

Cherwell District Council

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at Bodicote House, Bodicote, Banbury, OX15 4AA, on 13 September 2011 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor Kieron Mallon (Chairman)

Councillor Ann Bonner
Councillor Tim Emptage
Councillor Chris Heath
Councillor Alastair Milne Home
Councillor Leslie F Sibley
Councillor Daniel Sames
Councillor Trevor Stevens
Councillor Lawrie Stratford
Councillor Rose Stratford

Apologies
for
absence: Councillor Lynn Pratt

Officers: Claire Taylor, Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager
Caroline French, Equalities and Diversity Officer
Catherine Phythian, Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer

19 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

20 Urgent Business

There was no urgent business.

21 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 19 July 2011 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

22 Equality Framework for Local Government 'Achieving' Self Assessment

The Chairman welcomed the Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager and the Equalities and Diversity Officer to the meeting.

The Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager introduced the report and gave a short presentation which set the context for the Self Assessment. She explained that the Council's approach to equalities had evolved over the last few years from an original focus on legal compliance and "box-ticking" to the current ethos of ensuring that our business processes, performance management and service delivery are appropriate for the needs of all residents and flexible in response to people's requirements. The Committee learnt that in 2008 the Council identified 90 equalities impact assessments of its service departments but that as the approach to equalities has developed a more focused and targeted approach has been developed which aims to assess about 10 – 15 equalities issues per year prompted by changes to service delivery and customer requirements rather than following departmental structures.

The Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager highlighted four main points which underpin the Council's work on equalities:

Approach: the focus was now about making the Council's services equitable, accessible and high quality for all regardless of their needs and not about targeting particular strands of ethnicity or religion for the sake of box ticking.

Resources: the work is embedded in teams across the Council supported to a limited extent by the Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager and the Equalities and Diversity Officer and the Corporate Planning Assistant.

Legislation: still complex but now consolidated in the single 2010 act which is better suited to the Cherwell approach (i.e. focusing on a holistic and locally appropriate approach to equalities rather than a limited set of characteristics)

Results: the focus is on using customer feedback and service testing to produce practical results. For example on a local volunteer translation service and running the successful Knowing Our Communities events, these types of events aim to make a difference to service users by enhancing access and focusing resources on the frontline.

The Committee noted that although each section of the draft Self Assessment included details of "Areas For Improvement" there was no indication of how or when these would be reviewed or measured. It was therefore appropriate to suggest that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should monitor the progress on the implementation of these improvements at a future meeting. In response officers agreed to bring an initial response and action plan for the "Areas For Improvement" to a future meeting of the Committee.

The Committee were concerned to note that the Cherwell district has the highest reported hate crime figures next to Oxford City within the Oxfordshire area. The Committee invited officers to provide further information and detail on this matter.

The Committee requested further information on the work being undertaken by Housing Services to review the grants given to community groups in order to improve the distribution of funding to groups and also on the take up and effectiveness of the training offered to Asian landlords.

In response to questions from the Committee the Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager explained that the improvement proposal to “align our staff force to the Cherwell community” did not mean that there would be any attempt to introduce a strict numerical quota based on gender, ethnicity etc but rather that it was intended to illustrate that the Council would seek to ensure that the staff force had the necessary skills and experience to meet the needs of the community.

In conclusion it was agreed that the Equalities and Diversity Officer should bring an updated version of the Self Assessment and additional information on the specific topics raised to the next meeting of the Committee.

Resolved

- 1) That the Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager should bring an updated version of the Self Assessment and additional briefing information on the areas for improvement, hate crime statistics, the distribution of community grants and the training offered to landlords, to the November meeting of the Committee.
- 2) Not to refer the Self Assessment to the Executive for approval at this time.

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Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Head of Legal and Democratic Services which updated Members on the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2010/11.

Forward Plan

The Committee agreed that there were no items on the Forward Plan for September to December 2011 that they wished to include on their work programme in 2010/11.

Agenda for 18 October 2011

The Committee agreed that the agenda should include a further discussion with the Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager and the Equalities & Diversity Officer on the equalities issues raised at this meeting and a briefing from the working party looking at the Registered Social Landlord's Policy.

Resolved

- (1) That there were no items in the current version of the Forward Plan (September - December 2011) to include on the work programme for 2011/12.
- (2) That the current Overview and Scrutiny element of the work programme for 2011/12 be noted.

- (3) That it be noted that the 18 October 2011 meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would consider an updated report on the Council's Equality Framework for Local Government 'Achieving' Self Assessment and additional briefing information on the level of equalities related crimes in Cherwell and on the training offered by the Council to Asian landlords. In addition the working group looking at the Registered Social Landlord's Policy would brief the Committee meeting on their initial discussions with officers.

The meeting ended at 7.30 pm

Chairman:

Date: