

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

25 NOVEMBER 2013 - 2.30PM



PRESENT: Councillor Chambers (Chairman), Councillor Mrs French (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Broker, Mrs Bucknor, Hodgson, Miss Hoy, Stebbing and Sutton

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Humphrey

OBSERVING: Councillor Bucknor.

APOLOGIES: Councillor Swan

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey, Rob Bridge, Anna Goodall and Geoff Kent

OSC18/13 TO CONFIRM AND SIGN THE MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS OF 26 SEPTEMBER 2013 AND 14 OCTOBER 2013

The minutes of the meetings of 26 September 2013 and 14 October 2013 were agreed and signed.

Councillor Mrs French stated that it is not acceptable that the follow up responses from outstanding questions raised at the last meeting have only just been circulated. She added that the panel have had no time to look through the document, and asked that in future, these responses are emailed to the panel at least one week before the next meeting. Rob Bridge confirmed that the delay was due to clarification of some information which was to be included. Councillor Mrs French stated that this is not acceptable since the previous meeting was six weeks ago and is concerned that this Council does not take the Overview and Scrutiny Panel seriously.

Members stated that they would like an update with regards to transparency in relation to confidential reports at the next meeting.

*** FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL ***

OSC19/13 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT FOR 2014-15

Members considered the Council Tax Support for 2014-15 Report presented by Councillor Humphrey - Portfolio Holder for Finance.

Members asked questions, made comments and received responses as follows:

1. Councillor Mrs French stated that the report refers to additional revenue received by making changes to Council Tax and asked how many additional properties started to pay as a result of these changes. Geoff Kent confirmed that approximately 1100 additional households have now started to pay Council Tax following the changes as follows:
 - Class 'A' Exemptions - 74
 - Class 'B' Exemptions - 96
 - Class 'C' Exemptions - 808
 - Empty properties for more than 2 years - 130

2. Councillor Mrs French stated that this has been very successful. She recommended that this added detail be included in the report that is presented to Cabinet;
3. Councillor Mrs French stated that the report refers to 'Letters sent to Random Customers' and asked who random customers are, and how many were sent. Geoff Kent stated that as part of the consultation process, questionnaires were sent out to 2000 customers along with their Council Tax bills. Rob Bridge confirmed that the process involves the Council not just consulting people who are in receipt of benefits, so that the responses are mixed;
4. Councillor Mrs French stated that the report refers to the fact that 175 survey forms were completed, and asked how many in total were sent out. Geoff Kent stated that 4700 were sent to people in receipt of benefits, plus 2000 to random customers. Councillor Mrs French asked for confirmation that only 175 had been received when 6700 had been sent out altogether. Rob Bridge confirmed that 175 completed surveys had been received, he added that this was twice as many as had been received the year before when just 74 had been returned and that this was one of the highest level of responses. Councillor Humphrey stated that the important thing to consider is that people have had the opportunity to respond;
5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that people are cynical about this type of consultation and do not feel that their input will change anything;
6. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the report indicates that 68 people have responded saying that they will be financially worse off, and that she is concerned that this is before other changes to benefits etc. are introduced. If it has been identified that there will be people facing further difficulties, what assistance is the Council offering these people? What measures have been put in place to help these people before they get into major financial difficulties? Are there outside agencies involved that people can be referred onto? Geoff Kent stated that currently the trigger for non-payment is in April, people are invited to contact the Council at this early stage so that we can look at their circumstances and see what help we can offer them with regards to payment plans or referring them onto other agencies if that is appropriate. The flexibility of customers being able to make 52 weekly payments has been beneficial as it is much easier to budget. The key is that the customer needs to engage with the Council at this early stage when the letter is sent;
7. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if something to alert people to this assistance could be advertised in the local newspaper. Rob Bridge confirmed that this has been publicised in the newspaper and will continue to be;
8. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she is pleased that customers are now able to be break down the payments into 52 weekly instalments. She stated that there is a big literacy problem too and asked if there is assistance in place to help these people. Rob Bridge stated that the trigger to paying Council Tax is when the bill arrives, and around this time we move the contact centre and revenues and benefits teams around to ensure that they have the capacity to deal with the number of enquiries that come in during this time, the key is moving the resource to where it is needed most during this time;
9. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that residents are often faced with being told they are in arrears when they have missed a small payment, and there seems very little to help them to get out of a small arrears situation, there has to be a balance in these circumstances, as some people have every intention of paying, but need a bit of extra time. Geoff Kent stated that if customers approach us early when they are having difficulties making a payment we can work with them to avoid a summons. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that one resident told her that when they called the team for help they advised her just to wait for the summons, but once the situation gets to this stage the customer who was finding it difficult to make a payment has extra court costs added to the amount owed. Rob Bridge stated that the revenues and Benefits team are a great team and they work hard to help many customers, this is valuable feedback for the team;

10. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that the report refers to the survey being sent to individuals, but there is also reference made to organisations. Geoff Kent confirmed that responses are also captured from people within organisations that are assisting and supporting people on benefits. Rob Bridge confirmed that we were trying to gauge a response from all, he added that we also have to consult with the precepting authorities;
11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she had spoken to the revenues and benefits team on behalf of customer as there was a language issue. The family had missed two payments and were being told that they would have to pay the remainder of the bill in one sum, this was hundreds of pounds. Rob Bridge stated that there are strict regulations in place and triggers with regards to non-payment. Geoff Kent stated that the team would have been happy to discuss this at an earlier stage to arrange a more flexible payment plan. Rob Bridge suggested that if a response is not right members should let him know, hopefully they are isolated cases but the team can learn from this feedback;
12. Councillor Sutton stated that his experience having dealt with the benefits team was that they were very helpful;
13. Councillor Sutton stated that the Council have carried out the consultation on a 20 % increase and there have been no major obstacles to do this, he asked if it is the right decision to increase by just 14% especially if we have to increase to 20% next year anyway. Rob Bridge agreed that this is a good point to make, he stated that we will see a higher non collection rate at 20% than at 14%, there is a balance, and the conclusion was that this is the best way forward;
14. Councillor Sutton stated that other Councils did not take the 8.5% reduction from the Government and their collection rates were not affected. Rob Bridge confirmed that he has been to meetings where he has heard a very different side to this, where Council's are struggling with non-collection issues;
15. Councillor Sutton stated that there has been no negative feedback with regards to the 20% increase. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that this is an area of deprivation and it is better to take a cautious approach to this. Councillor Humphrey stated that there needs to be a balanced approach, we need to be mindful of those who are in receipt of benefits or on a low income;
16. Councillor Mrs French thanked officers, stating that this was a good report;
17. Councillor Chambers agreed and thanked Councillor Humphrey and the officers present.

(Councillor Sutton declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that he is a landlord)

OSC20/13 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Future Work Programme 2013/14 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor Mrs French stated that she is disappointed that a Planning Process Review has not been included in the work programme, as Councillor Melton, the Leader of the Council has agreed that this can be added. Anna Goodall confirmed that currently the terms of reference are being drawn up. Councillor Mrs French stated that this needs to be reflected in the Work Programme as the Leader has agreed and it should be included.

Councillor Mrs Bucknor agreed;

Councillor Broker agreed, stating that it needs to be added to the January agenda as he is getting a lot of enquiries;

Members agreed that Planning Policy should be added to the meeting scheduled for Monday 13 January 2014.

Following discussion members agreed to reschedule the Roddons Item to the February 2014 Meeting and the Wisbech 2020 Vision Update to the April 2014 Meeting.

Members agreed the Future Work Programme 2013/14 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel subject to the amendments above.

3.20pm

Chairman