

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 12 February 2013 at the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa at 6.30pm.

PRESENT: Councillor Gifford (Chairman); Councillors Boad, Brookes, Copping, Ms Dean, Edwards, Mrs Gallagher, Gill, Mrs Higgins, Weber and Wreford-Bush.

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Vincett (Portfolio Holder for Housing and Property Services).

Councillor Wreford-Bush substituted for Councillor Mrs Blacklock.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Davies, Mrs Falp and Guest.

95. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest made.

96. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2013 were agreed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

97. **UPDATE FROM THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING AND PROPERTY SERVICES**

The Committee received a presentation from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Property Services and the Head of Housing and Property Services on the Housing and Property Services section. The presentation informed Members of the work done by the service area, how it was performing against the service area plan and updated on how the targets for increased housing demand were being met. Councillor Vincett detailed the current performance in respect of the business plan, which was currently predicted to produce a £9 million surplus by year 50 taking into account the figures in the report that was due to go to the Executive Committee on 13 February 2013. The presentation also gave information on the work being done by Price Waterhouse Coopers Consultants for the Council to bring forward recommendations on how best to meet the targets with the available funding.

The Head of Housing and Property Services explained the various methods that could be used to increase housing and accommodation stock which included not only new-build, but also utilising under-occupied properties and empty houses. Some of this work involved improvements to the properties concerned with the installation of photo-voltaic panels and energy efficient biomass boilers for heating.

The presentation then went on to give details of the wider elements of the work done by the service area, including how it added value to the community by dealing with anti-social behaviour from any tenants;

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providing assistance to help tenants claim their benefit entitlements, and also providing help to private tenants who were struggling financially, and when necessary, helping these private tenants secure council properties. The presentation gave a flavour of the cross-tenure nature of the service area (private and council tenancies) and emphasised that the duties and responsibilities undertaken by Housing and Property Services went far beyond a "landlord's" role.

A "Question and Answer" session followed. Members were informed that evicting tenants was the last resort and indeed was the exception to the rule; very few evictions occurred. Questions were also asked about handling repair issues and the Portfolio Holder explained that the Council was currently evaluating which contractors to engage to handle these services. Quality would be a key issue in this evaluation.

Members then asked questions about how the service area would be dealing with the under-occupation charge, commonly referred to as the "bedroom tax" recently introduced by the Government. The Portfolio Holder and Head of Service agreed that a report would be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its March 2013 meeting to discuss the implications and to examine if the policy on the way discretionary housing benefits were allocated was still fit for purpose to deal with the bedroom tax. Members were concerned that if not dealt with compassionately, some of the more vulnerable members of the community would find themselves at a great disadvantage as there were instances where plainly the method to determine the number of rooms required per household would cause hardship; the example of certain illnesses were mentioned whereby the ill person would require a room of their own to sleep in and would be unable to share.

98. SCRUTINY OF PARTNERSHIPS

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report from Housing and Property Services that highlighted two of the Council's key partnership arrangements. Members were invited to discuss, investigate and assess the success or otherwise of the respective partnership over the preceding 12 months.

Members asked whether "quick build" methods of constructing properties were being considered rather than relying on the traditional bricks and mortar approach. The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Vincett, informed Members that part of Price Waterhouse Cooper's brief would be to look at building techniques and "system build" or "factory build" housing would be assessed as there were some good housing provided by these methods. Officers reassured Members that the Council was working very closely with the partnership members but recognised that the data provided in Appendix 2 to the report might not fully reflect this relationship.

The Members recommended that it was vital that closer examination was required to encourage the partners to build affordable and social housing in the best way and that quick build or other methods of building should be pursued to increase the speed of providing this housing.

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99. EXECUTIVE AGENDA (NON CONFIDENTIAL ITEMS AND REPORTS) – WEDNESDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2013

Item 6 – Housing Revenue Account Budget 2013/14 and Housing Rents

The Labour Group had requested that this item was discussed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee because of the importance of rent setting for Warwick District Council tenants and the District.

The report presented to Members the latest Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budgets in respect of 2012/13 and 2013/14. The information contained within the report supported the recommendations to Council in respect of setting next year's budgets and the proposed increases to council tenant rents, garage rents and Supporting People charges for 2013/14. Compared to the budgets approved in December 2012, the contribution to the HRA Capital Investment reserve had increased by £9,000 in 2012/13 but reduced by £82,600 in 2013/14.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that the Executive might like to consider increasing garage rents at a higher level so as to encourage development of garage sites for social housing.

Item 7 – Approval of Heating, Lighting and Water Charges 2013/14 – Council Tenants

The Liberal Democrat Group had requested that this item was discussed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in order to fully understand the implications for the Council and its tenants given the almost inevitable further increase in energy costs.

The report set out the proposed recharges to council housing tenants for 2013/14, for the provision of communal heating, lighting and water supply.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that the full energy costs should be passed on as they had been in the past.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Vincett, the Head of Housing and Property Services and his two officers for attending the meeting and answering questions under minute numbers 97 to 99 and for the presentation that had been given under minute number 97.

100. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2013 were agreed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

101. COMMENTS FROM THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee considered a report from Civic and Committee Services which detailed the response the Executive had given to their comments regarding the reports submitted to the Executive in January 2013.

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The report was produced to create a dialogue between the Executive and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and it ensured that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were formally made aware of the Executive's responses.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

102. FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered the Forward Plan which had been published for February 2013 to May 2013.

The Chairman directed the Members' attention to Forward Plan reference 386 – Car Park Action Plan 2012-2017. He informed them that Warwickshire County Council were now considering going out to tender for enforcement. He had spoken to Councillor Whitehouse at the County Council and had been informed that the County Council was currently scrutinising car parking. Members raised concerns that the Warwick District area could be considerably disadvantaged in the review if the County Council decided to maximise profits from enforcement. The wardens might choose to concentrate on soft targets where fines were easy to impose, such as shopping areas instead of out of town areas. The knock-on effect could be to discourage shoppers and visitors to town centres.

It was suggested that the District Council submit a bid to the County Council to handle enforcement but the Deputy Chief Executive (AJ) informed Members that the District Council would struggle to compete in respect of salary costs. Therefore, the Council should push for the County Council to rate "quality of service" as a key indicator when evaluating the tenders and if this happened, it would meet the District's needs. Members felt it was important that the District Council's views be heard by the County Council and various suggestions were mooted by Members that would help satisfy these requirements. The Chairman agreed to take up the matter on the District's behalf with the Overview and Scrutiny Board at the County Council.

In respect of the Forward Plan for February 2013 to May 2013 it was:

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

103. REVIEW OF THE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered a report from Civic and Committee Services on the Committee's work programme from March 2013 to April 2013.

It had previously been agreed that Housing and Property Services would present a report to the Committee at its March 2013 meeting dealing with the under occupancy charge, commonly referred to as the Bedroom Tax.

It was also agreed that the Chairman would write to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Doody, and invite him to talk to the Committee on the topic of "One Council". The Deputy Chief Executive (AJ) offered to draft an invitation for the Chairman to send.

In respect of the Work Programme for March 2013 to May 2013 it was:

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RESOLVED that the report be noted.

104. **SEXUAL ENTERTAINMENT VENUES (SEVS) TASK & FINISH GROUP – UPDATE REPORT**

Councillor Brookes gave an update of progress made by the Task and Finish Group set up to review SEVs within the District and whether the Council's policy was fit for purpose. Following the remarks from Members at the last Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Scope document, Councillor Brookes advised that these had been taken on board and the Scope document had been amended. He agreed to ensure that a copy of the revised Scope document was circulated to all Committee Members.

The Task and Finish Group would be undertaking a survey as part of its research. The survey would be tested on Members to ensure it was effective and the Task and Finish Group would use recognised statistical methods to determine the significant level of responses required to ensure that the results would stand up to legal requirements for changing policy in respect of SEVs.

105. **PUBLIC & PRESS**

RESOLVED that under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following item, by reason of the likely disclosure of exempt information within paragraphs 1 and 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, following the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

106. **EXECUTIVE AGENDA (CONFIDENTIAL ITEMS AND REPORTS) – WEDNESDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2013**

No items on this part of the Executive agenda were discussed.

(The meeting finished at 8.10 pm)