

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 6.00 PM ON TUESDAY, 11 DECEMBER 2012

COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, CROWMARSH
GIFFORD



Listening Learning Leading

Present

Mrs Eleanor Hards (Chairman)

Ms Joan Bland, Mrs Celia Collett, MBE, Mr Steve Connel, Mr John Cotton, Ms Kristina Crabbe, Mr Leo Docherty, Mr Will Hall, Mr Paul Harrison, Mr Stephen Harrod and Mr David Turner

Apologies:

Ms Elizabeth Hodgkin tendered apologies.

Officers

Mr Steve Bishop, Mr Paul Howden, Mr William Jacobs and Jennifer Thompson

Also present:

Mrs A Ducker, Leader of the Council.

Mr D Dodds, Cabinet member for finance, waste and parks.

Mr B Service, Cabinet member for leisure, grants and community safety.

18 Minutes, 30 October 2012

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 30 October 2012 as a correct record and agree that the Chairman sign these as such.

19 Council tax reduction scheme

The committee considered the report of the Head of Finance setting out a proposed council tax reduction scheme for 2013/14 for consideration by Council on 13 December 2012.

Mr D Dodds, Cabinet member, Mr P Howden, Revenues Client Manager, and Mr W Jacobs, Head of Finance, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee as follows:

- Government guidance had been received at a very late stage. The existing reduction scheme was workable, and the software to process claims was in place. As the scheme could be reviewed annually, it was deemed sensible by the county's authorities to retain the existing scheme for 2013/14 to ensure that the scheme did not have unforeseen consequences for recipients.
- It was not clear what changes would be made to government guidance in future years or whether the 10 per cent contribution required by local authorities would be increased.
- Under the current scheme, this authority bore the cost of the whole of the disregard for war widow's pensions but under the new scheme the cost would be shared across the three major precepting authorities (district, county councils and the police). It will also result in a reduced town/parish council's tax base which will result in an increase in the council tax they levy (all other things being equal) as the precept we pay them is fixed and council tax is calculated by dividing the precept by the council tax base.
- Council would consider an urgent report setting out options for giving parish councils certainty over their council tax base to allow them to set their precept and calculate the resulting council tax. The changeover from council tax benefits to localised council tax reductions reduces the tax base which reduces council tax revenue, causing authorities to increase council tax unless they can absorb the lost revenue.
- Take-up of council tax benefit is increasing in the district (benefit caseload in November 2012 is all all-time high for the district) but central government predicts a decrease in 2013. The two per cent increase predicted by officers was thought to be realistic but would be reviewed monthly.
- The impact on the council's finances was considered manageable in the short term. A strong emphasis on reducing fraud and overpayments reduced the impact; and reserves were adequate to cover the relatively small shortfall.
- The effect on the council's reserves and finances in the longer term and the financial impact on recipients would be considered when reviewing the scheme for 2014/15. All the Oxfordshire principal authorities would review and consult on their schemes in line with government guidance before agreement by individual councils in late 2013.

The committee noted the report and the answers to questions.

20 Council tax exemptions and discounts

The committee considered the report of the Head of Finance setting out a proposed scheme of council tax exemptions and discounts for 2013/14 for consideration by Council on 13 December 2012.

Mr D Dodds, Cabinet member, Mr P Howden, Revenues Client Manager, and Mr W Jacobs, Head of Finance, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee as follows:

- The scheme levied the maximum council tax permitted for each category under the current legislation. It was intended to indicate that the council strongly preferred houses to be in use not left empty.
- Officers inspected properties claiming exemption to ensure these were genuine cases and sanctions would be imposed on anyone fraudulently claiming a council tax reduction.

- Discounts were offered in cases where leniency was required such as where the property suffered damage, probate, or where the occupants were hospitalised or moved into care. There were a wide range of statutory exemptions as a result of specific circumstances in addition to the council's discount scheme.

Members of the committee discussed the options available to the council and noted the report and the answers to questions.

21 Board report - a graphical summary of the councils' performance to the end of October 2012

The committee considered a report showing the council's performance in key areas from April 2012 to October 2012.

Mr S Bishop, Strategic Director, answered questions as follows:

- The increase in people housed in bed and breakfast accommodation was due to several factors including a number of residents from one fire-damaged block having to be housed in the council's temporary housing. For a minority of single people with dependency problems, bed and breakfast may be the most appropriate option.
- The garden waste service was advertised and residents were still joining the scheme. The change to payment by direct debit would be complete by April 2013. The scheme should be self financing.
- Over the next year there would be more rigorous action taken against fly-tipping even if other factors mitigated against a reduction in the rate of fly-tipping.
- The council can use the income from income-generating services such as planning services and car parks to meet the costs of these services over a rolling period of, say, three to five years. Costs are not prescribed but can include indirect costs (such as IT) as well as capital costs (such as resurfacing and repairs) and direct costs. It was unlikely that the services would generate a surplus overall in the longer term.

Mr Bishop agreed to supply councillors with written answers to the following questions:

- Can the difference between the figures on page 20 and page 21 be clarified as it appears that the target for 2012/13 is 19 per cent but the council's policy is to seek 40 per cent affordable homes in larger developments?
- How many new residents have joined the garden waste service and how many have left during this financial year?
- Why was there a large increase in the otherwise very low level of debts owed for more than 30 days in August?

The committee noted the report.

The meeting closed at 7.00 pm

Chairman

Date