

Minutes of a meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE on Tuesday 5 December 2017

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Committee members:

Councillor Gant (Chair)

Councillor Chapman (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Azad

Councillor Curran

Councillor Fry

Councillor Henwood

Councillor Ladbrooke

Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan

Councillor Lygo

Councillor Thomas

Officers:

Andrew Brown, Committee Services Manager

Paul Adams, HR and Payroll Manager

David Growcott, Acting Communities Manager

Chris Harvey, Organisational Development and Learning Manager

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Also present:

Councillor Dee Sinclair, Board Member for Culture and Communities, Board Member for Community Safety

52. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Paule.

53. Councillor Jennifer Pegg

The meeting observed a minute's silence in memory of Councillor Jennifer Pegg who had, until her passing, been a member of the committee since January 2016.

The Chair said that Councillor Pegg had been a highly valued member of the Committee and one who would often ask the question that others would be hesitant to put. She would be greatly missed.

The Chair reminded the Committee that the last Council meeting had appointed Councillor Michele Paule to the Committee in place of Councillor Pegg.

54. Declarations of interest

None.

55. Minutes

Subject to the following amendments, the committee confirmed the minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2017 as a correct record.

- The latter half of the first recommendation on the review of community grants to be recast to read as follows: “This might include the identification of an existing group which can support underrepresented BAME communities in building capacity and making grant applications”
- A typographical correction to an earlier paragraph on the same item.

56. Report back on recommendations

The Committee was pleased to note that all of its recommendations in relation to the report on community grants had been accepted.

57. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer alerted members of the Committee to changes to the CEB Forward Plan as a consequence of which there were now two substantive items for the January meeting of the Committee: Air Quality; and Community Protection Notices.

58. Housing Panel

The Committee was asked to appoint a successor to Councillor Pegg on the Housing Panel of Scrutiny Committee. The Chair advised the Committee that the operating principles for the Panel meant that the 6th member of the Panel could be appointed from any political group.

Councillor Henwood, on behalf of the Labour Group proposed Cllr Paule. Councillor Thomas proposed Councillor Simmons on behalf of the Green Party. On putting the matter to a vote a majority supported the nomination of Councillor Paule who was therefore appointed to the Panel.

59. Isolation in older people

Councillor Sinclair said the request from the Committee for this report was timely and thanked Dave Growcott for his work on it. The balance of old and younger people in the City was atypical because of the size of the student population but the older population was both significant and growing. While the City Council had a role in making provision for older people it was by no means the only provider and, indeed, the burden of responsibility fell elsewhere.

In an extensive discussion the following points emerged.

The report provided a useful account of what was available via the City but was relatively silent on the question of how to engage older people in the first place.

Social prescribing by GPs and other health professionals was a valuable means of supporting older people. The City's Community Centres had the potential to play a more significant role through, for example, the promotion of activities or use by some groups which might otherwise not engage. This was potentially of greatest significance to some BAME groups and women in particular.

In relation to provision for the BAME community, language and cultural barriers often discouraged engagement with older members of the community. Outreach activities might mitigate this to some extent.

The Council no longer had an officer with dedicated responsibility for older people which was seen as very regrettable. The designation of an officer as a 'champion' might help but there was a view that it was necessary to give dedicated responsibility to an officer in order to make a real difference. Thought might be given to a joint County/City Council post.

Many older people lived alone in houses with spare rooms. There was enthusiasm for exploring the possibility of facilitating means by which those rooms could be used by younger people. As well as addressing, in some small measure, the housing shortage, it would provide companionship for older people. Councillor Sinclair said that this had been looked at before (and some funding made available to assist) but the project had not gained much traction at that time. It was recognised that this was a model which required careful risk assessments and capacity to deliver; the latter was lacking at the moment. It was agreed that it would be helpful to hear from a representative from Age UK at a future meeting about this matter.

It was noted with regret that society was generally less protective towards older people than it had been in the past (and as it remained in some communities and some other parts of the world). Social isolation was "corrosive." There was universal agreement

that there was a shared and collective community responsibility for the welfare of older people. One of the key means of engaging with older people was through Councillors' day to day constituency work. There may be merit in a 'reach out' day or week for older people, something which would be enhanced with the support of Parish Councils, Community Centres and Food Banks.

Dave Growcott said that as a result of the recent report to the Committee on grants, officers had placed greater emphasis on engaging diverse communities. He represented the Council on the Oxfordshire Stronger Communities Alliance which was meeting the following week and at which he would reflect the Committee's enthusiasm for some dedicated support for older people.

Many elderly people had little or no engagement with ICT and proper account needed to be (and was) taken of this in communicating with them. Community newspapers were recognised as being a particularly good means of engaging with older people however the production and distribution of them was very resource intensive.

Transport (or lack of it) was another factor which inhibited engagement of older people and was good reason to take every opportunity to protect local community transport services.

Given that the Oxfordshire's Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) had responsibility for protecting the health interests of the wider community, no opportunity should be lost to secure funds from its dedicated budget to support these areas of activity.

There was agreement that more comprehensive data would be helpful.

As house building continues in the City, it was important that all steps were taken, through good design and planning to integrate communities.

While the report had come to the Committee to note, the issues it had thrown up were of sufficient significance to warrant recommendations for action.

The Scrutiny Officer summed up the major issues arising from the discussion:

1. A stronger view of how to identify and engage with older people who are isolated or at risk of isolation would be helpful;
2. The possible use of population data for different parts of the city to identify any geographical concentrations of older people and gaps in provision should be explored;

3. Consideration should be given to developing the role of local intelligence and local assets such as community centres, community newsletters, parish councils and food banks in identifying and supporting older people facing isolation;
4. The absence of a lead officer for older people was regrettable and should be remedied if possible;
5. The need to secure a 'fair share' of CCG funding for the city to support the matters discussed;
6. The need to explore and pursue joint working opportunities in this area with the County Council and CCG. The County Council and CCG should also be invited to a future meeting on this topic;
7. Outreach work would help to mitigate language and cultural barriers and should be encouraged;
8. A representative of Age UK to be invited to a future meeting to speak, particularly about the possibility of older people sharing their houses with younger people (the 'Homeshare Oxford' scheme);
9. The desirability of justifying/promoting an older people's day or week should be explored; and
10. Securing a better view of how we engage with older people through more data, including data on diverse groups would be helpful.

The Chair thanked everyone present for their contribution and said that the Committee would revisit the subject at the next meeting.

60. Equality and diversity

Chris Harvey reminded the Committee of the background to the Equality and Diversity Review which had resulted in an action plan and that the report before the Committee was to update members with progress in relation to it.

Paul Adams said that recruiting to posts in the City was difficult and steps were being taken to enhance the employment offer. The appointment process had been simplified. Unsuccessful interviewees were now given feedback on their performance as a matter of course.

He was pleased to note that the percentage of BME colleagues employed by the Council had risen from 5-6% to 9-10% which compared favourably with comparable authorities. The Council continues to recruit apprentices 40% (of a total of about 50) of whom were from the BME community. The Council had a rolling programme of unconscious bias training which was targeted to the extent possible at those who would shortly be responsible for recruiting. An anonymous application process had been trialled for a few months but it had made no discernible impact. He recognised that there was more to be done to improve these figures still further.

There were evident advantages in having employees who were fluent in more than one language, particularly for front line services but making that an essential criterion for employment would limit the number of applicants to an unsustainable degree.

The Committee were pleased to hear about the increase in the proportion of BME staff but noted that there were few of them in more senior and managerial positions, something which other authorities seemed to be more successful in achieving.

There was a concern that an insufficient number of BME were getting through to the interview stage and it was alleged that some candidates were not shortlisted because of their name. The Committee commented that, notwithstanding the comments about it having made little difference, there was no disadvantage to the organisation in continuing with anonymised shortlisting.

Officers confirmed that a significant amount of data were available in relation to recruitment. Data about BME applications were however partial because candidates and employees were not obliged to declare their ethnicity (about one third of the workforce had not declared).

In relation to recommendation 13 (identification of Diversity Champions) in which “The OD team have been trying to make diversity part of business as usual” it was suggested that “business as usual” was insufficient and a more robust approach was desirable. The more regular inclusion of BME representatives on appointment panels would be desirable but difficult to achieve.

Chris Harvey said that the HR team no longer had a colleague with specific responsibility for diversity. The absence of a dedicated lead was of concern to the Committee. For there to be any meaningful improvement in relation to the BME issues more leadership needed to be shown at a strategic level within the organisation to really effect change, supported by measurable corporate objectives. This was, also, a political issue which warranted a portfolio responsibility.

Agreed that the Committee should return to this subject in 2018 with more of the background data and at a higher (leadership) level within the organisation.

61. Review the use of Community Protection Notices

This item had been included on the agenda in anticipation of the City Executive Board receiving a report on Community Protection Notices on 20 December. In the event the CEB would not be receiving that report until its meeting in January. This item was therefore deferred until the January meeting of the Committee.

62. Dates of future meetings

Meetings are scheduled as followed:

Scrutiny Committee

- 15 January 2018
- 06 February 2018
- 06 March 2018

All meetings start at 6.00 pm

Housing Panel

- 16 January 2018
- 08 March 2018
- 09 April 2018

All meetings start at 5.00 pm unless otherwise stated

Finance Panel

- 07 December 2018
- 31 January 2018
- 14 March 2018

All meetings start at 6.00 pm

Companies Scrutiny Panel

- 14 December 2017

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm

Chair

Date: Monday 15 January 2018

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