

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 6.00 PM ON TUESDAY 21 OCTOBER 2014

COUNCIL CHAMBER, SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
OFFICES

Present:

David Turner (Chairman)

Celia Collett, MBE, Steve Connel, Pat Dawe, Eleanor Hards, Paul Harrison, Alan Rooke and Margaret Turner

Apologies:

Joan Bland, Kristina Crabbe, Tony Harbour, Elizabeth Hodgkin and Imran Lokhon tendered apologies.

Officers:

Steve Bishop (Strategic Director), Andrew Down (Head of HR, IT and Technical Services), Phil Ealey (Housing Needs Manager), Susan Harbour (Democratic Services Team Leader), Paul Howden (Revenue and Benefits Client Manager), Ron Schrieber (Democratic Services Officer) and Simon Turner (IT Operations Manager).

Also present:

Tom Fox (Director, Oxfordshire South and Vale Citizens Advice Bureau)

39 Changes in Membership

The Committee was informed that, following the election of John Cotton as Leader of the Council and the appointment of his new Cabinet, Councillors Cotton and Will Hall had resigned as members of the committee and Tony Harbour and Imran Lokhon had been appointed in their place. Robert Simister had resigned as a substitute member.

40 Declaration of disclosable pecuniary interest

None.



Listening Learning Leading

41 Minutes of the previous meeting

Consideration of the minutes of the meeting on 16 September 2014 was deferred to the next meeting.

42 Welfare Reform Act 2012 - effect on South Oxfordshire residents

The committee considered the report of the Head of Finance which detailed the effect on local residents of the welfare reforms arising from the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

The officers reported that, to date, there had been no significant changes in the levels of homelessness as a consequence of the introduction of the “social sector size criteria” rules and the national “benefit cap” but that the situation would continue to be monitored closely.

Tom Fox, representing the South and Vale Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) commended the council on the way in which the legislative changes had been managed and confirmed that there was no evidence that the situation was worsening. However he expressed the view that the legislative changes, coupled with the roll out of Universal Credit, would have a cumulative detrimental effect on those struggling to survive on low pay and/or benefits. He reported that, following the closure of Oxfordshire County Council’s Support Fund in March 2014, the only options for those in need were charities or moneylenders. He offered to circulate a report from the Oxford Food Bank and asked Members to lobby the County Council to re-establish the Support Fund.

South Oxfordshire Housing Association (SOHA), the main social landlord in the SODC area, had been unable to send a representative to the meeting but had submitted an update which stated that, whilst most households affected by the welfare reforms wished to “pay and stay”, there had been a reduction in the number of people able to do so due to the pressure on limited budgets.

In response to questions, officers and Tom Fox reported that:

- Although the highest priority was given to anyone on the housing register downsizing by two or more bedrooms there had been relatively few such moves as, generally, residents wishing to downsize, wanted to stay within the locality or look for specific properties.
- There was a lack of information about the number of food banks in South Oxfordshire as there were many small, independent ones. However Thame, Henley, Didcot and Wallingford all had food banks.

- When Universal Credit was rolled out, self-employed claimants would be treated as earning a minimum income floor, regardless of their actual income. They would be expected to report their earnings monthly and there were concerns that some people might be discouraged from becoming self-employed.
- SOHA would be requested to provide further information regarding the number of tenants affected by the social sector size criteria rules and the number in arrears prior to the welfare reform changes.
- SOHA would be requested to confirm whether it encouraged tenants to take in lodgers.
- The SOHA Welfare Reform Project Officer was a new post.
- Council officers held regular meetings with Jobcentres, Registered Social Landlords neighbouring authorities and the CAB to monitor the situation.
- Once Universal Credit was rolled out, significant resources would need to be allocated to support tenants in receipt of direct payments to help them manage their budgets. The CAB was in discussions with SOHA in order to offer proactive support to tenants rather than wait until they got into debt.
- Any underspend in the Discretionary Housing Payment budget would have to be refunded to the Government and would affect allocation of this fund to the council in future years.
- The welfare reform changes resulted in a significant increase in calls to the benefits contact centre causing a deterioration in response times. It was not known how many calls would be made to the council rather than Jobcentres when Universal Credit was rolled out.

RESOLVED: to

- a) consider the effect of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 on South Oxfordshire's residents annually; and
- b) request that the housing allocations policy banding scheme be circulated to committee members.

43 IT Procurement

The committee considered the report of the Head of HR, IT and Technical Services which updated the committee on the progress of the information technology (IT) infrastructure project.

In response to questions, the officers reported that:

- Various locations had been considered for the data centre. A requirement was that it needed to be within a 90 minute drive from South Oxfordshire Council offices.

- It was anticipated that the move to a web-based email system would reduce the number of passwords required for access. However the security standards of the Public Services Network would need to be met.
- Members could continue to access the council intranet and email from their own equipment.
- The majority of staff would continue to use their desktop computers, whilst a minority would be issued with laptops or other suitable devices.
- Approximately 95% of the system could be run by the secondary data centre.
- The link was to the network service provider rather than direct to the data centre. A secondary circuit to Crowmarsh Gifford would be installed.
- Everything in the primary data centre would be replicated in the secondary centre to minimise the risk of data loss. Business continuity arrangements would still be needed in the event of a disaster.
- Approximately five to ten days of staff time were spent preparing specifications with several more days on evaluation.

It was agreed to ask the Economic Development Team to circulate an update on the roll out of superfast broadband.

44 Work Programme

An updated work programme was tabled.

Concerns were expressed about the amount of business, including the budget, scheduled for the February 2015 meeting. Members were advised that there would be a separate budget presentation once the Administration's proposals had been published at which questions could be asked and that this might reduce the amount of discussion at the Committee. However officers agreed to consider whether it would be possible to defer any of the other scheduled items to a later meeting.

The meeting closed at 7.40 pm

Chairman

Date