pilots and their outcomes.

The Committee agreed:

- (a) To thank Councillor Van Coulter, Helen Bishop and Nigel Kennedy for attending the meeting;
- (b) To record that it:
 - (1) Was concerned on the impact of the benefit changes on residents and tenants of Oxford;
 - (2) Was felt to be valuable to be part of the pilot schemes to allow the Council to help shape the schemes with its Partners and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP);
 - (3) Congratulated Officers for their hard work in preparing for the introduction of the pilots and for providing continued support to those tenants affected by the changes;
 - (4) Was concerned that there had been little discussion on the implications of the Under Occupancy Regulations (Bedroom Tax) on Council tenants.
- (c) To request the Head of Customer Services to provide a further update report on the progress of the Direct Payment Pilot and the Local Authorities Pilot to the Value and Performance Scrutiny Committee, along

with the learning points that would help the Council forward with the introduction of the final schemes;

- (d) That the membership of the Governance Reference Group for these pilots be more cross party and more representative of the most affected wards in the City.

40. LANDLORDS SURVEY RESULTS

The Head of Environmental Development submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) which updated the Committee on the results of the survey of landlords with regard to the impact of the Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Scheme in Oxford.

Ian Wright from Environmental Development attended the meeting along with Councillor Bob Price.

Ian Wright summarised the contents of the report to the Committee and in response to questions said that the Tenants survey had now been commissioned.

Councillor Abassi said that some landlords who had spoken to him had undertaken works to their properties to meet standards etc. only for the tenants to then damage the property. The landlords felt that they were being blamed for not keeping the properties up to standard. Was there anything the Council could do to protect the landlords.

In response Ian Wright said that landlords had to make it clear what responsibilities the tenants had, however the primary person responsible was the landlord. He said that the Council did not take action against landlords lightly and suggested that landlords in this situation contacted the Councils Tenancy Relations Officer who was their not just for tenants but also landlords.

Councillor Fry said that there were situations where for example a couple rented a property, but then took in a lodger and did not consider themselves to be a HMO. Were there figures for the numbers of properties in this situation? In response Ian Wright said that they would not be in the system.

Councillor Fooks said it would be useful to have information on what the minimum statutory requirements were for landlords and did the Council ensure that lettings agents informed landlords of the Tenancy Relations Service.

Councillor Simmons said that it was important to look at the wider situation, especially with families. Were they due to what was available being made to rent the worst properties. He said it would be useful to know with regard to student accommodation in the City whether this was enough to offset the loss to the private rented sector of properties.

In response to questions, Ian Wright said that the latest data showed that the number of properties in the private rented sector had actually increased. It had been noted that the student numbers for example at Brookes University had dropped and it would be interesting to see the impact of this. The Council encouraged landlords to invest in their properties and to approach the Council

for advice on this. He added regarding fees, that he would like to see some movement on possible rewards for good landlords, but this would be once the scheme was bedded in as the scheme was self financing.

Councillor Rowley said that there was no ideal definition of a HMO and asked if the Council had any flexibility on the enforcement of HMO Licensing. In response Ian Wright acknowledged that wherever the bar was set there would be some anomalies.

Councillor Malik felt that the scheme was working well and that the rental market was unlikely to decrease in Oxford. However it was important to ensure that a range of people were attracted to the City to live.

Councillor Canning asked when Members would be able to review the detailed survey and had there been any feedback so far from tenants on the scheme. In response Ian Wright said that there would always be some complaints when you regulated an area that was previously unregulated. He acknowledged that it would be useful to survey a wider area to enable a clear picture to be obtained.

Councillor McCready regarding homelessness said that the Council had no capacity to find emergency accommodation and asked what could be done. In response Ian Wright said that it was difficult to obtain data on this.

The Committee agreed:

- (a) To thank Ian Wright for attending the meeting;
- (b) To request Officers supply information on the minimum statutory requirements for landlords and their properties;
- (c) To request that the outcomes of the Tenants Survey be submitted to the next meeting of the Value and Performance Scrutiny Committee along with any evidence of an increase in complaints within the family rented sector and any impact on the private rented sector following a reduction in student numbers in the City;
- (d) To request that a more detailed survey of landlords be conducted within the next 6 months.

41. EQUALITIES & DIVERSITY: UPDATE REPORT

The Head of Human Resources and Facilities submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) which summarised the progress being made by the Council in increasing the diversity of its workforce.

Simon Howick, Head of Human Resources and Facilities, Jarlath Brine, Equalities and Diversity Business Partner/Apprenticeship Project Leader and Councillor Bob Price attended the meeting.

Simon Howick briefly introduced the report. Councillor Price added that the Council should celebrate the good work that has been done, especially on the apprenticeships. He added though that there was still work to be done such as going out into the schools with the apprentices to spread the word on what it was

like to work for the Council. He further added that where possible, existing role models such as the current apprentices should be used when ever the opportunity arose.

Councillor Malik had concerns over the gender split amongst the workforce and would like to see more females employed by the Council. In response Simon Howick said that traditionally the workforce had more male employees. He thought it would be good to speak to employees and Councillors from the black, minority and ethnic (BME) community to see how they felt about working for and being a member of the Council.

Councillor Rowley felt that tackling educational inequalities was an important area that should be dealt with as a way of increasing diversity of the workforce.

Councillor McCready felt that being able to offer services in a second language was a genuine service offer by the Council.

Councillor Fooks noted that 50% of the workforce lived outside the City and all young people whether they lived in the City or not, should be encouraged to consider Oxford City Council as a place they wanted to work.

Councillor Simmons welcomed the Oxford Living Wage, but also felt that the Council had to show it was not a stereo-typical public sector employer and that people enjoyed working for the Council, the image/brand of the Council should be considered.

Councillor Kennedy asked why in the Annual Workplace Equalities Report 2011/2012 under religion, the report differentiated between Christian and Catholic. In response Jarlath Brine said that national guidance on this data collection had been followed.

Councillor Rowley also in the Annual Workplace Equalities Report 2011/12 asked if there were any barriers to employees being open about their sexuality.

The Committee agreed:

- (a) To thank Simon Howick, Jarlath Brine and Councillor Bob Price for attending the meeting;
- (b) To note that Simon Howick would submit the new Annual Workplace Equalities Report 2012/13 when available to the Value and Performance Scrutiny Committee;
- (c) To note the pay difference between male and female employees and to request information on how the Council through its training programme could move people through the organisation to achieve their potential;
- (d) To note and welcome the suggestion from the Head of Human Resources and Facilities that a Pay Equality Audit be conducted on the new pay scheme to be introduced from 1st April 2013 for Oxford City Council employees, and for it to be submitted to the Value and Performance Scrutiny Committee.

42. MINUTES

The Committee agreed to approve the minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting held on 27th November 2012 subject to the following amendments:

- (a) In minute 29 (Houses in multiple occupation (HMO) Licensing – Update) to amend the fifth paragraph to read:

“Councillor Simmons supported the scheme, but was concerned that rents had increased because of it and this would lead to poor quality accommodation being the only accommodation available to families on restricted incomes. In response Councillor Turner said that the Administration was concerned that there could be an increase in the number of poorer quality properties being available to families. Councillor Simmons further asked why all private rented properties should not be licensed.

43. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted that the next scheduled meeting date was Wednesday 3rd April 2013.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.10 pm