

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee
held in Committee Room I, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon
at 6.30pm on Thursday 24 April 2014

PRESENT

Councillors: P J Handley (Chairman); Mrs E H N Fenton (Vice-Chairman);
Mrs L J Chapman; A S Coles; Mrs M J Crossland; D A Cotterill; H B Eaglestone; J Haine;
T N Owen; L D Poole MBE and D A Snow

Also Present: D S T Enright

68. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence was received from A C Beaney; Mrs J M Doughty and Mrs H R Hibbert-Biles

The Chief Executive reported the following temporary appointments:

Mr D A Cotterill attended for Mr P D Kelland
Mr L D Poole MBE attended for Ms E P R Leffman

69. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

70. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

71. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

No submissions were received from the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

72. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATE REPORT

The Chairman advised that, with the agreement of the committee, he would be taking agenda items 8 and 9 before item no 6.

The Committee then received and noted the Chairman's update report.

73. NOTICE OF MOTION – SUPPORT FOR LOCAL PUBLIC HOUSES

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director in respect of a Notice of Motion proposed by Councillor D S T Enright and seconded by Councillor G Saul at the Council meeting held on 26 February 2014 and referred to this committee for consideration and report back to Council.

The Community Development Manager explained that the report was intended to put the notice of motion in context and outline work that had already been undertaken, relevant planning policies and campaigns in respect of retaining facilities.

Mr Enright thanked officers for presenting such a detailed report and explained that he had bought forward the notice of motion as a way of supporting public houses in the district. Mr Enright indicated that there had been a significant change in drinking patterns and this had impacted on town centre pubs particularly in market towns. As a result they were not relied upon as much and many pubs were struggling to survive.

Mr Enright highlighted that the business models for public houses varied greatly and often landlords were tied to the brewery so were only able to buy products from them putting pressure on their profitability. In addition the pub companies may have to service debt and it was often the case that the property was worth more than the business so there was pressure to convert to residential. Mr Enright emphasised that free houses operated differently and also many breweries were very supportive of tenants.

Mr Enright highlighted the challenges facing many rural pubs and the importance of protecting facilities as community hubs in these communities. Mr Enright referred to the registering of Assets of Community Value (ACV) and the possibility of developing a simple online system to allow communities to nominate and also to promote the nomination process more widely.

Mr Haine indicated that he generally supported the motion and was cognisant of the challenges facing the licensed trade in the district. Mr Haine however suggested that a lot of the problems related to the difficult economic situation and people were eating out and frequenting pubs less. The smoking ban in pubs had also had an impact and Mr Haine suggested that landlords needed to be innovative and proactive to be successful.

Mr Haine reiterated that he acknowledged the challenges facing the pub trade but suggested that it was difficult for the council to get involved in respect of beer ties as this was essentially a business decision made by a tenant. With regard to monitoring it was highlighted that the Federation of Licensed Victuallers Associations already had a role in this regard.

Mr Haine then made a proposal that Council be recommended:

“Pubs are important local assets and West Oxfordshire District Council has a record of supporting pubs across the District. They are under threat as a result of a number of pressures including the economic situation and high property prices.

Therefore the Council supports the proposal that the government help protect community pubs in England by ensuring that planning permission and community consultation are required before community pubs are allowed to be converted to betting shops, supermarkets and pay-day loan stores or other uses, or are allowed to be demolished.

In addition officers be requested to consider strengthening local plan policies regarding change of use of public houses to help protect them as community hubs.”

Mr Owen then seconded the proposal.

Mrs Crossland expressed her support for the proposal and that many of the issues related to commercial matters outside of council control. Mrs Crossland suggested that the focus

for supporting public houses should be around planning policy and testing the viability before permission for a change of use was given.

Mr Handley concurred and suggested the proposal was wide ranging and would help in giving protection to important community assets. It was agreed that there were a lot of challenges facing the licensed trade.

Mr Poole referred to the second part of the proposal and asked if there were many public houses that were susceptible to that type of development. The Community Development Manager acknowledged that there was likely to only be a small number of premises affected.

The Strategic Director highlighted planning policies that had been successful in protecting pubs in rural areas and it was acknowledged that it may be beneficial to look at the possibility of strengthening policies. Mr Poole referred to the importance of registering ACV's and whilst it offered some protection it was often difficult to prove viability.

Mr Coles asked how successful the Community Right to Bid legislation had been in letting local communities take on local facilities. The Community Development Manager advised that as the legislation was relatively new it was difficult to assess. The committee was reminded that local communities could in any case purchase pubs outside of the legislation through the commercial market.

Mr Coles expressed disappointment that the wording of the proposal by Mr Haine had not been made available to other members in advance.

Mr Haine reiterated the positive impact that existing policy had achieved in respect of rural communities. It was acknowledged that it was unlikely many pubs in the district would be changed to supermarkets or similar developments but the possibility of strengthening policy needed to be looked at including changing business premises to residential. Mr Cotterill referred to problems of pubs that had been left vacant for a number of years. The Strategic Director reminded members that whilst policy can resist change of use, the council had limited powers in respect of commercial decisions relating to premises. The change of use was governed under the Use Classes Order which was applied nationally.

Mrs Chapman indicated her support for the spirit of the original motion by Mr Enright but reiterated that a number of the issues were beyond the control of the council. Mrs Chapman highlighted that a number of village pubs had already been protected but if policy could be strengthened further it would be very positive. Mrs Chapman suggested that the district council also had a lobbying role when facilities were threatened. Mrs Chapman indicated that it would be positive to write to the local MP to advise him of the concerns and the action needed to protect local pubs.

Mr Poole, whilst acknowledging the council had no direct control, suggested that the issue could not be forgotten completely and the committee could still have a role in looking at this aspect in the future.

On being put to the vote the proposition was carried.

RESOLVED: That Council be recommended as follows:

Pubs are important local assets and West Oxfordshire District Council has a record of supporting pubs across the District. They are under threat as a result of a number of pressures including the economic situation and high property prices.

Therefore the Council supports the proposal that the government help protect community pubs in England by ensuring that planning permission and community consultation are required before community pubs are allowed to be converted to betting shops, supermarkets and pay-day loan stores or other uses, or are allowed to be demolished.

In addition officers be requested to consider strengthening local plan policies regarding change of use of public houses to help protect them as community hubs.

74. ROLLOUT OF HIGH SPEED BROADBAND

The report of the Head of Planning and Strategic Housing updating members on the rollout of High Speed Broadband in West Oxfordshire was received.

Mr Cotterill asked if the modelling exercise, in light of the additional contributions from district councils, had been completed by BT. The Business Development Officer advised that this had been completed and revised broadband coverage levels had been sent. It was clarified that no decision had yet been taken and the Cabinet would need to make a choice on the best option for the district.

Mr Cotterill expressed concern at the level of information being provided to community broadband champions about the project. The Business Development Officer advised that the Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) website provided some interactive information on coverage. The committee was then advised of the options for delivering wider coverage via BT or another provider including infrastructure other than fibre optic.

Mr Poole expressed support for looking at a wide range of options and the need to identify the right solution for each community. Mr Haine referred to the contract between OCC and BT and asked whether there was any form of payback provision within the contract. The Business Development Officer reminded members that this was a contractual matter between OCC and BT and he did not have any further details.

Mrs Chapman suggested that there were particular challenges in the district due to its rurality and the OCC contract had been looking to achieve maximum coverage across the whole county. The additional funding by the district council would help address the shortfall but it needed careful consideration how best to use the funding. Mrs Chapman emphasised the importance of involving the local community broadband champions. Mrs Chapman suggested that it may be beneficial for the Cabinet/officers to liaise with counterparts at OCC before a decision was made. A number of members concurred that this could be positive.

Mr Handley indicated that technology was changing rapidly and it was vital that full information was available when the Cabinet decided on a preferred option.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted

75. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2013/2014

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director providing an update on the work programme for 2013/2014.

RAF Brize Norton

The Strategic Director advised that officers would be meeting on 28 April 2014 to agree an agenda and date for a liaison meeting.

Meeting the Needs of an Ageing Population

Mrs Crossland advised that a new weekly session was to be held in Carterton for dementia sufferers and their families. The scheme would launch in June and provide social stimulus for sufferers and provide respite and support for families. Mrs Crossland highlighted the lack of day care provision across the district and suggested it would be beneficial if the committee received a presentation about the scheme at a future meeting.

The committee agreed with the suggestion and it was further agreed that representatives from OCC and other organisations could be invited to participate.

Marriotts Walk

The Principal Committee Officer advised that retail data was being analysed and a further meeting of the review group would be held in due course.

Leisure Contract

Mrs Crossland advised that an inclusivity visit for people with learning/physical disabilities had been held at Carterton Leisure Centre. A number of issues had arisen relating to the adequacy of the changing facilities and access to the swimming pool. Mrs Crossland indicated that there had been no response to the concerns and the group were now using facilities in Faringdon instead.

The Strategic Director undertook to investigate the matter further.

Integration of Bus Services

Mr Poole advised that he had previously suggested that it would be good for the committee to look at the integration of bus services in the district with other bus and public transport services to ensure that passengers could easily access on-going journeys.

(Mr Coles declared an interest at this juncture by virtue of being employed by Stagecoach.)

Mr Coles concurred with Mr Poole that it was a matter worthy of discussion. The Principal Committee Officer advised members that the results of a review of subsidised bus services had been published.

It was noted that the committee would need to consider a new work programme at the July 2014 meeting and it was agreed that the issue be included as a possible future item.

Review of Non-Emergency Patient Transport Services

The Principal Committee Officer reported that the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group (OCCG) was intending to undertake a consultation regarding the future of Non-Emergency Patient Transport Services.

As part of that process the OCCG would be giving a pre consultation presentation to the County Health Scrutiny Committee on Thursday May 1st. It was advised that a copy of a letter sent by the OCCG giving some more detail would be sent to members and any views could be forwarded to the Council representative on the committee Councillor Martin Barrett.

It was understood that the consultation period would run from 30th May to 8th August and there would be an opportunity for the District Council to submit a formal response at that stage. The matter would be included on the next agenda in July for consideration.

RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted subject to the issues outlined above.

76. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Chief Executive giving an opportunity for the Committee to comment on the Work Programme published on 8 April 2014 was received.

The Strategic Director advised that there would be further workshops for members in respect of the Local Development Framework.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Work Programme published on 8 April 2014 be noted.

77. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – QUARTER 3 2013/2014

The report of the Shared Head of Business Information and Change providing information on the Council's performance for the third quarter of year 2013/2014 was considered.

Mrs Chapman highlighted the red indicator for the period in relation to the average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation but that in comparison to other councils the figures were acceptable. Mrs Chapman suggested that overall the indicators were healthy and congratulated officers.

Mr Coles expressed concern at the figure relating to use of bed and breakfast accommodation and suggested it was an issue that could be looked at in more detail. It was suggested and agreed that it may be beneficial to obtain some comparative data with other authorities. Mr Poole in noting that the indicator was an average figure asked if details were available of the longest time somebody was in such accommodation. The Strategic Director advised that he did not have detailed figures to hand but there was likely to be exceptional cases where the stay was quite lengthy.

Mr Handley suggested that this was an important issue and it may be positive, as in previous years, to meet with the housing associations and obtain their views on the matter.

The committee was reminded that the year-end performance indicators would be considered at the next meeting and it may be possible to include additional commentary and data in that report.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

78. MEMBERS QUESTIONS

South Central Ambulance Service

Mrs Crossland expressed concern at recent press reports that the ambulance service had a number of vacant posts and would only be recruiting to a small percentage of those.

Mr Handley acknowledged the concern and reminded the committee of the savings the ambulance service needed to find and that the matter was being carefully monitored by the Countywide Health Scrutiny Committee. Mrs Chapman suggested that the Joint Health Scrutiny Committee and Health & Wellbeing Board had a role in ensuring that the ambulance service was performing.

Mr Handley suggested that it would be positive if Councillor Barrett attended a future meeting to provide an update on health issues being discussed. The committee expressed support for the suggestion.

Defibrillators

Mrs Fenton referred to the provision of defibrillators in local communities and asked if they were also available at the council offices. The Principal Committee Officer confirmed that this was the case and a number of staff had been trained.

Mr Coles welcomed Mr Handley back to council duties following his recent stay in hospital.

In closing the meeting Mr Handley wished those members who were standing for election good luck and expressed his thanks to those members not seeking re-election for their input to the work of the committee.

The meeting closed at 8.10pm

Chairman