

Minutes of a meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE on Tuesday 5 November 2019

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Committee members:

Councillor Gant (Chair)	Councillor McManners (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Altaf-Khan	Councillor Arshad
Councillor Bely-Summers	Councillor Corais
Councillor Djafari-Marbini	Councillor Fry
Councillor Howlett	Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan
Councillor Simmons	

Officers:

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement
Paul Adams, HR & Payroll Manager
Tanya Bandekar, Service Manager Revenue & Benefits
Laura Bessell, Benefits Manager
Tim Wiseman, Oxford Waterways Coordinator
Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer
John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Also present:

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Customer Focused Services
Councillor Marie Tidball, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities

Apologies:

Councillor Donnelly sent apologies.

43. Declarations of interest

In relation to the item on Oxford's Waterways, Councillor Howlett declared a non-pecuniary interest as someone who lived on a boat in the City and Councillor Fry declared a non-pecuniary interest as the Chair of the Oxford Canal Festival.

44. Chair's Announcements

The Committee agreed with the Chair's proposal to re-order the agenda for the benefit of the Committee's guests.

45. Universal Credit

Councillor Marie Tidball, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities, introduced the report, drawing attention to some of its key elements.

The administrative burden of processing Universal Credit was considerable, greater than anticipated and exacerbated by inaccurate (and changing) information from the Government. This sometimes resulted in over or under payments which, in turn, required more administration to resolve. Despite increased and increasing administrative costs, Government grants to assist with the administrative burden were decreasing. Claims had to be re-visited once a month and the costs of doing so (c. 2000 a month) were estimated to be about £50k pa for which there was no funding from the DWP. These concerns and others about the introduction of UC had been the subject of a Council Motion in July 2018 and the Leader and Portfolio holder had subsequently written to the then Secretary of State for Work & Pensions. A non-committal reply had been received in response to this letter.

The nature of UC payments (in arrears) combined with the possibility of over or under payments was often a source of considerable psychological distress to claimants, particularly those who were already vulnerable. The application of UC to those who had a disability and single mothers had been found to be discriminatory.

Councillor Tidball concluded her introduction by saying that the Housing Benefit element should be taken out of UC so that it could be paid direct to landlords, as it had been hitherto. Ultimately UC should be withdrawn because of its impact on the vulnerable.

The Committee shared Councillor Tidball's view about the iniquity of UC and was appreciative of the team's work to mitigate its detrimental consequences to the extent that they can. They went on to raise a number of detailed matters to which the officers responded.

Eviction of any tenant sat uncomfortably alongside the Council's declared intention to reduce and, ultimately, have no rough sleeping in the City. In practice eviction was only ever a very last resort and the number evicted was very small. The team had to go through a lengthy and detailed process, which sought to take full account of a person's circumstances, the Homelessness Reduction Act and consultation with relevant support agencies. It was unusual for those who were evicted to have no alternative provision at all.

The irrecoverable sum of £900k cited in the report related to all debt write offs and not just those associated with UC. Those in receipt of UC were offered advice about maximising energy efficiency in their homes.

Discretionary Housing Payments are funded through an annual allocation of money by the Department of Work & Pensions to the Council. The Council is at liberty to devote more money to this purpose if it wishes and the Committee agreed that there would be

merit in moving to a needs based policy for its allocation in future. Many of those families in receipt of UC were affected by long term issues and while there would be merit in exploring connections with such things as health outcomes, school attendance and achievement etc., access to the necessary data was often difficult.

The fluctuating administrative burden caused by the introduction of UC was being weathered by the team, albeit at some financial cost. Looking to the future, greater levels of automation were being explored.

The process of recovering debt from those in receipt of UC was a delicate matter and one which sought to take full account of a debtor's circumstances, the Council's Financial Inclusion Strategy and the Corporate Debt Recovery Policy. All staff receive safeguarding training as financial hardship often leads to other concerns. This training was increasingly necessary given the anxieties and vulnerability of many of those in receipt of UC. Enforcement agents were only ever used as a last resort and for those who simply refuse to pay. A member of staff had been employed to support UC claimants to sustain their tenancies as far as possible.

It was now clear however that the Government was likely to address some of the issues which had been raised about the shortcomings of UC and was awaiting the outcome of a pilot in Harrogate before announcing the next steps. It was noted that the Government was still catching up with the consequences of recent case law in relation to UC, this was a further source of shifting ground rules about the application of UC.

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Customer Focused Services, had worked closely with the team over the previous year, looking at the administrative processes involved, and said it should be congratulated for all it had achieved in that time, meeting its target deadlines, while dealing with a complex set of arrangements.

In conclusion, the Committee recommended that there should be:

1. A review of the Council's Discretionary Housing Payments Policy from a needs-based perspective and consideration given to funding from general reserves any necessary top-ups beyond the committed total; and
2. A needs-based analysis to demonstrate the need for Discretionary Housing Payments above the committed total.

46. Workforce Equality Report & Update on the Equalities Action Plan

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Customer Focused Services, introduced the report. Good progress was being made in increasing the proportion of the Council's BAME employees. The number of BAME candidates is increasing and twice as many new starters are from the BAME community as in the recent past. Much more needed to be done, however, both to increase the proportion (so as provide a closer match to City's overall BAME community) and, more urgently, to increase the proportion holding senior positions. Similar efforts were needed to increase the proportion of women holding senior

positions. More employees were declaring themselves to have a disability. There was a significant lack of voluntary disclosure of sexual orientation (the voluntary nature of such disclosures was emphasised). These declarations assisted the Council in enabling it to respond more effectively to the workforce's need. The recent 'Everyone Matters' Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Week had been a success and created a "palpable sense of enthusiasm."

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement, said a "step change" was needed in relation to the employment of those from the BAME community and women in senior positions as described by Councillor Chapman. To do this there would be a focus on the existing BAME and female workforce, combined with some targeted recruitment of apprentices and graduates. Following the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Week, some employees had expressed interest in acting as ambassadors for recruitment to the Council. The Council's recruitment process was being looked at very closely. This included taking positive action at the interview stage and consideration of whether the person specifications were, on occasions, unnecessarily stringent. In relation to the absence of BAME and females in more senior positions, discussions would be held with those in post who might aspire to more senior roles to see what could be done to support their development.

Appointment Panels were as representative as possible and it was agreed that it was desirable to have adequate BAME representation on them but, regrettably, this was not always possible. For more senior positions in particular it was noted that other local institutions (eg the Universities) had been successful in recruiting members of the BAME community to senior positions and might be able to assist in the process, to the extent, perhaps, on occasions, of providing someone to serve on a panel. Exit interviews provided important intelligence to inform future recruitment and employment practices. The take up rate of exit interviews had increased to about 60%, helped by the new practice of having them conducted by HR colleagues rather than line managers. The majority of departures were accounted for by the need for career progression of one kind or another.

In discussion it was suggested that the increase in the proportion of BAME employees (1% over the previous year) was not enough and that the proportion cited (13.1%) was itself flawed because the total BAME population in the City was much greater than the base figure which had been used. In response it was noted that the base figure used was the latest confirmed figure available and that this figure referred, only, to the number who were economically active. A revised version of this figure would be available following the next census in 2 years' time. The importance of actively promoting the opportunities for work with the Council with the BAME community was recognised but there was concern that some associations and groups had not been contacted at all. Some members of the Committee would be able to assist with making those contacts. More generally, the Committee agreed that further job promotion workshops in the community would be helpful.

Councillor Chapman was clear that the efforts to increase the level of BAME representation were both considerable and having an impact, while still accepting that much more still needed to be done. He rejected any suggestion that these efforts were superficial 'tick box' ones.

The adoption of a proactive and affirmative approach to the recruitment of women and members of the BAME community to more senior positions was welcome and reflected similar issues in the NHS. The importance of training on the subject of structural discrimination for those on interview panels was crucial. Those who are not promoted are likely to leave and if this is the result of racism (whether intended or not) it is unlikely to be declared.

It was noted that those holding Civic Office had many opportunities to speak to wide and diverse groups in and around the City. This provided an excellent opportunity, with provision of suitable briefing, to promote job opportunities in the Council.

Oxford Direct Services (ODS) and its employees, as a separate legal entity, were not now included in these data. Councillor Chapman made clear however that the Council, in its role as Shareholder, would have similar expectations in terms of its wish to see take steps taken to establish a properly diverse and representative workforce. This would be open to Scrutiny by the Companies Panel.

In conclusion the Committee recommended that:

1. Consideration should be given to the suitability of the Council's current policy with regard to BAME and female representation on officer-led recruitment panels, with particular reference to the recruitment of heads of service;
2. When making appointments to Director and Head of Service level, the Council should be clear in its expectation to relevant recruitment agencies that shortlists should include women and BAME candidates;
3. All managers, particularly senior managers, should be given structural discrimination training;
4. Briefings on current outreach and employment opportunities should be provided to civic office holders, with details to include i) the support available to BAME groups to make applications to work at the Council, ii) upcoming job fairs and other events, and iii) upcoming apprenticeship and graduate placements;
5. The Council should extend the number of targeted BAME-focused careers fairs to reach different BAME communities;
6. Oxford Direct Services should be held to the same equality standards as the Council, and that it should make regular reports on actions taken towards and progress against equality goals to the shareholder;
7. The reasons for the high rate of non-disclosure over sexual orientation should be investigated, and consideration given as to whether, as part of that work, to engage with the Stonewall Workforce Equality Index; and
8. Before new census data are released, learning on which approaches are and are not successful in attracting BAME staff should be captured to inform recruitment strategies.

47. Oxford's waterways

Tim Wiseman, Oxford Waterways Coordinator, introduced the report. His post had been established a year previously in recognition of the complexity and wealth of benefits the waterways could offer the City. The post was temporary, due to end in September 2020. He was hopeful that the post would be extended to enable his initial work to be developed. A vision for Oxford's waterways had recently been published, identifying areas to deliver against the Council's priorities. A significant benefit of the vision had been its success in getting partners to sign up to its aspirations, so recognising their shared responsibilities. While the waterways touched specific parts of the City, he was keen to find ways in which they benefited the whole City. It was noticeable that few of the Council's policies made reference to the City's waterways.

Communications with those living on the waterways could be challenging, in part for historical reasons. He tried to develop a good relationship through, for example, small initiatives, such as dropping off letters to encourage people to vote or sign up with a GP.

The Committee congratulated Tim Wiseman for the significant improvement he had made to the Council's relationship with those who live on the City's waterways. Among the many initiatives, the potential development of biodiversity "corridors" and waterways as a sustainable transport option were particularly welcome.

There was wide acknowledgement of the potential offered by the waterways to contribute to the City's housing crisis. If and when new homes become available on the water, serious consideration will need to be given to how they will be allocated on an equitable basis. For those currently living on the water it was not without significant challenges (e.g. supply of fresh water; toilet emptying facilities; and refuse collection). Some city moorings (e.g. Port Meadow) needed considerable investment to bring them up to an acceptable standard. Little seemed to be made of the significant historical role played by the waterways in the history of Oxford which was a regret. The potential of waterways to serve as locations for social prescribing/health walking was noted.

Tim Wiseman concluded by saying he was happy to make himself available to any communities in the City to encourage them to make use of and engage with the waterways and would welcome requests from Councillors to that end.

In conclusion the Committee recommended that:

1. Where appropriate and relevant, council strategies and policies should reflect the contribution of the waterways to the city and that the review cycle be used to update those which are already in place. For example, the Local Plan, Infrastructure Delivery Plan, Housing and Homelessness Strategy, Green Spaces Strategy and Leisure Strategy.
2. The importance of the City's waterways should be recognised as an infrastructure asset, and there should be the requirement to support them through capital investment, alongside that of wider partners;
3. Given the limited understanding of the diverse communities living on boats in the City, there should be a study to get a better understanding of the number of people living permanently on boats in the City, the varying reasons for living on boats, the

provision of mooring sites and services and the suitability of existing infrastructure to support these communities;

4. Consideration should be given as to how the Council should best develop a policy position on the issue of boats used as housing and what roles the Council has, considering the following questions:
 - 1) Does Cabinet agree with the Scrutiny Committee that boats should be recognised and welcomed for the contribution they currently make to housing?
 - 2) Cabinet should consider the implications for the Council with regard its role as both a housing and planning authority, on wider policy and strategy matters and the role of our other partners.
 - 3) Are there sufficient mooring sites and service infrastructure and what is the Council's role in addressing any shortfalls?
 - 4) Is the infrastructure at current Council-owned sites sufficient?
 - 5) Are there opportunities for the Council to develop approaches to prioritise the allocation of moorings to those most in need?
5. Given that the City's waterways (particularly through their rich history and heritage) contribute to the visitor experience and provide a visitor attraction and a leisure asset, efforts should be made to maximise this potential. This may include the need for future investment to regenerate areas of the city and improve facilities;
6. There should be support for the use of the waterways as a health and wellbeing resource, supporting healthy communities. In particular, there should be support for efforts to explore how the waterways can contribute to social prescribing activity and other health initiatives such as health walks;
7. The contribution the waterways make to the natural environment of the City, providing habitat and biodiversity, should be acknowledged. As such, there should be support for improvement initiatives on the waterways which contribute to wider efforts to combat the climate crisis; and
8. There should be support for increased access and use of the waterways by all in the city, particularly as routes for sustainable alternative transport modes such as cycling and walking.

48. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 01 October 2019 as a true and accurate record.

49. Report back on recommendations

The Chair spoke briefly to the paper which detailed Cabinet's response to the Committee's most recent recommendations, the majority of which had been accepted in full. There were however a few concerns.

Floyds Row The recommendation had not sought to "seek information on illegal activities" as the response had suggested.

Modernising Leisure Concessions This "partially" agreed response had not given the number of over 60 year olds who would lose their existing discount.

Performance Monitoring The absence of any comment to the “agreed” recommendations failed to respond to the question posed in the first recommendation.

The Chair agreed to feed these observations back to Cabinet.

50. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer updated the Committee with changes to the work plan.

Draft Corporate Strategy 2020 – 2024, originally due in November, would now go to the December Committee meeting as a result of slippage in the Cabinet timetable.

Oxpens Lane Redevelopment would now go to the February meeting, as a result of slippage in the Cabinet timetable.

Climate Emergency /Carbon Management, originally scheduled for the March Committee meeting had since been superseded by the review group. The March meeting would therefore be an item to consider the group’s report.

Community Wealth Building will go to April Cabinet as a subset of an item on the Economic and City Centre Strategy and so will go to the April Committee meeting.

Property Investment Strategy & Portfolio Strategy report going to Cabinet in December will go the December Finance Panel meeting.

51. Dates of future meetings

Meetings are scheduled as followed:

Scrutiny Committee

- 03 December
- 14 January
- 04 February
- 03 March
- 06 April

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

Standing Panels

- Housing Standing Panel: 07 November, 05 March, 08 April
- Finance Standing Panel: 05 December, 06 January
- Companies Panel: 14 November, 12 March

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.45 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 17 December 2019