

Scrutiny Committee reports (1) for City Executive Board Thursday 14 April 2016

6. Scrutiny Committee Reports (Pages 3 - 12)

The Scrutiny Committee considered the following items at its meeting on 5 April 2016 and has submitted reports on the following items:

- Discretionary Housing Payment Policy – 2016 Revision
- Tackling elderly isolation
- Security in tower blocks

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To: City Executive Board

Date: 5 April 2016

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Discretionary Housing Payment Policy – 2016 Revision

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee on the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy – 2016 Revision

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Craig Simmons

Executive lead member: Councillor Susan Brown, Board Member for Customer and Corporate Services

Recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the two recommendations set out in the body of this report.

Introduction

1. The Scrutiny Committee pre-scrutinised the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy – 2016 Revision at its meeting on 5 April 2016. The Committee would like to thank Paul Wilding for presenting the report and answering questions.

Summary and recommendations

2. The Revenue and Benefits Programme Manager introduced the report. The Committee heard that the lowering of the benefit cap will take place mid-way through the current year and is expected to affect 350-400 people in Oxford, many of whom are expected to apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). Following a 50% cut last year, the Council's funding allocation has been increased for the current year (2016/17) to take account of the lowering of the benefit cap and is expected to increase further next year.

3. The Committee noted concern that despite the clear housing need in the City (as evidenced by the high number of refused cases), the Council is again giving back some of the grant funding to the Government and have not used any of the additional £150k set aside in the budget. The Committee questioned whether the changes to the DHP policy would ensure that no money would be returned to government at year end next time, and whether there was a strategy for balancing spend over the year. The Committee heard that DHP is used as a tool to effect longer term changes by helping people to become more financially independent while sustaining tenancies. The Council's focus is on applying these principles rather than on spending a set amount of money.
4. The Committee questioned why households with children are no longer being prioritised for DHP and heard that this prioritisation was added last year but is no longer considered to be necessary given that the grant funding has increased. No groups are precluded from being awarded a DHP. The Committee supported this change to the policy and questioned whether people who had been refused a DHP when the policy was tighter would be invited to re-apply.

Recommendation 1 – That consideration is given to inviting people who were refused a Discretionary Housing Payment in 2015-16 to reapply in light of the proposed policy change and any changes in their personal circumstances.

5. The Committee noted that in addition to the DHP grant allocation, £150k of homelessness prevention funding has been made available and there is an overall spending ceiling of 2.5 times the grant allocation. The Committee questioned how spend is managed and what the legal position is given that councils cannot place undue restrictions on DHP awards such as using spending caps as a refusal reason. The Committee heard that the Council's approach of ensuring that DHPs delivered improved outcomes, rather than passively awarding funding, offers some protection.

Recommendation 2 – That the Council keeps a watching brief on the legal position with regards to Discretionary Housing Payment spending limits and on the approaches being taken by other local authorities.

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List of background papers: None
Version number: 1.0

To: City Executive Board

Date: 14 April 2016

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Tackling Isolation

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee on tackling isolation

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Craig Simmons

Executive lead member: Councillor Christine Simm, Board Member for Culture & Communities

Recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the five recommendations set out in the body of this report.

Introduction

1. The Scrutiny Committee requested a report on council funded projects aimed at tackling isolation amongst older people and considered this report at its meeting on 5 April 2016. The Committee would like to thank Luke Nipen for writing and presenting the report and Councillors Christine Simm and Gill Sanders for contributing to the discussion.

Summary and recommendations

2. The Communities Specialist Officer introduced the report and highlighted the main outcomes of the different projects. The Board Member for Culture and Communities welcomed the positive results from a relatively modest investment and said that she would like there to be more emphasis and analysis around opportunities for older people to contribute to the community through these projects in future. The Older Person's Champion said that the £40k had been

well spent and that she hoped this funding could continue, noting the importance of personal contact to people who are digitally excluded.

3. The Committee agreed that the £40k of council funding for elderly isolation projects does represent good value for money by improving outcomes and making a difference to the lives of isolated older people.

Recommendation 1 – That the Council continues to provide funding for projects aimed at tackling isolation.

4. The Committee noted that older people can be very active citizens so this group shouldn't necessarily be seen as one that needs support but also one that can contribute positively to the community in different ways. The Committee suggest that more could be done to facilitate and evaluate these positive contributions through funded isolation projects.

Recommendation 2 – That opportunities to involve older people in contributing to the community through isolation projects, such as supporting older people to volunteer for things that will deliver wider social value, are maximised and evaluated.

5. The Committee questioned how the longer term impacts of small-scale isolation projects are evaluated and whether an economic multiplier model can be used, similar to the social return on investment model used to evaluate the Youth Ambition programme. The Committee noted that the Youth Ambition programme is much larger and backed by a strategy, which helps in attracting external funding. The Committee heard that evaluating community development projects is key and that there are plans to involve university student volunteers in seeking to demonstrate and quantify the social impacts of these projects. The Committee welcome these plans and would encourage a more co-ordinated programme based approach to isolation projects in future with a view to attracting external contributions to projects.

Recommendation 3 – That the Council looks to develop a more programme-based approach to isolation projects with a view to attracting external funding, as well as looking to draw on external funding and resources in developing a social value assessment that can be used to demonstrate the social impact of isolation projects.

6. The Committee questioned the rationale for defining older people as the 50+ population, noting that many people in their 50s do not have the same needs as elderly people and that their involvement could result in other people feeling they are too old. Members heard that the definition of older people had previously been extended to include people in their 50s because under-60s had wanted to participate in the Older People's Network. Some people in their 50s did have similar needs to elderly people and others were often thinking ahead to the future. The Committee suggest that consideration should be given to whether the Council can more effectively target funds at an older age profile, without interfering with the work of those like the 50+ network.

Recommendation 4 – That consideration is given to whether the Council can more effectively target funds for tackling isolation at an older age profile given that the ‘older people’ group is defined as being the over 50 population.

7. The Committee questioned whether the Council was looking to new models in terms of providing housing for elderly people and noted that a review of older people’s housing has recently taken place. The Committee suggest that housing models for the elderly should also be considered as part of the Local Plan review.

Recommendation 5 – That housing models for elderly people are considered as part of the Local Plan review.

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List of background papers: None
Version number: 1.0

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To: City Executive Board

Date: 14 April 2016

Report of: Housing Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee)

Title of Report: Security in communal areas of tower blocks

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present recommendations of the Housing Panel on security in communal areas of tower blocks

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Linda Smith

Executive lead member: Councillor Mike Rowley, Board Member for Housing

Recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the four recommendations set out in the body of this report.

Introduction

1. The Housing Panel requested a report on security issues in communal areas of tower blocks and considered this topic at its meeting on 9 March 2016. The Panel would like to thank Daryl Edmunds and Daniel Newton for providing a report and supporting this discussion.
2. To inform this discussion, the Panel canvassed the views of Block Representatives using a brief survey. Five of the seven Block Reps returned a completed survey and the Panel would like to thank them for providing their opinions and insights.

Summary and recommendations

3. The Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team Manager introduced the report and explained that each tower is different. Different types of groups tend to congregate in communal areas at some blocks and within a block there may be issues on certain floors that residents on other floors are unaware of. Different

enforcement approaches are taken with different age groups and an appreciative enquiry is being undertaken to engage directly with youths and seek their views.

4. The Scrutiny Officer summarised the survey responses and said that the following observations could be made:
 - The results were skewed towards Hockmore Tower, which is the block that officers identified as having relatively few issues of anti-social behaviour (ASB).
 - The majority of Block Reps stated that ASB and crime take place 'quite often' but none responded with 'very often'.
 - The majority of Block Reps stated that residents are 'quite affected' by security issues in communal areas.
 - No Block Reps stated that residents were 'not affected' by these issues.
 - Issues of 'vandalism and graffiti', 'noise', 'rubbish or litter' and 'damage to property' are considered by more than one Block Rep to be either a 'fairly big problem' or a 'very big problem'.
 - A minority of Block Reps responded that residents typically felt 'very unsafe' in communal areas in 'the evening' and / or 'at night'.
 - The Block Reps provided some suggestions for improving security.
5. The Panel noted that a door knocking exercise had been undertaken at Evenlode Tower to seek residents' views on the behaviour of groups of young people in communal areas. The Panel questioned whether feedback would be given to the residents who had provided comments and whether there were plans to repeat this engagement exercise at other towers.

Recommendation 1 – That door-knocking to seek views from residents on the behaviour of groups of young people in communal areas takes place at other tower blocks.

6. The Panel also noted that CCTV has been used successfully to identify perpetrators of anti-social behaviour in internal communal areas at Evenlode Tower. Once identified, the young people involved were visited at home and asked to sign Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and signposted to local positive activities on offer. The Panel would support this approach being replicated at other towers where issues have been identified.

Recommendation 2 – That if anti-social behaviour is identified as a problem within a tower block consideration should be given to the temporary use of CCTV coverage at entrances to identify the perpetrators so that the appropriate council officers can engage with them.

7. The Panel commented that the local police had been given keys to enable them to access communal areas at the two tower blocks in Blackbird Leys and noted from the survey responses that there was a request for occasional police patrols at Hockmore Tower too. The Panel suggest that as part of efforts to tackle issues of anti-social behaviour, there should be an enhanced police presence at all tower blocks and the local police should be given the means to access internal communal areas at the remaining blocks.

Recommendation 3 – That local police teams are asked to undertake occasional patrols of tower blocks, and where necessary given the means to access internal communal areas, as they can at the Blackbird Leys tower blocks.

8. The Panel Asked a number of questions about youth engagement and provision for young people and welcomed a number of different initiatives, including looking at the viability of reward schemes for positive behaviours, efforts to tackle graffiti 'tagging', the general quality of many community facilities and the appreciative enquiry, which will enable the Council to better understand what youths want and use this information to fund these things, for example through the Council's Youth Ambition programme.
9. The Panel heard that Youth Forums had been created in response to 12-15 year olds at Barton saying that they wanted a bigger voice. The Panel encourage plans to 'mainstream' this work in various ways including by engaging young people in community groups and helping to support elderly residents.

Recommendation 4 – That the Council continues to look at ways of integrating youth engagement activities with other forms of resident and community engagement.

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