

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL: WEDNESDAY, 26 JUNE 2019

NOTICE OF MOTION – EQUALITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

(Contact: Keith Butler, Tel: (01993) 861521)

1. PURPOSE

To consider the Notice of Motion proposed by Councillor Duncan Enright and seconded by Councillor Andrew Coles at the meeting held on 24 April 2019 and referred to the Economic and Social and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committees prior to its consideration and determination.

2. RECOMMENDATION

That the Council considers the motion in light of the recommendations made by the Economic and Social and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committees at their meetings held on 30 May and 13 June, respectively.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1. The following motion was proposed by Councillor Duncan Enright and seconded by Councillor Andrew Coles, at the meeting of the Council held 24 April 2019:

“This Council is very concerned at the continued growth in use of voluntary sector emergency provisions such as food banks, and also recognises the increased demands on public services, resulting from inequality and insecurity.

The Council therefore agrees to add a statement at the end of each officer report, giving a statement or impact assessment of policies on equality and the environment in West Oxfordshire.

This will focus attention on the importance of tackling inequality, insecurity and environment, and encourage us all to look after each other and build strong community responses led by innovative and creative local government.”

3.2. The Council decided to refer the motion to the Economic and Social and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committees for consideration, prior to it being determined at this meeting.

3.3. Following consideration of the reports submitted, both the Economic and Social and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committees resolved that the Council be advised that the Committees are of the opinion that no further action should be taken on the motion.

3.4. The relevant extracts from the minutes of those meeting are included in the [Appendix](#) and Members are now invited to consider and determine the motion in the light of the recommendations.

Keith Butler

Head of Democratic Services

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Date: 17 June 2019

Background Papers:

None.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 30 MAY 2019

Members considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services which sought consideration of the Notice of Motion regarding equality and the environment referred to the Economic and Social and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committees by the Council.

Councillor Leverton suggested that the inclusion of a statement at the end of each officer report, giving a statement or impact assessment of policies on equality and the environment implied a lack of faith in Officers. The Council already had robust arrangements in place to consider these issues and highlighting this in reports would add nothing other than to suggest that it had not done so before.

Accordingly, he proposed that the Council be advised that the Committee is of the opinion that no further action should be taken on the motion. The proposition was seconded by Councillor Owen.

Councillor Graham disagreed and suggested that, by highlighting these issues as suggested, the Council would show that they were taken seriously. He did not see that flagging up such matters could have negative connotations.

Councillor Bull agreed that flagging up these issues would not be perceived negatively but questioned whether it was necessary as consideration of such issues should be the norm.

The Executive Director advised that, in developing policies, the Council was required to undertake an equalities impact assessment and/or an environmental impact assessment where appropriate. Whilst these were not generally incorporated as it was considered that to do so would add unnecessarily to a report, Officers would highlight any adverse impact likely to arise from recommendations made in a report. Whilst it was not explicitly reported, this work was carried out as a matter of course.

Councillor Acock believed that this should be evidenced in writing as, in his opinion, consideration of equality and the environment was not the norm. These issues should underpin the work of the Authority.

Councillor Ashbourne stated that she did not believe that making specific reference to equality and the environment should raise concerns. Doing so would raise these issues in everyone's consciousness and would not be viewed in a negative manner.

Councillor Leverton suggested that introducing such changes at this stage would suggest that the Council had not been 'up to speed' on such issues in the past. He maintained that it could send out a negative message and stressed that he had confidence in the strong systems that were already in place.

Councillor Beaney expressed concern that the suggested changes would become a 'cut and paste' administrative exercise. Officers were good at pointing out any adverse implications and it was the role of Members to consider these when taking difficult decisions.

Councillor Carter stressed that, in proposing the Motion, Councillors Enright and Coles had no intention of implying a lack of faith in Officers.

RESOLVED: that the Council be advised that the Committee is of the opinion that no further action should be taken on the motion.

(Councillors Acock, Graham and Rylett requested that their votes against the foregoing resolution be so recorded)

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 13 JUNE 2019

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services which sought consideration of the Notice of Motion regarding equality and the environment referred to the Economic and Social and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committees by the Council.

Whilst recognising the reasoning behind the Motion, Councillor Harvey indicated that he did not see the data to support it. He advised that, when the Notice of Motion had been considered by the Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 30 May, Christine Gore, the Executive Director – Commissioning, had advised Members that, in developing policies, the Council was required to undertake an equalities impact assessment and/or an environmental impact assessment where appropriate. Whilst these were not generally incorporated as it was considered that to do so would add unnecessarily to a report, Officers would highlight any adverse impact likely to arise from recommendations made in a report. Whilst it was not explicitly reported, this work was carried out as a matter of course.

There had also been some concern amongst Members that the inclusion of a statement at the end of each officer report, giving a statement or impact assessment of policies on equality and the environment implied a lack of faith in Officers. As the Council already had robust arrangements in place to consider these issues, highlighting this in reports would add nothing other than to suggest that it had not done so before.

The Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee had resolved to advise the Council that it was of the opinion that no further action should be taken on the motion and Councillor Harvey proposed likewise. The proposition was seconded by Councillor Postan.

Councillor Coles expressed his disquiet that Councillor Harvey had chosen to make such a proposition prior to any debate. He considered that the key factor was that, without the results of such assessments being reported, Members could not be certain that they were being carried out. Councillor Coles suggested that it was inappropriate for Members to take decisions without the outcome of such assessments forming part of the report.

The suggested practice was widespread in other authorities; it was a matter of good practice and Councillor Coles stated that he could not see why this could not be adopted as a matter of course as equality and the environment should be at the heart of everything the Council did. Whilst he did not wish to cast doubt on the ability of Officers, Councillor Coles believed that this information was essential for the Council to make informed decisions. Members would be failing in their duty if they simply took it on trust.

Councillor Leffman concurred and expressed concern that consideration of such matters by Officers could become a 'box ticking exercise'. It was irresponsible to assume that such assessments were being made and Members should ask to see

evidence that this work was being carried out and the criteria by which such assessments were being made.

Councillor Poskitt expressed her support for the Motion and indicated that she often found it difficult to see the connection to the references to the Council's Aims and Priorities in the 'Reasons' section of committee reports.

Councillor Postan indicated that Members of the Council had a basic commitment to resist inequality and a duty to comply with legislative requirements. They should question rather than apply an automatic restriction that could skew their actions and decisions. They should critically examine each case rather than skew their actions by regulation.

The proposition was then put to the vote and was carried.

RESOLVED: that the Council be advised that the Committee is of the opinion that no further action should be taken on the motion.