

Minutes of: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 14 January 2014

Present: Councillor M Hankey (in the Chair);
Councillors D Cassidy; S Carter; A J Cummings; J Daly; L Fitzwalter; M James; P Heneghan; D O’Hanlon and T Tariq

Public in attendance: No members of the public were present at the meeting.

Also in attendance: Councillor J Smith– Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Affairs
Councillor R Shori – Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Health and Housing
Councillor J Black – Deputy Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Health and Housing

Apologies for absence: Councillor Nuttall

OSC.670 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Heneghan, as a Deputy Cabinet Member, declared a personal and prejudicial interest in all matters relating to issues within the Children and Families portfolio.

Councillor Fitzwalter declared a personal interest in Minute OSC.XXX below, Medium Term Financial Strategy, as a landlord of properties within the borough.

OSC.671 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present at the meeting to ask questions under this item.

OSC.672 MINUTES

It was agreed:

That the Minutes of the meeting, held on 4 December 2013, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

OSC.673 MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member – Finance and Corporate Affairs submitted a report setting out the Council’s Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

The Strategy covers the years 2015/2016 to 2016/2017 and sets out the assumptions underpinning the draft budget forecasts for those years. The report sets out, at a strategic level, the challenges facing the Council in the light of the further and significant Government funding reductions announced as part of the 2013 Spending Review and suggests an initial strategic response to the position.

Questions and comments were invited from Members of the Committee and the following issues were raised:

- In response to a question from Councillor Fitzwalter, the Executive Director of Resources undertook to provide forecast figures in respect of the cost per household as a result of the budget cuts.
- With regard to the provision of statutory services, the Executive Director explained that although the Council has a legal duty to provide certain services, it is not always prescribed as to the how these services are delivered and to what level. The Executive Director stressed the importance of Elected Members and the public identifying priority service areas in order to inform the budget setting process.
- With regard to the concept of demand reduction, the Executive Director highlighted the role of the Council in influencing this and referred to public health initiatives and the work of the Public Service Reform Board. The Executive Director acknowledged the difficulty in controlling areas of adult and children's social care but referred to recent fostering initiatives that will help to manage the cost of the demand.
- In response to a question concerning the risk of future appeals in relation to business rates, the Executive Director explained that he felt the £600k that had been set aside to cover the backdating of future appeals would be sufficient, although it was acknowledged that due to the nature of the appeals process this could not be guaranteed.
- Councillor O'Hanlon suggested that the level of Management Fee paid to Six Town Housing should be looked at to ensure the Council was receiving value for money. The Deputy Leader of the Council explained that the Fee was arrived at via a formula and detailed service specifications were outlined within the Management Agreement.
- With regard to the minimum level of balances identified within the report, the Executive Director confirmed that money could still be made available where robust invest to save business cases could be evidenced.
- During discussion of the issue of shared services, it was highlighted that the Council did look to explore opportunities to provide services for other authorities. Currently pest control, payroll and benefits services are provided to other authorities/organisations.

It was agreed:

That the report be noted.

OSC.674 BURY HOUSING STRATEGY 2014-2024

The Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Health and Housing submitted a draft version of Bury's Housing Strategy for 2014-2024. A copy of a draft action plan and analysis of the consultation process was appended to the Strategy. The long term vision of the Strategy is to encourage a sustainable mix of quality housing in the Borough that is suitable and sufficient to meet the needs of Bury residents. In order to achieve this aim the draft strategy set out the following actions:

- Encouraging house building – to help meet the demand for accommodation whilst protecting the features that make Bury a great place to live.
- Promoting a balance between different tenure types (owner occupied, private rented, social housing) to maximise residents' choice in where and how they live.
- Promoting affordable housing.
- Working to reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough.
- Working with others to invest in housing, build decent neighbourhoods and improve the quality and sustainability of the housing stock.
- Influencing the market to recognise and support the specific housing needs of older people, people with disabilities and other groups within our communities.
- Supporting the 'Green Agenda' to maximise the energy efficiency of housing.
- Supporting individuals to access housing by providing good quality information, advice and guidance.

Questions and comments were invited from Members of the Committee and the following issues were raised:

- Members of the Committee highlighted the issue of empty properties in the borough and recognised the importance of a pro-active approach to bring these properties back into use. The Cabinet Member referred to the problem of developers land banking sites and properties but highlighted a Council led pilot project in Radcliffe and reported that the Council had removed the Council Tax exemption for long term empty properties.
- The Chair, Councillor Hankey, highlighted the issue of ensuring the type of housing provided by developers matched the housing needs of the borough.
- With regard to the issue of private landlords, the Cabinet Member referred to the pro-active work undertaken by the Council Urban Renewal Team with landlords to improve standards in that sector. Reference was made to initiatives in relation to payment of bonds; rent in advance and assisted living.

- In response to a question from Councillor O'Hanlon, Marcus Connor, Head of Performance and Housing Strategy, undertook to provide a breakdown of the 274 properties completed in 2012/2013 by type and occupancy.
- With regard to further schemes to bring properties back into occupation, the Cabinet Member explained further schemes would be introduced following the evaluation of current projects.
- Members highlighted the importance of robustly enforcing the Affordable Housing Policy.
- In response to a question from Councillor O'Hanlon, the Cabinet Member reported that the proportion of social housing at 15% of all properties in the Borough was based on current levels to maintain a fair mix of tenure types. This amount would be provided by a mixed portfolio of providers.

It was agreed:

That, subject to Cabinet approval in March 2014, an update in respect of the Housing Strategy Action Plan be submitted to this Committee in 12 months time.

OSC.675 OVERVIEW PROJECT GROUPS - UPDATE

Leigh Webb, Principal Democratic Services Officer, provided an update on the work to date of the following Overview project Groups:

- School Admissions
- Neighbourhood Planning
- Worklessness

It was reported that final reports from the Groups would be submitted to the March meeting of this Committee

It was agreed:

That the update be noted.

COUNCILLOR M HANKEY
Chair

(Note: The meeting started at 7.00 pm and ended at 8.35pm)