

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 12 January 2016

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COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Simmons (Chair), Darke, Fry, Gant, Hollick, Henwood, Pegg, Smith and Cook.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Alex Hollingsworth

OFFICERS PRESENT: David Edwards (Executive Director City Regeneration and Housing), Nigel Kennedy (Head of Financial Services), Lindsay Cane (Legal Services Manager), Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer) and Catherine Phythian (Committee Services Officer)

76. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from the following Committee members: Councillor Hayes (substitute Councillor Cook), Councillor Coulter and Councillor Taylor.

Apologies were received from Councillors Price, Turner and Rowley who had been invited to attend the Committee.

77. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

78. REPORT FROM HOUSING STANDING PANEL - RENTS PERFORMANCE

Councillor Smith, Chair of the Housing Standing Panel presented the Panel's recommendations on the Council's rents performance. She explained that the Panel had commissioned and considered this at its public meeting on 10 December 2015. She cited the success of the Council's incentive scheme for waste recycling and said that the Panel hoped that a similar approach could be taken to encourage people to pay their rent by direct debit. In response to questions she confirmed that the Panel were satisfied with officer assurances that the level of rent arrears was not a matter of concern and that the Council was already providing debt advice and support for tenants in arrears.

The Scrutiny Committee resolved to submit the Housing Panel report on Rents Performance to the City Executive Board and ask the Board whether it agrees or disagrees with the following recommendations:

1. Recommendation 1 – That the Council should look at ways of incentivising Council tenants to pay rent by Direct Debit, including the option of holding a prize draw.
2. Recommendation 2 – That the proportion of eligible Council tenants paying rent by Direct Debit should be a performance indicator in future years.

79. REPORT FROM HOUSING STANDING PANEL - CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

Councillor Smith, Chair of the Housing Standing Panel presented the Panel's report and recommendations on proposed changes to the Choice Based Lettings scheme which had been discussed at its public meeting on 10 December 2015. She said that the Panel had wanted to address concerns about what methods of bidding were available to people who were disabled or visually impaired. The Panel had learnt that of 428 offers of housing made in the first 7 months of the year, 64 were refused. They felt that this was a high percentage and the Council should look at ways to reduce the number of rejections. Finally she confirmed that the Panel supported the proposed change from a fortnightly lettings cycle lasting 13 days to a weekly cycle.

The Scrutiny Committee resolved to submit the Housing Panel report on Choice Based Lettings to the City Executive Board and ask the Board whether it agrees or disagrees with the following recommendations:

1. Recommendation 1 – That the Choice Based Lettings cycle should be changed from a fortnightly (13 days) to a weekly cycle.
2. Recommendation 2 – That advice should be sought from relevant council officers and local disability groups on making the Choice Based Lettings bidding process more accessible to individuals with disabilities.
3. Recommendation 3 – That Council Officers should explore positive ways of reducing the number of offers of housing that are refused.

80. OXPENS REVISED DELIVERY STRATEGY

The Chair introduced this item. He explained that this was an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to make recommendations to the City Executive Board to inform their consideration of the proposals for a revised delivery strategy for the Oxpens development at its special meeting on 14 January 2015. He said that this was a substantive, complex and commercially sensitive matter that warranted careful consideration.

He welcomed Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Board Member for Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services, David Edwards, Executive Director, Regeneration & Housing, Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services and Lindsay Cane, Legal Services Manager.

The Executive Director, Regeneration & Housing reminded the Committee of the background to the item:

- the Council had been exploring strategic options for the redevelopment of Oxpens for several years;
- the Council was committed to the comprehensive regeneration of the whole Oxpens area which would contribute to the wider city economy;
- negotiations with the Department of Transport and LCR (London and Continental Railways) over the previous JV arrangements (agreed by CEB in October) had now stalled;
- central Government had now confirmed the disposal of railway lands at Oxpens to the Council on the basis of an unconditional sale for a fixed price and within a tight timescale;
- in response the Council and Nuffield College proposed to set up a joint venture partnership based on their respective positions as the predominant landowners in the area, their shared values, and their collective ambition to regenerate the Oxpens area.

In private session the Committee asked a range of questions, covering risks, financing, financial scenarios, land ownership and links with other developments.

The Committee expressed its support for all the recommendations before the City Executive Board and made the following observations:

- that there were 3 main elements to recommendation 2; the establishment of a delivery partnership, the acquisition of land owned by London and Continental Railways, and the transfer of land owned by the City Council. These elements could have been 'unpacked' more clearly in the recommendations;
- that the partnership business plan and the selection of a private sector partner would be subject to future CEB decisions and scrutiny;
- that recommendation 6 relates specifically to the land at Oxpens that is currently owned by London and Continental Railways;
- that recommendation 7 relates to 3 joint venture company directors to be appointed by the City Council. A further 3 would be appointed by Nuffield College.

To make the transfer of the Council's land into the joint venture clear and explicit the Committee agreed to propose that the City Executive Board should resolve to authorise this disposal as a separate recommendation to those set out in the report.

PART TWO - MATTERS EXEMPT FROM PUBLICATION

The Scrutiny Committee resolved to exclude the press and public from the meeting during consideration of the item in the exempt from publication part of the agenda in

accordance with the provisions in Paragraph 21(1)(b) of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (England) Regulations 2000 on the grounds that their presence could involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in specific paragraphs of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and that, in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

81. CONFIDENTIAL APPENDICES - OXPENS DELIVERY STRATEGY

The Scrutiny Committee considered a presentation by the Executive Director for Regeneration and Housing and noted the contents of the confidential appendices.

Councillor Smith left the meeting at the end of this item.

THE MEETING RESUMED IN PUBLIC SESSION

82. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Committee reviewed the work programme and Forward Plan noting that the City Executive Board report on the Transfer Station for Recycled Material scheduled for pre-scrutiny in February would not now be available until the autumn.

The Committee noted that the Finance Standing Panel was engaged in pre-scrutiny of the 2016-17 Budget.

The Committee resolved to AGREE that:

1. The City Executive Board report on Go Ultra Low Oxford Grant Funding should be added to the work programme for February; and
2. The City Executive Board report on Energy and Water Supply Contract Procurement should be referred to the Finance Standing Panel for pre-scrutiny.

83. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee NOTED the report. The Chair said that the Scrutiny Officer would request updates on the implementation of agreed recommendations where required.

84. MINUTES

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2015 as a true and accurate record.

85. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee NOTED the dates of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.15 pm and ended at 8.05 pm

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By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

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