

# SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**Thursday 5 September 2013**

**COUNCILLORS PRESENT:** Councillors Mills (Chair), Sanders (Vice-Chair), Abbasi, Brett, Campbell, Fry, Lloyd-Shogbesan, Paule, Pressel, Simmons and Smith.

**OFFICERS PRESENT:** Lois Stock (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), Helen Bishop (Head of Customer Services) and Paul Wilding (Customer Services)

## **23. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor Altaf Khan (Councillor Brett substituted), Councillor Coulter (Councillor Pressel substituted), and Councillor Darke.

## **24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None made

## **25. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN**

### **Work Programme**

The Principal Scrutiny Officer presented the current Work Programme and Forward Plan to the Committee and provided some background and context.

The Committee noted that the following items were now expected to be taken by City Executive Board (CEB) in October, and as a result they were not on the current Scrutiny agenda:-

- Riverside Land;
- City Deal;
- Grants Commissioning.

The Committee resolved to:-

- (1) Note that Councillor McCready had joined the Housing Standing Panel;
- (2) Note that Councillor Brett had agreed to lead the debate on the Council's use of social media when this is considered at its October meeting;
- (3) Note that the Oxfutures item which the Committee had requested, is in abeyance and that the County Council is not moving this forwards at present;

- (4) Agree that Councillor Jones could take part in the Committee's debates on flooding, Community Safety and building scale when they take place;
- (5) Note that Councillor Van Nooijen has left the Covered Market Review Group.. It was agreed that a substitute Labour member would be sought to take his place, although the Committee did not that the work of this review group was well advanced;
- (6) Agree that Councillor Mills would leave the Finance Standing Panel, and that his place would be taken by Councillor Fooks;
- (7) Agree that the following recommendation from the Housing Panel (concerning the Allocations Scheme Review) should be forwarded to CEB on 11<sup>th</sup> September:-

A Communications Strategy should be in place to explain the scheme as agreed; what it means for applicants alongside some general information on the likelihood of being housed. Communication should include the opportunity for feedback on the scheme itself, and the understandability of it.

#### Covered Market Review – update

Councillor Jim Campbell provided a short update concerning the work of this group. So far the group had:-

- Visited markets in London and Bristol;
- Carried out a survey of traders in the Covered Market; producing 30 written responses and many oral comments;
- Held discussions with many Council Officers, including the City centre Manager;
- Met with Board members Councillor Price and Councillor Cook.

The strategy produced by the Retail Group will not be available until October 2<sup>nd</sup>, and the Review Group would like to see this before finalising its recommendations. It would prefer to report to the Scrutiny Committee's November meeting.

The Committee asked that an interim report be presented at the October meeting, noting that Councillor Campbell would be unable to present it (but another group member would).

#### Other updates

- (1) It was noted that the Recycling Review has stalled owing to lack of time, but it was hoped to revive it.
- (2) There is an item in the work programme concerning Thames Water's investment in sewage treatments and flooding alleviation in Oxford. The Principal Scrutiny Officer suggested that a group be formed (two Councillors have already volunteered for this) to meet with officers who regularly deal with Thames Water, agree a firm brief with them, and seek information from Thames Water concerning its investment so far.

Information about the City Council's responsibilities (where it is the riparian owner) would also be sought.

It was agreed that Councillor Wilkinson should be invited to join this group, as this was her original suggestion. The Principal Scrutiny Officer will circulate all members in case anyone else wished to join.

### Forward Plan

It was noted that the Public Engagement Strategy would be on the November agenda. The Committee did not wish to add anything else from the current Forward Plan.

## **26. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS**

Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer) introduced the report back on recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved to note the recommendations and their outcome as shown in the report.

## **27. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS - MONITORING REPORT**

The Head of Customer Services submitted a report (previously circulated now appended)

Susan Brown, Board Member for Customer Services, attended the meeting, introduced the report and provided some background and context to it.

Councillor Brown clarified paragraph 26 of the report. This related to unsuccessful claims by applicants for Disability Living Allowance. The Oxford Welfare Rights (OWR) group had a good reputation for winning appeals on this – 9 out of 10 appeals it represented were successful. Where OWR thought an applicant had a good case, the City Council would assist them to represent a client. The Council was keen to ensure that those entitled to Disability Living Allowance could get it.

Paul Wilding (Revenues and Benefits Manager) and Helen Bishop (Head of Customer Services) guided the Committee through the report and provided some background and context.

### Questions and issues raised by the Committee

The Committee raised the following :-

### Applicant profiles

The Committee was keen to see more hard data in future monitoring reports. It would like to know more about applicants' profiles and any reasons for refusal of DHP.

It noted concerns expressed about digging too deep into applicants' profiles. This was not the intention of the Committee – it did not wish to know personal details, but rather information about numbers affected by the benefit cap, bedroom tax and other reforms; and how many and what sort of households were affected (people with children? Older people? Couples?)

The Committee noted an offer to provide case studies next time. It felt this could be helpful to its understanding of this complex subject. It wished to know how DHP worked in practice for people living in Oxford.

### Conditionality

There was interest in any conditions attached to grants of DHP. What would happen if any conditions imposed on applicants were not met? What happens if applicants cannot meet any conditions within 3 months?

Of especial interest was a requirement to find smaller and/or cheaper accommodation, which was particularly difficult in Oxford. Perhaps this condition should say "look for" such accommodation rather than "find" it within 3 months. Paul Wilding agreed that in reality people had to try to find alternative accommodation, by bidding on other properties, for example.

The Committee felt that for some people the chances of finding somewhere else to live would be almost impossible. There were big decisions for the Council leading from this, as the Council was not going to be able to top up payments forever.

The Committee noted that officers had to make judgements about who was and who was not likely to apply for and receive another award. Officers were aware that for some people there was no other option, and that there was likely to be a small number of people who would need on-going support.

The Council could suspend awards if conditions were not met; or the applicant would simply not receive another award.

### Reasons for refusal of an award of DHP

The Committee noted that there were 2 reasons for the refusal of an award:-

- (1) Where people have a shortfall which is affordable within their current budget;
- (2) Where people are unwilling to work with the Council in finding a solution to their difficulty.

There was an appeals process if an application was unsuccessful.

## Utility Bills

The Committee was concerned that many people were hit by high utility bills. It noted that there were many reasons for this. They could be on too high a tariff, or they could be paying back past arrears. They could be helped find a smaller tariff, or perhaps agree smaller arrears payments with their utility provider.

## Publicity for DHP

The Council promoted DHP through many channels, including Housing Associations, face to face with customers, home visits to those affected by the benefits cap and hand delivered letters. People affected by the bedroom tax had also been contacted by letter. All options were tried in order that potential applicants were informed of this – the Council sought to be proactive.

## Future grants

The Council expected to receive further DHP funding for next year, but it expected it to be less than at present. This should be known in November.

## Further information

The Committee appreciated that this scheme was quite new, that it was at an early stage and that this was the first monitoring report. It accepted that it was currently within budget, but it needed to know what would happen if that budget ran out. The Committee did not wish to explore people's personal circumstances, but it did need to know who (in general terms) was using the scheme and if it was focussed in the right direction. For that, it would like to see more data as well as case studies.

The Committee agreed that it would like the following information in future

- Information about applicant profiles, family make-up, where they live and the type of property in which they live;
- Information on the benefits cap – most difficult cases and how many may need to be paid on a continuous basis;
- Reasons for non-payment of DHP by the Council;
- Information about the number of payments withdrawn because of failure by the applicant to meet conditions;
- Case studies;

It welcomed the offer from Helen Bishop to see an overview of the processes behind DHP and the type of conversations that officers were having; so that it could see how the Council dealt with its clients.

The Committee further agreed that the Principal Scrutiny Officer should talk with Councillor Coulter (Scrutiny Lead member on DHP), Paul Wilding, Helen Bishop and Councillor Susan Brown in order to formulate future reports that would provide the depth and scope of information that the Committee required.

The Committee thanked Councillor Brown, Paul Wilding and Helen Bishop for their attendance and useful input.

## **28. CUSTOMER CONTACT STRATEGY**

The Head of Customer Services submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning the draft Customer Contact strategy for Consultation. Helen Bishop attended the meeting to present the report and answer questions.

### Questions and issues raised by the Committee

The Committee raised the following issues:-

#### Abandoned / “no option” calls

The Committee noted that 76,000 calls had been logged as “no option selected by the customer”; and wondered what that meant in practice. In response, it was explained that these were calls where the customer held the line and waited to speak to an advisor. A proportion of those calls would actually be for other services, but they were not shown as such.

New telephony was in the pipeline which would offer only four options and which would encourage the caller to make a more active choice.

The abandoned call rate had slipped slightly in recent weeks; possibly as a result of recent staff turnover and the need to train new people. Seven new team members had joined, and exploration of a staff retention policy was under consideration.

#### “Channel shift” and customer satisfaction

The Committee noted that Customer Services was seeking to find out how people wanted to do business with the Council, and what methods would best suit customers’ needs. There was a desire to find out how best to serve customer expectations and in turn make best use of Council resources. It was most cost effective for the Council to use the Internet, however, surveys had shown that customer satisfaction with this method was low, compared with other methods.

Customer satisfaction was highest with telephone contact – 91%, putting the council in the top 10 comparators in Govmetric ( a body that compares and benchmarks the Council’s performance against others). Satisfaction level with face to face contact has increased. Staff were encouraged to maximise customer engagement when meeting face to face. It should be noted, however, that people who express unhappiness with contact with the Council may not be unhappy with the standard of service, but rather with the answers that they receive.

The Committee observed that the Council’s unit costs for each method of access were quite high when compared with the average, especially face to face

contact. It noted that Oxford has two face to face enquiry centres, in the areas of greatest need, and that telephone costs are not hugely out of line with comparators. The most vulnerable people must have easy access to Council services.

The Committee also asked that the business community should be included, separately, in any consultation, as this was a key group for consultation.

A significant part of the cost is employment costs.

Benchmarks are sourced from SOCITM and PriceWaterhouseCoopers.

#### Other means of contact

It was noted that some organisations (for example Children's Centres) made use of Skype sessions. This enables customers to have a virtual meeting with an advisor, but at a time and place which suits the customer. This might be something for the Council to consider.

The Committee commented that 43% of internet access was by mobile phone and mobile apps, and this level was increasing. This was something that deserved to be explored further, provided that mobile use could be made efficient. There was awareness that there was a digital divide on Oxford, and the Committee was concerned that those without certain forms of electronic access should not be excluded.

#### Recommendations to CEB on 11<sup>th</sup> September

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendations:-

- (1) That the business community should be consulted separately on the draft Customer Contact Strategy;
- (2) The costs of any options for contact should be evaluated, as the Scrutiny Committee recognises that this is a high-cost service;
- (3) Consideration should be given to holding Skype sessions in locations such as the Children's Centres.

The Committee also congratulated Helen Bishop and Customer Services for recently gaining a Customer Excellence award.

## **29. PERFORMANCE MONITORING - QUARTER 1**

The Principal Scrutiny Officer presented the report to the Committee.

She reminded the Committee that the housing data had been examined by the Housing Panel, and that therefore the Committee should focus on the other data.

Councillor Mills asked for further explanation of performance measure LP106 – Participation at leisure centres by target groups. The Principal Scrutiny Officer would obtain this and circulate it. Should any further details be sought on any measure, members of the Committee were reminded that they could raise it after the meeting.

Resolved to note the current position.

### **30. MINUTES**

Resolved to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2013.

### **31. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

Resolved to note the dates of future meetings:-

1<sup>st</sup> October  
5<sup>th</sup> November  
3<sup>rd</sup> December  
14<sup>th</sup> January 2014  
4<sup>th</sup> February  
4<sup>th</sup> March  
1<sup>st</sup> April

All meetings start at 6pm.

**The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.52 pm**