

# Minutes

of a meeting of the

## Scrutiny Committee

held at 7.00pm on Thursday 24 May 2012

at the Abbey House, Abingdon



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

### Present:

Members: Councillors Jim Halliday (Chairman), Melinda Tilley (Vice-Chair), Andrew Crawford, Jane Crossley, Charlotte Dickson, Jason Fiddaman, Angela Lawrence, Julie Mayhew-Archer, and Fiona Roper

Substitute members: Councillor Mike Badcock (in place of Councillor Eric Batts), Councillor Helen Pighills (in place of Councillor Tony de Vere), and Councillor Robert Sharp (in place of Councillor Bill Jones)

Non-participating members: Councillors Matthew Barber, Dudley Hoddinott, and Richard Webber

Officers: Jayne Bolton, Steve Culliford, Susan Harbour, Clare Kingston, Anna Robinson, Emma Morris, Lyn Scaplehorn, Paul Staines, and Sally Truman

Number of members of the public: Nil

### **Sc.1 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence**

Councillors Eric Batts, Tony de Vere, and Bill Jones had sent their apologies for absence and had appointed substitute Councillors Mike Badcock, Helen Pighills, and Robert Sharp respectively.

### **Sc.2 Minutes**

**RESOLVED:** To adopt the minutes of the committee meeting held on 22 March 2012 as a correct record and agree that the chairman signs them.

### **Sc.3 Declarations of interest**

None

### **Sc.4 Urgent business and chairman's announcements**

The chairman reported that the election task group set up by the committee in 2011 would be reporting back shortly.

## **Sc.5 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee**

Councillor Dudley Hoddinott had given notice that he wished to ask two questions: one on the capital community grants scheme and the other on the board report. These were considered later in the meeting and are recorded with the relevant minute item.

## **Sc.6 Staff satisfaction**

The committee received the presentation slides on the October 2011 staff satisfaction survey results. The committee noted that staff from the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire districts had been surveyed jointly. The committee considered that there should have been separate survey results for this council as South Oxfordshire's results were not relevant to this council. The committee noted that the reason for carrying out a joint survey was that most staff were shared between the two councils. They had the same managers and the same working terms and conditions and most individuals worked for both councils. There was also an objection to the joint South and Vale logo used in the presentation slides; they were separate council and should be recognised as such with their official separate logos. The officers agreed to feed these points back to the chief executive for review before the next staff survey.

The committee noted that it was not compulsory for staff to complete this anonymous survey as this might lead to a more negative result. The results showed more staff dissatisfaction in the planning service. Management team was investigating the reasons behind this and were involving the planning staff in a project to identify their main concerns and the actions that could be taken to address these. The strategic director was asked to circulate a note to committee members before the next committee meeting providing more detail on this.

Councillors noted that the October 2011 survey was carried out by a consultant survey specialist, surveying public sector organisations. In previous years, the survey had been for councils only. The cost of the survey included benchmarking with other public sector organisations. The committee queried the benefit the council gained from the extra cost of benchmarking with other public sector organisations outside local government. The committee asked management team to consider whether the council should continue this benchmarking in future years. However, the committee recognised the benefit of having year on year benchmarking information for this council.

### **RESOLVED: To**

- (a) note the results of the October 2011 staff survey and request that the results of the next survey show staff working for this council only; and
- (b) request the strategic director to circulate a paper before the next committee meeting identifying the actions being taken to address the low satisfaction levels within the planning service.

## Sc.7 Housing allocations policy

The committee considered the head of health and housing's report on the council's housing allocation policy. The government had published for consultation a revised draft code of guidance on the allocation of affordable homes. This would become statutory advice to councils on their housing allocation policies. The report set out the council's response to the consultation that had been submitted by the March 2012 deadline.

As background information, the report also summarised the existing housing service provided by the council. The committee welcomed this and asked questions for clarification. The committee noted that currently, the council had to accept all applicants to the housing register (the waiting list), even if they had no local connection. The council had a choice-based letting scheme, which allowed people more choice over where they would like to live, compared to the previous scheme where people had no choice of property, and had to accept what they were offered. Following a request from a councillor, the head of service agreed to supply information about the numbers and categories of people on the housing list and the housing stock and turnover.

The committee noted the council's response to the government's draft revised code of guidance but suggested that in future, instead of a joint response with South Oxfordshire District Council, separate responses might carry greater weight, even if they were the same.

The committee noted that the Localism Act had given councils a greater degree of discretion to exclude some people from their housing registers, such as:

- Owner/occupiers who owned a property outright, unless there were exceptional reasons to allow their application
- People who had the financial capacity to solve their own housing needs
- People who did not have a local connection with the district (i.e. did not live or work in the district), unless there were exceptional reasons to allow their application

Following another request from a councillor, the head of service agreed to supply information on the guidance the council followed when assessing a person's financial capacity.

The draft code of guidance gave councils discretion on how they prioritised applications. The code had suggested giving enhanced priority to armed forces personnel if they were in urgent housing need. However, the committee noted that the council already gave priority through the Oxfordshire Armed Forces Covenant.

The draft code also gave councils discretion on giving additional priority to people in work or looking for work that contributed to the community. However, officers wished to see the final code of guidance before recommending any change to the policy on this issue and on giving enhanced priority to armed forces personnel. Councillors asked that these issues were brought back to the committee for reconsideration at a later date; the head of service agreed.

The committee noted that the council's existing policy already gave greater priority to under-occupation and overcrowding cases. This had also been suggested in the draft revised code.

In answer to a question from a committee member, the officer reported that it might be possible through the national planning policy framework to allow some private housing development in rural exception sites if this resulted in the scheme proceeding, thereby providing some affordable housing for local people. The officers would have to explore this possibility.

The committee noted that Cabinet had opted for 20 per cent of new affordable housing to be allocated to local people. However, this percentage would be kept under close review. Applicants would be made aware that a local connection was not an absolute guarantee of obtaining affordable housing in their town or village.

The committee supported the proposals set out in the report, particularly the ability of the council to exclude applicants who had no local connection. However, the committee considered that there should be a clear definition of 'local connection'.

**RESOLVED:** To advise Cabinet that the Scrutiny Committee:

- (a) notes the intention to make no changes to the housing allocation policy priority given to former armed forces personnel, and persons in work or seeking work that contributes to the community, until either the code of guidance or revised statute is published, but following publication, the officer proposals on these issues be brought back to the committee for further consideration;
- (b) supports the proposals to amend the housing allocation policy to allow the following exceptions from the housing register:
  - Owner/occupiers who own a property outright, unless there are exceptional reasons to allow their application
  - People who have the financial capacity to solve their own housing needs
  - People who do not have a local connection with the district (i.e. living or working in the district), unless there are exceptional reasons to allow their application
- (c) agrees with the proposal to amend the housing allocations policy so that for any new developments in the district, up to 20 per cent of the allocations be ring-fenced in the first instance to people from that parish or falling within adjoining parishes but accepts that this needs to be kept under review.

## **Sc.8 Capital community grants**

The committee considered the head of corporate strategy's report on a new capital community grants scheme. The committee was asked for its views on the new scheme ahead of Cabinet considering the same report on 1 June.

Before it did so, the committee heard a question from Councillor Dudley Hoddinott. He asked how the cost of capital projects would be broken down when the largest component was often labour? The officers reported that the whole capital cost of a project, including labour, would be considered as capital expenditure when determining each application.

The committee noted that this was a new scheme, offering grants to constituted community groups for capital schemes. The scheme did not offer grants to cover running costs, i.e. revenue costs. However, the committee noted that a small budget would be

available for some revenue grants through a separate scheme, the details of which had yet to be determined.

The committee made the following suggestions:

- The council should provide examples of capital projects that might be successful under the new scheme as the public might not be aware of the difference between capital and revenue expenditure in local government terms
- The council should inform applicants that there would be a separate revenue grants scheme at a later date
- Applications should be allowed from charitable bodies and community interest companies
- Area committees should consider the grant applications. (One councillor suggested an alternative to the area committees distributing grants funds, believing that councillors should each have an amount to spend on projects in their ward as they thought fit. However, this suggestion did not receive the committee's support, as this would result in each councillor having a very small budget. The committee considered that it would be better to pool resources and determine grants collectively through area committees.)
- Area committees could initiate their own schemes. The committee considered that these schemes must be subject to a formal agreement for ownership, liability and future maintenance, for example, perhaps through the formal involvement of a third party
- The scheme eligibility criteria needed clarification on the difference between items such as repairs, maintenance, and professional fees, which were not normally eligible for capital grants, and refurbishment, which might be
- Each applicant should always obtain support of their parish or town council, and ideally an appropriate financial contribution
- Where an area committee was in support of a scheme that had not met all of the criteria (e.g. had yet to obtain planning permission or achieve parish/town council support), the committee should delegate approval of a grant, subject to the criteria/conditions being met. Authority should be delegated to the strategic director/head of service, following consultation with the relevant area committee chairman
- The scheme eligibility criteria should be amended to read 'applications will **normally** be considered if organisations/projects meet the following eligibility criteria...'
- The committee strongly preferred budget allocation option 2: funds to be allocated to area committees on a per councillor basis (10 votes), over option 3 (2 votes) and option 1 (no votes)
- The councillor numbers for each area should not be shown as actual councillor places on each committee as the Hanneys and Longworth wards were split between two areas. The councillor numbers should be amended to read: Abingdon 16, North East 11.5, South East 15, West 8.5
- Where an area committee does not spend its capital grants budget during a year, this should be carried forward to the following year, if capital accounting rules allow

Finally, the committee asked to review the detailed guidance to applicants for this scheme, either at the next Scrutiny Committee meeting or by other means before the guidance was published.

**RESOLVED:** To

- (a) recommend Cabinet to consider the suggestions in the above bullet points before approving the new capital community grants scheme; and
- (b) request that the Scrutiny Committee be given an opportunity to review the detailed guidance for this scheme before the guidance is published.

## **Sc.9 Continuation of meeting**

**RESOLVED:** To continue the meeting for up to a further 30 minutes to complete the remaining business.

## **Sc.10 Board report**

The committee had previously agreed to consider the board report each quarter and determine whether to invite any heads of service to a subsequent committee meeting to explain performance. To this end, the committee considered the board report dated March 2012.

However, before doing so, the committee received a question from Councillor Dudley Hoddinott. He asked 'how could the leadership assure him that the number of affordable houses could be sufficiently boosted to give the 1000 plus people in real housing need a realistic opportunity of having a home of their own, since the number of people in real housing need was 16 times the number of affordable houses built last year?'. The chairman asked that this question was referred to the head of health and housing outside of this meeting and that a reply was circulated to Councillor Hoddinott and committee members.

The committee noted that the board report contained key performance indicators identified by management team or the Cabinets at both this council and South Oxfordshire District Council.

In answer to a question from a councillor, the committee noted that the council's performance in determining planning applications and the percentage of planning appeals dismissed had both dropped due to reduced staffing levels and the implementation of a new IT system. The latter meant the officers had not been able register any new planning applications for several weeks and would need a few more weeks' work to catch up. This meant performance for the year would be below the norm. Management team was looking at adopting lower performance targets for the planning service. The committee agreed to review the planning service's performance again when it considered the next board report.

**RESOLVED:** To

- (a) note the board report dated March 2012, and agree to review performance of the planning service again in the next board report; and
- (b) request the head of health and housing to provide a reply to Councillor Hoddinott's question and circulated it to committee members also.

## **Sc.11 Scrutiny work programme**

The committee reviewed its work programme for 2012/13. With regard to the review of the council's website, the committee recalled that it had previously appointed Councillors Jane Crossley and Jim Halliday to carry out the review and report to the committee in due course. The chairman referred to a survey he had sent to councillors and urged them to feedback views on the council's website.

## **Sc.12 Dates of meetings**

The committee noted the dates of its forthcoming meetings:

- 28 June 2012
- 26 July
- 23 August
- 20 September

In each case these were Thursdays at 7pm.

## **Exempt information under section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972**

None

The meeting closed at 9.41 pm