

Scrutiny reports for City Executive Board - Tuesday 22 May 2018

7. Scrutiny Committee Reports (Pages 3 - 10)

Please find attached two Scrutiny Committee reports for consideration at CEB.

- recommendations concerning the Discretionary Housing Payments Policy.
- recommendations concerning Oxford Town Hall.

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To: City Executive Board
Date: 22 May 2018
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Discretionary Housing Payments Policy

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Discretionary Housing Payments Policy.
Key decision:	Yes
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny
Executive Board Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Board Member for Economic Development and Partnership
Corporate Priority:	Meeting Housing Needs
Policy Framework:	Corporate Plan
Recommendation(s): That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. The Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Discretionary Housing Payment Policy at a meeting on 17 May 2018. This was provided in advance of the City Executive Board considering a recommendation to approve the Policy at its meeting on 22 May 2018.
2. The report provided the Committee with data on the annual expenditure for DHPs and the fluctuating level of grant received by HM Government over the past five years. Information was also provided on the number of applications received for DHPs and the number accepted and refused. It was noted that there were no substantial changes to the Policy, and that most amendments related to legislative and administrative updates that were required. The Committee would like to thank James Pickering (Welfare Reform Manager) for producing the report, and attending the meeting to present and take questions.

Summary and recommendations

3. One key issue that is evident from the report is that the varying level of HM Government grant received each year provided no consistency in the total level of grant available in any given year. For example, in 2015/16, the total net expenditure on DHPs was £270,505 (94% of the available grant), but this stretched to £494,566 in 2017/18 (97% of the available grant). In these circumstances, it is clear that the policy criteria is being applied with varying consistency based on the different levels of grant received each year. The Committee are pleased however to see that officers are working to ensure that the maximum amount of grant is being used to support local residents.
4. On the basis that demand will remain at current levels, the Committee believes that a reduction in DHP grant funding from HM Government will have an adverse impact on local residents. Therefore, the Committee proposes that the City Executive Board considers how 'topping up' the grant would enable a fairer and more consistent application of the DHP policy, which also benefits more people. For example, in years where the DHP grant increased, the Committee heard that more single people were able to receive DHPs.
5. The Committee understands that the Council has the ability to contribute two and a half times the Government grant amount. Whilst the Committee would not suggest committing this level of funds to top up the DHP grant, the City Executive Board is recommended to consider what approach to 'topping up' the grant would offer a fairer and further reaching policy. The Committee are aware that changes in other welfare benefits may impact on the demand for DHPs.

Oxford's position as one of the most unaffordable cities in the country, not least because of the affordability of housing, highlights the value of DHPs for local residents. Importantly, the demand for DHPs in Oxford is not contingent on, or defined by, the grant received from HM Government. To address this imbalance, the Committee believe that the Council should offset against any reduction in Government funding by bridging the gap between local demand and the level of available grant. In particular, the Committee suggests that the Homelessness Reserve should be considered as a possible fund for 'topping up' the DHP grant. In making this recommendation, the Committee wishes to highlight that the Council will receive approximately £100,000 less this year than in 2017/18.

6. ***Recommendation 1 - That consideration is given to 'topping up' the DHP grant provided by HM Government, in order that the policy criteria can be broadened to include more residents who are in need of support. Consideration should be given to how this might be funded and to what extent, such as from the Homelessness Reserve.***

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To: City Executive Board
Date: 22 May 2018
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Oxford Town Hall

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning Oxford Town Hall.
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny
Executive Board Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Board Member for Economic Development and Partnership
Corporate Priority:	Strong and Active Communities
Policy Framework:	Corporate Plan
Recommendation(s): That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. The Scrutiny Committee considered a report concerning Oxford Town Hall at a meeting on 17 May 2018. This was provided following a request by the Committee in 2018 to review how the Town Hall is being promoted, and the work that is underway to improve accessibility. The report provided the Committee with information on the income generated by the Town Hall and expenditure on the upkeep of the building. The report also highlighted an increase in online activity to promote the Town Hall. The Committee would like to thank David Hunt (Commercial Manager) for producing the report, and attending the meeting to present and take questions.

Summary and recommendations

2. In hearing from the Commercial Manager and reviewing the report, the Committee have devised three recommendations to the City Executive Board as outlined below:

3. The Committee understands that the use of voice enhancing facilities for a room booking incurs an additional charge of £75. The Committee were of the view that every person, regardless of their disability or impairment, should be able to use a room without paying an additional fee for accessibility equipment. Whilst noting that there are a limited number of voice enhancing facilities available in the Town Hall, the Committee believes that additional fees should not be used as a way of limiting usage. The Committee therefore suggests that there should be a review of the charging schedule to ensure that no other fees are in place that might discriminate against certain groups.
4. ***Recommendation 1 - That the charging schedule for rental facilities in the Town Hall is reviewed to ensure that it does not discriminate against any person with a disability or impairment. For example, there should be no charge on the use of voice enhancers.***
5. The Committee recognise and value the approach of providing discounted room rates to community groups. However, there was ambiguity over what constituted a community group, and there would be value in strengthening the criteria. It would also be beneficial in future to understand the total level of discount given to community groups each year, to see how this impacts on the commercial viability of the Town Hall.
6. The Committee were acutely aware that they did not have access to data on the number of groups using the Town Hall, and the types of user groups. The Committee believe this information is crucial for understanding whether the Town Hall is being used by the breadth of the community. There was a perception that the diversity of groups using the Town Hall did not fully reflect the communities in Oxford. Members of the Committee raised concerns that some groups of society perceived cultural and geographic barriers between them and the Town Hall. The analysis of demographic data would help to identify these barriers, and work should be undertaken to respond to the data. Members of the committee suggested that officers look at other authorities that make good use of their Town Hall facilities, such as Luton and Birmingham.
7. The Committee took issue with the £5 surcharge on non-approved catering companies in lieu of commission, and how this was justified in relation to food hygiene standards. There was concern that some groups who have specific catering needs may not be catered for by the approved caterers. Therefore, the £5 surcharge may adversely affect those who have specific catering needs on the grounds of religion or belief, for example.
8. ***Recommendation 2 - That data should be collected on the number, type and proportion of community groups using the Town Hall, relative to the number of private and council bookings. These data should be used to analyse what barriers might exist to different user groups, and targeted promotional activities should be undertaken to engage more effectively with those underrepresented. These data should include:***
 - a) ***The type of user groups that are using the Town Hall***
 - b) ***Where the user groups are geographically based***
 - c) ***How often each user group books rooms at the Town Hall***

9. The ongoing accessibility audit of the Town Hall represents a positive step towards improving the Town Hall offer. Because of the importance of this review, the Scrutiny Committee will want to consider the outcome of the audit once it has been completed, and any subsequent reports prior to consideration by the City Executive Board. There are concerns however about how any major changes to the building will be funded, and the Committee recognises that any improvement works will need to be scoped, costed and budgeted through the normal budget setting process.

10. Recommendation 3 - That consideration is given to how key public spaces within the Town Hall can be made equally accessible for all visitors.

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