

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 3 December 2013

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Mills (Chair), Abbasi, Altaf-Khan, Campbell, Coulter, Darke, Fry, Lloyd-Shogbesan, Simmons, Smith, Upton and O'Hara.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors Brown and Curran

SUPPORTING MEMBERS: Councillors Brett and Jones

OFFICERS PRESENT: Helen Bishop (Head of Customer Services), Jarlath Brine (OD & Learning Advisor, Equalities & Apprenticeships), Angela Cristofoli (Communities and Neighbourhoods Manager), Martin John (Principal Elections Officers), Jane Lubbock (Head of Business Improvement and Technology), Peter McQuitty (Head of Policy, Culture and Communications), Tim Sadler (Executive Director Community Services), Jeremy Thomas (Head of Law and Governance), Paul Wilding (Benefit Operations Manager), Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer) and Sarah Claridge (Trainee Democratic and Electoral Services Officer)

53. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sanders (substitute Councillor O'Hara)

54. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

55. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Principal Scrutiny Officer introduced the current work programme and Forward Plan to the Committee, mentioning the following:

Members had been emailed further information on –

- outlying flooding issues,
- the Finance Panel's timetable for the budget review and
- the capital bid for extending recycling facilities into flats

The panel review on Enhancement and Enfranchisement is on the agenda tonight, and final reports from the Covered Market and Recycling Incentive inquiries are expected in January 2014.

The Education Attainment Panel has stalled due to a change in head teacher; however it is hoping to meet with the new head teacher before Christmas to get the review back on track.

The Committee reviewed the Forward Plan but had no new items they wished to pre-scrutinise.

56. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Principal Scrutiny Officer introduced the report back on recommendations made from the Committee to CEB and announced that all scrutiny recommendations except one had been agreed by the Board. The exception was the recommendation from the Waste and Recycling strategy, to investigate the costs of diverting recyclables before sending it to landfill. The County Council plans to incinerate all of the County's waste in the near future and so investing in a plant to pre-sort waste beforehand would be costly and would not yield the amount of recyclables to outweigh the cost.

57. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY (2014-2017) DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION - PRE-SCRUTINY

The Head of Policy and Culture introduced the draft Community Engagement Strategy (2014-2017) and explained its purpose as an overarching strategy which acknowledges that one form of consultation does not work for all and outlines the different methods that can be used to consult with the different communities of Oxford.

The strategy focuses on how the public can engage in the council decision making process and is based on principles agreed to by Council to encourage community engagement and to support, inform and improve elected members decision making.

The Committee made the following questions/ comments:

- No reference in the draft strategy to the need to train councillors to enable better public engagement
- Would like to see case studies which show what does and does not work to improve understanding of the policy.
- Strategy has too much jargon and needs to be written in plainer English if people are to understand it.
- How does this policy fit with public consultation of different services? Is there a link at all?
- How do you plan to consult with communities where there are no organised community groups?
- Need to identify groups and understand the best method to engage them
- Do you liaise with other councils and see what they are doing?

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendations to CEB on 12 March 2014:

Recommendation 1

To provide a clear statement in the Plan, supported by guidance to services, of the need for all engagement to link in order to deliver the overall aims of the Community Engagement Plan.

Recommendation 2

To ensure that the guidance and Tool Kit are fit for purpose for the many diverse groups the Council is seeking to engage with.

Recommendation 3

To consider in the Community Engagement Plan the role played by councillors, how this is supported through advice and training and is linked into democratic processes.

Recommendation 4

In order to improve engagement in the consultation process of this document to include:

- A simple questionnaire built around the main areas of consideration.
- Examples of good and poor engagement activities.

Recommendation 5

To emphasis and give more weight in the Plan to looking for and encouraging engagement at a very local level to ensure communities can help shape decisions and issues that matter to them.

Recommendation 6

To recognise within the Plan and Tool Kit the importance of defining what might constitute a Hard to Reach Group as broadly as possible and on a case by case basis.

58. USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY THE COUNCIL

Councillor Brett explained the importance of social media to engage with the public and suggested ways that Council could develop how it uses social media to engage with the public.

The Committee resolved

That a report be presented to the Committee in January 2014 on ways which the Council could use social media to engage the public and target hard to reach groups.

59. ENFRANCHISEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT - FINAL PANEL REPORT

Councillors Darke, Jones and O'Hara presented their final report on Enfranchisement and Empowerment to the Committee.

The panel outlined the difficulties new migrants have accessing Council service, due to language and cultural barriers and explained that there was more work they would like to do around social cohesion and promoting the diversity of Oxford, the panel asked the Committee whether they could continue their work.

Communities and Neighbourhood Officers and Elections Officers said they could report back to the Committee on the issues the panel raised in the future.

The Committee resolved

1. That given the importance of social cohesion for Oxford's future that further panel work be considered on enfranchisement and empowerment in the new Council year.

2. That the Principal Electoral Services Officer updates the Committee on:
 - the progress towards the implantation of IER in 2014 and how funding, following a successful bid to the Cabinet Office to increase voter registration within IER was to be spent.
 - the current annual update (cavass) of the electoral register, which will be published on 17th February 2014.
3. That the Communities team leader report back to the Committee on how the Council can:
 - Provide better communication and engagement – by investigating how on-going dialogues can be established with as many of the larger communities as possible. Exploring what information would be most useful to them and in what form i.e. leaflets, website information in various languages etc.
 - Discuss partnership and joint/co-ordinated activities between Electoral Services and Communities and Neighbourhoods, with the introduction of IER to provide opportunities for outreach and engagement not only with in-migrants but also with other hard to reach groups such as young people. It provides an opportunity to communicate and inform about the democratic process and the need to sustain the vitality of civic engagement. All efforts should be made to maximise available funds from Government and other sources to produce the widest possible outcomes.
 - To support the consideration of bids within the Social Inclusion Fund Officers should be asked to draw up a “wish-list” of resources needed to take this work further. Working to make Oxford a welcoming, diverse and integrated community is an important aim.
 - Report to the Committee how the integration of recent in-migrants communities has been encouraged in other local authority areas.

The Committee recommended to CEB:

That City Executive Board renew the Council’s Social Inclusion Fund in 2014/15 and to actively seek bids which meet the aspirations of extending the engagement and support work with new and emerging communities

60. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS - MONITORING REPORT

Councillor Susan Brown, Board Member for Benefits and Customer Services presented the monitoring report on the discretionary housing payment (DHP). The Scrutiny Committee had resolved to receive quarterly reports on the monitoring of the DHP since the policy was amended in June 2013.

To be eligible for the DHP, applicants must be receiving a housing benefit (HB) and must prove that they cannot afford their HB shortfall by filling out a detailed income and expenditure form. Before a payment is made, the applicant must agree to 1 or 2 conditions such as, finding work, finding affordable accommodation or reducing expenditure.

There was a general concern about the number of people needing continual assistance as applicants can apply for the DHP more than once. Whether the budget can continue to afford repeat payments is an ongoing concern.

The Committee noted the report.

61. REPORT BACK ON PERFORMANCE INDICATORS BI002A, CH001 AND BV017A

The Head of Business Improvement and Technology presented the report on the following corporate performance indicators.

B1002a – number of training places and jobs created through council investment

The Head of Business Improvement and Technology explained that the Council expected its contractors and sub-contractors to pay the living wage and to encourage jobs for young people or apprenticeships. Companies that failed to comply with these arrangements would not receive any future council contracts.

BV017a – Percentage of Blacks and Ethnic Minority Employees

The OD & Learning Advisor explained that although only 7% of the workforce came from a BME background. Work was ongoing to promote the Council as an employer across all communities in the city and to reduce barriers to employment that might exist.

The Committee resolved:

That the Head of Human Resources and Facilities review the essential requirements for entry level jobs to ensure that there are no barriers to employment that aren't necessary or could be delivered through training, support or mentoring . To be prepared to take some chances in an effort to provide employment opportunities to those who would otherwise not be considered.

In an effort to better understand the employment prospects of individuals from BME groups to provide some analysis of the reasons applicants from BME groups fail at each stage of the process (shortlisting and appointment).

To see the options for the Talent Management Strategy and the possibilities within this to support the progress of staff from BME groups into senior posts within the Council.

62. MINUTES

The Committee resolved to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 5 November 2013.

63. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the next meeting would be held on 14 January 2014.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.35 pm