

HINCKLEY AND BOSWORTH BOROUGH COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMISSION

3 JULY 2014 AT 6.30 PM

PRESENT: Mr MR Lay - Chairman  
Mr C Ladkin – Vice-Chairman

Mr PR Batty, Mr PAS Hall, Mrs L Hodgkins, Mr DW Inman, Mr JS Moore and Mr K Nichols

Also in attendance: Councillor WJ Crooks and Councillor MT Mullaney

Officers in attendance: Steve Atkinson, Bill Cullen, Edwina Grant, Julie Kenny, Rebecca Owen, Sally Smith and Andrew Thompson

79 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Hulbert and Morrell.

80 MINUTES

On the motion of Councillor Moore, seconded by Councillor Nichols, it was

RESOLVED – the minutes of the meetings held on 15 May and 9 June be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

81 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared at this stage.

82 RURAL AREAS REVIEW 2014

The Scrutiny Commission received the annual rural areas review which detailed services provided in the borough's rural areas. During discussion on the report, the following points were discussed:

- Fuel poverty: it was noted that work was being undertaken to provide fuel poverty advice to tenants, and also to provide advice on effective ventilation due to the apparent reluctance of residents to open windows and therefore lose heat.
- A member asked how the reduction in average household energy consumption had been measured and also the monitoring score. Officers agreed to look into this after the meeting and respond.
- Local walking groups: the popularity and growth of these was noted and it was explained that Cultural Services facilitated the groups but they were led locally.

Members felt that the report was very useful to demonstrate the level of service provision to rural areas, particularly to those residents in those areas who felt their Council Tax did not provide value for money.

RESOLVED – the report and extent of service provision be endorsed.

83 HOUSING REPAIRS

Members were updated on the Housing Repairs review and progress made against the action plan. It was reported that a lot of progress had been made over the previous 18

months and a peer review by another authority had been undertaken. Whilst it was noted that customer satisfaction was high, more responses to surveys would provide a more robust view.

In relation to areas for improvement, it was reported that whilst response to repairs under priority categories 1 and 2 had improved, priority 3 and 4 cases required improved response rates.

Members were reminded that Wilmott Dixon had operated an open book system rather than schedule of rates; so, when the service was brought in-house an uplift of 20% had been applied to a former schedule of rates. A subsequent review of the schedule of rates had found that rates were still 30% lower than they should have been and a further uplift had been agreed.

Void costs remained high and additional controls had been introduced in an attempt to manage this. The additional controls would not reduce the standard of work to voids, but would enforce an audit of work necessary and undertaken. It was agreed that the performance information for 'time to re-let' would be brought back to a future meeting. In response to a member's question, it was stated that loss of rental income was not included in void costs, but was closely monitored. A member also reminded officers that the Finance, Audit & Performance Committee had asked that ward members receive updates on voids and on work undertaken to enable re-letting. It was agreed that this would be followed up. Members were also reminded that there were now tenant inspectors. It was also agreed that numbers of kitchens and bathrooms installed would be brought back, along with average costings of each, in order to assist members in understanding how much work could be undertaken within the budget.

RESOLVED –

- (i) the report be notice and progress be welcomed;
- (ii) a further report be brought back to the Commission regarding the installation of new kitchens and bathrooms.

84 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

The programme of environmental improvement projects for 2014/15 was presented to the Commission. Members reiterated the importance of the programme for communities, particularly also as it attracted external contributions in addition to capital expenditure. It was stated that this was likely to result in projects costing £59,647 being implemented at a net cost to this authority of £34,704 for the 2013/14 programme. In response to members' concerns, it was reported that continuity of staffing had been achieved due to succession planning and that the momentum would be maintained.

It was noted that many of the schemes were put into the programme as a result of Conservation Area appraisals the previous year and others were unpredicted schemes that arose during the period.

RESOLVED – the schemes programmed for 2014/15 be endorsed.

85 AFFORDABLE HOUSING DELIVERY

Members received an annual update on affordable housing permissions granted, completions and projections.

Concern was expressed that delivery wasn't much higher than prior to the 40% threshold being adopted, due to developers arguing about viability, and members asked how this

could be valid in light of increasing house/land prices. It was requested that officers from Coventry City Council, who were contracted to do viability assessments on HBBC's behalf, be asked to attend a future meeting to explain the methodology behind the recommendations made. It was agreed that thought needed to be given to how to strengthen the authority's case to argue against viability claims. The Chief Executive advised members that the District Councils' Network had made a submission to government, which included a strong reference to this particular difficulty.

Concern was expressed regarding commuted sums and off-site provision of affordable housing, and the risk of affordable housing being provided off-site as part of the SUEs.

RESOLVED –

- (i) the report be noted;
- (ii) viability assessments be discussed at a future meeting.

86 PLANNING APPEALS UPDATE

The Scrutiny Commission received a six monthly update on planning and enforcement appeal decisions made. It was reported that five appeals had been allowed and four had been dismissed. Members identified that, of those allowed, all but one had been an appeal against a member decision contrary to officer recommendation.

It was noted that, whilst there was a substantial reserve for appeal costs, this would not cover all appeals, as developers tended to appoint expensive Barristers and in the event that they won, the authority often had to cover the costs of the Barristers.

A member expressed concern that the planning committee was opening the authority up to high costs to be funded from tax payers' money. In response, however, it was suggested that the issue had already been raised, other authorities were in the same position, and that whilst the Inspectorate continued to encourage development, local authorities would continue to lose appeals. The Chairman agreed to inform the Chairman of the Planning Committee of the discussion which had taken place at this meeting.

RESOLVED – the report be noted and the Chairman of the Planning Committee be informed of the debate.

87 SCRUTINY COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME 2014-2015

In considering the work programme, an update on capital projects was requested. It was felt that it would be useful for this update to be provided to the Extraordinary meeting scheduled for 17 July as the purpose of this was to receive an update on the Leisure Centre, which was usually combined with updates on all capital projects.

An update on planning enforcement was requested, particularly capacity of the service.

It was suggested that the Barwell & Earl Shilton Scrutiny Group should reconvene.

(The Meeting closed at 8.25 pm)

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CHAIRMAN