

Agenda Item 7

COMMUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday 6 June 2011

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Altaf-Khan, Baxter, Campbell, Clarkson, Hazell, Khan, Lloyd-Shogbesan, Sanders, Sinclair, Wilkinson and Mills.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Lois Stock (Democratic Services Officer), Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer), David Edwards (Executive Director of Regeneration and Housing), Graham Stratford (Head of Housing and Communities) and Angela Cristofoli (Communities and Neighbourhoods Manager)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR COUNCIL YEAR 2011/2012

Resolved to elect Councillor Jim Campbell as Chair for the Council Year 2011/2012

2. ELECTION OF VICE CHAIR FOR COUNCIL YEAR 2011/2012

Resolved to elect Councillor Dee Sinclair as Vice Chair for the Council Year 2011/2012

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Jones (Councillor Mills substituted).

The Chair welcomed Barrie Finch and Anita Fisher from the Involvement Monitoring Panel (IMP). They were present as co-opted members from the last council year. The Committee would be examining the role of co-optees at its informal scrutiny meeting in July.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None made.

5. CHANGES TO GUIDANCE ON "CREATING SAFE, STRONG AND PROSPEROUS COMMITTEES"

The Committee welcomed Alison Baxter (OCVA - Oxfordshire Council for Voluntary Action) to the meeting. The Chair explained that she had been invited to give the Committee an insight into how the voluntary sector was coping in the current financial climate, and how it was likely to cope in the next six months. Ms

Baxter would also make some suggestions concerning help that the City Council and Councillors could offer to voluntary and community groups.

Introduction

Alison Baxter explained that she did not believe that the Government's plan to introduce a minimal Best Value Statutory Guidance for community and voluntary groups, as explained in the agenda, would have a huge impact. She felt that the maintenance of the current "Oxfordshire Compact" was of more importance. All local authorities wanted this to continue, however it may be reviewed and refreshed as it was important to remind people of the principles agreed between voluntary groups.

The impact of the Localism Bill was not known, since it was not in force yet. What the voluntary sector was currently experiencing was a big change in the way public services were delivered, including a move towards personal budgets for adult social care, and Locality Boards carrying out service commissioning from September 2011. Oxfordshire County Council now had an approved providers list, which was a help to voluntary organisations, but this was causing disquiet in some quarters. There were also issues around the provision of services to people with physical disabilities. It was intended that there would be 8 Health and Wellbeing Centres, each to be given funding of £50,000 to begin with, and then expected to source additional income to fulfil needs beyond this. These Centres would be the core part of service delivery. Children's' Services would be provided through early intervention hubs. The deadline for all of this was very tight, since the aim was to have everything up and running by September 2011.

Voluntary organisations would need to forge new relationships – schools and GP surgeries would have their own budgets, for example, and it would be difficult for the voluntary sector to decide where it should focus its relationship-building efforts.

Despite all the uncertainty, there was some good news. The Stronger Communities Alliance had awarded a large chunk of its funding to groups within the City. The County Council also had some "Big Society" funding; however, it should be noted that this had received far more bids than there was money available.

In answer to the question "What can the City Council do? Ms Baxter suggested that Councillors, as individuals, could offer their skills and expertise to voluntary groups, which would gladly receive any help and advice that was offered. There was also a new initiative with the City council's procurement team that allowed voluntary groups to access providers at favourable rates, and this had been welcomed. But if groups could not obtain funding, the fact remained that they would struggle to survive and have an impact.

Members of the Committee considered this issue and identified the following key concerns:-

Access to funding

There was concern that smaller groups might find it difficult, on their own, to access funding, and that they might be crowded out by larger groups. It would

be helpful if a consortium of small groups with similar interests and aims could apply for funding together, in order to maximise their chance of success. Alison Baxter confirmed that where funds could be accessed jointly, such a bid was submitted; but not every funding body allowed this.

Alison Baxter was not sure how many City groups had applied for “Big Society” funding, but she could find out. It was noted that more than £1.5 million had been requested in the first round of funding, for a total fund of £800,000.

Capacity building

In answer to a question, Alison Baxter explained that OCVA had exceeded its own targets for capacity building, and that groups associated with OCVA had now raised over £1million in funding. OCVA was about to start an evaluation process as it wished to understand what impact this funding had.

Equalities issues

In answer to a question, Alison Baxter explained that there was no evidence that Oxfordshire County Council was abandoning the equalities aspects of voluntary funding. However, the Committee noted that the Government had made consideration of equalities issues “desirable” rather than “essential”, and that this allowed equalities issues to become less of a priority. The Committee felt that there was a need to monitor this, and asked OCVA to keep it informed of cases where “desirable” rather than “essential” was used.

Volunteering

The Committee noted that some organisations (for example Oxford Brookes University) encouraged staff to undertake volunteering in their community for up to 2 days a year, for which the staff member was allowed paid leave. It agreed that the City Council should be asked to investigate instituting a similar scheme for its own staff, if one was not already in existence.

Timetable of changes

The proposed changes were currently out to consultation, and there was no timetable yet for their introduction.

It was noted that the Oxford Strategic Partnership (OSP) was likely to change to a forum that met annually.

Voluntary groups working with children and young people

It was noted that some voluntary groups carried out useful work with children and young people through schools. With significant cuts to education funding, there was concern about these groups viability. It could be assumed that some would survive but others would not, depending on their success at fundraising. The Committee noted with interest that the Oxfordshire Community Foundation hoped to launch a “community bond”, with the aim of using investments to fund groups that worked with children and young people – but this was at a very early stage of development.

Councillor involvement

The Committee observed that Councillors would shortly have their own individual budget to spend within their ward. Councillors were well placed to know what the priorities for their area were, and this could be of assistance to voluntary and community groups.

Conclusion

The Committee identified the following issues arising from the discussion:-

- There was a need for more two-way information between OCVA and Councillors. OCVA produced a monthly newsletter which it would be useful for Councillors to receive;
- Councillors should be encouraged to be aware of OCVA and its work, and to promote it to voluntary and community groups within their ward. Councillors were also encouraged to attend the Voluntary Awards Ceremony in October ;
- The Committee would be interested to see how the proposed community bond developed;
- The Committee was pleased to note the scheme to encourage staff volunteering at Oxford Brookes University. It wished to encourage the same at Oxford University, if such a scheme did not exist, and Councillor Campbell was happy to write to the Vice Chancellor on this matter;
- It was felt that the City Council should encourage a higher level of volunteering from its staff, and to give support to those members of staff who wished to participate in it.

Resolved to:

- (1) Ask CEB to encourage volunteering amongst City Council staff, and to support staff members who wished to volunteer;
- (2) Ensure that the OCVA newsletter was made available to all Councillors.

6. HOUSING STRATEGY UPDATE

The Head of Housing and Communities submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) giving an update on the Housing Strategy and related issues. Graham Stratford presented this report to the Committee and explained the background. He added that tenants would be involved with the draft Housing Strategy, and then consulted on the resulting draft. It was hoped to include some discussion of the future of Council housing stock.

The Committee considered this issue and identified the following concerns:

Impact of downsizing

Graham Stratford informed the Committee that the Council encouraged people to downsize if they were under-occupying their current property; and there was an incentive scheme to assist with this process

Anita Fisher expressed some concern at the process for moving on in this way. Graham Stratford indicated that he intended to convene a group to look at this process, to which Anita Fisher would be invited.

Flexible tenancies

Graham Stratford confirmed that the current Council policy was for lifetime tenancies for Council housing stock. Where new housing stock was built with grant aid, it was intended to have a proportion of affordable rents. Housing Associations could choose to adopt flexible tenancies if they so wished, and it was possible that some of their new tenants would be on fixed term tenancies. The Council was not aware of any Housing Association intending to adopt 2 year tenancies under the flexible arrangements as most had expressed an interest in having 5 to 10 year periods. This process was known as “churn”. David Edwards added that A2 Housing Association had indicated that they would not churn their properties. Catalyst Housing Association probably would churn, whereas Green Square intended to churn 50% of its voids and invest the money back in the City. Guidance from the Government and the Homes and Communities Agency indicated that 80% market rents and flexible tenancies must be accepted in order to attract grant assistance.

Young people

The Committee expressed concern that young people should not be disadvantaged when it came to their housing needs. It was agreed Oxford had particular housing difficulties, in that it was expensive – house prices were very high while some wages were very low, thus causing an imbalance between supply and affordability. The Council was trying to discover more about the different needs of the City’s different communities, including young people.

It was noted, with concern, that recent bidding for funding from the Homes and Communities Agency had produced no firm bids for new developments in the City for the first two years of the HCA’s programme.

The Committee agreed to note the current position.

7. END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE FIGURES - COMMUNITY HOUSING

The Head of Housing and Communities submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning the end of year performance figures for Community Housing. Graham Stratford presented the report to the Committee and explained the background to it.

He acknowledged that the figure for rough sleeping was still over target. The Council did what it could to assist people, but a number were drawn to live on the streets of Oxford and it was a slow process to reduce their numbers. Homelessness acceptance figures had missed their target too, for the first time in over 6 years. There was greater difficulty in accessing private sector housing, it was hard to find two bedroom properties, and there had been a larger number of complex presentations in recent times. Nationally, the figure for homelessness acceptance was up. The figure for people in temporary accommodation was on target.

Some good news was that 10 empty homes had recently been put back into use. Allocations were progressing well. A recent legal decision meant that the Council did not have to provide two homes for people who shared the custody of their children. Two Empty dwelling management orders had recently been completed.

At any one time, approximately 1,000 properties were empty within Oxford. These were either voids, between owners, awaiting planning consent or awaiting development. Council properties did not normally stand empty for a long period of time, unless there were serious structural problems that needed to be addressed.

The Chair, Councillor Campbell, suggested that there were several issues that could be taken up by a Housing Panel, should the Committee decide to establish one. In the meantime, he thanked Graham Stratford and his team for their hard work on these complex issues.

Resolved to note the current position.

8. WORK PROGRAMME AND REPORT BACK ON COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Pat Jones introduced this item to the Committee. The following items were considered

Work Programme

The Committee agreed to hold an informal meeting on 19th July starting at 6pm, in order to determine the work programme for the forthcoming year.

Time of meetings

The Committee agreed that meetings would start at 6pm for the Council Year 2011/2012.

Report Back – Household Waste Recycling Centre Strategy

The Committee noted the contents of a briefing note about Oxfordshire County Council's Household Waste Recycling Centre Strategy. Lois Stock reported that it had not been possible to obtain information concerning the County Council's response to recommendations made by the scrutiny committee; however she had managed to find information from the County Council's website, to which she had been directed by County officers, and prepared the briefing note from that.

The Committee expressed disappointment that the County Council's officers had not been willing to respond directly to enquiries from a City officer on this important subject. Councillor Campbell would contact Huw Jones at Oxfordshire County Council to express this disappointment. It was observed that although much information had been unearthed, there was no direct response to the Committee's questions on differential charging and the provision of a temporary site for use whilst Redbridge was closed for refurbishment.

Resolved to:

- (1) Thank Lois Stock for her work on this issue;
- (2) Contact Oxfordshire County Council again and ask for a specific response to the questions about differential charging and the provision of a temporary site whilst Redbridge was closed.

9. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT - UPDATE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AREA FORUMS

The Principal Scrutiny Officer submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) providing an update on the development of the Area Forums. Pat Jones presented this report to the Committee and explained the background.

The Chair, Councillor Campbell, thanked Councillors Wilkinson and Sanders, and Pat Jones, for their hard work on this matter. Councillor Sanders explained that each area had its own ideas about the operation of the Forums. Each has a starting point for what they want to do. Angela Cristofoli (Communities and Neighbourhoods Manager) added that she and her team would review the Forum system at the end of the year. The Scrutiny Committee would work with her on this to avoid duplication of work, or working at odds with each other.

Councillor Wilkinson expressed some surprise at the disparity between the Area Committee areas. She felt that there was a need for member training, especially on community leadership and holding effective meetings. There was also an issue about the resources available for the Forum meetings – how they would be supported, where they would meet, and how success could be measured. Councillor Sanders added that the intention was to produce, at the end of the first six months, a list of issues discussed by each forum and the numbers of people attending. It was important to know how many people the Forums had reached.

The Committee considered this and made the following points:-

- What worked well for one area might not be successful in another. There was a need to be open to an exchange of ideas;
- It was important to look at the impact and influence a Forum had, as well as the number of people attending it;
- It would be useful to know how many “calls for action” actually resulted in an action. What tangible results came from the discussions and decisions made? If results were few, people would not attend. It was important that proposals coming from the community were discussed and received a response. The response of the public towards the Forums was more important than the response of Councillors;
- There was an argument for a two-tier structure – surgery and case work on the ground, and themed meetings dealing with items of concern above this;
- The Council should consider actively canvassing the views of the people with whom engagement is sought after the first six months of operation;

- Meetings and surgeries were a good starting point. There was a need to record the issues coming in;
- There was a need to assess the groups that do not engage with the Council – do they attend Forums? If not, how can we encourage them to attend?
- The items discussed by the Forums were a key part of encouraging people to attend them and join in their work.

Angela Cristofoli gave the following response:-

- The new system would be reviewed after six months, probably by the end of the year;
- The Forums were one strand of community engagement. There were other ways to reach out and engage the local community. The message of engagement went wider than just the Forums;
- Forums could be planned and shaped in advance, but they needed to be shaped with the community, focussing on real issues of concern within an area;
- She welcomed the chance to work with Councillors Sanders and Wilkinson and Pat Jones on this matter.

Resolved to:-

- (1) Recommend that a plan for member training be devised, to include training on the conduct of effective meetings and community leadership;
- (2) Ask for details to be supplied of the budget available for Area Forums and the wider work with communities;
- (3) Ask Councillors Sanders and Wilkinson to continue to work with Pat Jones on this issue, and specifically to draw up some means of evaluating the success of the Forums that can be circulated to the Committee in due course.

10. MINUTES

Resolved to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 30th March 2011, with the following observations:-

- (1) Barrie Finch and Anita Fisher represented the **Involvement** Monitoring Panel for tenants - not Improvement;
- (2) Councillors Smith and Campbell would be touring the litter "hot spots" of Blackbird Leys shortly, as part of the Cleaner Greener panel work;
- (3) Barrie Finch asked to be involved with any work related to older people and housing;
- (4) Barrie Finch also suggested that there should be a 6 monthly review of the HRA figures. Pat Jones explained that this matter would be dealt with by the Finance and Performance Panel, but she would make sure that Mr Finch and Mrs Fisher were involved with that. David Edwards added that a Board would be addressing the issue of HRA figures, and he would consider how tenants could be best involved with this.

Councillor Campbell thanked David Edwards for his attendance at the meeting and his useful input.

11. DATES AND TIMES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Resolved:-

(1) To note the following dates:

19th July (INFORMAL MEETING)
17th October
12th December
7th February 2012
2nd April

(2) That meetings would start at 6pm in future, starting with the informal meeting on 19th July.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 7.12 pm

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