

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday 8 December 2014

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Simmons (Chair), Hayes (Vice-Chair), Altaf-Khan, Anwar, Coulter, Darke, Fry, Hollick, Henwood, Smith and Upton.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Bob Price, Leader of the Council

OFFICERS PRESENT: Tanya Bandekar (Revenues and Benefits), Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Geoff Corps (Cleaner Greener Services Manager), Douglas Loveridge (Direct Services), Stephen North (Revenues and Benefits), Peter Sloman (Chief Executive) and Jennifer Thompson (Law and Governance)

53. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

54. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

55. UPDATES SINCE THE LAST MEETING

Councillor Coulter reported that the inequalities panel was focussing on areas where the council could make a difference, was gathering data, and had arranged for speakers to give evidence. He thanked officers for their initial responses.

Councillor Fry reported the finance panel would be scrutinising the budget.

Councillor Darke reported that while the flooding group last met in May, work on flood prevention was ongoing and Thames Water were being encouraged to complete their work on schedule.

56. CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE ACTION PLAN

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive. Councillor Price, Leader of the Council, and Peter Sloman, Chief Executive, introduced the report and answered questions.

The peer review process picked up many positive points.

Key areas to develop included:

- Local agendas through neighbourhoods working with themes tailored to each area.
- The concept of 'leadership of place' – to improve relationships with key groups in the city such as universities, health service and business and develop with them clear strategies to align with the Council's corporate

strategy, City Deal and economic growth strategy and their own plans. This relied heavily on the work done by elected members to provide the continuity and links to county wide structures.

- Improving management capacity and achieving efficiencies as a result of this.
- Creating a balanced budget and achieving a large savings target in the medium-term financial strategy was challenging and a key area for discussion. Capital programme slippage had slowed partly due to reduced funding reducing the pressure of multiple projects.
- It should be possible to maintain ongoing discretionary spending without imparting on statutory services, although the effectiveness of both parts of the council's spending should be kept under review.
- Engaging with the community required working with residents and continuing to improve external and internal co-ordination and capacity. Meetings were not the best way; better use of social media encouraged people to take part and helped reach active community groups.
- A group of councillors was working with the committee and members services manager to develop the member guarantee including community and case work. Member champions made a useful contribution but should be restricted to key areas to maintain focus.

The Committee noted that it could contribute by considering the integrated and thematic issues and taking a strategic approach. Members suggested that a record of actions taken as a consequence of the review and the outcomes would be useful.

The Committee noted the report and **agreed** to add updates on actions to address the key points raised in the report and above to the work programme.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive and Leader for attending, and thanked those involved in the review and the peer review group for their work.

57. CLEAN STREETS

The Committee considered the report from Streetscene Direct Services. Douglas Loveridge, Streetscene Services Manager, and Geoff Corps, Cleaner Greener Services Manager, introduced the report and answered questions.

They explained the remit of the Streetscene team. During the floods at the start of the year, operatives were heavily involved in clearing up and preventative work. As a result while work in the city centre was unaffected other work was not carried out. This had an effect on the cumulative statistics.

The city centre manager and Environmental Health team were working with businesses and waste collectors to reduce the problem of trade waste on streets in the city centre. Proposals for alterations to the council's trade waste collections to reduce the time trade waste was on the street would be presented to the City Executive Board for decision.

They explained the policy for cleaning graffiti from private property including street furniture.

They explained the schedule for daily, weekly and deep cleaning city streets, that there was a schedule for sweeping leaves, and that if necessary particular problem areas could be dealt with outside the schedules.

The Streetscene team were happy to walk round wards with councillors and discuss solutions for problem areas.

The Committee made the following points

- councillors thanked the team for their prompt responses to their queries;
- it supported the review of the city centre bins and changes to the trade waste and general waste removal in the city centre to improve the street scene;
- adequate resourcing of normal street cleaning as well as prioritising flood clearance work should be considered as flooding occurred annually.

and asked for:

- details of the cleaning schedules to be circulated to all councillors so that any additions could be suggested before the budget was agreed by Council;
- clarification of the legal powers around graffiti removal;
- that the website give a consistent message on the council's policy and processes on graffiti removal.

58. DISCRETIONARY RATES RELIEF FOR BUSINESSES POLICY

The Committee considered the report from the Head of Customer Services. Tanya Bandekar, Revenues and Benefits Service Manager, and Stephen North, Senior Revenues Officer, introduced the report and answered questions.

She reported that:

- The policy had been updated to include recent changes and new reliefs. Since its drafting, further changes had been announced in the autumn statement.
- National guidance required that local policies were not applied indiscriminately but on a case-by-case basis. Reliefs covered a broad spectrum of cases, taking the interests of the applicant and local residents and council taxpayers into account.
- Reliefs and reductions in valuation reduced the tax income from business rates, and the shortfall had to be made up by other taxpayers.
- Businesses affected by roadworks or major works were not eligible for relief but could appeal to the Valuation Office for a temporary reduction in valuation. The Council had made a block application for temporary reductions for those affected by the St Clements work and notified the Valuation Office of issues which might trigger reductions. However they recommended businesses and organisations make their own applications as the Council could not guarantee to include all those affected.
- There were other reliefs and reductions available to businesses and organisations from central government in addition to the council's discretionary reliefs. The Covered Market businesses did not ordinarily attract discretionary reliefs but some were eligible for these other reliefs.
- Business rate liability for empty premises was set centrally: empty shops attracted full business rates; newly tenanted shops attracted a 50% relief for 18 months. This did not encourage owners to leave shops empty.
- Those liable for business rates should talk to the Revenues and Benefits team for advice as there were a range of possible reliefs and reductions available, and the council's policy and the requirement to consider each case

on its merits allowed for more discretion on some aspects than was immediately apparent.

The Committee recommended that:

- The Local Economy Scrutiny Panel consider this policy and its effects.
- It was difficult for businesses, and in particular not for profit organisations, to decide if they met the criteria for relief. Non-profit making organisations should be clearly encouraged to contact the City Council for an early assessment of their entitlement to discretionary reliefs. There should be clear guidance and information available for all those who might be eligible.

59. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Committee agreed that in addition to the items on the work programme

1. it would consider:
 - grant allocations to community and voluntary organisations 2015/2016 (item 33)
 - the culture strategy 2015-18 (31)
 - Oxfutures programme (26)
2. the Housing Panel would consider the aids and adaptations policy (20) and the exemption policy for repairs (25)
3. and the Finance Panel would consider the capital strategy (28), the treasury management strategy 15/16 (33) and the creation of a panel to manage the council's investment portfolio (29).

60. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee noted the report and progress.

61. MINUTES

The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2014 as a true and accurate record subject to correcting the figure in Minute 41, paragraph 3 from £200,000 to £515,000.

62. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted these.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm