

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee  
held in Committee Room 1, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney,  
at 6.30pm on Thursday 22 March 2018

### PRESENT

Councillors: P J Handley (Chairman), Mrs E H N Fenton (Vice-Chairman), M A Barrett, A C Beaney, J C Cooper, Mrs J M Doughty, H B Eaglestone, Miss G R Hill, P D Kelland, Mrs L E C Little, T N Owen, G Saul, and B J Woodruff.

Also in Attendance: Mrs J C Baker

#### 81. MINUTES

**RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2018 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### 82. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs L C Carter and the following resignation and temporary appointment was received and noted:-

Miss G R Hill for C J A Virgin

#### 83. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members or Officers in items to be considered at the meeting.

#### 84. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no submissions from members of the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

#### 85. MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF COTTSWAY HOUSING

Ms Sue Lakin, Operations Manager, and Ms Wendy Hardy, Financial Inclusion Manager of Cottsway Housing attended the meeting to provide Members with an update on the impact of the introduction of Universal Credit.

Ms Lakin thanked Members for the invitation and advised that, as there had been sufficient time to plan for the introduction of Universal Credit, people had managed well so far. The long lead time had allowed Cottsway the opportunity to put a range of measures in place to support their tenants.

Ms Hardy explained that her team was responsible for rent collection and the introduction of Universal Credit had the potential to impact upon their ability to collect. She advised that Universal Credit had been introduced gradually, commencing in 2015 with single person households with the transition to becoming a full service area by November of last year. All claims had now to be made on line and claimants were required to update their circumstances and communicate with the job centre in the same manner. In consequence, there had been an increase in the number of tenants receiving Universal Credit.

Whilst the majority of its properties were within the District, Cottsway operated a development programme across nine local authority areas and, at present, there were 177 Cottsway households on Universal Credit, 73% of which were within West Oxfordshire. A proportion of these were on direct payments as Cottsway worked in partnership with the Department of Work and Pensions as a trusted landlord to verify rent details and request direct payment in cases where there was a history of arrears or tenant vulnerability.

23 households were subject to direct payments but these would only continue for a finite period as the underlying principle of Universal Credit was to make claimants responsible for their own financial affairs. Cottsway worked with their tenants to assist them in becoming self-sufficient.

On average, some eight to ten households were making the transition to Universal Credit each week.

Mr Handley enquired whether the waiting period before payments were made had impacted on the level of rent arrears. In response, Ms Hardy advised that, whilst some tenants had fallen into arrears, their accounts were being managed. She noted that the Government had removed the seven days waiting period in the Autumn Statement and changes to the six week transition period between Housing Benefit and Universal Credit were to come into force in April. Ms Hardy also advised that claimants could request 10% of their payment in advance.

(Mr Saul joined the meeting at this juncture)

Ms Hardy reiterated that, whilst some tenants were in arrears, their accounts were being managed and advised that there had also been instances where those with persistent arrears had cleared their accounts and were managing well under the new benefits regime.

Ms Lakin advised that Cottsway's level of arrears fell far below the national average, primarily as a result of the support available to those moving to the new system.

Ms Hardy confirmed that there was a lot of assistance available to claimants as Cottsway worked closely with Citizens Advice and the Council's own Officers. The long lead time had helped by giving the opportunity to put appropriate measures in place.

Returning to concerns that he had expressed in the past, Mr Handley voiced his disappointment that, whilst local libraries provided residents with internet access, their staff were unable to assist individuals in making a claim. He enquired whether Cottsway was able to offer direct assistance to those who had difficulty in submitting a claim on line. In response, Ms Hardy advised that Cottsway had its own designated Officers who were able to visit tenants in their own homes to help them make a claim. In addition, clients were also signposted towards the Council's Client Support Officers who were able to offer further assistance. Whilst she acknowledged that there were those who lacked confidence in its use, there had been no instances of individuals claiming that they had no access to the internet.

Work Coaches employed by the Job Centre were also able to assist those who had difficulty in using the internet as this was an integral part of the claimant commitment to gaining employment.

Mr Handley apologised to the Group Manager, Revenues and Housing Support, for comments he had made at the last Council meeting in which he expressed doubt as to the ability to provide the necessary level of support.

His concern was that some residents were unable to cope with the new arrangements and were distressed to find themselves falling into debt through no fault of their own.

In response to Mr Handley's concern over the level of advice available through libraries, the Group Manager, Revenues and Housing Support advised that the matter had been discussed with the County Council. Whilst libraries had become something of a community hub, staff did not have a sufficient level of expertise to offer advice to claimants and there was a concern that they could be blamed for errors made in applications. He went on to emphasise that the Council employed its own Client Support Officers who could carry out home visits to assist claimants. He advised all Members that any enquiries or requests for assistance that they received should be referred to the Council's Revenues and Housing Support Service which was able to offer professional welfare advice.

(Mrs J M Doughty joined the meeting at this juncture)

The Executive Director (Commissioning) advised that she had spoken to the County Council's Assistant Director for Customer Services on this issue and, whilst the County was keen to work with West Oxfordshire, there were concerns that staff in the libraries were not trained to give advice. A meeting was to be held with the Business Service Manager for Revenues and Benefits to discuss the matter in more detail but the extent to which any assistance could go was questionable.

The Group Manager, Revenues and Housing Support **AGREED** to update Members on the outcome of these discussions at the next meeting.

Mr Beaney was pleased to note that the measures put in place during the lead in period appeared to be operating successfully. He suggested that it was far better for claimants to seek professional advice from those equipped to give it where it was available and to avoid the use of libraries if possible. He enquired whether claimants could request to be placed on a direct payment scheme and Ms Hardy confirmed that they could do so if they wished. Cottsway would then put in place a plan designed to support them in becoming capable of managing their finances independently going forward.

Given that some tenants might have continuing difficulties and the fact that direct payment arrangements ran for a finite period, Mr Beaney questioned whether support would be withdrawn at the end of that time. In response, Ms Hardy advised that, whilst it was early days in terms of numbers, she envisaged that, where necessary, Cottsway would continue to offer an appropriate level of support to manage tenancies as the Company would not wish to see tenants fall into arrears and face the prospect of eviction.

Mr Beaney noted that those with three or more children were currently exempt from the transition to universal credit. Ms Hardy confirmed that this was the case at present but all legacy benefits were due to be transferred starting next year and concluding by 2022. It was difficult to assess the impact this would have at such an early stage but Ms Hardy stressed that each case would need to be considered on an individual basis.

Mr Kelland questioned whether other registered social landlords operating within the District had similar arrangements in place. Ms Hardy advised that Cottsway attended regular partnership meetings with other RSL's and met with them at the partnership forum. From discussions at these meetings it was apparent that other RSL's were operating similar arrangements. In response to a further question from Mr Kelland, the Group Manager, Revenues and Housing Support advised that there were nine RSL's operating within West Oxfordshire and **AGREED** to provide Members with a list and contact details.

Mr Kelland then raised a question regarding tenants' maintenance responsibilities and it was explained that, whilst Cottsway assumed responsibility for boundary fencing, each RSL operated its own individual policies through its tenancy agreements.

Mr Woodruff asked how the impact of the new system compared with the previous arrangements. In response, Ms Lakin advised that there had always been those in arrears under the Housing Benefit System Whilst there may have been an assumption that tenants would find managing their finances difficult, those with limited means were often better at doing so than those in a more fortunate financial position by reason of necessity. In general terms, people were managing well. The support system developed during the lead in period meant that people were ready for and prepared to embrace the change. Whilst there were those that would need long term support, the introduction of Universal Credit had not had the impact that had been anticipated.

Mr Woodruff agreed with Mr Beaney that it was inappropriate to expect staff in libraries to offer advice on benefits and Ms Lakin concurred. She indicated that it was far better for Members to refer clients to Cottsway or the Council's Officers and confirmed that Cottsway would continue to support its tenants from falling into debt.

Mr Cooper noted that there were some 1230 households currently receiving Universal Credit in West Oxfordshire and advised that, as a pilot authority, Oxford City had found that the introduction of Universal Credit had a detrimental impact upon its capital programme and the ability to deliver additional affordable housing. He questioned whether Cottsway had faced similar issues.

In response, Ms Lakin advised that this had not been the case. Whilst Cottsway had made greater provision for bad debt in anticipation of the introduction of Universal Credit, it had found this to be unnecessary. There had been no negative impact on its development programme and, from some 75 new properties a year in 2013, Cottsway was now able to provide more than 150 new homes each year.

Being employed by the City Council, Mrs Doughty confirmed that Oxford City had found the introduction of Universal Credit a challenge and enquired how many staff Cottsway employed to provide assistance. Ms Hardy advised that there were seven staff directly associated with this role in addition to the Customer Services Team which had also been trained to provide advice and assistance. She confirmed that there were always staff available during office hours to respond to enquiries and to offer more specialist support if required.

(Mr Woodruff left the meeting at this juncture)

Mrs Doughty congratulated Cottsway on the preparatory work that they had carried out and was pleased to learn that there had been no adverse impact upon their development programme.

Mrs Little indicated that she was aware of the good work that Cottsway did by virtue of her involvement with veterans associations. She noted that new tenants received support visits during the first 12 months and asked how these arrangements were continued going forward. Ms Lakin advised that tenants were first offered a 12 month starter tenancy to allow time to ensure that an ongoing tenancy would be financially sustainable and that the property was suited to their needs. Follow-up visits were arranged to ensure that they were able to set up home and the tenancy would be converted to an assured tenancy after the first 12 months.

Mrs Little advised that there had been a 15% increase in the use of the Carterton food bank in December and January and Ms Lakin confirmed that Cottsway had recognised a similar increase in its own operation. However, she noted that the demand on food banks had been increasing over the last few years.

Mr Beaney expressed his thanks to Cottsway for the work they were doing and was pleased to see the co-operation between the relevant organisations working towards a common goal.

Mrs Baker stressed the importance of referring any enquiries or requests for assistance to the Council's Officers, herself as the Portfolio Holder or to Cottsway.

Mr Handley asked whether Cottsway participated in the Landlords Forum and it was explained that this was directed towards private landlords rather than RSL's. The Group Manager, Revenues and Housing Support advised that the Forum had primarily focussed on environmental health issues and had been led by Officers from that field. He informed Members that, once the new Private Sector Liaison Officer was in post, the Forum would be reinstated with greater focus on more wide ranging housing issues.

Mr Kelland indicated that private landlords were reluctant to take tenants on benefits and the introduction of Universal Credit where benefits were paid to the claimant was a further disincentive. He asked if tenants could request to be put on a direct payment arrangement and Ms Hardy confirmed that this was an option open to them.

The Group Manager, Revenues and Housing Support reminded Members that the Council had received the sum of £120,000 from Central Government to provide support to access the private rented sector.

Ms Lakin advised that private tenants could also seek advice and assistance with regard to universal credit as the support facilities were open to all tenants, irrespective of the status of their landlord.

Mr Beaney suggested that a fact sheet, similar to that devised by the Leisure Management Contract Working Party, be prepared and circulated to all Members. It was **AGREED** that a fact sheet would be made available and Mrs Baker advised that the necessary information had been made available at the Member briefing on Universal Credit held last year.

The Chairman thanked Ms Lakin and Ms Hardy for their work and their contribution to the meeting. He expressed his concern that the delay in payment of Universal Credit occasioned stress and worry amongst those who found it distressing to be in debt.

**RESOLVED:** That the information provided be noted.

## 86. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATE REPORT

The Committee received and noted the Chairman's update report.

Mr Handley made further reference to the Select Committee Report on the Operation of Overview and Scrutiny he had mentioned at the last meeting and commended it to Members.

Mr Kelland expressed concern that the Oxfordshire Growth Board was not subject to any formal scrutiny arrangements. In response, the Executive Director (Commissioning) advised that, as a requirement of the Growth Deal, proposals to formalise scrutiny arrangements would be brought forward.

87. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2017/2018

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services which gave an update on progress in relation to its Work Programme for 2017/2018.

87.1 RAF Brize Norton

The Executive Director (Commissioning) advised that arrangements had been made for the next meeting of the new liaison group to be held in May. In addition, Officers were to meet with representatives of Homes England and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation in early April to discuss the future development of the REEMA housing site. Mr Handley requested Officers to raise the concerns he had expressed over pupil numbers and funding and the Executive Director (Commissioning) undertook to update Members on progress at the next meeting.

Mr Cooper enquired whether any of the funding secured through the growth bid could be utilised to promote development of the REEMA site. The Executive Director (Commissioning) advised that this funding formed part of the Housing Infrastructure Fund bid put forward by the County Council which was not yet approved. The bids put forward related to specific infrastructure projects, including highway improvement works that would help Carterton achieve its ambitions.

Mr Handley advised that he had been party to discussions regarding the potential improvement of highway junctions within five miles of RAF Brize Norton. He questioned whether the Council could utilise any budget underspend to help facilitate this work. In response, the Executive Director (Commissioning) suggested that it would be more appropriate to defer any consideration until fully formed bids were brought forward.

87.2 Oxfordshire Health Care Transformation Programme/Deer Park Medical Centre

The Executive Director (Commissioning) advised that she had received an email from the Head of Communications & Engagement at the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group with a report to be presented to its Board on 29 March.

The report sought approval for the way forward that would allow a new and very different approach to engaging people in localities on the issues that affect them locally, in line with the strategic direction of becoming a much more integrated health and care system. A key part of this new approach required the review of the proposed changes that were due to be addressed in Phase Two of the previous consultation. The report described that review and proposed that no changes would be made to the current A&E and paediatric services at the Horton hospital or the current midwife led units across Oxfordshire.

It was **AGREED** that a copy of the report would be circulated to all Members.

Mr Kelland questioned whether it was possible to ensure that financial contributions secured from developers by the CCG through planning agreements were used exclusively for the provision of services within the immediate area affected by the development. In response, the Executive Director (Commissioning) advised that it was a requirement that Section 106 contributions were spent in the locality but the Council was not able to dictate to the CCG as to how they were used.

Mr Kelland expressed some concern that funding could be applied elsewhere in the District. It was **AGREED** that the Development Manager be requested to provide a briefing paper on the application of developer funding for submission to the next scheduled meeting of the Committee.

### 87.3 Police and Community Safety

It was noted that Superintendent Mark Johns was to address a future meeting of the Committee and the Chairman suggested that Members submit any particular questions or concerns through Committee Services. He expressed concern over recent press reports suggesting that only 35% of reported crimes were investigated and questioned how the triage process operated. Mr Kelland expressed concern at the low detection rate in respect of burglaries.

### 87.4 Notice of Motion – Support for the LGBTIQ+ Community

In response to a question from Mr Beaney, the Executive Director (Commissioning) advised that she intended to meet with Mr Graham shortly and would be preparing a report for the next scheduled meeting of the Committee.

**RESOLVED:** That, subject to the amendments detailed above, progress on the Committee's Work Programme for 2017/2018 be noted.

## 88. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services, copies of which had been circulated, which gave Members the opportunity to comment on the Cabinet Work Programme published on 16 March 2018.

### 88.1 Appointments to Outside Bodies

Mr Cooper noted that a number of the outside bodies to which the Council made appointments no longer met and that a number of Members failed to attend meetings of those outside bodies to which they had been appointed. It was **AGREED** that the Cabinet be requested to consider whether to continue to make appointments to all the outside bodies currently listed.

### 88.2 Approval of Tender for Phase II of the Carterton Leisure Centre Project

Mrs Little expressed concern that the squash courts proposed as part of Phase II of the Carterton Leisure Centre Project were not suitable for competition use and would be closed at certain periods of the day. She also enquired whether the extent of the trampoline park had been evidenced through public consultation.

Mr Beaney pointed out that the specification had already been approved and tenders invited. He suggested that Mrs Little raise any concerns with the Leisure Services Manager.

### 88.3 Planning Consultations

In response to a question from Mr Beaney it was confirmed that the outcome of the initial planning consultations referred to at item Nos. 6 to 8 of the Cabinet Work Programme would be considered by the Committee prior to the Cabinet's consideration of the emerging proposals.

**RESOLVED:** That the content of the Cabinet Work Programme published on 16 March 2018 be noted.

## 89. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - QUARTER 3 2017/2018

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Leisure and Communities providing information on the Council's performance at the end of quarter 3 2017/2018.

Members joined with Mr Beaney in offering their congratulations to Officers in the Planning Department on achieving the target for determining major planning applications within the assessment period.

**RESOLVED:** That the information provided be noted.

90. NOTES OF THE LEISURE MANAGEMENT CONTRACT WORKING PARTY

The notes of the meeting of the Leisure Management Contract Working Party held on 24 January were received and noted.

Mr Handley thanked Mr Beaney for Chairing the Working Party and Members and Officers for their contributions.

91. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

There were no questions from Members relating to the work of the Committee.

The meeting closed at 7:50pm

Chairman