

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MONDAY, 12 AUGUST 2013

PRESENT:- Councillors Kevin Small (Chair), Andrew Bennett, John Ballman, Michael Dickinson (Vice-Chair), Emma Faramarzi, Brian Ford, Mary Friend, Cindy Matthews, Des Moffatt, Maureen Penny and Robert Wright.

Councillors Russell Holland, Cabinet Member for Finance, and Garry Perkins, Cabinet Member for Economy, Regeneration and Culture, were also in attendance.

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Stan Pajak.

17. Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting.

18. Public Question Time

No public questions were asked.

19. Welfare Reform and Benefit Changes

Councillor Russell Holland, Cabinet Member for Finance, was in attendance and presented to the Committee a report on the detail of recent welfare reform and benefit changes and the impact of these on Swindon residents. In accordance with a request by the Chair, Councillor Holland's presentation focussed on:

- the specific reforms introduced
- changes that had been made to the benefits system and the effect of these changes for Swindon residents
- the Council's process for delivering the required changes and how it will monitor and review the impact of the changes on local residents
- revisions made to Council policies and future development plans to accommodate the welfare reform and benefit changes

Following his introduction of the report, Councillor Holland responded to members' questions and observations in relation to the following matters:

- the Cabinet Member's assessment of the impact of the changes as less significant than anticipated and the increased level of arrears, over a relatively short period of time, on the rental accounts of tenants whose properties have been assessed as under-occupied
- the number of applications received for discretionary housing payments
 - the position of applicants whose applications for discretionary housing payment awards are not approved
- the data relating to the numbers of claimants impacted by the Council Tax Support (Benefit) changes
- Council Tax Collection and Recovery
 - the increase in the numbers of council tax reminder letters issued
 - the increase in the numbers of council tax summonses issued

- the total number of claimants affected by the under-occupancy changes to housing benefit and the number of these that were Swindon tenants
 - the availability of support for non-Swindon tenants
- the abolition of the discretionary elements of the National Social Fund as part of the Welfare Reform Bill
- the stated aims of the Local Welfare Assistance policy agreed in March 2013 and the apparent lack of any specific reference therein to children and families or single parents
- the prioritisation of payments received in respect of attachment of earnings orders (in cases of both rent and council tax arrears)
 - the current number of council tenants in both rent and council tax arrears
- the impact of the welfare reforms on tenants of Registered Social Landlords and the level of support being provided by these landlords
- the lack of progress in relation to the motion agreed at Council regarding the development of a sheltered housing scheme in The Hawthorns
- the level of officer support available to assist tenants in resolving issues around the individual tenant's rent and council tax payment commitments
 - the ability of officers to make personal visits to tenants in order to provide assistance
 - the number of tenants who had requested assistance before a situation was reached that the Council had to necessarily intervene
- the Cabinet Member's assessment of the overall revenue impact of the welfare reforms on Housing and the Council and the recognition that the impact of the changes on a tenant's individual circumstances can be very significant
- the increasing use of food banks by families and individuals in serious need and the recognition of a possible correlation between pressures to pay bills and a rise in health issues related to poor or inadequate nutrition
- the Emergency Assistance Fund claim data and the analysis of the diversity information available about claimants for assistance
 - the breakdown of claimants according to Ward
- best practice and the availability of comparative data regarding the responses of other authorities to the welfare changes
- the council's Fair Debt Policy
- the implications for the Housing Revenue Account of any further reduction in the Benefits subsidy the Council receives from Central Government
- the Council's debt write off policy, the recommended delegated levels for write offs and the details of amounts that had actually been written off
- the possibility of a survey to determine client's satisfaction with the support services offered by the Council in relation to welfare reforms changes

It was agreed that information requested by members during the course of the Committee's consideration of this item be forwarded to members via the Committee Clerk.

Resolved – (1) That Councillor Russell Holland, Cabinet Member for Finance, be thanked for attending the meeting to present this report and for his full and open responses to Members' questions and observations.

(2) That an update report on the impact of welfare reform changes be made to the Committee in November (following the presentation of this information to the next scheduled meeting of the Swindon Benefits Strategy and Welfare Reform Group).

20. Cabinet Member Question and Answer Session - Cabinet Member for the Economy, Regeneration and Culture

Councillor Garry Perkins, Cabinet Member for Economy, Regeneration and Culture, was in attendance and presented a detailed report summarising progress and performance in respect of each of the following service areas within his portfolio of responsibility:

- Arts and Culture
- Community Heritage
- Economic Development
- Museums, including Steam
- Regeneration (except Wichelstowe and Village Centres project)
- Specific Responsibility for Lydiard Park Project
- UK Broadband
- FSL Ltd (in his capacity as Client Lead Member).

At the request of the Chair, Councillor Perkins, in his presentation of the report, commented specifically on those elements of his portfolio which he felt had been most successful, those where a different approach might have produced better results and the lessons that might have been learned as a consequence, and the challenges he expected to be faced by the Council relation to these service areas in the coming year and beyond.

Following his presentation of the report, Councillor Perkins, with the assistance of his support officers, responded to members' specific questions and observations on the following topics:

- the attraction of manufacturing industries to Swindon and the capability of the current education system to both encourage and prepare students for careers in the manufacturing industries
- the detail and anticipated outcomes of the Leisure and Culture options appraisal
 - measures to reduce the cost of arts and cultural services provision in Swindon and to ensure that such provision is accessible by all sectors of the community
- the future of the "Big Screen" in Wharf Green as a "stand alone" feature
- initiatives to support the promotion of commercial apprenticeship opportunities with small and medium-sized business enterprises
- members' experiences of the Council's failure to advise them of major issues affecting their wards, in advance of press statements being made by the Council, and the requirement for a protocol to be put in place to prevent such instances in future
- the recognition that the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) monies of £5m is, essentially, a loan to the Council that will have to be repaid
- the development of the UK Broadband initiative
 - broadband coverage in the rural areas
 - the provision of effective broadband coverage as an essential element in promoting local plan designated employment areas in the east of the borough

- the improvement of broadband coverage in business parks where the Council has a freehold interest
 - the importance of consulting rural areas representatives about any proposals to enhance broadband coverage in their areas
- recognition of Swindon's improved cultural offer
- the Council's support of the development of plans to celebrate 175 years of the Great Western Rail Works
 - recognition within the celebration proposals of Swindon's Railway heritage beyond the "steam age"
- the success of the Council's car parking policy in the town centre
- the promotion of Lydiard Park as a major Council asset
 - maximisation of the commerciality of the Park and placing it on a sound commercial footing
- the Big Arts Day
- work to reduce the level of subsidy for theatre provision and the position regarding the current contract for services at the theatre
- the apparent exclusion of Central Ward councillors from meetings regarding Fleet Street
 - the levels of capital expenditure proposed for the enhancement of Commercial Road (£5m) and Fleet Street and Faringdon Road (£2.5m)
- the MUSE project and the attraction of major companies to occupy the development
- the current position regarding the provision of a new health centre as part of the town centre development proposals
- traffic management in the town centre and the adequacy of the existing and proposed highways infrastructure to support the new developments

Resolved – That Councillor Perkins be thanked for attending the meeting and for his full and open responses to members' questions and observations.

(In accordance with the National Code of Local Government Conduct, Councillor Michael Dickinson made a non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of the Committee's consideration, under this agenda item, of any matters relating to his employer, Swindon New College.)