

# Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

## Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 6.00 PM ON TUESDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2013

COUNCIL CHAMBER, SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL  
OFFICES

### Present:

Mrs Celia Collett, MBE (Chairman)

Ms Joan Bland, Mr John Cotton, Mrs Pat Dawe, Mr Will Hall, Mrs Eleanor Hards,  
Mr Paul Harrison, Ms Lynn Lloyd (as substitute for Ms Kristina Crabbe),  
Mr Alan Rooke and Mr David Turner

### Apologies:

Ms Kristina Crabbe, Ms Elizabeth Hodgkin and Mrs Margaret Turner tendered  
apologies.

### Officers:

Mrs Karen Brown, Mrs Liz Hayden, Mr Paul Howden, Mr William Jacobs,  
Mr Matt Prosser, Mr Paul Staines and Mrs Jennifer Thompson

### Also present:

Ms Anna Badcock, Cabinet member for health and housing  
Mr David Dodds, Cabinet member for finance, waste and parks  
Mr Bill Service, Cabinet member for community safety, leisure, and grants.

For Minute 17

Mr Tom Fox, Director of South and Vale Citizens' Advice Bureau  
Ms Maureen Adams, South Oxfordshire Housing Association

For Minute 18

Chief Inspector Elaine Axe representing the South and Vale Community Safety  
Partnership

### 15 Declaration of disclosable pecuniary interest

None.



Listening Learning Leading

## **16 Minutes**

**RESOLVED:** to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 2 October 2013 as a correct record and to agree that the Chairman sign them as such.

## **17 The local impact of recent welfare reforms**

The committee heard a presentation and answers to questions on the impact of the recent welfare reforms on residents of the district. Ms Anna Badcock, Cabinet member; Mr Paul Staines, Head of Health and Housing; Mr Paul Howden, Revenues and Benefits Client Manager; Mr Tom Fox, Director of South and Vale Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB); and Ms Maureen Adams, representing South Oxfordshire Housing Association (SOHA) spoke to the committee.

The main points of the discussion are summarised below.

### **Benefits changes**

1. The £26,000 cap on total benefits affected a small number of tenants (around 50) significantly. The average reduction in benefits per household was £2,000 over the year, and a £99,000 reduction in the total benefit bill for the district. The cap applied to the total of all benefits not just housing benefit.
2. The spare room subsidy affected about 400 housing association tenants; 312 had a 14% reduction and 92 had a 25% reduction in housing benefit (HB). The average reduction was about £1,000 per household and could be a significant cut in already low incomes.
3. All the people discussed received other benefits as well. The CAB saw a small increase in clients but not the significant increase in debt or benefits enquiries that they had been expecting.
4. However, foodbank vouchers issued in Didcot had increased by 30% and by 100% in Thame, often because income support had stopped or not yet started. Unemployment had fallen. While awareness of foodbanks had increased, people had to be referred by the same agencies who had made referrals since the banks opened.
5. The main changes affecting clients were in the main income supporting benefits. The DWP seemed to be under increasing pressure and delays in payment, sanctions, and claims for maladministration were all more frequent.

### **Housing stock and transfers**

6. 34% (about 1700 properties) of SOHA's stock was under-occupied, but 60% of these (about 1000 properties) were occupied by pensioners who were exempt from the spare room subsidy reduction.
7. The committee were advised that the over-60s had less financial incentive to move from a family home. The majority of households were under-occupied by one bedroom and there were too few suitable two-bed houses available. New affordable housing would include two-bedroom properties to address this

shortage. There were also too few one-bedroom houses and a shortage of all types of social housing.

8. SOHA had a relocation budget; helped with finding employment and budgeting; and facilitated transfers via the housing register.
9. Those under-occupying and wishing to transfer were given the highest priority. This had an effect on others on the waiting list as their ability to bid for houses was reduced because of the increased activity.
10. SOHA had contacted all affected tenants before the changes came in and discussed their options. There was strong interest in exchanges and transfers but it was difficult for people in rural areas to move because of the disruption to schooling and family life. Moving a few streets was easy; moving a few villages was expensive and disruptive. SOHA confirmed that information on taking in lodgers was available and they helped with applications for DHP. Most tenants who could feasibly move were doing so; some decided not to. Ms Adams emphasised that there was a difference between those who would not and those who could not move and their approach needed to be tailored in this context.
11. There were limited properties available to move to, especially if there was a restricted choice of location. SOHA were working to match tenants and suitable houses within communities but the lack of availability was causing difficulties. They tried to dissuade tenants from swapping from one too-large house to another, although there was less control over mutual swaps.
12. The committee asked about reducing rents. Ms Adams confirmed that to reduce rents for all affected tenants, SOHA would have to rewrite their business plan and renegotiate terms with the government. However there were discretionary powers to reduce rents in specific cases, and therefore each case was assessed individually. While SOHA had to follow their policy on arrears, they were considering action carefully, and to date no-one had been taken to court over arrears solely as a result of the spare room subsidy.
13. Arrears had to date increased by 2.5% over last year and about £20,000 due to the spare room subsidy changes, and were expected to rise.

### **Discretionary housing payments (DHPs)**

14. Discretionary housing award budget for 2013 had been doubled to £122,000. The council could add to this if it was required. Cabinet had agreed revised award criteria in March 2013. There was an increased demand but this appeared to be levelling off within the budget, although applicants who had not been able to move yet may ask for a further six-month award. About half of all applications were given an award.
15. Council officers worked with the registered providers when making DHP awards and assessed each case carefully on its merits in line with the council's policy.
16. The CAB helped people with DHP applications and considered these were fairly awarded by the council. In some cases a six-month award was not enough time to allow people to make changes, and it could take 10 months for a benefits appeal

to be heard. SOHA anticipated individuals' rent arrears rising when their DHP awards ceased.

### **Other points**

17. Mr Howden chaired the registered providers' forum where these problems could be discussed. The council worked closely with providers to prevent homelessness and seek solutions, with a 90% success rate to date.
18. SOHA expressed a view that universal credit was likely to cause more significant problems as tenants may not pay rent at all and direct payments were difficult and took longer to set up. The pilots showed high numbers running up rent arrears. SOHA was beginning work with their tenants, and the CAB had a role to play in offering budgeting education.
19. Cabinet members were concerned with the impacts of welfare reforms and housing changes on residents and have informally discussed how to manage these.

### **Councillor's comments and requests for information**

- There were positive impacts – for example people in overcrowded housing were able to move to more suitable houses and the limited housing stock could be better used.
- Policies should be designed to help and be fair to all sections of the population not just penalise one group of people.
- Could SOHA provide information as to the total number and value of discretionary rent reductions resulting from the welfare reforms?
- Could Housing quantify the shortfall in two-bedroom and one-bedroom houses across the district?
- Was there evidence that time taken by the DWP to pay income-related benefits had increased?

The committee thanked all the speakers for their presentations and answers to questions, and for giving their time to attend the meeting.

The committee requested a further update in six months and regular updates thereafter.

## **18 Community safety annual plan - 2012/13 review**

The committee considered the South and Vale Community Safety Partnership (CSP) 2012/13 annual report.

Mr Bill Service, Cabinet member and current chairman of the CSP; Chief Inspector Elaine Axe representing the CSP; Mrs Liz Hayden; Mrs Karen Brown, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee.

The main points were:

1. The partnership met quarterly and allocated funding and agreed projects.
2. It was hard to make predictions and plans as long-term funding was not certain. All funding for the community safety team was from the Police and Crime

Commissioner's (PCC) budget via the Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership (OSCP); South Oxfordshire District Council contributed no other funding. The council funded six police community support officers from a different budget.

3. The majority of fixed costs were for staff as many projects could be run at low cost provided staff time was available.
4. Additional or replacement funding from this council would be a matter for the ruling group to propose and Council to agree.
5. The underspend was from a one-off grant which had been retained due to the uncertainty in funding after the election of the PCC to allow the team to continue working in 2013/14 in the event of no PCC budget allocation. The money had now been allocated to projects. There would be a reducing carry-forward from 2014/15 onwards.
6. Services such as Didcot TRAIN and the county council youth hubs were valuable. The CSP considered that the hubs should be funded via the county council to give more continuity and allow the CSP's limited funds to be used for projects and wider community safety work.
7. The Oxfordshire district councils were working together to procure services as a group.
8. Solving anti-social behaviour caused by families or groups involved splitting up groups and relocating families; finding ways to solve the root causes of the problems; and dealing with people over a period of time. The partnership had got better at dealing with repeated and sustained anti-social behaviour but solutions took time.
9. The time shown to make contact with victims of domestic violence was the time from the initial contact to the first face to face meeting. Before this there would be support via the helpline and telephone, although the timescales were unsatisfactorily long.
10. Quantifiable targets were not always meaningful in this work, although they were used where relevant or for specific projects. The PCC's focus on rural crime had been included in the CSP plan. The over-riding target was to deliver the PCC's plan; then to monitor and respond to developing trends.
11. The designated public places order in Henley on Thames helped officers to reduce violent disorder by moving people on earlier and was an important power to retain.

Councillors commented:

- the JTAC group's joint approach had proved very effective in solving a complex situation in her ward;
- that in respect of Regatta week it may be worth reviewing whether the powers under the designated public places order in Henley on Thames were over-used; if disorder was increasing; and the order's effectiveness;
- that the partnership should press for the continued funding of the County Council hubs;
- the case studies were useful and showed that these good outcomes took time to achieve;
- the annual report highlighted good projects, good group working, and successes;
- the partnership was exemplary and the committee hoped necessary funding to continue was forthcoming.

and asked for:

- an updated budget report including an amended table on page 5 of the report to be circulated;
- information about the reason for the difference between South and Vale residents' perceptions on community cohesion (page 14 of the report).

The committee noted the South and Vale Community Partnership Annual Report for 2012/13 and the successes of the partnership.

The committee thanked Chief Inspector Axe, officers, and the Cabinet member for attending and speaking to the committee.

## **19 Distribution of council tax reduction scheme grant**

The committee considered the report of the Head of Finance setting out the options for distributing the council tax reduction scheme grant to town and parish councils and the feedback from these councils.

Mr W Jacobs, Head of Finance; Mr P Howden, Revenues and Benefits Client Manager; and Mr D Dodds, Cabinet member for Finance, introduced the report and answered questions.

- The council tax benefit scheme for individual households had been agreed in October 2013.
- Officer had held two briefings with parish councils to explain the proposals and ask for their views. While there was not a conclusive vote, the debates at both had favoured option 2 in the report as the method of distributing the council tax reduction scheme grant.
- Cabinet was recommending that Council maintain the principle of passing on the whole of the parishes' portion of the grant.
- There was a higher but not significant administrative cost in calculating the grants each year under option 2.
- The amount of the grant was not certain until the annual settlement was issued, but officers were fairly confident it would not change significantly.

Councillors debated:

- Whether it would be better to use the grant to reduce the district's council tax.
- Whether it was possible to obligate parishes to reduce their precept by the amount of the grant and pass the benefit to residents, rather than treating it as a windfall.
- The benefits of each option and which provided incentives to build houses.
- That the parishes' view as to the preferred option seemed clear.

The committee agreed to recommend that the Cabinet Member for Finance support Option 2 in the report for the distribution of the council tax reduction scheme grant.

The meeting closed at 8.20 pm

Chairman

Date