

# Minutes

of a meeting of the

## Scrutiny Committee

held on Thursday, 26 March 2015 at 7.00 pm

at the Lockinge, The Beacon, Portway, Wantage, OX12 9BY



**Open to the public, including the press**

### Present:

Members: Councillors Jim Halliday (Chairman), Charlotte Dickson (Vice-Chairman), Eric Batts, Tony de Vere, Debby Hallett, Mohinder Kainth, Sandy Lovatt, Julie Mayhew-Archer, Fiona Roper and Richard Webber

Officers: Steve Bishop, Paul Howden, Phil Ealey, Debbie McLatch, Anna Robinson and Ron Schrieber

Also present: Trevor Gaffney, Capita

Number of members of the public: 0

### **Sc.211 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from Councillors Jason Fiddaman and Alison Thomson.

### **Sc.212 Minutes**

The minutes of the meetings held on 18 December 2014 and 11 February 2015 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the chairman as such.

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2015 were agreed as a correct record, subject to the following amendments, and were signed by the chairman as such:

Minute 198, Abbey Meadow and Gardens: In the second paragraph, point 3., insert "features" after "natural".

Minute 199, Councillor Development Programme. In the second paragraph, penultimate sentence, insert "and buddy" after "mentor". Delete final sentence.

It was agreed to request officers:

- to provide a written response detailing which of the committee's suggestions on the Abbey Meadows and Gardens consultation had been accepted and which rejected.
- to circulate the revised draft councillor development programme to Scrutiny Committee members.

## **Sc.213      Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **Sc.214      Urgent business and chairman's announcements**

The Chairman made the following announcements:

- The next meeting of the Councillor Induction and Development Project Board would be held on 30 March at 10am. Councillor Debby Hallett would be attending but any other Councillors would be welcome.
- He had agreed with officers that, rather than having an item on the performance of housing associations on a future agenda, Sovereign Housing Association should be invited to Scrutiny Committee to discuss their working arrangements with the council. The Strategic Director read out the draft letter of invitation to the Chief Executive of Sovereign. The committee agreed this approach and requested that the letter be copied to the Vale's M.P.s for information.

## **Sc.215      Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee**

None.

## **Sc.216      Action List**

Noted.

As no Scrutiny Committee members had been able to attend the demonstration of cameras on bin lorries, the Committee requested that a further demonstration be arranged.

## **Sc.217      Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2014/15 - the effects to date**

The committee considered the head of finance's report on the effect of the 2014/15 council tax reduction scheme (CTRS) on council taxpayers.

In response to members' questions, the committee was informed that:

- To help counter the reduction in government grant following the introduction of the CTRS, the council had introduced additional council tax rates for empty properties and second homes. In 2014/15 the number of properties empty for more than two years had reduced by 30%.
- The additional administration costs of the scheme amounted to £43,600, with £10,200 of this figure being funded by the County Council and Thames Valley Police. However, by reducing claimants' entitlements net savings were currently estimated at approximately £155,005 (to be apportioned between the council, the county council and the police and crime commissioner (Thames Valley). In addition, the CTRS caseload had reduced significantly contributing to an estimated £140,000 surplus in the council tax collection fund (also to be apportioned).
- A discretionary hardship fund of £22,000 had been established. By the end of February 2015, only 20 applications had been received with 13 awards being made at a total cost of £882.12. This compared with 515 CTRS cases which were subject to legal action.

Whilst the committee recognised that an award from the discretionary fund would not, of itself, solve the problems which had led to individuals failing to meet their council tax liabilities, it did express concern about the low number of applications and asked if more could be done to publicise its existence.

## **RESOLVED:**

- a) That the report be noted and a further update be submitted to the committee in April 2016.
- b) That the equalities officer be requested to review the operation of the discretionary hardship fund.
- c) That copies of sample correspondence be circulated to committee members.

## **Sc.218 Draft Homelessness Strategy 2015-2020**

The committee considered the head of development and housing's report on the objectives and key actions of the draft homelessness strategy 2015-2020 prior to it being sent out for consultation.

In response to members' questions, the committee was informed that:

- Contrary to what was stated in the report, the consultation exercise would begin as soon as possible.
- The consultation period was four weeks after which responses would be collated and published. It was anticipated that the draft strategy would be submitted to Cabinet for final approval in June.
- Whilst homelessness had increased nationally by 6% in 2014/15, the number of new statutory homeless households had reduced in Vale of White Horse District Council from 63 in 2013/14 to 38 in 2014/15. This was, in part, due to the work of the social lettings team which had built up a network of private sector landlords willing to provide accommodation for those in housing need.
- Approximately 40 - 60 households were joining the housing register each week. However, the majority of these were in priority band 4 as they were considered to be reasonably housed.
- The introduction of Universal Credit, with rent being paid directly to tenants, was likely to be a challenge to homelessness prevention. However, alternative payment arrangements could be made so that landlords continued to be paid directly.
- Whilst the summary of key actions in the report did not indicate timescales and the officer(s) responsible, this was set out in the draft strategy's action plan.

The committee congratulated the officers on the report.

## **RESOLVED:**

- a) That the objectives and key actions of the draft homelessness strategy 2015-2020 be noted.
- b) That the draft strategy's action plan be circulated to committee members.
- c) That a review of the first year of operation of the homelessness strategy 2015-2020 be submitted to the committee in September 2016.

## **Sc.219 Corporate Services Project - inter council agreement**

The committee considered the strategic director's report which set out the draft inter-council agreement for the corporate services project.

It was noted that, revenues and benefits counter fraud had been included in the list of services for market testing, contrary to the information in Schedule 1 to the report.

In response to members' questions, the committee was informed that:

- As of 20 March, there had been 143 expressions of interest from suppliers.
- The partner councils were required to commit to the project by 31 March.
- A bidders' day would be held on 1 April.
- There were two draft agreements; one relating to procurement which would run for one year and the other relating to the corporate services contract(s) which had a minimum duration of nine years and two months.
- There would be three stages to the tender evaluation process and, at each stage, a weighting of 60% would be given to quality.

Members stressed that they were clients of many of the services being market tested and requested that their requirements were taken into account in the drafting of service level agreements and performance standards.

Members pointed out a number of typing errors in the draft agreements. The strategic director requested that he receive any further comments/corrections by 30 March.

**RESOLVED:** that the report be noted.

## **Sc.220 Indicative Scrutiny work programme**

Noted, subject to the inclusion of items agreed at this meeting.

The meeting closed at 9.25 pm