

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 June 2013

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Abbasi, Altaf-Khan, Coulter, Fry, Mills, Paule, Sanders, Simmons, Smith and Fooks (ex-officio).

OFFICERS PRESENT: Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer), Lois Stock (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), Helen Bishop (Head of Customer Services), Richard Hawkes (Corporate Asset Manager), Nigel Kennedy (Head of Finance), Jane Lubbock (Head of Business Improvement and Technology) and Paul Wilding (Customer Services)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR THE COUNCIL YEAR 2013/14

Resolved to elect Councillor Mark Mills as Chair of the Scrutiny Committee for the Council Year 2013/104.

2. ELECTION OF VICE CHAIR FOR THE COUNCIL YEAR 2013/14

Resolved to elect Councillor Gill Sanders as Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Committee for the Council Year 2013/104

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Darke and Councillor Campbell (Councillor Fooks substituted)

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

5. SCRUTINY WORKING ARRANGEMENTS AND PREPARATION FOR THE 2013-14 WORK PROGRAMME

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning scrutiny arrangements for 2013/14. Pat Jones, Principal Scrutiny Officer presented the report to the Committee and provided some background and context.

The following points/observations were made by the Committee:-

- Discussion around the autonomy of panels – some members felt they could be completely autonomous, whilst others believed they should report their recommendations back to the Committee. It was pointed out that, owing to the timing of meetings, panels may not have time to report back before recommendations went on to CEB;

- Any recommendations from panels would be circulated to members, as at present;
- Panels would be scoped at the Committee, and panel meetings would be open to the public (unless during the course of its work something emerged that necessitated the closure of the panel to the public);
- Political balance on panels was desirable, however there was broad support for panel membership as outlined in paragraph 7 of the report;
- Members of the public could be invited/co-opted onto panels as and when necessary;
- The Committee could invite anyone to speak – expert witnesses, members of the public, fellow Councillors, etc;
- The current co-optee to the Housing Panel will be invited to join the Committee as a co-optee, unless a Housing Panel is established; in which case she will sit on that;
- The choice of items for review will be guided by a scoring system outlined in paragraph 15 of the report. Items should have 3 positive attributes, however, the scores will be for guidance and should not limit the choice of review topic;

Considering the unfinished reviews from the last Council year, the Committee decided the following:-

Covered Market Strategy and Leasing Strategy – to continue, Councillor Campbell as Lead Member, aim to complete by October.

Recycling Rates review - to continue, Councillor Fry as Lead Member, panel to be asked to tighten their focus; aim to complete by September.

Enfranchisement and Empowerment - to continue, Councillor Darke to be Lead Member, aim to finish by September/October;

Educational attainment at Primary level – to continue, Councillors Coulter and Paule can replace Councillors Clack and Kennedy if the latter do not feel able to continue;

Helping the High Street – discontinue, issues to date to be passed to the relevant Board Member. This item will be placed in the work programme as the Committee was keen that it should not be lost altogether;

Mutual exchanges between Council Tenants – to continue as per the report.

Having taken all information into account, **and taking into account those issues shown above**, the Committee RESOLVED:-

- (1) To agree the outline operating arrangements for scrutiny as shown in Table 1 of the report;

- (2) To agree the starting point for the selection and membership of Panels as outlined in paragraph 7 of the report;
- (3) To agree to appoint Lead members from the Scrutiny Committee as outlined in paragraph 8 of the report;
- (4) To agree how to place the current co-optee within the structure as outlined in paragraph 11 of the report;
- (5) To agree the framework for the work programme as outlined in paragraph 14 of the report;
- (6) To agree the outline scoring system for the selection of Panel topics as outlined in paragraph 15, noting that this would guide decisions;
- (7) To agree to take forward those Panels listed above.

6. FORWARD PLAN

The Forward Plan for June to September 2013 was submitted. Pat Jones introduced this item and provided some background to it.

The following items were chosen for the next meeting:-

- End of Year Reporting – Fusion Contract 2012/13;
- Low Emission Strategy and Air Quality Action Plan;
- Youth Ambition Strategy; - Consultation Outcome;
- Housing Strategy Action Plan – Periodic Review.

The Committee expressed a wish to see the Oxpens Masterplan at a future meeting, when the outcome of the consultation was known.

7. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS

The Head of Customer Services submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended). Susan Brown (Board Member for Customer Services) and Paul Wilding (Revenues and Benefits Programme Manager) attended the meeting to present the report and answer questions from the Committee.

Paul Wilding introduced the report and provided some background and context.

The Committee believed that the proposals were sensible, but it raised the following issues:-

Nature of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs)

The Committee felt that the current and potential loss of benefits to claimants in Oxford would cause hardship. The use of DHPs was to be welcomed, but it was not a long term solution. Examples were given of claimants who were not clear that the DHP was temporary, and that it was intended to assist them whilst they sought a long term solution to their financial situation.

It was noted that the Council was trying to make this clear to claimants, but the Committee would welcome a campaign of advice to claimants generally; and in particular those in receipt of DHP so that they were clear about the nature of it. Indeed, the Committee would welcome a more broadly based campaign to encourage everyone entitled to claim benefit now to do so.

Impact of future Welfare Reform

The Committee felt that the changes that were coming were the “tip of the iceberg” that would result in more acute need in the Oxford population. It was noted that some older people were protected from Welfare Reform, but they should consider if they needed to take action now to protect their entitlement for the future. An example was given of a couple with an age difference of perhaps 10 years. Entitlement to retirement benefits was to be focussed on the younger partner, not the older, and this could result in significant loss of income for couples with large or even modest age differences.

Other issues

The Committee felt that the DHP Policy should be kept under review, and that future consideration might be given to “topping up” the DHP fund from other sources. To enable the Committee to consider this in future, it would welcome regular advice on the progress of the DHP fund, perhaps on a quarterly basis.

Recommendations to City Executive Board

The Committee made the following recommendations to CEB:-

- (1) To organise a general campaign of clear advice through as many agencies, partnerships and offices as possible, making it clear the temporary nature of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), and the requirement to engage in more sustainable solutions;
- (2) To extend current outreach work to include benefit take-up to maximise benefits to current and potential claimants;
- (3) To keep the DHP Policy under review, and in particular to revisit it once regulations on further Welfare Reform are clear;
- (4) For the Scrutiny Committee to be included in the monitoring arrangements for this policy in both financial and outcome terms.

8. END OF YEAR INTEGRATED REPORT 2012 - 2013

The Head of Finance and the Head of Business Improvement and Technology submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended). Nigel Kennedy (Head of Finance) and Jane Lubbock (Head of Business Improvement and Technology) attended the meeting to introduce the report and provide some background and context to it. (Councillor Ed Turner sent apologies for not being able to attend the meeting.)

The Committee highlighted the following issues:-

- There seems to be a large underspend going into the Westgate Development reserve, and the Committee would like further information on this;
- It was noted that the Council had achieved the Decent Homes Standard, and that the Stock Condition Survey would further update this;
- The Committee would welcome more information on unspent budgets generally;
- It was observed that there were a number of service areas with budgetary problems, for example HR and Facilities and Law and Governance. It was explained that Facilities intended to employ a commercial manager in order to maximise income opportunities for the Town Hall, and that Law and Governance was also responsible for emergency planning, and had encountered problems with the budget for flooding;
- A question was asked about the possibility of surplus budgets being used to alleviate pressures on Discretionary Housing Payments, and about the use of the HRA to help with homelessness issues.

The Committee felt that this was an important report, and that it would like to include the following issues within its work programme:-

- Organisational Development and Corporate Services – performance and issues;
- Fee income targets;
- House building targets;
- Perception of anti-social behaviour;
- Satisfaction with neighbourhoods;
- How the Council can meet efficiency targets in future.

Resolved to note the report and include highlighted issues in its work programme.

9. CORPORATE DEBT MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Head of Finance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended). Nigel Kennedy (Head of Finance) attended the meeting to present the report and provide some background and context.

In answer to a question about debt collection, Nigel Kennedy explained that debt collection agencies acting for the Council had to adhere to guidelines laid down by the Council in its contract with them. The Committee asked to see a copy of these guidelines, which would be circulated in due course.

Nigel Kennedy also explained that the Council did not charge an administration fee for payment by debit card, but that it charged 1.5% for payment by credit card.

Resolved to note the report.

10. APPOINTMENT OF MAIN CONTRACTOR FOR THE AFFORDABLE HOMES PROGRAMME - 2015

The Regeneration and Major Projects Manager submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended). Richard Hawkes (Corporate Asset Manager) attended the meeting to present the report to the Committee and provide some background to it.

The Committee raised the following issues:-

- It was noted that the new properties have been designed to meet Level 4 of the Code for Sustainable Homes, but would it be possible to increase that? There was some question about the requirement in the Council's planning policy – that this required Level 5 of the Code – and Richard Hawkes undertook to check this and inform the Committee;
- The Committee noted that it would not be possible to protect the new homes from "Right to Buy" legislation, but that building costs could be recouped should this right be exercised in the future. This would be actual building costs, as incurred over a 7 year period.

Resolved to note the report.

11. DATES AND TIMES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Resolved to:

- (1) Note the dates as listed, with one change – the September meeting will be held on 5th September (as opposed to 3rd);
- (2) Agree the start time of meetings will remain at 6pm.

12. MATTERS EXEMPT FROM PUBLICATION

Resolved to note the exempt from publication annexe to item 10 – Appointment of Main Contractor for the Affordable Homes Programme 2015.

13. APPOINTMENT OF MAIN CONTRACTOR FOR THE AFFORDABLE HOMES PROGRAMME - 2015

Resolved to note the exempt from publication appendix to the main report.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.10 pm