

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 28 November
2007

MINUTES

Present:

Councillors A Fry (Vice Chair in the Chair), J Brunner, P Hill and D Taylor

Non Members:

Councillors R King and M Shurmer

Also Present:

Mrs P Bridle (Borough Tenants' Panel Representative) and Mr M Chawner (Substitute Borough Tenants' Panel Representative)

Officers:

E Hopkins, J Smith and L Tompkin

Committee Services Officer:

J Bayley and H Saunders

79. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Banks, Cookson, MacMillan, Passingham and Thomas.

80. CONFIRMATION OF CO-OPTED MEMBERS

Mrs P Bridle was confirmed as a co-opted Member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Mr M Chawner was confirmed as a substitute co-opted Member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

81. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or of any party whip.

.....
Chair

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 28 November 2007

82. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 7th of November 2007 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

83. CALL-IN AND PRE-SCRUTINY

Members received the Decision Notice from the meeting of the Executive Committee held on Wednesday, the 21st of November 2007, with a view to considering the need for any Call-ins.

RESOLVED that

no action be taken to initiate call-in procedures on any of the Key Decisions contained in the Executive Committee Decision Notice.

84. TASK & FINISH REVIEWS - DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENTS

There were no draft scoping reports for consideration.

85. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

The Committee considered update reports in relation to current and pending reviews.

The following oral reports were given:

- a) Communications Task and Finish Group (Stage One)– Chair Councillor J. Brunner.

Members were informed that the Group had completed its consultation process and had begun to collate information obtained during that period.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 28 November 2007

The Chair explained that the Group had started to consider final recommendations and had started to produce a presentation for the first stage of the exercise.

b) District Centres Task and Finish Group
– Chair Councillor A. Fry

The Chair of the District Centres Task and Finish Group explained that the Group had met on the 22nd of November. Members were informed that a number of items had been discussed and the Group had started to consider possible recommendations.

The Chair explained that the completion date for the exercise had also been discussed at the last meeting of the Group. Members were informed that the Group hoped to complete the exercise by March 2008.

c) Fees and Charges Task and Finish Group
– Chair Councillor C. MacMillan

Officers provided an update on the progress of the exercise on behalf of the Chair of the Group.

Members were informed that at the last meeting of the Fees and Charges Task and Finish Group Members had interviewed the Head of Financial, Revenues and Benefits Services to clarify relevant terminology and to discuss financial arrangements at Redditch Borough Council. Officers explained that Members had invited the Head of Leisure and the Arts to the next meeting of the Group to discuss fees and charges in that service area. Members were also informed that the Group was scheduled to review local authority powers to trade.

d) Housing Priority Task and Finish Group
– Chair Councillor B. Passingham

Members were informed that the Council's visioning event was addressing issues of relevance to the Task and Finish Group exercise. Officers suggested that Members should postpone a decision about the progress of this exercise until Officers had reported the initial findings from the visioning exercise to the Executive Committee. This suggestion was approved.

e) Gypsies and Travellers Task and Finish Group

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 28 November 2007

– Chair Councillor P. Hill

Members discussed the date for the first meeting of this exercise. The Chair explained that due to personal circumstances and concerns about Officer and Member capacity she would prefer to postpone the first meeting of the Group until 2008.

Members agreed to discuss the date for the first meeting of this Group in 2008.

f) Joint Scrutiny on Flooding

Officers reported to Members that the first meeting for this review had taken place on Monday the 26th of November at 6pm at County Hall. Members were informed that Councillor Chalk had attended the meeting to represent the interests of Redditch Borough Council.

Officers explained to Members that the next meeting was not scheduled to take place until January 2008, to enable Officers to gather information about current actions in response to the floods. Members were informed that this information would inform the framework of the Joint Scrutiny exercise.

Members discussed the exercise and requested that Councillor Chalk attend the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to discuss proceedings at the Joint Scrutiny on Flooding meeting on the 22nd November.

RESOLVED that

the Committee note the reports and agree the proposed action, all as detailed in the preamble above.

86. PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS REPORT: OFFICER UPDATE

Officers explained that the report contained an update on the actions that had been undertaken in response to recommendations contained within the Preventing Homelessness Report that had been produced by the former Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee in July 2006.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 28 November 2007

The Chair asked Officers to explain what action the Council had undertaken to prevent homelessness and what changes had occurred to the provision of relevant services in 2007.

Officers explained to Members that Housing Options Officers and Housing Advice Officers had been encouraged to focus upon managing individual cases to ensure continuity of care. Members were also informed that choice-based lettings had been introduced since the publication of the Preventing Homelessness report. Officers explained that previously Council housing had been allocated in accordance with the applicant's position on the housing list. However, Officers explained that this approach had been inefficient. By contrast, the choice-based letting system provided a list of available housing stock.

Under this system applicants would secure housing by bidding to become tenants of a specific property.

Members sought clarification about the impact of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) on applications for housing. Officers explained that people could apply for DHPs, or additional housing payments from the Council to subsidise a tenant's rent payments, in exceptional circumstances. Members were informed that the Council had spent more money as part of this scheme than had been available. However, Members were informed that Officers were seeking to secure a grant to recover those costs.

Members discussed mediation and support for vulnerable applicants in the housing prevention process. Officers informed Members that the Council used mediation services provided by the County Council. In addition, Officers explained that vulnerable young tenants were referred to the charity Nightstop for mediation. Members were informed that, unlike the County service, Nightstop provided respite care and that this was considered to be a particularly useful resource for vulnerable young people.

Members discussed the rent deposit scheme and requested clarification about its purpose. Officers explained that the rent deposit scheme was organised as an arrangement between the tenant and the landlord. However, as part of the scheme Officers provided additional support and advice to tenants who were experiencing tenancy difficulties. Officers explained that this additional service was provided as part of the Council's proactive approach to preventing homelessness.

Members were informed that the Housing Service would be subjected to peer assessment in 2008. This peer assessment would be undertaken by a local authority that was a regional

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 28 November 2007

champion for Council housing. Officers explained that the peer assessment would review actions undertaken by the Council in response to the recommendations contained in the Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee's report.

Members discussed measures to increase public awareness of the Council housing system. The co-opted members signified that awareness was limited within their communities. Officers were asked to note this situation.

Members congratulated Officers for the progress that had been made and on their performance. Councillor Hill reported that she had been contacted by a constituent who had praised the work of a particular Housing Officer and the excellent customer service that she had provided.

RESOLVED that

- 1) Officers note the level of public awareness of Council housing application arrangements; and**
- 2) the report be noted.**

87. PORTFOLIO HOLDER ANNUAL REPORTS – COUNCILLOR SHURMER PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING AND HEALTH

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health, Councillor Shurmer, attended the meeting to provide the third Annual Portfolio Holder Report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Shurmer provided a brief presentation in accordance with the requirements of the Committee.

a) Roles and Responsibilities

Councillor Shurmer began his presentation by explaining to Members his role and responsibilities as a Portfolio Holder. He explained that his role as a Portfolio Holder did not provide him with specific decision-making powers as these resided with the Executive Committee and full Council. Councillor Shurmer informed Members that instead the Portfolio Holder role required him to meet relevant Officers; to maintain awareness of relevant changes; to review day-to-day performance of relevant Council services; and to act as a spokesperson for housing and health related issues. Councillor Shurmer also explained that as a Portfolio Holder he was directly answerable to the Council for relevant issues through the Overview and Scrutiny process.

b) Key Issues for the Portfolio Holder

Councillor Shurmer explained that three main areas were covered within the remit of his Portfolio: Housing Service, Housing Strategy and Health.

Councillor Shurmer explained that choice-based lettings had been a topical Housing Services issue during his tenure as a Portfolio Holder. Councillor Shurmer explained that the Council applied criteria in the operation of the choice-based lettings system. These criteria reviewed the needs of the applicant and the length of time that the applicant had been waiting for housing.

Members were informed that the Council was planning to spend £27 million housing capital monies over the following five years.

Councillor Shurmer explained that capital expenditure required a considered approach. Members were informed that the Council would apply capital spending work on a descending scale in accordance with the age of the property.

Councillor Shurmer explained that, within the Health remit of his Portfolio, the Council had no direct involvement with the local hospital. However, Members were informed that the Portfolio Holder liaised with the Primary Care Trust, Mental Health Partnership Trust and health practitioners. Councillor Shurmer explained that the Health Trainers initiative was another initiative which he had some involvement in as the relevant Portfolio Holder. Members were informed that the intention of the Health Trainers initiative was to employ people from local communities to work with people from within those communities to address health issues.

c) Improvements to the Portfolio Holder Role

Members questioned whether there was any possibility of expanding the role of Portfolio Holder in the future. Councillor Shurmer explained that while Portfolio Holders currently possessed no powers he envisaged in the future that the Council would review this situation and grant Portfolio Holders greater delegated powers.

Councillor Shurmer felt that the role of Portfolio Holder for his particular portfolio area might be enhanced by using the role to heighten the profile of the portfolio area with the general public. Members commented that this would be an effective way of educating and raising awareness within the Borough. Councillor Shurmer explained that one way this could be achieved by the

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 28 November 2007

Portfolio Holder was by visiting tenants' and residents' organisations to provide information about the Council's housing services.

Councillor Shurmer was thanked for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED that

the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health's presentation be noted.

88. REFERRALS

There were no referrals.

89. WORK PROGRAMME

The programme of future work was received and accepted, without comment.

RESOLVED that

the Committee Work Programme be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 8.30 pm