

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 5 April 2016

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COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Simmons (Chair), Hayes (Vice-Chair), Coulter, Darke, Fry, Gant, Henwood, Smith, Taylor and Pegg.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Kennedy (Young People, Schools and Skills) and Councillor Simm (Culture and Communities)

INVITEES AND OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Sanders (Older Person's Champion) and Councillor Fooks.

OFFICERS PRESENT: David Edwards (Executive Director City Regeneration and Housing), Graham Bourton (Head of Direct Services), Ian Brooke (Head of Community Services), Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Stuart Fitzsimmons (Parks and Open Spaces Manager), Hagan Lewisman (Active Communities Manager), Doug Loveridge (Streetscene Services Manager), Craig Morbey (Youth Ambition Manager), Luke Nipen (Communities Specialist Officer), Laurie Jane Taylor (City Centre Manager), Paul Wilding (Programme Manager Revenue & Benefits) and Catherine Phythian (Committee Services Officer)

108. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hollick.

Apologies were also received from Councillor Tanner in respect of agenda item 5.

109. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

110. YOUTH AMBITION

The Board Member for Young People, Schools and Skills introduced the report. The Youth Ambition Manager and Active Communities Manager were present to answer the Committee's questions.

In discussion the Committee noted that a new female member of staff had been appointed to a permanent post in the Youth Ambition team to focus on work with disadvantaged young women. The gender balance amongst casual staff had also been addressed and the programme now included more activities that should appeal to young women such as such as games, arts and crafts, as well as competitive sports. Officers were confident that participation amongst young women would continue to increase.

The Committee noted concern about the availability of mental health support services for young people in schools and elsewhere, and an increase in referrals to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Youth Ambition team was targeting mental health and well-being and building capacity in that area. Session leaders were able to signpost young people to support.

The Committee NOTED the contents of the report and made the following observations:

1. That the Scrutiny Committee welcomed and supported the prioritisation of mental health issues in the Youth Ambition Strategy.
2. Officers should be mindful of the risks of reinforcing stereotypes when developing / supporting particular projects.
3. Officers should explore additional ways to evaluate the projects (e.g. outcomes, long term targets, impacts on school attendance and attainment, take up levels from the target groups and sustained involvement).
4. Councillors should be provided with regular information on the number and range of projects and participation levels within their Wards.
5. That more details and data on inclusivity should be provided to all councillors.
6. That the presentation of the social return on investment in Appendix 1 was confusing and should be revised in future documents.
7. Officers should circulate details of the existing Youth Ambition Strategy.
8. That officers should circulate details on the Bungee app including about the number of downloads, value for money and why the Bungee app is not integrated with the main Oxford City Council app.

The Committee confirmed that it would wish to pre-scrutinise the revised Youth Ambition Strategy at a future meeting.

111. TACKLING ISOLATION PROJECTS

The Communities Specialist Officer introduced the report and highlighted the main outcomes of the different projects. The Board Member for Culture and Communities welcomed the positive results from a relatively modest investment and said that she would like there to be more emphasis and analysis around opportunities for older people to make positive contributions to the community

through these projects in future. The Older Person's Champion said that the £40k had been well spent and that she hoped this funding could continue, noting the importance of personal contact to people who were digitally excluded.

The Committee observed that the £40k of council funding for elderly isolation projects did represent good value for money by improving outcomes and making a difference to the lives of isolated older people.

The Committee noted that older people could be very active citizens and this group shouldn't necessarily been seen just as one that needed support but also one that could contribute positively to the community in different ways. The Committee suggested that more could be done to facilitate and evaluate these positive contributions through funded isolation projects.

The Committee questioned how the longer term impacts of small-scale isolation projects were evaluated and whether an economic multiplier model could be used, similar to the social return on investment model used to evaluate the much larger Youth Ambition programme. The Committee heard that evaluating community development projects was key and that there were plans to involve university student volunteers in seeking to demonstrate and quantify the social impacts of these projects.

The Committee questioned the rationale for defining older people as the 50+ population, noting that many people in their 50s did not have the same needs as elderly people and that their involvement could result in other people feeling they were too old to participate in the projects. Members heard that the definition of older people had previously been extended to include people in their 50s in response to demand. Some people in their 50s had similar needs to elderly people and others were often thinking ahead to the future. The Committee suggested that consideration should be given to whether the Council could more effectively target funds at an older age profile, without interfering with the work of those like the 50+ network.

The Committee questioned whether the Council was looking to new models in terms of providing housing for elderly people and noted that a review of older people's housing had recently taken place. The Committee suggested that housing models for the elderly should also be considered as part of the Local Plan review.

The Committee AGREED to make five recommendations to the City Executive Board:

1. That the Council continues to provide funding for projects aimed at tackling isolation.
2. That opportunities to involve older people in contributing to the community through isolation projects are maximised and evaluated.
3. That the Council looks to draw on external funding and resources in developing a social value assessment that can be used to demonstrate the social impact of isolation projects.

4. That consideration is given to whether the Council can more effectively target funds for tackling isolation at an older age profile given that the 'older people' group is defined as being the over 50 population.
5. That housing models for elderly people are considered as part of the Local Plan review.

112. GRAFFITI UPDATE

The Street Scene Manager introduced the report which detailed the latest position on graffiti removal from private properties in the city and responded to questions from the Committee.

The Committee was concerned that the Council did not make full use of its powers of legal enforcement under the 2003 Act. The Street Scene Manager explained that enforcement was the responsibility of the Community Response Team and that there was a need to balance the resources available between clean-up activities and legal action.

The Committee NOTED the report and made the following observations:

1. the appointment of the Graffiti Removal Supervisor as a permanent member of staff was welcome.
2. that the Council should take a stronger stance on enforcement for persistent offenders in the city.
3. Officers should explore the possibility of sharing graffiti removal equipment with individuals or community organisations where it was safe and appropriate to do so.
4. Officers should provide all councillors with monthly data on graffiti incidents within their ward.

113. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT POLICY - 2016 REVISION

The Revenue and Benefits Programme Manager introduced the report. The Committee heard that the lowering of the benefit cap would take place mid-way through the current year and was expected to affect 350-400 people in Oxford, many of whom were expected to apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). Following a 50% cut last year, the Council's funding allocation had been increased for the current year (2016/17) to take account of the lowering of the benefit cap and was expected to increase further next year.

The Committee were concerned that despite the clear housing need in the City (as evidenced by the high number of refused cases), the Council was again giving back some of the grant funding to the Government and had not used any of the additional £150k set aside in the budget. The Committee questioned whether the changes to the DHP policy would ensure that no money would be returned to government at year end next time, and whether there was a strategy

for balancing spend over the year. The Committee heard that DHP was used as a tool to effect longer term changes by helping people to become more financially independent while sustaining tenancies. The Council's focus was on applying these principles rather than on spending a set amount of money.

The Committee questioned why households with children were no longer being prioritised for DHP and heard that this prioritisation had been added last year but was no longer considered to be necessary given that the grant funding had increased. No groups were precluded from being awarded a DHP. The Committee supported this change to the policy and questioned whether people who had been refused a DHP when the policy was tighter would be invited to re-apply.

The Committee noted that in addition to the DHP grant allocation, £150k of homelessness prevention funding had been made available and there was an overall spending ceiling of 2.5 times the grant allocation. The Committee questioned how spend was managed and what the legal position was given that councils cannot place undue restrictions on DHP awards such as using spending caps as a refusal reason. The Committee heard that the Council's approach of ensuring that DHPs delivered improved outcomes, rather than passively awarding funding, offered some protection.

The Committee AGREED to make two recommendations to the City Executive Board:

1. That consideration is given to inviting people who were refused a Discretionary Housing Payment in 2015-16 to reapply in light of the proposed policy change and any changes in their personal circumstances.
2. That the Council keeps a watching brief on the legal position with regards to Discretionary Housing Payment spending limits and on the approaches being taken by other local authorities.

114. RECOMMENDATION MONITORING - LOCAL ECONOMY REVIEW GROUP

The Executive Director for Regeneration and Housing and the City Centre Manager were present to answer questions. They said that the Council had offered Business Rates support to businesses in Frideswide Square and would offer support and signposting to all City Centre businesses. Communication was largely an issue for individual services rather than the Corporate Communications Team but the message to business was that the Town Team was their single point of contact. A long term strategy for the City Centre was being developed and there were already a number of strategies for specific locations but the Local Plan review would be a major piece of work and there may not be capacity to progress other priorities.

Councillor Fry, Chair of the Local Economy Review Group spoke on behalf of the Review Group and in discussion the Committee made the following observations:

- that additional resources were needed to support the Events team
- that there was merit in the Council maintaining a list of empty properties in order to facilitate the temporary uses of these spaces for things like pop-up shops and social enterprises, short of taking an agency-role
- that the idea of encouraging “local quarters” as part of a long term strategy for the City Centre should not be overlooked
- that the Town Team could have a greater focus on external outreach

The Committee NOTED the progress update on the recommendations of the Local Economy Review Group.

115. REVIEW OF OXFORD CITY COUNCIL'S TREE MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Head of Direct Services and the Parks & Open Spaces Manager presented the report and explained that the Council was undertaking a light touch review of the current Tree Management Plan which had been written in 2008, and updated in 2011. They said that the review was an opportunity for the Council to introduce new examples of best practice.

In discussion the Committee considered the importance of providing timely responses to enquiries from Ward Councillors and the public; the problems caused by known “nuisance trees”, fruit bearing trees and older, larger trees; the need for a more positive tone and constructive information in the revised Tree Management Plan.

Officers welcomed the suggestions made by the Committee and said that they would take these into account in the revised document. They said that they would also include proposals for an arbitration process involving residents, ward councillors and officers to resolve “nuisance tree” cases.

In conclusion the Committee proposed that the Tree Management Plan should be revised to:

- present a more positive and constructive tone to address the views and concerns of local residents and ward councillors
- encourage the use of native tree species for planting
- where possible plant more than one tree to replace any felled trees
- provide more detail on the Council’s approach to dealing with and replacing damaged trees (for example, what do we do about stump grinding)
- information on what options are available to for dealing with “nuisance” trees (alternatives to pruning or felling)
- include details of the proposed arbitration meetings with officers, ward councillors and residents

- that officers should send the revised Tree Policy and details of the agreed response times for public enquiries to the local MPs

The Committee NOTED the report and thanked officers for their contribution to the discussion. The Committee confirmed that it would wish to pre-scrutinise the revised Tree Management Plan at a future meeting.

116. REPORT OF THE HOUSING PANEL - SECURITY IN TOWER BLOCKS

Councillor Smith, Chair of the Scrutiny Housing Panel, said that the Panel had considered an officer report on security issues in communal areas of tower blocks at the meeting on 9 March 2016. To inform the discussion the Panel had also canvassed the views of Block Representatives using a brief survey. She thanked the Scrutiny Officer for his support to the Panel in developing the resident survey and preparing the Panel's report.

Councillor Smith said that temporary CCTV has also been used successfully to identify perpetrators of anti-social behaviour in internal communal areas at Evenlode Tower. Once identified, the young people involved were visited at home and asked to sign Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and signposted to local positive activities on offer.

The Committee AGREED to submit the report and the following recommendations to the City Executive Board:

1. That door-knocking to seek views from residents on the behaviour of groups of young people in communal areas should be rolled out to other towers.
2. That if anti-social behaviour is identified as a problem within a tower block consideration should be given to the temporary use of CCTV coverage at entrances to identify the perpetrators so that the appropriate council officers can engage with them.
3. That the local police teams should be asked to undertake occasional patrols of tower blocks, and where necessary should be given the means to access communal areas other towers, as they can at Blackbird Leys.
4. That the Council should continue to look at ways of integrating youth engagement activities with other forms of resident and community engagement.

117. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Committee reviewed the work programme and Forward Plan and AGREED to include the following items on the work programme for 2016/17:

CEB reports for pre-scrutiny:

- Annual Safeguarding Report

- Sustainable Energy Action Plan
- Tree Management Plan
- Youth Ambition Strategy

Long List

- Role and contribution of the Design Panel

Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel (if applicable)

- Energy Strategy – Housing & Property.

118. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report noting that since May 2015 Scrutiny has made 176 recommendations to CEB, of which 123 (70%) have been agreed and a further 27 (15%) agreed in part.

He then read out the following City Executive Board comment on the recommendations of the Guest Houses Review Group:

A code of conduct for guest houses seems likely to make a useful contribution if it is widely respected and publicised. The Board will discuss with senior officers the serious resource implications of the agenda set out in the Scrutiny report and seek to identify the how to effectively deliver the actions proposed within current administrative resources.

The Committee NOTED the contents of the report.

119. MINUTES

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2016 as a true and accurate record.

120. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee NOTED the dates of the future meetings.

The Chair closed the meeting by thanking all members of the Committee for their work and support during the year.

On behalf of the Committee the Vice-Chair thanked the Chair for his leadership and contribution to the work of scrutiny during the year.

The meeting started at 6.15 pm and ended at 8.20 pm

