

Scrutiny Committee reports (2) for City Executive Board - Thursday 14 April 2016

6. Scrutiny Committee Reports (Pages 3 - 22)

Additional scrutiny reports have been submitted on the following items:

- Council Tax and Business Rates exemptions and discounts
- Low Carbon Hub
- Tenant Involvement

Suggested City Executive Board responses to scrutiny recommendations on the following items are also included:

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

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To: City Executive Board

Date: 14 April 2016

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

Title of Report: Council Tax and Business Rates Exemptions and Discounts

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present recommendations of the Finance Panel on Council Tax and Business Rates Exemptions and Discounts

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Craig Simmons

Executive lead members:

Councillor Ed Turner, Board Member for Finance, Asset Management & Public Health,

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 Finance Panel requested a report on local rates exemptions and discounts and considered this report at its meeting on 7 April 2016. The Panel would like to thank Tanya Bandekar for providing the report and advising the Panel.

Summary of the discussion

2. The Panel noted that the financial impact of mandatory Business Rates reliefs appeared to be very high at £20.5m, compared to a total take of £86.8m (of which some £6.2m would be retained by the Council). The Panel questioned how certain Council Officers were that the mandatory reliefs granted were legitimate. The Panel heard that these reliefs would apply to organisations such as colleges and schools, and that businesses had a duty to inform the Council of any changes to their status.

3. The Panel also asked about the enforcement of Council Tax discounts and exemptions, noting that there appeared to be a high number of discounts and exemptions granted, such as 17,000 Single Persons Discounts. The Panel heard that the Financial Services Team had timetables for reviewing Business Rates and Council Tax exemptions and discounts over the coming year based on risk analyses. The Fraud Investigations Team was also deploying resources to assist with these reviews. This team had recently doubled in size and was able to access data from different sources and flag anomalies. This would inform the areas that warranted further investigation and the Single Person's Discount was likely to be one of these.
4. The Panel welcomed the work that was taking place to reduce fraud, noting that £508,480 had been recovered and £21,053 saved since February 2015. The Panel questioned whether more frequent reviews might raise additional income for the Council and whether there was a case for increasing resources to enable this. The Panel heard that the new rolling reviews would be more manageable and that the only resourcing challenge was managing a peak in workload each September due to some 7,000 student processes.

Recommendation 1 - That a cost benefit analysis takes place at an appropriate time to determine what level of Fraud Investigation resources would maximise Council revenues.

Recommendation 2 - That consideration is given to whether resources can be increased in the Revenues Team a temporary basis in order to manage peaks in workload such as during the annual student turnover.

Further consideration

The Panel requested the following information:

- The financial impacts of Business Rates reliefs provided due to the redevelopment of Frideswide Square and the closure of St. Clements car park.
- The numbers of changes that were identified in-year that would affect the mandatory reliefs provided to businesses.

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List of background papers: None

Version number: 1.0

To: City Executive Board

Date: 14 April 2016

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

Title of Report: Low Carbon Hub

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present recommendations of the Finance Panel on the Low Carbon Hub

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Craig Simmons

Executive lead members:

Councillor Ed Turner, Board Member for Finance, Asset Management & Public Health

Councillor John Tanner, Board Member for Cleaner Greener Oxford

Recommendation of the Finance Panel 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 Finance Panel considered the Low Carbon Hub funding model at its meetings on 29 October 2015 and 7 April 2016. The Panel would like to thank Steve Drummond, Non-Executive Director (Investment), for attending these meetings to discuss the funding model and work of the Low Carbon Hub.

Summary of the discussion

2. Steve Drummond said that the Low Carbon Hub (the Hub) aimed to reduce energy usage and create renewable energy by working through communities. The funding model relied on raising money in the community and it created a multiplier effect. The Panel questioned whether a similar funding model could be used by the Council to fund things like new build affordable housing with solar electricity systems. The Panel heard that this was possible but there were challenges around the economic viability of solar power at the current time.

3. The Panel heard that the Hub would be issuing a call for capital in the coming weeks and aimed to raise £3m. Together with £2m from the Charity Bank this would fund £2m of solar electricity systems on schools and a £3m hydro project at Sandford which was expected to be the largest such project on the river Thames. These projects would generate some £170k in direct benefits to the local community and pay for the Hub's core staff.

Recommendation 1 - That the Council promotes the Low Carbon Hub's call for capital.

4. The Panel asked whether the Council could consider investing in the Hub as this may generate higher returns than some of the Council's existing investments. The Management Accountancy Manager advised that the Council's Treasury Management Strategy did allow for this but while the option remained on the table, the Council was not looking to make longer term investments at the current time due to uncertainties around the impacts of recent national policy changes on the Council's Housing Revenue Account.

Recommendation 2 - That the Council considers making an investment in the Low Carbon Hub.

5. The Panel heard that Feed-in Tariffs (FITs) on solar electricity systems had previously balanced European Union (EU) import tariffs but changes to FITs announced in October had made new solar projects unviable and had seriously damaged the industry. This situation was expected to be resolved within two years, either through successful lobbying or Brexit (British exit from the EU). Given the impacts of changes to FITs on the City, such as making plans to fit solar energy systems on Council housing unviable, the Panel suggest that the Council should look to lobby government to address this situation, either through increasing FITs or reducing solar import duties.

Recommendation 3 - That the Council lobbies Government to make installations of solar energy systems viable again following recent changes to feed-in tariffs, perhaps by the Leader of the Council writing to the appropriate government minister.

6. Steve Drummond also said that the Hub would be bidding for money that could enable the fitting of solar electricity systems on social housing in the City more economical. The Hub was also looking to retrofit homes with energy efficiency measures in two postcode areas on a holistic basis. One area would be within the City and include a high proportion of private rented housing, and the other would be rural. The Panel observed that the Council may be able to assist in identifying a suitable urban area for this pilot project.

Recommendation 4 - That Council continues to support Low Carbon Hub projects where appropriate, including potentially by assisting with a bid to fund the installation of solar electricity systems on Council housing, and identifying a suitable location for an energy efficiency project in the City.

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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: Tenant Involvement

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present recommendations of the Housing Panel on Tenant Involvement

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Linda Smith

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

Recommendation of the Housing Panel to the City Executive Board:

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

Introduction

1. The Housing Panel requested a report on the activities of the Council's Tenant Involvement service and considered this topic at a joint session with the Tenant Scrutiny Panel on 11 April 2016. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Mike Rowley, Bill Graves, Simon Warde and members of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel for sharing their experiences and ideas.

Summary of the discussion

2. The Landlord Services Manager introduced the report. He said that the previous tenant scrutiny regime and structure had been discontinued in November 2012 but that the service had come a long way since then, engaging with the Involvement Strategy. The Council had recently become the third local authority to achieve a TPAS accreditation. The Tenant Scrutiny Panel was now much more positive and inclusive and there were plans to further improve and develop the Tenant Involvement service in the months ahead.

3. The Panel congratulated officers and tenants for turning the service around over recent years and achieving the TPAS accreditation. The Panel questioned how tenants are recruited and how the Tenant Scrutiny Panel operates before considering each of the tenant involvement activities in turn.
4. The Panel heard that tenants are recruited to tenant involvement in various ways and that on occasion, some Councillors have come forward with suggestions.

Recommendation 1 – That elected members are asked to approach or suggest tenants who may wish to contribute to tenant involvement.

5. The Panel heard that the balance of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel membership is broadly proportionate to the total numbers of Council tenants and leaseholders. Tenants had asked for leaseholder involvement in the Tenants in Touch Editorial Panel and planned to include more content specifically aimed at leaseholders.

Recommendation 2 – That the Tenants in Touch newsletter continues to include some content (e.g. one page) specifically aimed at leaseholders.

6. The Panel questioned the costs of producing Tenants in Touch and heard that it costs £3k produce approximately 8500 copies of each issue and post these to tenants and leaseholders. The newsletter is included with rents statements to save postage costs following a tenants' suggestion. Other suggestions from tenants included presentational changes and the inclusion of a crossword and a 'no trick or treat poster', which have been well received.
7. The Panel asked whether consideration has been given to including paid advertising in Tenants in Touch in order to cover some of the production costs. The Panel heard that this had not been considered but a tenant suggested that more can be done to promote local charities and support groups.

Recommendation 3 – That consideration is given to exploring opportunities to offset some of the costs of producing Tenants in Touch through paid sponsorship or advertising, as well as promoting local charities and support groups.

8. The Panel questioned how many people access Tenants in Touch online and suggest that it should be easy to access and read using the Council's mobile app.

Recommendation 4 – That Tenants in Touch is fully accessible using the Council's mobile app.

9. A tenant involved in testing the online repairs portal advised that significant changes had been made in response to tenants' feedback. A further suggestion was that users should be able to easily report other things when accessing the portal, such as incidents of anti-social behaviour, but clarity is needed as to whether this suggestion is being taken forwards.

Recommendation 5 – That tenants using the repairs portal are signposted to reporting other things, such as incidents of anti-social behaviour.

10. In response to a question about systems testing, the Panel heard that the Tenant Involvement Team link in with community-based IT training provision and publicising this training on the portal. The Panel support these links, as well as continuing to involve tenants in trialling online services.

Recommendation 6 – That the Tenant Involvement Team continues to support and link with local IT training (such as the Blackbird Leys Information Technology Zone) and facilitate trials of new online services.

11. The Panel heard that tenant involvement in procurement had raised the bar and provided real empowerment. The furnished tenancy scheme had enabled tenants to make choices about their living environments. The same process was followed for the Tower Block Refurbishment Programme, where tenants were involved in choosing questions, interviewing and scoring contractors. It was suggested that tenants should be involved in the tendering process from the outset and that tenants could be encouraged to register their interest in getting involved in future procurement exercises.

Recommendation 7 – That tenants are involved in future procurement processes from the early stages through to selection, perhaps on a rotating basis from within a pool of tenants who have expressed an interest.

12. The Panel heard that tenants on interview panels had provided invaluable insights and contributions to the recruitment process. Their views and scores had carried equal weight to those of officers on the interviews panels. The Council wants to mainstream this work by involving stakeholders in recruitment to key housing posts as standard and the Panel fully supports this approach.

Recommendation 8 – That tenant involvement in recruiting to housing posts is mainstreamed with involved tenants having a full and equal say in the process of recruitment.

13. In response to a question about joint partnership working, the Panel heard that tenants had visited and were continuing to engage with tenants of Reading Borough Council, which was proving to be very useful. Tenants said that they want to continue to build links with other authorities and housing associations in different parts of the country.

Recommendation 9 – That joint partnership working opportunities continue to be provided, enabling the sharing of best practice and ideas with other local authorities and housing associations.

14. The Panel heard that the annual Tenant and Leaseholder Conference would be taking place on Wednesday 13 April 2016. Elected members hadn't been specifically invited but would be welcome to attend and feedback would be gathered and circulated following the event.

Recommendation 10 – That elected members are invited to the annual Tenant and Leaseholder Conference in future years.

15. Tenants commented that the equality and diversity training course provided by officers that Tenant Scrutiny Panel members were required to take had been excellent. Some tenants had also attended negotiation skills training. Tenants said that they are keen for training to continue and for the scope of the courses offered to be widened. It was suggested that courses would be useful on business acumen and understanding budgets, to help tenants to understand and scrutinise the new Housing Company, and on group dynamics and behaviours, to assist tenants in working together. It was suggested that the Tenant Involvement Team should use a matrix to keep track of which tenants have attending which training sessions.

Recommendation 11 – That a training matrix is created to assist in keeping track of which tenants have attended the basic and more advanced training courses.

16. The Panel heard that an awareness and training programme had been delivered to tenants of the Council's sheltered blocks and questioned whether activities in sheltered blocks could be 'opened up' to non-residents, including tenants who may be thinking of downsizing. The Panel heard that in some cases this could be possible but some blocks are stricter about letting visitors enter communal areas.

Recommendation 12 – That consideration is given to inviting non-residents to organised activities within sheltered blocks, where it is appropriate and safe to do so.

17. The Panel considered the Tenant Involvement Team's improvement focus for 2016-17, which includes plans to develop 'virtual involvement', involving tenants in influencing new build developments and a Tenant Involvement Review Group to scrutinise the service. The Panel suggest that involving tenants in estate regeneration projects should also be a priority for the team.

Recommendation 13 – That consideration is given to the involvement of tenants in regeneration projects at Blackbird Leys and Barton, possibly as part of the Tenant Involvement Team's improvement focus for 2016-17.

18. The Panel noted that there are some 4,000 potential tenants currently on the waiting list for social housing and questioned whether there are plans to make use of their views and feedback. The Panel heard that while this is not a current customer group of the Tenant Involvement Team, there may be opportunities to involve them in future, for example in improving the customer experience of those on the Housing Register.

Recommendation 14 – That consideration is given to opportunities to involve and seek the views of potential future tenants who are currently on the Housing Register.

Further consideration

19. The Panel requested the following additional information:

- The numbers of hits on the Tenants in Touch webpages.
- Feedback from the Tenant and Leaseholder conference.
- Performance against measures and targets set by the Local Offer Working Group.

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List of background papers: None

Version number: 1.0

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Suggested City Executive Board response to the recommendations of the Housing Panel on Tenant Involvement

Executive response provided by the Board Member for Housing

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Recommendation	Agreed? (Y / N / In part)	Comment
1. That elected members are asked to approach or suggest tenants who may wish to contribute to tenant involvement.	Y	Agreed
2. That the Tenants in Touch newsletter continues to include some content (e.g. one page) specifically aimed at leaseholders.	Y	This has been in place for the last two editions and apart from the forthcoming issue where it was not possible, will continue in future editions. Members are encouraged to read the newsletter.
3. That consideration is given to exploring opportunities to offset some of the costs of producing Tenants in Touch through paid sponsorship or advertising, as well as promoting local charities and support groups.	Y	We will give consideration to this, with the agreement of the tenants involved in editing the newsletter
4. That Tenants in Touch is fully accessible using the Council's mobile app.	In part / provisionally	We support in principle and will look to incorporate into the IT work programme if feasible.
5. That tenants using the repairs portal are signposted to reporting other things, such as incidents of anti-social behaviour.	In part / provisionally	As above
6. That the Tenant Involvement Team continues to support and link with local IT training (such as the Blackbird Leys Information Technology Zone) and facilitate trials of new online services.	Y	This builds on the excellent work already done in this area
7. That tenants are involved in future procurement processes from the early stages through to selection, perhaps on a rotating basis from within a pool of tenants who have expressed an interest.	Y	As above
8. That tenant involvement in recruiting to housing posts is mainstreamed with involved tenants having a full and equal say in the process of recruitment.	Y	As above – for key housing posts.

9. That joint partnership working opportunities continue to be provided, enabling the sharing of best practice and ideas with other local authorities and housing associations.	Y	As above
10. That elected members are invited to the annual Tenant and Leaseholder Conference in future years.	Y	All members are welcome. Notification of events are provided through Tenants in Touch
11. That a training matrix is created to assist in keeping track of which tenants have attended the basic and non-compulsory training courses.	Y	This should allow us to suggest things involved tenants could do to contribute more fully
12. That consideration is given to inviting non-residents to organised activities within sheltered blocks, where it is appropriate and safe to do so.	Y	The Council has been considering how to publicise our sheltered accommodation better, and this is a valuable suggestion
13. That consideration is given to the involvement of tenants in regeneration projects at Blackbird Leys and Barton, possibly as part of the Tenant Involvement Team's improvement focus for 2016-17.	Y	We are determined to ensure maximum participation in the regeneration programmes in BBL and Barton, and it would be very helpful for the Tenant Involvement Team to make this a focus for the coming Council year.
14. That consideration is given to opportunities to involve and seek the views of potential future tenants who are currently on the Housing Register.	Y	Although this is more difficult than involving existing tenants for obvious reasons, the input would be valuable and we will look at ways of doing this, in conjunction with the Tenant Involvement Team.

Suggested City Executive Board response to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee on the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy – 2016 Revision decision

Provided by the Board Member for Customer and Corporate Services

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agreed? (Y / N / In part)</i>	<i>Comment</i>
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.	N	The Council already receive repeat applications from customers previously turned down; indicating people are not dissuaded from reapplying for DHP's. Additionally DHP's are widely promoted through organisations that come into contact with those likely to require support, as well as frontline teams in the Council.
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.	Y	A number of staff in the Welfare Reform Team belong to professional institutes which provide regular updates on changes to regulations and case law as well as best practice elsewhere. The DWP also provide advice in this area and we participate in a couple of local authority forums which include consideration of DHP practice and policy. As such we are well positioned to keep up to date in this area.

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Suggested City Executive Board response to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee on Tackling Isolation

Provided by the Board Members for Culture and Communities and Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services

Recommendation	Agreed? (Y / N / In part)	Comment
1. That the Council continues to provide funding for projects aimed at tackling isolation.	Y	The Council grant programme continues to be available for projects which will reduce older person isolation. A number of organisations were successful in 15/16 in applications to the City Council for grants, such as Cutteslowe Seniors, Friendleys and the Clockhouse project.
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.	Y	As part of 'Investors in Volunteers' the community service are identifying more ways to support volunteers in the city. Also, Oxford City Council Commission OCVA to increase volunteer opportunities which will deliver increase social value.
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.	Y	Oxford City Council work with key partners to develop increased support for projects focused on reducing isolation. Working with local organisations and partners to increase opportunities for external funding. The Communities team is working with Public Health, Oxfordshire CCG and oxford Brookes university on work experience projects where students can help demonstrate the importance of Older Peoples groups and their social benefits / impact on isolation.
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.	In part	The Council will continue to work with partners within 50+ networks. We do acknowledge that this may not be an entirely helpful construction of older people and our resources will be targeted at groups experiencing need, in particular, social isolation.
5. That housing models for elderly people are considered as part of the Local Plan review.	Y	Agreed. The needs of all groups, including the elderly, will be reviewed and taken into account as we develop the new Local Plan.

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Suggested City Executive Board response to the recommendations of the Housing Panel (Pane of the Scrutiny Committee) on security in communal areas of tower blocks

Provided by the Board Member for Crime, Community Safety and Licensing

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agreed? (Y / N / In part)</i>	<i>Comment</i>
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.	Y	This will be conducted between communities, CRT, ASBIT, TVP and Housing
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.	Y	CCTV is in place in most tower blocks and we now have a temporary system we can deploy if necessary
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.	Y	The local beat teams have been provided with Fob access to the towers. In addition the can gain access through a radio communication with their control room. Each neighbourhood team works with ASBIT/CRT to develop hotspot patrolling based on actionable intelligence.
Recommendation 4 – That the Council continues to look at ways of integrating youth engagement activities with other forms of resident and community engagement.	Y	ASBIT/CRT/Communities/Housing and Youth Ambition are continuing to develop youth Appreciative Inquiries, Youth Focus groups and Youth Forums.

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