



DISCLAIMER

The attached Minutes are DRAFT. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information and statements and decisions recorded in them, their status will remain that of a draft until such time as they are confirmed as a correct record at the subsequent meeting

Agenda Item no: 7

Bristol City Council Minutes of Business Change and Resources Scrutiny Commission 16 March 2015 at 9.30 am

Members Present:-

Labour	Liberal Democrat	Conservative	Green
Councillor Brain (A) Councillor Breckels (P) Councillor Mead (P) Councillor Rylatt (P)	Councillor Campion-Smith (A) Councillor Kent (P)	Councillor Hiscott (P) Councillor Weston (A)	Councillor Malnick (P)

(P) – denotes present; (A) denotes absent

Other key members in attendance: - Councillor Gollop Deputy Mayor, Councillor Cook Assistant Mayor, Councillor Lucas Cabinet Advisor.

Key officers in attendance: - Max Wide Strategic Director Business Change, Peter Gillett Service Director Finance, Paul Arrigoni Service Director Business Change, Richard Billingham Service Director Human Resources, Sheralynn McCarthy Revenues and Benefits Manager, Paul Hill Revenue, Benefits and Rent Officer, Karen Blong Policy Advisor - Scrutiny, Steve Gregory Democratic Services.

1. Apologies for absence and substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Brain, Weston and Campion-Smith. Councillor Holland substituted for Councillor Brain, Councillor Alexander substituted for Councillor Weston and Councillor Hopkins substituted for Councillor Campion-Smith.

2. Public forum

Subject	Author of Statement	No.
Under Occupancy Charge	Councillor Kent	1

3. Declarations of interest

None received.

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the Business Change & Resources Scrutiny Commission meeting on –

(i) 5 January 2015;

(ii) 12 January 2015;

were confirmed as a correct record.

5. Action sheet

The Commission noted the current status of the actions that had been taken or remained to be completed. The Action sheet to be updated accordingly.

6. Whipping

None declared.

7. Chair's business

None reported.

8. Under Occupancy Charge

The Commission received a report from the Service Director (Integrated Citizen Services) regarding the Council's position in respect of questions raised by the Scrutiny Commission at its meeting on 15 December 2014 regarding the national legislative status of the Under Occupation Charge (UOC) and the Council's responsibilities in applying that law.

The Chair reminded members that this item had been brought to the Commission's attention following a question that had been put to the Overview & Scrutiny Management Board last autumn in relation to the cost to the Council arising from UOC legislation and if the Charge could be implemented in a way that reduced its impact on citizens.

The Commission then debated this item and the following points were made/clarified–

- a) With reference to recommendation 2 of the report a member felt that the Council should assist tenants who wished to challenge the UOC having regard to the contention that the Council would in effect be challenging itself. Officer response was that it would be inappropriate for Revenue & Benefits staff to do this but that there were other teams within the Council that could provide assistance and support to mitigate negative impact on tenants and that this should be part of the Council's approach to dealing with cases;
- b) Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) could be used to help vulnerable tenants but this needed to be understood within the context of the Government's austerity measures and that the Council's DHP fund for 2015/16 had been significantly reduced;
- c) A particular difficulty lay in the definition of a bedroom as the UOC Regulations did not define what a bedroom was or how it could be defined, although recent case law had now given further guidance;
- d) The specific needs of less able people or those with significant health issues were considered sensitively particularly having specific regard to the higher costs associated with certain conditions. The Commission were also informed that there was an ongoing review into this part of the process with an extensive consultation taking place with charities and other client groups;
- e) Families/children occupying more than one home could not be exempted but where applicable the DHP was used to assist tenants;
- f) Bedroom status was assessed on a case by case basis and if clarification was needed the room was visited for further assessment;
- g) Some tenants were given a temporary payment to cover additional housing costs to enable more time to find alternative accommodation and pension age tenants were not always affected depending on circumstances;
- j) The Commission was informed that the current assessment process was under review, in particular the DHP Policy and Policy in respect of UOC guidance regarding the interpretation of a bedroom, to ensure consistency of approach by the Council in the future.

The Commission then received a written submission from the public gallery and a verbal summary outlining their concerns in relation to the UOC and how the Council was implementing it. (A copy of this paper is kept on public record on the Commission's Minute Book). The information contained within the paper challenged some of the assumptions made and factual information presented in the report to the Commission.

The Chair was satisfied, however, with the information that had been provided regarding the Council's application of the Under Occupancy Charge

legislation and concluded that due procedures appeared to have been followed. He asked that further updates in relation to any developments regarding the policy be brought as appropriate.

Resolved – that the Commission be kept updated of future policy developments in relation to the Under Occupancy Charge.

9. Quarter 3 Monitor

The Commission received a report from the Service Director (Finance) in respect of the progress that had been made on the Council's overall financial performance including against the approved revenue and capital budgets for the 2014/15 financial year that were approved by Council on the 18 February 2014.

The Commission welcomed the overall reported position for the Council's spend against its general fund services which had improved by £2.7m. The surplus was derived from maximising grant income and seeking discount spending where possible. It was also recognised that the key issue was to translate surpluses into controlled actions eg, where spending pressures were the greatest.

The Commission were interested to know what would happen to budget surpluses and asked that information about what it would be used for and how it would be allocated, be circulated to members as soon as possible.

Resolved- that the report be noted and information about budget surpluses, as discussed, be circulated to Members as soon as possible.

10. Change Programme Monitor

The Commission received a report from the Service Director (Business Change) in respect of the regular six monthly reports to Cabinet regarding progress with the Council's Change Programme.

The Commission then debated this item and the following points were made/clarified and suggestions made –

a) a suggestion was made that housing advice teams could be placed in public libraries according to demand or by appointment to maximise the resource. It was recognised that this would need to take any lone working requirements into account but could be feasible;

b) The Commission was advised that the Council as a whole needed to get to a point whereby it made full utilisation of all its buildings to bring service provision together and in one place. It was equally important to ensure that any arrangements would need to be sustainable for the future given the level of likely expenditure reductions that would be required in the next three year MTF cycle 2017-2020;

c) With regard to outsourcing of services it was essential to ensure that the contractual standard was of a high quality so that officers and elected members retained control of quality and performance, particularly when dealing with complaints or concerns from service users;

d) Future reductions in the workforce were difficult to predict and currently the potential reduction of a total 800 (FTE) employees during the current three year MTFS remained;

e) Income generation would become increasingly important in future years and it was considered essential that policies should be clear and transparent so that efficient implementation would follow accordingly. The future role of Councillors in developing policy in this area, could include consideration of Social Need, Current Market Failure and Competitive Advantage in line with the ethos of the Council. This issue would be examined more closely at the Commissions Inquiry Day on 20 April 2015.

11. Review of the Budget process for 2014/15

The Commission received a report from the Service Director (Finance) in respect of the Budget process for 2014/15.

The Commission then considered if the scrutiny process could further add value to the MTFS budget process by engaging members at an earlier stage in the process to ensure that the process was as productive as possible. The following comments were made –

a) Some real time information was not easy to include within the statutory dispatch of agenda papers so this would be looked at to see if ways could be found to improve on this, also consideration be given to do more pre-work to prioritise work that required more in depth scrutiny;

b) More focus could be given to the three year MTFS with more intense scrutiny at the beginning of the period with fewer but perhaps more targeted scrutiny in years two and three;

c) The budget debate needed to happen before the final figures were included in the MTFS so that broad principles could be identified and avoid a 'post budget'/'line by line' analysis;

d) It was envisaged that the MTFS would also be aligned with the four year Mayoral term of office;

e) It was considered that it would be helpful if budget scrutiny membership remained consistent throughout the MTFS period to give greater consistency and allow for experience to be gained;

f) Scrutiny of the Capital Programme to be given equal attention as the Revenue budget scrutiny process.

Resolved- that the report be noted and the points raised be taken on board for future budget scrutiny process work.

12. Work Programme

The Chair reminded members that the next meeting would be held on 13 April in workshop format and the one after that would be held on 20 April as an Inquiry Day. The topics to be discussed were as set out in the Work Programme.

Resolved – that, subject to the above, the Work Programme be noted.

(Meeting ended at 12.45 pm)

CHAIR