

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday, 11th December,
2012

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Juliet Brunner (Chair), Councillor Simon Chalk (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Andrew Brazier, David Bush, John Fisher, Andrew Fry, Pattie Hill, Gay Hopkins, Pat Witherspoon, Roger Bennett, Michael Braley and Carole Gandy

Also Present:

Councillors Roger Bennett, Michael Braley and Carole Gandy.

Officers:

C Felton, T Kristunas and J Staniland

Committee Services Officer:

J Bayley and M Craggs

EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES – MINUTE 113 **109. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES**

There were no apologies for absence.

110. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any party whip.

111. MINUTES

The Committee noted that at the previous meeting Members had discussed the appropriate level of detail to include in minutes of a Committee meeting and it had been suggested that further detail could have been added to the minutes of the meeting held on 9th October 2012. However, Officers were not required to take a verbatim record of proceedings and it had been concluded that no additional detail could be added to this set of minutes.

Officers suggested that in future if it was considered to be appropriate to minute a particular item of the Committee's debate in

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Chair

detail a specific request to this effect should be made by Members during the meeting.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 6th November 2012 be approved as a true and correct record of the meeting and signed by the Chair.

112. QUARTERLY BUDGET MONITORING REPORT - QUARTER 2 - JULY - SEPTEMBER 2012

Officers provided an overview of the report which detailed the Council's financial position for the period April to September 2012.

Members sought clarification on a number of figures contained within the report and related issues, including the present arrangements for receiving Section 106 income, and what was being done to reduce the number of empty industrial units within the Borough. Officers explained that efforts were continuing to be made to attract new tenants to empty properties. However, the prevalence of vacant properties was reflective of difficult economic times and was not an issue restricted to Redditch. It was agreed that additional information on this subject should be presented for the consideration of the committee in due course.

Having noted the capital budget figures for the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Members requested an update on the introduction of more informal games opportunities in open spaces across the Borough, especially the installation of table tennis tables, as recommended by the Promoting Sporting Participation Task and Finish Group.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

113. CONCESSIONARY RENTS - PRE-SCRUTINY SHORT, SHARP REVIEW

Before Members considered the final report of the Pre-Scrutiny Short, Sharp Review, Officers delivered a presentation on the Council's draft new policy for granting concessionary rents to voluntary sector organisations (VSOs). This explained that a policy was being introduced to ensure that the Council's approach to offering rent relief to VSOs was fair, transparent, equitable, and consistent.

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It was anticipated that the introduction of the new policy would accelerate the process for suitable VSOs to obtain grants. Members heard that VSOs would be able to apply for rent concessions up to a 70 per cent ceiling if they met certain criteria. Applications for concessionary rents would need to be submitted via the Council's Grants Panel which would then make recommendations to relevant Officers to make a final decision on whether rent relief was appropriate. VSOs were not necessarily required to submit full business cases unless they were appealing for a concession in excess of the 70 per cent ceiling.

Concern was expressed that the issue of rent reliefs could give some VSOs an unfair competitive advantage within in the Borough as costs would be reduced. Officers explained that the Council would mitigate this by not allowing two competing businesses to be positioned in the same Council owned business centre.

The Committee then received a summary of the final report of the pre-scrutiny review which was undertaken by Councillors Brunner and Brazier. Members were referred to the eight recommendations within the report and were provided with a rationale for each proposal.

The Councillors on the pre-scrutiny review commented that all VSOs should be required to provide a business case to explain why they were applicable to receive rent relief. It was thought that this would be beneficial to all parties involved, as it would strengthen the applications that were made. It could also give VSOs at the outset of the process a much clearer idea of whether they should proceed with an application.

It was also suggested that VSOs should be able to apply for five year leases rather than be restricted to a three year lease as proposed within the new policy. This would make some applications more viable for the VSO involved. However, on the other hand it was noted that other VSOs would not require a lease for a five year period.

The pre-scrutiny review had referred to a charitable organisation that provided comprehensive advice to VSOs on property issues. It had been suggested that the expertise held by the organisation could be utilised at a minimal cost to strengthen the overall concessionary rents process. However, while the principle behind the recommendation was accepted, concern was raised that the Council should not necessarily endorse any specific independent organisation without further examination of its operations. It was

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therefore agreed that the recommendation should be made more generic so that assistance could be obtained from a wider field of independent organisations.

The Committee felt that communicating the new policy effectively was extremely important, especially to VSOs that currently did not pay any rent at all on Council owned property. Members were generally supportive of the recommendation that workshops be held to promote and publicise the policy, although concerns were expressed about the potential costs involved.

There was general support amongst the Committee that a review should be undertaken of the new policy after its inception. However, the appropriate timeframes for this review were debated and it was suggested that the Council could monitor the policy on a more regular basis.

Finally, Members commented that the final recommendation within the pre-scrutiny report was superfluous as it was essentially covered by the first recommendation. Councillors Brunner and Brazier accepted the suggestion.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1) the Draft Policy attached at Appendix 1 to the report be approved, and implemented with immediate effect for new tenancies, subject to the further recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee being approved (as listed below in recommendations 4 to 10);**
- 2) transitional arrangements be introduced with effect from 1st April 2013 to allow the policy to be fully implemented over a three year period taking into account the terms of existing leases;**
- 3) authority be delegated to the Head of Finance and Resources in conjunction with the Council's Voluntary Sector Grants Co-ordinator to approve concessionary rents/rent relief in line with the draft policy attached at Appendix 1 to the report;**
- 4) that any Council policy on concessionary rents ensure that a consistent, fair, clear and transparent approach is applied to dealing with applications from third sector organisations;**

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- 5) that any third sector organisation looking to obtain a concessionary rent from the Council be required to submit a detailed business case outlining their plans for a particular property;
- 6) that Officers facilitate a series of workshops to advertise and promote the new policy to the third sector in Redditch;
- 7) that the Council work with the local media and utilise social networks and its own website to publicise the new policy to the third sector in Redditch;
- 8) that each approved concessionary rent agreement be for a minimum five year duration, include a three year break clause, and be monitored on an annual basis;
- 9) that the Council undertake a review of the approved policy twelve months after its inception;
- 10) Officers further investigate suitable organisations to which third sector groups could be signposted with regard to obtaining independent advice on renting and managing properties; and

RESOLVED that

the reports be noted.

114. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY - SIX MONTH REVIEW OF THE COMMITTEE FUNCTION

Officers provided an overview of a report which enabled Members to review the Committee's achievements during the first six months of the 2012/13 municipal year and to consider whether any improvements could be made to the process.

In particular, Members were advised to consider whether the current approach to holding Portfolio Holders to account via an annual report process was the most effective form of accountability. Concern was raised that the process had become especially onerous for Officers and was lengthening the duration of Committee meetings quite considerably. Furthermore, during the previous five years the Committee had only made six recommendations as part of the process.

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The Committee was therefore advised to consider how it might better direct its resource and expertise more effectively. It was suggested that Members could place a greater focus on undertaking thorough and comprehensive reviews on the current performance and operation of the Council. It was also proposed that the effect of Transformation and Shared Services on the Council's performance could be a suitable area for the Committee to review. It was suggested that the Committee was far more effective when Members were given sufficient time to carry out a full investigation.

Members were very much supportive of the proposed changes as included within the report. However, Members remained to hold Portfolio Holders to account for the work that they did. It was commented that Portfolio Holders should only be called before the Committee when this was timely, rather than as part of an overly bureaucratic process. As part of this process the Portfolio Holders could be invited to present information and answer questions during scrutiny of service Transformation and Shared Services by the Committee.

RESOVED that

- 1) the Portfolio Holder Annual Report process be discontinued with immediate effect;**
- 2) the Committee focus on investigating the effects of service Transformation and Shared Services on the Council's current performance; and**
- 3) the report be noted.**

115. PORTFOLIO HOLDER ANNUAL REPORT - WRITTEN REPORT - LEISURE AND TOURISM

Having taken the decision under the previous item to discontinue the Portfolio Holder Annual Report process, Members took no further action with the report.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

116. ACTIONS LIST

Members noted that information regarding apprenticeship opportunities for young people in the Borough had recently been provided. In addition, following publication of the agenda pack,

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Officers had provided further information about allotments situated in the town.

RESOLVED that

the Committee's Actions List be noted.

117. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES AND SCRUTINY OF THE EXECUTIVE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received the minutes of the Executive Committee meeting held on 20th November 2012 and considered the latest edition of the Executive Committee Work Programme.

The Chair commented that the Executive Committee had endorsed all of the recommendations within the Sickness Policy Pre-Scrutiny Short-Sharp Review Final Report and congratulated the two members of the review group, Councillors Fisher and Witherspoon, on the outcome.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 20th November 2012 and the latest edition of the Executive Committee Work Programme be noted.

118. TASK & FINISH REVIEWS - DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENTS

There were no draft scoping documents.

119. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

The Committee received the following reports in relation to current reviews:

a) Arts and Culture Centre – Chair, Councillor Gay Hopkins

Members were informed that the group had recently undertaken a number of visits to locations in and outside the Borough.

The group had already received a considered number of responses to its public consultation on the possible introduction of an arts and cultural centre in Redditch. It was expected that the final figure would be in excess of 300 responses. Councillor Pattie Hill was thanked for her help in

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distributing copies of the group's questionnaire amongst local residents.

On behalf of the group, Councillor Hopkins requested that the Committee defer its consideration of the final report by four weeks to allow sufficient time for the review to be completed.

b) Redditch Market – Chair, Councillor Andrew Brazier

Councillor Brazier explained that the review group had recently visited Bromsgrove Market to speak with customers and, primarily, traders about what they considered to constitute a successful market. It was expected that a visit to Kidderminster Farmers Market would take place in the New Year.

The group had also been undertaking consultation work, the initial findings of which would be discussed at their forthcoming meeting.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **due to a delay in starting the review the deadline for the Arts and Cultural Centre Task Group be extended to Tuesday 2nd April 2013; and**
- 2) **the update reports be noted.**

120. HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillor Witherspoon, the Committee's representative on the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC), informed the Committee that no meeting had taken place since the previous update provided.

Members were instead referred to a number of relevant forthcoming dates, including: a meeting of the Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) on 12th December; a Joint Services Review (JSR) meeting on 18th December; and a meeting of the Worcestershire NHS Trust Board on 19th December 2012.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

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121. REFERRALS

There were no referrals.

122. WORK PROGRAMME

In line with the Committee's earlier decision to focus on scrutinising service Transformation and Shared Services, Members requested training on both subjects.

Members were also reminded that a scrutiny training session, to be provided by an external facilitator, would take place on Thursday 17th January at 6.30pm in the Council Chamber.

RESOLVED that

the Committee's Work Programme be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 7.01 pm
and closed at 9.15 pm