

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 9th January,
2020

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Joe Baker (Chair), Councillor Debbie Chance (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Joanne Beecham, Michael Chalk, Peter Fleming, Andrew Fry, Nyear Nazir, Mark Shurmer and Jennifer Wheeler

Also Present:

Councillor Mike Rouse- (Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Tourism) and Councillor David Thain - (Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management)

Officers:

Ruth Bamford, Helen Broughton, Lisa Devey, Clare Flanagan, Jayne Pickering, Deb Poole, Guy Revans and Judith Willis

Democratic Services Officers:

J Gresham and A Scarce

83. PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Committee welcomed three public speakers to the meeting, who were invited to speak to the Committee in turn. No written record of the individual's speech was provided for Council records. The speeches as delivered during the meeting, which lasted for a maximum of three minutes each and might therefore, not reflect the full length of the points residents had recorded in advance of the meeting, are recreated below.

a) Ms Liz Williams - Fighting for Survival Group

“For those of you that don't know me I'm Liz Williams, and I am speaking on behalf of the Fighting for Survival Group. Firstly can I just say thank you to for reconsidering the proposed changes. I would also like to thank the Officers who have worked on producing the report.

I would like to make a couple of points. Firstly, the importance of leases to the Voluntary Sector. If we apply for funding from other

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Chair

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organisations then part of the funding criteria is often having a lease. If we do not have this then we cannot be awarded the funding.

I just want to clarify that I am speaking on behalf of 8 of the 9 organisations affected by this change in policy, not for the Voluntary Sector as a whole.

Secondly, we believe that only voluntary organisations based in Redditch should be awarded funding. If they are outside of the Borough it means that often they can apply for funding within Redditch and in the area where they based – here and there.

I am sure that you do not want empty units in our districts. It does not look good if there are empty units in our district centres. Even with the £5000 grants on offer that does not even cover our rents. It's just not enough.

Finally we would like to get a market appraisal on the units. We never got a proper appraisal of rents in the units.”

b) Ms Sue Yeng

“Hello. As an introduction I have been working in the voluntary section since I was a child, first with the West Indian Community and then with Women’s Refuge. I also work around positive use of the bandstand in Redditch”.

The following points were noted from the speech:

- Hours that are provided by the voluntary sector provide value for money for the Council. Working in the voluntary sector can almost be a full-time job.
- The voluntary sector provides support for the Council and the community and is good value for money as we provide services that the council do not have to provide and ‘fill the gaps’.
- New policy needs to be re-visited.
- Council Tax could be raised by £12 per annum and this would cover the costs so no changes need to be made.

c) Mr Andy Thompson

“Good evening, I am here representing the Liberal Democrats in regards to the proposal of change to the Council’s Concessionary Rents Policy.

It is reckless to cut funding for the voluntary sector and the proposals that are given in the report just don't add up.

More money cannot be obtained from renting to commercial organisations as the units are sub-standard and will not reach the market rental value. This will mean that the units will be unoccupied and will require Council maintenance.

After working with the voluntary groups before I have always encouraged them not to be reliant on one pot of money and always diversify their income streams. To stop it in one go is dangerous.

During the financial crash in 2008 the voluntary sector stepped up and filled the gaps that were created".

An email was received by Democratic Services regarding the Voluntary Concessionary Rent Policy and read out by the Senior Democratic Officer. It read as follows:

"Hi I am a disabled lady who wants a voice but unable to attend. Could someone tell the committee that the increased rents to charities would be detrimental to so many in our community who rely on the places for mental health support, physical, emotional, and social and these increases will cost more to the finances with the damage it will do with increases for services. Please urgently reconsider Karen Smith".

84. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY - SUPPORT TO THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR 2020/21 (REPORT TO FOLLOW)

The Head of Community Services explained that the Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Councillor Mike Rouse, who was also in attendance at the meeting for this item, would introduce the report which had been provided by Officers. Councillor Mike Rouse outlined the background of the report and reasons why the Voluntary Concessionary Rents Scheme was proposed to change.

It was highlighted that

- Due to the Section 24 notice there needed to be some difficult decisions made with a focus on an increase in revenue.

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The Chair invited Councillor David Thain, as Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management to speak. Councillor David Thain thanked the Officers for all of their hard work on pulling together a complicated report. Councillor Thain also added that the voluntary sector in the area needed to move forward and look to national organisations as a model on how to expand their own organisations.

Following the presentation of the position statement for the Council's Concessionary Rents Policy a number of points were discussed in detail by Members:

- The hard work and commitment by Officers in regards to this proposal were acknowledged.
- This policy had divided the Council and had left the Council in a difficult position.
- The voluntary sector was the heart of the community in Redditch.

Councillor Debbie Chance expressed the view that this policy change should be suspended as none of the options provided in the report supported what she considered to be the proper way to go forward. It was then proposed that a further option be considered by Executive. This recommendation was circulated by Councillor Debbie Chance as follows:

"That the Executive

Option 7

- To reject all 6 current options in favour of O&S current position that no change is made to the Voluntary Concessionary Rent Scheme.
- To NOT continue with the current Members £5000 grant allocation of £145,000 and revert back to the former grants panel and grants allocation scheme to set the criteria. Setting up a simpler application scheme.

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- Maintain the £75,000 grant for financial and advice problem solving”.

The recommendation made by Councillor Debbie Chance was seconded by Councillor Joe Baker.

On being put to a vote the proposal was lost.

Councillor Peter Fleming raised his concerns regarding the ‘meanwhile type’ leases that Officers had included in a number of the options in the report. It was discussed by Members that this meant leases were unstable for the organisations. The Head of Planning explained that the reason for the ‘meanwhile type’ leases was that some of these areas were looking to be redeveloped and leases needed to be flexible to offer the best options for redevelopment. Councillor Peter Fleming suggested that a recommendation be made that the Executive reconsider the inclusion of ‘meanwhile type’ leases in any proposed options. This recommendation was seconded by Councillor Nyear Nazir and on being put to the vote it was approved.

Members questioned Officers as to what the most important issue for the voluntary groups was. The Head of Community Services explained that during the consultation period the issue that most concerned the sector was the lack of stable Core Funding available. It was agreed by Members that this was important and they enquired whether it was possible to provide Core Funding from the pot of funding which was already available.

The Committee also discussed other options that had previously been used to provide support to the voluntary sector. Members questioned Officers as to whether the sector was pleased with the revised funding process in respect of grants given out by Members. Officers reported that organisations had expressed the view during consultation that they had a preference for a grant application process as opposed to the current Community Councillor Grants scheme.

A number of other issues were discussed by Members including:

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- The need for compromise in making this difficult decision.
- Voluntary organisations had expressed the view during the consultation that they would feel more comfortable with an Officer led panel decision making process with clear and fair criteria which included providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

Members discussed at length which option was most acceptable to them.

Councillor Shurmer proposed that Executive discard options 1, 2 and 6 and only consider options 3, 4 and 5. This proposal was not seconded as it stood. Councillor Shurmer amended the recommendation and proposed that Executive discard options 1, 2, 5 and 6 and only consider options 3 and 4. This recommendation was seconded by Councillor Jennifer Wheeler.

On being put to the vote and the recommendation was lost.

Councillor Debbie Chance the proposed that the report be noted. This resolution was seconded by Councillor Michael Chalk and on being put to the vote this was agreed.

RECOMMENDED that

the Executive Committee reconsider the inclusion of 'meanwhile type' leases in any proposed options.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

(At the end of this item there was a brief adjournment).

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm
and closed at 8.53 pm