

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the **Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee**
held in Committee Room 1, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney,
at 6.30pm on **Thursday 27 February 2020**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chairman); Laetisia Carter (Vice Chairman); Jake Acock, Joy Aitman, Luci Ashbourne, Jill Bull, Jane Doughty, Harry Eaglestone, Andy Graham, Nick Leverton, Neil Owen and Carl Rylett

Also in attendance: Councillors Julian Cooper and Jeff Haine.

Officers in Attendance: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive); Jon Dearing (Group Manager for Resident Services); Chris Hargraves (Planning Policy Manager); and Keith Butler (Head of Democratic Services).

59. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 January 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

60. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Suzi Coul.

61. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members or Officers in items to be considered at the meeting.

62. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chairman advised the Committee that (i) at its meeting on 2 April, the County Council's Lead Officer would be in attendance to explain the county-wide work being undertaken; and (ii) arrangements were being made for an awareness session open to all councillors to take place after the local elections in May, hopefully late in May or early in June.

63. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

Janet Wilkinson of Rollright Parish Council and John Chaplin of Swerford Parish Council each addressed the Committee in relation to the agenda item concerning resources in the Planning Enforcement section.

Mrs Wilkinson referred to 30 years of concerns over a particular issue in her parish and stated that staff turnover and a lack of coherent responses to the parish council had not been helpful. She considered that more explanations were necessary as to why enforcement action was or was not taken, and referred to promises of information as to timescales which had not been kept.

The submission made by Mr Chaplin is attached to the original copy of these minutes, and the Group Manager Resident Services undertook to reply to some specific questions which were posed.

The Committee thanked Mrs Wilkinson and Mr Chaplin for their contributions.

64. GARDEN VILLAGE AREA ACTION PLAN (AAP) UPDATE

The Committee received and considered the report of the Planning Policy Manager, which provided a brief update on the progress of the Oxfordshire Cotswolds Garden Village Area Action Plan (AAP).

In speaking to the report, the Planning Policy Manager referred to the consultation exercises which had taken place in 2018 and 2019, and the many positive responses received, particularly in 2019 with good support for the proposed vision and thematic structure of the document. He further explained that the draft AAP: (i) would be considered by Cabinet and Council in April; and (ii) would then be subject to a six-week statutory consultation process, following which submissions would be forwarded to and considered by an independent Inspector. It was anticipated that the Inspector's hearing would take place in the summer, with a view to adoption of the AAP in the autumn; and noted that an outline planning application was expected to be submitted in the reasonably near future.

Queries were then raised about infrastructure and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), and the Planning Policy Manager explained that the viability work relating to CIL was separate from the AAP process, and reminded the Committee of the consideration of CIL at the Council meeting the previous day, that evidence relevant to the Council's decisions would be available during the consultation on CIL, and that there would be a process of independent examination before the matter was finalised.

In response to further queries from Councillor Rylett, the Planning Policy Manager:

- explained that work was being carried out to seek to ensure that the garden village would have as low a carbon impact as possible. Evidence in relation to this would support AAP policies, and would be considered through the examination process
- agreed that the affordability of housing was a recurring theme, and that the AAP would seek to secure a balance of different affordable housing options, including with reference to local incomes. This would of course have a bearing on overall viability considerations
- stated that, in relation to community ownership of land, an adviser had been appointed to give advice on the potential for different options, including Community Land Trusts

Councillor Graham enquired whether it would be possible for a briefing on the AAP to be arranged for all Councillors prior to its consideration by Cabinet and Council, in order to ensure maximum understanding of the various issues, and the Chief Executive undertook to look into that possibility as soon as possible.

Comments were then made about the ongoing issue of congestion on the A40, and a request made that highways input into any Councillor briefing would be useful in that context. This was acknowledged, and the Planning Policy Manager referred to close working with county highways, and the need for the AAP to knit in with county proposals for the short and long term future of the A40 as effectively as it could, as well as facilitating opportunities for more home working and a much greater degree of walking and cycling with less focus on the use of the private car.

Finally, the desirability of the garden village being as accessible as possible in all respects was asserted.

RESOLVED: That the content of the report and the proposed next steps in relation to the progression of the Area Action Plan be noted.

65. RESOURCES IN THE HOUSING AND PLANNING ENFORCEMENT SERVICES

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager for Resident Services, which reminded it of the request for a meeting to consider the level of staffing resources in these two service areas. The Group Manager gave a presentation in relation to each of the areas, in which he outlined the main services and functions which they undertook, and explained the current staffing structure.

During consideration of planning enforcement, the Group Manager referred to the plans for improvements, in particular to reduce the proportion of staff time which was spent dealing with queries about progress on existing cases, and to improve communications with complainants, the subjects of complaints, councillors and town and parish councils. He also advised that a high proportion of complaints did not result in a conclusion that there was a breach of planning control, and confirmed that the enforcement function was not a service which was shared with other authorities within the Publica partnership.

It was suggested that there was a perception that the enforcement function was failing, but the Chief Executive stressed that judgments as to whether enforcement action was appropriate needed to be made on a case by case basis, stated that where enforcement action was taken it was subsequently possible to prosecute for non-compliance and, in relation to applications for retrospective planning permission, explained that it was often the case that imposing conditions on a permission would overcome objections or concerns about specific aspects.

In response to a question about the recruitment and retention of staff, the Group Manager stated that planning enforcement staff often moved on into other areas of development control, and that there were active steps in hand to seek for the future to develop staff in-house and to include apprenticeship and graduate schemes. He also acknowledged a point made that communications and language were important considerations, and confirmed that those aspects were part of the current review of the service and its processes.

In conclusion, the Group Manager considered that the staffing levels and structure were sufficient, and that the proposed improvements would greatly increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the service; and the Committee was reminded that details of the current staffing structure had been circulated to all members of the Council following the meeting of the Council on 22 January.

In relation to housing, the staffing structure was more complex, and included officers working at different sites, and the Group Manager reported that there were a number of staff who were specific to West Oxfordshire and, in response to a question, stated that he considered that the staff in the service did receive sufficient support in the carrying out of their duties. Councillor Doughty expressed concerns about support and the well-being of staff, and also considered that communications were not adequate, and there was too much jargon used and not enough clear explanation of situations for customers. The Group Manager did not agree with those comments, and emphasised the intensive work involved in housing matters and the provision of associated support, including a very high number of face to face meetings and visits. He considered the staffing levels to be sufficient.

During further consideration, the Group Manager answered a number of detailed questions which related to the services provided and the management and maintenance of the housing waiting list, as opposed to the level of resources, and some Councillors requested the future availability of more information and statistics to assist with the monitoring of the services provided.

The Group Manager was thanked for his attendance and input, and the Committee –

RESOLVED: That the reports on the Planning Enforcement and Housing Services be noted.

66. PROPOSED CLOSURE OF RYEGRASS, WOODSTOCK AND ST MARYS COURT, WITNEY

The Group Manager for Resident Services updated the Committee on Cottsway Housing's decisions to close the above and seek to redevelop the sites, explaining that it had not been possible for Cottsway to be represented at the meeting because of its own meeting taking place the same evening. He undertook to try to answer questions which members might have, and to seek responses from Cottsway for any others.

Introducing the matter, he (i) commented that these were clearly decisions for Cottsway to take, but that the Council was working closely with Cottsway and would continue to do so; and (ii) advised that these processes usually took round two years to complete, for the obvious reasons of the need for sensitivity and to get things right for all tenants who were to be re-housed.

Councillor Cooper was grateful for this matter being included on the agenda, and for the answers given to the questions he had raised at the meeting of the Council held on the previous day. However, he was concerned at the impact of the proposals on senior citizens who were very worried and expressing concerns, and queried whether consultations had taken place with other Housing Associations, the extent of the examination of other options for the site, and whether refurbishment would be possible. In response, the Group Manager confirmed that Cottsway had carried out an extensive assessment of the options, before reaching its conclusion that redevelopment was the preferred option, and undertook to seek additional information on that aspect.

Councillor Doughty expressed disappointment at the proposed closure of St Mary's Court, and the fact that Ward Councillors had not been advised, and the Group Manager clarified the understandable Cottsway policy to inform tenants first, and its obligation to take their wishes into account.

Councillor Leverton referred to the previous closure of a site in Carterton, and the fact that it appeared to be have been well-managed, and the tenants well looked after and satisfied.

RESOLVED: That the report and update be noted, and that Cottsway's responses to issues to be raised with them be circulated to members of the Committee in due course.

The meeting closed at 8:30 pm

Chairman