

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 7.00 PM ON TUESDAY 19 FEBRUARY 2013

COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, CROWMARSH
GIFFORD

Present

Mrs Eleanor Hards (Chairman)

Ms Joan Bland, Mr Steve Connel, Mr John Cotton, Mr Paul Harrison,
Mr David Turner, Ms Lynn Lloyd and Mrs Ann Midwinter.

Apologies:

Mrs Celia Collett, MBE, Ms Kristina Crabbe, Mrs Pat Dawe, Mr Leo Docherty,
Mr Will Hall, Mr Stephen Harrod and Ms Elizabeth Hodgkin tendered apologies.

Officers

Mr Simon Hewings, Mr William Jacobs, Mr Matt Prosser, Ms Lyn Scaplehorn,
Mr Paul Staines, Mrs Jennifer Thompson

Also present:

Ms Anna Badcock, Cabinet member for health and housing
Mr David Dodds, Cabinet member for finance, waste and parks
Mrs Ann Ducker, MBE, Leader of the Council

25 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 15
January 2012 as a correct record and to agree that the Chairman
sign them as such.

26 Revenue Budget 2013/14 and Capital Programme to 2017/18

The committee considered the report of the Head of Finance to Cabinet on 14
February 2013. Council would consider the report, the recommendations of Cabinet,
and any recommendations from this committee on 21 February 2013.

Mr D Dodds, Cabinet Member, Mr W Jacobs, Head of Finance, and Mr S Hewings,
Shared Accountancy Manager introduced the report, outlined the changes from the



Listening Learning Leading

report considered at the meeting of 15 January, and answered questions from the committee.

They reported that:

- There had been an error in the awarding of the grant for efficiency support for services in sparse areas (paragraph 15) and this had been withdrawn by the Department of Communities and Local Government on 5 February.
- The definition of 'larger villages' in capital project SELCAP7 was that used in the council's core strategy.
- Public art at Chinnor cement works (SELCAP14) was funded by developer contributions.
- Funds had been set aside under capital project SELCAP16 to improve broadband services should the opportunity arise.
- Mr Staines confirmed that the appointment of a lettings officer should provide sufficient staff to cope with the anticipated workload created by new legislation, but a bid for extra staff could be submitted if necessary.
- The district council's share of the council tax would continue to provide good value for money but the estimated amounts for future years were subject to change.
- There was a continued drive to reduce costs to close the expected gap in the council's finances by 2014/15.
- The charges for the garden waste service remained unchanged in 2013/14 but would be reviewed in the following years.

Councillors noted that:

- Under SELCAP15, ticket machines requiring registration numbers could cause delays at busy periods.
- The council's financial position was sound because of both good investments from the sale of council housing stock and good stewardship of those investments.

The committee noted that the budget would be considered by Council on 21 February and made no recommendations.

27 Corporate plan 2008-2012: final review of performance

With the agreement of the committee, the Chairman varied the order of the agenda to consider this item after the budget.

The committee considered the report of the Head of Corporate Strategy setting out the council's performance against its corporate plan 2008-2012.

Mrs A Ducker, Leader of the Council, drew the committee's attention to the council's achievements against the corporate plan objectives.

The committee noted and commented that:

- Although the council had not met the targets for new and new affordable houses, a larger number of houses should be completed in the next few years.
- Partnership working between the council and other agencies was still working well. Although the police were no longer supporting neighbourhood action groups, they were still involved productively in joint agency working with this council and other partners.

- The waste service's text message service had 17,000 subscribers. They would be encouraged to use the new Binfo app, which councillors noted had proved useful and user friendly.
- The council and other agencies had worked hard on flood prevention, and local flood prevention groups were proving effective. Communities should be encouraged to set up and get involved in their own groups.
- The council continued to support communities along the M40 in their lobbying of government and the highways agency to reduce noise from the motorway.
- Delivering the plan had produced worthwhile benefits for the district.

The committee noted the report and the good performance in delivering the corporate plan objectives.

28 Review of the Council's Housing Allocations Policy

The committee considered the report of the Head of Health and Housing setting out the proposed amendments to the housing allocations policy. The council was consulting on the amendments until 1 March 2013 and the final policy would be submitted to Cabinet for approval.

Mr P Staines, Head of Health and Housing, Ms L Scaplehorn, Shared Housing Needs Manager, and Ms A Badcock, Cabinet member, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee as follows:

- 'Permanent work' excluded temporary contracts and short-term work, but included probationary periods within a permanent contract.
- 'Within the district' was defined as strictly within the district boundaries. This was considered appropriate as it applied to only 20 per cent of lettings overall and helped drive economic growth within the district.
- 60 per cent of properties would be available to everyone on the register, but those with a strong local connection or in work in the district would have an increased priority when bidding for the 40 per cent of properties open to people meeting those criteria.
- Suspension from the register for refusing a reasonable offer of accommodation was appropriate, as an offer of a property was only made to an applicant who had submitted a formal bid for that particular property.
- The definition of 'sufficient financial resources' had yet to be decided.
- The policy did not duplicate requirements set down in legislation or regulation, such as the priority to be given to ex-servicemen.
- The policy should be transparent and easy to apply with the information required to assess each applicant's circumstances as easy and non-intrusive to gather as possible.
- The council's Social and Welfare Panel would look at how the new bedroom standards affected foster carers.
- People who were in categories excluded from the housing register were not necessarily homeless and would be expected to find housing in the private sector.
- There were no plans for a two-tier register but different priorities would be given to those with different housing needs.
- Mutual exchanges are a statutory right of tenants and the council has no control over these. Registered Providers can in exceptional cases overrule a mutual exchange.

- Numbers in nightly-paid accommodation were reducing. The budget considered by Council contained a bid to fund work on a business case for buying housing for emergency accommodation,

One councillor commented that Great Western Park in Didcot would provide affordable housing, but Science Vale UK outside the district was the major employment site for the area. There was a planned mismatch between housing provision and employment in the district which was not reflected in this policy.

The committee noted the report and the changes to the housing allocation policy, and asked that the comments and the questions raised be taken into consideration by officers.

29 Adoption of the Council's Tenancy Strategy

The committee considered the report of the Head of Health and Housing setting out the draft tenancy strategy. The council was consulting on the strategy until 1 March 2013 and the final policy would be submitted to Cabinet for approval.

Mr P Staines, Head of Health and Housing, and Ms A Badcock, Cabinet member, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee as follows:

- The strategy set out how the council would like to work with registered providers.
- The Department of Homes and Communities could be asked to intervene if there were serious concerns about the actions of a registered provider.
- The council had no control over the registered providers selected by developers to provide and manage affordable housing within a development.
- Grant funding for new houses was greatly reduced but the requirement to offer finance to bring forward affordable housing remained. The government's vision was that instead Registered Providers would have to borrow commercially against their asset base.
- The government were promoting right to buy and requiring councils and housing associations to give enhanced discounts.
- Tenancy reviews should be frequent enough to make best use of the stock but infrequent enough to allow tenants to settle. The cabinet member and officers considered that five years was a reasonable review period.
- Housing associations needed to work with people likely to be affected before the changes took effect and councillors could help to alert them to any tenants who needed help. Housing Services had a contract with the Citizens' Advice Bureau and could refer tenants to it for specialist money advice.
- The strategy asked Registered Providers to reflect upon the tensions between, and merits of, lower and higher percentages of market rent when setting rent levels taking into account issues of affordability for local people.

Councillors were concerned about the impact of the bedroom standards on disabled people who required an extra bedroom for overnight carers; those whose homes had been adapted; and those who would have to move away from established community support. Officers advised that Registered Providers needed time to find suitable solutions for disabled people affected by the bedroom standard. Tenants could apply for discretionary housing payments to cover short-term rent shortfalls. It was possible that social services may cover the extra rent required for overnight carers' rooms.

One councillor commented that social rents should be at a level that allowed tenants to be aware of the true level of market rents and to more easily bridge the gap between social and private rents as they moved into work.

There were mixed views on the merits of five or two year tenancy reviews. Lengths of residence did not necessarily correlate with community involvement. However, communities should not have an unnecessarily high level of turnover as a result of frequent tenancy reviews.

Councillors asked for:

- training, and advice to pass to residents, about the implications of the bedroom standard and the changes to rents and tenancies;
- the stock profile of SOHA housing and in particular the number of one-bedroom properties;
- that the results of the consultation be circulated to all councillors and discussed with the Chairman of Scrutiny.

The committee agreed that it wished to consider the final draft of the strategy after the consultation finished if significant changes were made and if the timetable for decision permitted.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm

Chairman

Date