

COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2016

Present:

Councillor Jenny Forde - Chairman  
Councillors -  
SI Andrews Jim Parsons  
Julian Beale SDE Parsons  
RG Keeling

Substitutes:

JA Harris (until 11.40 a.m.)

Observers:

Mrs SL Jepson (until 10.55 a.m. -  
invited to speak on Minute OS.11)

Apologies:

NP Robbins

OS.4 SUBSTITUTION ARRANGEMENTS

Councillor JA Harris substituted for Councillor NP Robbins.

OS.5 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(1) Member Declarations

Councillor JA Harris declared an 'other' interest in respect of agenda items (13) and (14) insofar as they related to the Gloucestershire County Council Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee as, at the County Council's Annual General Meeting 2016, he had been elected Chairman of that Committee.

There were no other Declarations of Interest from Members under the Code of Conduct.

(2) Officer Declarations

There were no Declarations of Interest from Officers.

OS.6 MINUTES

**RESOLVED that:**

**(a) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 be approved as a correct record;**

**Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 1, absent 0.**

**(b) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016 be approved as a correct record.**

**Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 1, absent 0.**

**OS.7 CHAIRMAN'S OPENING REMARKS**

Councillor Forde stated that it had been an honour at having been elected as Chairman of the Committee; and thanked Councillor Jim Parsons for his work as Chairman over the previous three years, commenting that she understood that he would be a 'tough act to follow'.

Councillor Forde looked forward to working with other Committee Members in an effective and pro-active way, in collaboration and devoid of party politics. She believed that there should be constructive challenge and questioning, but asked that questions for meetings be submitted in advance so that responses could be made available.

Councillor Forde hoped that the Committee's work would translate into better outcomes for local people in the Cotswolds.

**OS.8 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

No public questions had been received.

**OS.9 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

No questions had been received from Members.

**OS.10 CALLED-IN DECISIONS**

No executive decisions had been the subject of Call-In since the Committee's previous Meeting.

**OS.11 CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT HOUSING PLAN**

The Committee was invited to consider and comment on the draft Housing Plan, as part of the formal consultation process. The circulated report provided some background information, together with copies of the Draft Housing Plan 2016-2020 and the Draft Housing Action Plan 2016-2018.

It was noted that the new Plan built on the outcomes of previous Plans and incorporated a number of separate policies and strategies, including the Housing Plan; the Homelessness Strategy; the Strategic Tenancy Policy; and the Policy

on Discharging Statutory Homeless Duty into the Private Rented Sector - and the bringing together of related policy and strategy documents in one place sought to facilitate a holistic approach to housing within the District. That said, each policy or strategy could still be reviewed and updated individually in conjunction with its actions. It was also noted that the proposed Plan had regard to the whole housing market, recognising that all housing tenures were important in meeting the housing needs and demands of the District, and reflecting the relationships between the different sectors.

In introducing the item, the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, Councillor Mrs SL Jepson, explained that the current Plan would remain in force until a new version had been approved; whilst the new Plan would run through to 2020, the more detailed Action Plan only covered the period to 2018, due to rapidly changing policies at national level; each section of Plan covered the key achievements for 2012-16 together with the latest information in terms of challenges, priorities and opportunities; and actions to address future local needs and connections were identified and prioritised, along with associated timescales and resourcing requirements.

The Cabinet Member also pointed out that the Housing Plan sat alongside the Local Plan in seeking to address the needs of the District, including the delivery of new housing, the introduction of new tenures through the Cotswold discount market model, and negotiating better levels of affordability.

The Strategic Housing Manager confirmed that, once approved, the Plan would be reviewed and updated regularly and, in due course, actions for 2018-20 would be added.

In response to questions, the Cabinet Member and Strategic Housing Manager explained that:-

- the role of local authorities in relation to housing was now more about enabling than direct delivery, helping to negotiate provision on new developments where the threshold for affordable housing had been reached in terms of affordability, mix, type, location, etc.;
- there was a role in reviewing existing stock performance as not all need could be met through new provision - in terms of adequacy compared to need and sustainability;
- Officers would work with local providers, and challenge where disposal was not supported;
- the implementation and monitoring of management standards sought to ensure that providers responded to tenant needs;
- more influence over market provision was expected once the new Local Plan was in place;
- a risk and issues log was in place to assist with delivery and monitoring, with quarterly monitoring of (i) the risks attached to housing delivery and (ii) the action plan, to ensure that risks to delivery were inter-woven;
- the new Plan sought to address the national 'shift' to home ownership from rented;
- there remained a challenge with affordability, even though the discount model had been successful;
- in terms of figures, different 'measurements' were used by different organisations and in different fora;

- the armed forces covenant was reflected through references to national guidance, particularly in respect of low cost home ownership, local priorities, promotion, etc.;
- there was a continual challenge regarding empty properties, and the Council had regularly reviewed the topic, investigating different options and possible solutions;
- the Council would be involved in a housing needs survey when there could be a strategic interest, but such surveys would largely be 'driven' by town/parish councils and/or the Gloucestershire Rural Community Council - although some could be instigated by developers;
- the affordable housing figure had been established through the County-wide Strategic Housing Market Assessment of 2014;
- the Strategic Housing Market Assessment process was set down in legislation and would be robustly tested at the Local Plan Examination;
- the National Planning Policy Framework did allow some flexibility to test different scenarios;
- it was acknowledged that some housing would fall out of use over time, which increased future need for replacement;
- Officers were not aware of a registered provider having planned any disposal around flood risk;
- with regard to planning, Officers would look at the tenure needed for affordability and seek to achieve this through an associated legal agreement; but build quality was subject to normal build standards.

A number of Members expressed concern that the figures in the document were likely to have been skewed due to the number of houses of significant values within the District. It was suggested that the use of lower quartile or median values might be preferable.

During its detailed consideration of the draft documentation, the Committee identified the following issues for forwarding on to the Cabinet:-

- the armed forces covenant should be more overtly covered in the documents, given the Council's commitment in this regard and its success locally;
- whilst the assessment process was set down in legislation, with little scope for flexibility, the Cotswold 'context' should be set out in the document text - highlighting the difficulties faced within the District and providing comparative data in respect of other authorities;
- further consideration should be given as to the most appropriate method of calculating figures - lower quartile, mean, median, mode - so that these most accurately represented the Cotswold position;
- key risks should be identified.

Arising out of the debate, Officers undertook to identify housing stock properties which were at risk, due to possible flooding or other reasons. It was also acknowledged that, in considering future affordable housing provision through legal agreements and/or the Community Infrastructure Levy, the Council would need to look at ways of ensuring scheme certainty at the outset and, also, how to safeguard provision in instances where schemes changed following initial planning approval, with reduced numbers then being proposed.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Strategic Housing Manager for their contributions to the debate; and reminded the Committee that it was open to any Member to make individual comments in response to the consultation.

**RESOLVED that the comments made be forwarded to the Cabinet.**

**Record of Voting - for 7, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.**

OS.12 SUMMARY FINANCE/SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORT - 2015/16 YEAR  
END

The Committee received details of overall performance for the Council in 2015/16, with particular focus on progress towards achieving the Council's top tasks, and efficiency measures, and providing information on the Council's capital expenditure, capital receipts and use of reserves.

Service performance details had been set out within the circulated report and, in accordance with the Committee's previous wishes, specific oral reports were given at the Meeting with regard to performance in respect of Building Control; Housing Benefit/Council Tax Support applications; and long-term empty properties.

Given issues of timing, the Chief Finance Officer highlighted financial information by way of an oral update and presentation at the Meeting. Such presentation covered the key revenue and capital budget highlights; significant variances; resultant changes to the budget for 2016/17; and specific recommendations being made to the Cabinet relating to the use of some of the underspends.

The Committee was pleased with the overall performance achieved, both in terms of service and finance. Officers amplified various aspects, and responded to a number of questions from Members on a variety of issues, including the manner in which the Council and 2020 partnership budgets were handled; the fact that the issues in relation to recycling were largely due to economic reasons, given that quantity prices for recycling volumes had decreased; and the positive variances attributable to Ubico. It was also explained that annual budget setting had regard to previous years' data in order that trends could be identified and budgets realigned in cases where changes were not merely of an one-off nature.

During its detailed consideration of the performance information, the Committee:-

- noted continuing issues regarding building control performance; the changes implemented in an attempt to resolve those issues, particularly in relation to the service becoming part of the 2020 Partnership; and agreed that a detailed report should be submitted after six months of operation within the Partnership;
- noted resilience measures now in place in relation to Housing Benefit/Council Tax Support claims, and the separation of processing duties between three teams - telephone, new claims and changed circumstances; that these measures had seen improved performance; that problems continued to be experienced due to irregular electronic data transfers from the DWP, but of the need for related work to be prioritised to avoid subsidy penalties; the continued need for elements of manual processing while confidence in the system had been achieved; and, most importantly, that Cotswold was consistently performing in the top quartile nationally (new claims processed in 13.2 days compared to the national average of 21 days), even though the more challenging local target (12 days) had not been met;

- asked for a breakdown to be provided in respect of the number of long-term empty properties, in an attempt to establish which properties were genuinely empty and those which were being worked upon/renovated; and also suggested that it be made clear in future reports that such data was compiled having regard to council tax definitions;
- questioned the need for formal sickness absence reporting to Members, as it was considered to be more appropriate for this to be addressed by Officers;
- welcomed financial performance, but wished to raise a note of caution at strategic level in that it was hoped that the Council would not be so assiduous in cutting costs that value for money and service delivery were adversely impacted, or that opportunities for enhanced service provision were not looked at;
- supported the suggested allocations of £395,000 to the Business Rates Smoothing Reserve, to fund future budget gaps resulting from the accounting treatment of retained business rates income; and of £125,000 to an earmarked reserve to fund additional resources for processing the Chesterton Site planning application.

**RESOLVED that the report be noted, and the comments made be forwarded to the Cabinet.**

**Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 1.**

OS.13 LEISURE SERVICES

The Head of Democratic Services explained that, in order to progress this matter, it had been suggested that a number of Members of the Committee be asked to work with Officers to draw up some possible terms of reference and framework/scope for the presentation to be given at the Committee's next Meeting. Such proposals could be circulated to all Members of the Committee for comment/approval/support.

The presentation would provide an initial opportunity for the Committee to assess the success or otherwise of the Council decision to outsource the service to SLM in July 2013, having particular regard as to whether the perceived benefits and/or objectives and/or outcomes of that move had been achieved. There would be an opportunity for Members to ask questions and challenge where appropriate, debate the issue, and decide whether any further information and/or work/action was required (including methodology, scope, and timeframe). This approach was endorsed.

It was noted that the presentation would cover the museum as well as leisure service, as a combined contract had been let.

**RESOLVED that Councillors SI Andrews and Jim Parsons be appointed to work with Officers to draw up suggested terms of reference and presentation scope/framework.**

**Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 1.**

**OS.14**      OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2015/16

The Committee was requested to consider a draft Annual Report on the work of the Committee during 2015/16.

The draft report covered the Committee's activities, both internally and externally focussed; and was endorsed by the Committee.

However, it was suggested that future reports should also include a section on outcomes and impacts, i.e. what had happened with any recommendations and/or suggestions from the Committee. This was seen as a positive way forward, and agreed.

**RESOLVED that the Annual Report be approved.**

**Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 1.**

**OS.15**      COUNTY MATTERS

The Committee noted that the Minutes/reports of the relevant County Scrutiny Committees had been incorporated in the quarterly digest. There were no other significant updates.

It was explained that a reply was still being pursued in relation to ambulance response times, together with an action plan to address the Council's concerns.

A Member enquired as to how scrutiny might be engaged in any devolution proposals for Gloucestershire. In response, it was confirmed that matters were still at a relatively early stage, but that the question would be posed and any response received would be reported back in due course.

**OS.16**      QUARTERLY DIGEST

The Committee was invited to identify any issues arising out of the Quarterly Digest for future debate and/or action by the Committee; but no specific issues were highlighted.

**OS.17**      WORK PLAN 2016/17

The Committee was requested to consider its forward work programme, including the identification of any other matters for possible consideration.

The Head of Democratic Services circulated a Briefing Note which detailed the outcome of the review of the Agreement relating to the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer of the Council's housing stock insofar as it related to the possible ring-fencing of housing receipts within the Cotswold District.

Whilst the covenant did to an extent create a "ring-fence", there were limitations. As a result, enquiries would be made of Bromford as to how it had used receipts from the sale of former Council houses in Cotswold District; with a view to a report back to the next meeting of the Committee.

With reference to the proposed presentation by the GCC Cabinet Member and Area Highways Managers in respect of the implications for rural communities of the new GCC highways and transport contract (awarded to Amey), it was agreed

that the presentation be scheduled for the Committee's December 2016 Meeting, but that the scope and remit of the requested presentation be considered at the next Meeting.

In response to a question, it was explained that the elections review would take account of the 2016 Police and Crime Commissioner Election and EU Referendum as well as the various elections that had taken place in 2015 (although this could impact on timing).

The Chairman would identify the appropriate scheduling for the Parking Strategy item, given her membership of the Parking Board.

The following items of business were also agreed, subject to timings to be scheduled:-

- First-Line Health Provision - the impact on the Cotswold District of the current review of primary and urgent care across Gloucestershire;
- Broadband in the Cotswolds - with the timing to be reflective of the planned roll-out programme.

**RESOLVED that, subject to the above, the Work Programme be approved.**

**Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 1.**

OS.18 COMMITTEE APPOINTMENTS

It was noted that appointments to the various County bodies rolled forward on an annual basis.

It was also agreed that Councillor JA Harris be invited to continue to support the elections review through to its conclusion, even though he was no longer a Member of the Committee.

OS.19 OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business that was urgent.

The Meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and closed at 12.25 p.m.

Chairman

(END)