

ECONOMY AND REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 22 April 2013

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	M Johnston (Chair)	
	Councillors	J Stapleton A Hodson A Cox P Kearney	R Gregson M Sullivan S Whittingham J Williamson
<u>Deputies:</u>	Councillors	J Salter (In place of D Realey)	
<u>Cabinet Member:</u>	Councillor	G Davies	

53 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Members were reminded that they should also declare, pursuant to paragraph 18 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any item(s) to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

Councillor Stuart Whittingham declared his personal interest in agenda items 5 – Under-Occupation Scrutiny Review, 6 – Draft Housing Needs Assessment and 10 – End of Year Performance Update (see minutes 58, 59 and 62 post), by virtue of him being a Member of Wirral Partnership Homes Board.

54 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the meetings held on 16 January 2013 and 12 February (Special) 2013, be approved.

55 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION - MEMBER OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY (THEXTONS)

The Chair introduced Simon Thexton of Thextons, a construction company based in Birkenhead, who had been invited to give a brief presentation to the Committee upon the nature of the business and the factors related to its location and operation in Wirral.

Thextons had been based in Wirral since 2004 and had started as a plastering and dry lining provider. It had since expanded into other areas, including double glazing and external rendering, in conjunction with the government initiative, Green Deal. He provided detailed information of the services available under the Green Deal which had been designed to help households to increase the energy efficiency of property on a cost neutral basis with payments made through energy bills. He provided information with regard to current contracts and commented that wherever possible, the company had sought to employ local labour. He was particularly pleased to inform the Committee of the success of the apprenticeship programme and he

indicated that during the economic downturn of recent years, the company had worked strenuously to avoid laying anybody off. The business had since expanded with significant work being undertaken on behalf of tenants of social housing and it was hoped that services available under the Green Deal would soon also be available to private households.

In response to various questions from members, he commented upon the significant business support and advice from Invest Wirral, which continued to this day to help with the development of the company. He provided an explanation of the backlog for the provision of Green Deal services to private households and commented upon work that was ongoing to attract accredited suppliers to Wirral.

Resolved – That Mr Thexton be thanked for his presentation and the best wishes of the Committee be accorded to Thextons for the continued success of the business.

56 DIGITAL INCLUSION - PRESENTATION

Further to minute 37 (14 November 2012), the Council's Principal Economic Policy Officer gave a presentation on Increasing Digital Inclusion in Wirral. She referred to the significant benefits of digital technology and commented that it supported every aspect of life and influenced how individuals and businesses communicated and received services. She referred to DWP digitalisation and commented that the government proposed to deliver public services online, starting with Universal Credit in 2013, which would have significant implications for service users, Councils and social housing providers.

Digital exclusion referred to access to, and extent of use of, the internet. She highlighted the scale of exclusion nationally and across the Liverpool City Region, which indicated that in Wirral, 42,452 adults had never used the internet. Those groups less likely to be connected included older people, those with disabilities and those unemployed or on low income – those who would benefit most from online services and who would be directly affected by Universal Credit.

For all those reasons, Go ON Wirral launched last year, to promote digital inclusion for all and she outlined the activities that were being undertaken by the Council and its partners, including –

- Recruitment of digital champions
- Increasing the number and range of local places for people to access the internet and to get support to build their digital skills
- Provision of wi-fi in public places
- Increasing web access points
- NGA superfast broadband

Members expressed their concern in relation to service users being required to use the internet for access to Universal Credit and, specifically to the adequacy of the provision of suitable public IT facilities. In response to a number of questions, the Strategic Director: Regeneration and Environment reported upon ongoing work associated with the provision of high speed internet to Wirral businesses. He also agreed to provide an update to Members with regard to the provision of wi-fi in Council buildings, together with information related to affordable access to equipment and connectivity for disadvantaged groups.

Resolved – That the presentation be noted.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE: PROCESS TO ACHIEVE £2 MILLION BUDGET SAVINGS

The Strategic Director: Regeneration and Environment reported that in order to assist the Council in meeting its financial requirements, it had been determined that the Supporting People budget for 2014/2015 would be reduced by £2m per annum which, along with changes to the Handy Person Services and decommissioning of the BME Support Services in 2013/2014 meant an overall reduction of 24% to the annual budget. He had negotiated and agreed future funding arrangements for Supporting People contracted services and he provided an update on the programme, which focused on the recent key changes in terms of overall funding, funding for the main client groups and the effect on the design and delivery of housing support services.

Between 2003 and 2010, Supporting People had been a national programme with commissioned housing related support services delivered through a ring fenced budget, but since 2010 decisions and funding had been devolved to the local authority. The Strategic Director was pleased that in Wirral, the Council had taken a decision that Supporting People funding would continue to be used for the purposes it had been intended for. Consequently, the programme had had a positive impact in Wirral and currently supported over 5000 people to live independently and securely in suitable accommodation. However, the Strategic Director commented that it would be a challenge to deliver the scale and quality of provision within the current budgetary and economic environment. Nevertheless, he provided detail of work being undertaken to help ensure that clients continued to receive support, tailored to their specific needs, whilst also achieving the required budget saving by 2014.

He indicated that the achievement of efficiencies as a result of contract negotiation with service providers and remodelling of service activities had negated the requirement to conduct a tendering process, which would have been more costly and may not have realised the same level of efficiency. He confirmed that the process of negotiated contracts was compatible with the Procurement Methodology detailed in the Supported and Special Needs Housing Strategy and continued to be supported by the Council's legal services and Director of Finance under Contract Procedure Rules 21.1.1 (ii) and (v).

He provided detail of where the £2m saving would be achieved which, in summary was in the following areas –

	£k
• Services for People with Learning Disabilities	500
Re-Assessment of Process	
• Services for Older People	800
Re-Appportionment of Time	
• Services for Socially Excluded Clients	700
Efficiencies from re-modelling	

The Strategic Director assured Members that the situation would be kept under review and a series of further update reports would be presented to future meetings to keep Members informed of developments. In response to concerns raised regarding the implications of cuts to funding for work associated with domestic violence, he proposed that some benchmarking would be undertaken to ascertain the nature of provision in other local authorities.

The Chair commented that Supporting People had been an area of work that had previously been contemplated by Members to form the basis of a scrutiny review. However, Members had considered that, in view of the excellent work being

undertaken by officers in the SP team, a scrutiny review was not necessary in this area.

Resolved – That the process to achieve savings of £2m against the Supporting People Budget, be supported.

58 UNDER-OCCUPATION SCRUTINY REVIEW

Further to minute 34 (14 November 2012), the Chair presented a report of the Under-Occupation Scrutiny Task and Finish Group, which introduced the Final Report of the Scrutiny Review 'The Implications of Benefit Reforms on Under Occupation'. The Panel had consisted of Councillors Mark Johnston (Chair), Denise Realey, Jean Stapleton, Mike Sullivan and Janette Williamson and the Chair indicated that the Scope Document agreed by the Committee had identified the following key issues to be focused upon –

- The impact of the introduction of the Housing Benefit Cap;
- The impact of changes to the Local Housing Allowance, with special reference to the Shared Accommodation Rate for under-35s;
- The allocation process for Discretionary Housing Benefit;
- The impacts of the reforms relating to Under-occupation and how this affects households and communities;
- The impact of the reforms on the Social Housing sector.

The report outlined the methodology for evidence gathering during the course of the review and the Chair highlighted the 18 recommendations contained within the document, separated in terms of their implications for tenants; social housing providers; the private housing sector; the Council and its Services; and other partner organisations and their clients.

Members noted that recommendation 14 of the review proposed that a follow-up review of the impact of the reforms should be held in the future, that "an Evaluation Impact Assessment regarding the effect of the reforms on under-occupation would be conducted by the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee (or successor Committee) during spring 2014 to assess the practical impact of the reforms". The report indicated that in order for any follow-up review to be most beneficial, it would be helpful if statistical measures were put in place to evaluate the impact of the reforms on individuals, organisations and communities. Members were requested to give consideration now, to the type of data that would be required for the Impact Assessment, as early identification of the statistical measures would enable the Council and partner organisations to be aware in advance of the requirement to capture the data.

Members thanked the Scrutiny Panel for the excellent work they had undertaken and expressed support for the recommendations contained within the Scrutiny Review. In response to comments in relation to the criteria for the allocation of Discretionary Housing Payment, the Chair indicated that further clarity was required and that the Strategic Director: Transformation and Resources would be requested to ensure that all front-line staff had access to an online toolkit to enable them to sign-post clients accordingly. Members requested that, on its completion, the online toolkit be made available to partner voluntary, community and faith organisations.

Resolved –

- (1) **That, subject to the amendment of Recommendation 11, to enable the online toolkit to be made available to voluntary, community and faith organisations, the Under-Occupation Scrutiny Report be approved.**

- (2) That the Under-Occupation Scrutiny Report be referred to the next appropriate meeting of the Cabinet.
- (3) That further reports be presented to the Economy and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee (or successor Committee) to update Members regarding the progress being made towards the implementation of the recommendations.
- (4) That the following statistical measures be available prior to the proposed Follow-up Review in Spring 2014 –
 - Criteria for the fair allocation of Discretionary Housing Payments
 - The effect/impact of Benefit Reforms on landlords
 - Statistics in relation to arrears/evictions
 - Impact on homelessness referrals
 - The number of legal challenges
 - The impact of Benefit Reform on crime levels and the activities of loan sharks
 - Any other issues notified by Members to Alan Veitch
- (5) That the thanks of the Committee be accorded to the Scrutiny Panel, to residents, partners and officers, who contributed to the Scrutiny Review, in particular to Alan Veitch, Scrutiny Support Officer.

59 DRAFT HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Further to minute 35 (14 November 2012), the Head of Housing and Community Safety presented research timelines in respect of the Sub-Regional Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment. He reported that Arc 4 had been appointed as consultants on 12 April and the timeline indicated that following consultation with stakeholders, neighbouring local authorities and a Traveller Survey, a draft report was expected during week commencing 19 August, which should identify requirements for each local authority for the next 20 years. The final report, having taken account of the Council's comments was expected in week commencing 23 September 2013.

He referred also to the Strategic Housing Market Assessment and indicated that following consultation with sub-regional local authorities, required as part of the 'duty to co-operate', consultants would be appointed on 14 June, prior to the commencement of the contract on 27 June 2013. Subject to consultation with the successful consultant, an interim report was expected in week commencing 25 November, with a final report in week commencing 30 December 2013.

Resolved –

- (1) That the report be noted.
- (2) That the draft Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation report and the Interim Strategic Housing Market Assessment report be presented to future meetings of the Committee, as soon as they become available.

60 TRADER TOOLKIT AND SHOPPING CENTRE ACTION PLANS - PROGRESS REPORTS

Further to minute 47 (16 January 2013), the Head of Regeneration provided an update with regard to the development of the Trader Toolkit and reported upon

progress in relation to Town Centre Action Plans. He commented upon the positive experience of working with traders and indicated that the Trader Toolkit was now near completion and would be circulated to Members when finalised. It was anticipated that the first phase of Action Plans would be presented to the Cabinet in June, prior to commencing work on the next phase.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

61 **FAIR TRADE**

The Chair, Councillor Mark Johnston, provided a final overview report of the work he had undertaken as Council Champion for Fair Trade, having been appointed to the role by the former Leader of the Council, Councillor J Green.

Matters of note in relation to Fair Trade included the identification of champions in various sectors and the appointment of a Fair Trade Ambassador who had undertaken significant work in Wirral following a recent visit to Ghana. There had been a successful event in Heswall Hall and an award had been made to a Wirral resident who had been an active campaigner for Fair Trade for 30 years. A number of sustainable outcomes had been achieved and he was pleased to inform the Committee that Fair Trade status for Wirral had been upheld for a further 5 year term.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

62 **END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE UPDATE**

The Strategic Director: Regeneration and Environment set out the performance of the Council's Corporate Plan 2011/2014 for the period January to March 2013, and provided an overview of performance, resource and risk monitoring. The report detailed the performance of projects and performance indicators which were relevant to the Economy and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee, under the Corporate Plan themes of 'Your Economy' and 'Your Neighbourhood', and provided details of what was working well; performance against Corporate Plan targets, resource implications; future challenges and risks.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

63 **REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

Further to minute 49 (16 January 2013), the Chair provided a final update of the Committee's work programme, which provided detail of the work undertaken during the present municipal year. Members also gave consideration to what topics for scrutiny should be focused upon in the forthcoming municipal year and expressed a view that Universal Credit should be the subject of scrutiny by the appropriate Policy and Performance Committee.

Resolved –

(1) That the report be noted.

(2) That, in the light of proposed changes to the scrutiny function, the views of Members as to what issues should form the basis of the Scrutiny Work Programme for the forthcoming municipal year be fed to the Policy and Performance Co-ordinating Committee for allocation.

64 **FORWARD PLAN**

The Head of Legal and Member Services reported that the Forward Plan for the period April to July 2013 had been published on the Council's intranet/website. Members had been invited to review the Plan prior to the meeting in order for the Economy and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider, having regard to the work programme, whether scrutiny should take place of any items contained within the Plan and, if so, how it could be done within relevant timescales and resources.

Resolved – That the Forward Plan be noted.

65 **REGENERATION UPDATE (PART 1)**

The Strategic Director: Regeneration and Environment provided an update on development schemes within the Borough. He commented upon work undertaken in relation to high speed broadband and indicated that he envisaged a planning application would soon be submitted in respect of the International Trade Centre.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

66 **EXEMPT INFORMATION - EXCLUSION OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

Resolved – That in accordance with section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business, on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by the relevant paragraphs of Part 1 of Schedule 12A (as amended) to that Act. The public interest test has been applied and favours exclusion.

67 **REGENERATION UPDATE (PART 2)**

The Strategic Director: Regeneration and Environment provided a further update on development schemes within the Borough, which he anticipated would form the basis of reports to future meetings.

Resolved – That the report be noted.
