

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, Oxon
at 6.30pm on Thursday 20 November 2014

PRESENT

Councillors: P J Handley (Chairman), Mrs E H N Fenton (Vice-Chairman), A C Beaney, Mrs L C Carter, H B Eaglestone, J Haine, P D Kelland, Mrs L E C Little, J F Mills, A H K Postan; D A Snow and B J Woodruff

Also Present: S J Hoare

31. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mr R A Courts and Mrs J M Doughty

The Chief Executive reported the following temporary appointment(s):

Mr J F Mills attended for Mrs M J Crossland

Mr A H K Postan attended for Mr T N Owen

32. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meetings held on 18 September 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

34. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

35. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATE REPORT

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

Mr Handley advised that he would be taking Item Nos. 8 and 9 before Item No. 6.

36. BUDGET 2015/2016

Consideration was given to the report of the Strategic Director seeking consideration of the initial draft base budgets for 2015/16, draft fees and charges for 2015/16 and the latest Capital Programme for 2014/15 revised and future years. The committee was reminded that the Cabinet was required to consult overview and scrutiny committees on its budget proposals in accordance with the Council's Constitution.

Mr Hoare, Cabinet Member for Resources, introduced the budget and highlighted that at a time when financial pressures were significant it was positive that a balanced budget was being proposed. Mr Hoare advised that the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) meant that the council was in a good position and thanked officers for their work in this regard. It was advised that key items in the proposals included maintaining the current grants budget, an increase in the living wage and an allocation of 2% for the national pay award. Mr Hoare outlined savings targets together with budget growth to meet costs arising from Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) financial cuts.

In conclusion Mr Hoare reported that no increase in council tax was proposed and free car parking would be maintained.

The Strategic Director advised that provision to repay general fund balances as a result of the increased pension fund payment made during 2014/15 was included and there was an increase of £400,000 from revenue to fund the capital programme from 2015/16 to compensate the Council's diminishing capital balances.

Mrs Carter drew attention to previous discussion at the committee and Council regarding cuts in funding by OCC for domestic violence services. Mrs Carter highlighted the consensus at the previous meeting on the need to maintain the current service levels if possible. It was suggested that the service was very important particularly at a time when demand was increasing. Mrs Carter requested that the possibility of the council providing funding to meet any shortfall in the district should be considered.

Mr Hoare acknowledged the concern and that it was another example of a public body reducing funding with other organisations needing to decide whether to plug the gap. Mr Hoare suggested there was a danger that the council could be seen as an alternative funder which would have significant implications on the budget. Mr Hoare asked that further details such as the amount required and whether funding was likely to be recurring needed to be provided and then the potential reallocation of funds could be properly assessed.

Mr Hoare suggested that it was important, in any such case, to look at options carefully to ensure that there was not duplication of work. It was recognised that the work being undertaken was important but decisions needed to be made within available budgets.

Mr Mills referred to the need to build communities through the emerging Local Development Framework (LDF) and asked if funds were available through for example leisure to facilitate cohesion in new developments. Mr Hoare advised that the New Homes Bonus may be applicable as well as developer funding. The Strategic Director referred to the new Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and that 15% was passed to local councils for such initiatives and this rose to 25% if a neighbourhood plan was in place.

Mr Kelland emphasised the importance of assessing grant aid carefully to ensure that work was not duplicated. Mr Hoare gave an assurance that the process was managed in such a way that funding was given to organisations providing a service that accorded with council priorities and was not being delivered elsewhere.

Mr Kelland sought further information regarding investments and in particular why £12m was invested at only a 1% return. The GO Shared Services Head of Finance explained that money had been invested by fund managers and this was in conjunction with the property investments the council had made. It was clarified that the £12m was immediately available and was not a long term investment. The Strategic Director confirmed that 65% was invested in the property portfolio.

Mr Eaglestone highlighted the unavoidable growth of £295,700 and asked whether this reflected cuts in funding at OCC. Mr Hoare indicated that OCC had to make significant savings and the district councils needed to consider as to whether to fund shortfalls. Mr Eaglestone suggested there was still a gap of £71,000 even if predicted savings were met. In response it was advised that increases in planning income should help meet the deficit. In response to Mr Eaglestone it was further clarified that the overall grants budget was to be retained but this did not mean that individual organisations would necessarily receive the same amount.

Mr Postan supported Mr Mills in respect of building communities and suggested it was often other matters, such as large planning applications, which drew people together. Mr Postan then questioned whether the planning fees/charges for large applications were enough and asked if a cost benefit analysis had been undertaken for shared posts.

In respect of shared services Mr Hoare advised that each proposal had to have a business case approved which included issues such as resilience of the service. The success was measured in savings achieved and customer feedback together with regular performance indicator reports to relevant member bodies.

The Strategic Director reported that fees for pre-planning application advice had been benchmarked against other authorities and were therefore comparable. The committee was advised that the service had been quite well received and there had been few complaints. The Strategic Director confirmed that the position would continue to be monitored. In response to Mr Kelland it was clarified that the charges were higher for larger developments as often more than one officer was involved and specialist advice was needed which was more expensive for the council.

Mr Beaney asked how much longer it would be possible to retain no increase in council tax. Mr Hoare indicated that as long as central government continued to provide funding to cover the cost it was feasible but it was acknowledged this may not be indefinitely. The Strategic Director reminded members that options would be reflected in the MTFS which would be approved by Council.

Mrs Carter, in acknowledging the Council's strong financial position, suggested that additional funding for services could be covered by income from the property portfolio. Mr Hoare acknowledged that councils needed to be innovative with financial planning and not be as reliant on government funding however the property income covered the loss in income from reduced interest rates and there was no excess funding.

Mr Handley highlighted the importance of receipts from the sale of housing stock to the council and suggested that options for increasing income needed to be explored. Mr

Handley, in acknowledging the benefits of many projects, indicated that value for money needed to be properly demonstrated and referred to the broadband project as an example. Mr Hoare concurred that use of taxpayers' money needed to be cost effective and outlined that broadband provision was a strategic decision that would benefit residents and businesses and be good use of money.

Mr Handley suggested that it would be beneficial for the committee to receive more detailed information on shared services and the associated savings. Mr Hoare advised that the Finance and Management Scrutiny Committee and Human Resources Committee looked at such issues in detail.

Mr Handley thanked Mr Hoare for his attendance at the meeting.

After discussion the committee:

RESOLVED:

- (a) That Cabinet be advised that the committee supports the budget proposals subject to (b) below; and
- (b) That Cabinet be asked to consider the possibility of providing funding to support the domestic violence service in light of reduced funding from Oxfordshire County Council.

37. AFFORDABLE HOUSING TARGETS

The Committee received the report of the Head of Planning and Strategic Housing updating Members with regard to progress in achieving the Council's current affordable homes target for the period 2013 to 2015 and seeking consideration of the proposed affordable housing target for the three year period 2015 to 2018 and the five-year period 2015 to 2020.

The Housing Enabling Manager introduced the report and outlined the impact that the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) had on targets. The committee noted that in the emerging local plan the policy would seek 35% to 50% of affordable housing depending on where the development was located.

The Housing Enabling Manager outlined that more recently there had been a reduction in housing being delivered and therefore the target of 800 homes over the five year period was realistic but challenging.

Mr Beaney acknowledged that the target was positive but highlighted that often, at the planning stage, less affordable homes were delivered by developers due to viability. Mr Beaney asked if the figures provided by developers were fully tested. The Strategic Director advised that viability was a key factor and the council operated within government guidelines in testing the financial feasibility of schemes. It was highlighted that some applications had been refused for this reason but there was also a danger of losing an appeal and not having any control over the tenure types in the development.

Mr Handley suggested that the council had previously done well in delivering affordable housing but it was becoming more difficult. The Strategic Director advised that Registered Providers were being more selective in bringing forward schemes as changes in the funding process meant they were taking more financial risk themselves. The committee noted that Cottsway Housing were now able to resume development.

In response to Mr Eaglestone it was confirmed that affordable housing levels for the Curbridge scheme were agreed and would be delivered as part of the programme. Mr Woodruff asked if delivery of the affordable element would mirror the phasing of the whole development. The Housing Enabling Manager confirmed that would be the case and it was further advised that roads infrastructure would come forward after the first stage was complete.

Mrs Little asked if there was a difference between social and affordable housing and whether homes were allocated to local people. The Housing Enabling Manager clarified that they were the same but within that were a number of options such as affordable rents, social rents and shared ownership. It was confirmed that the waiting list was used to identify people with a local connection and they were given priority.

Mr Kelland asked if there were less rural exception sites becoming available as this had been beneficial in delivering housing in smaller communities and suggested that it would be positive to work with local parishes to identify sites. The Strategic Director acknowledged that it was proving more difficult but there was liaison with local councils to try and identify potential development areas.

Mr Kelland suggested that self-build schemes could help and highlighted developments at Bicester where this had occurred. The Housing Enabling Manager advised that legislation was being developed that would facilitate this and it was also an area to be strengthened in the emerging local plan. Mr Postan expressed concern at developers holding land and the delay this could cause in the delivery of housing.

Mr Handley summarised the discussion and in particular that larger sites were less likely to come forward than before, the need to encourage development of affordable homes and the lack of availability of rented properties in the area.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the content of the report be noted; and
- (b) That Cabinet be recommended to adopt the proposed affordable housing target of at least 400 affordable homes in the period 2015 – 2018 and at least 800 affordable homes in the period 2015 – 2020

(Mrs Little left the meeting at this juncture)

38. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2014/2015

The Committee received the report of the Strategic Director providing an update on the work programme for the committee for 2014/2015.

RESOLVED: That progress on the Work Programme be noted.

39. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Chief Executive giving an opportunity for the Committee to comment on the Work Programme published on 11 November 2014 was received.

The Strategic Director, in response to Mr Kelland, confirmed that the CIL was linked to the local plan and the charging schedule needed member approval.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Work Programme published on 11 November 2014 be noted.

40. MARRIOTT'S WALK REVIEW

Consideration was given to the report of the Strategic Director updating on the work of the Marriott's Walk Review Group and seeking the views of the committee in respect of future reports on the issue.

Mr Kelland advised that the review had been a useful exercise and it would be beneficial to continue to monitor the health of the town centre as a whole. Mr Woodruff suggested that many towns would like to see the high level of shop occupancy that Witney had achieved.

Mr Mills asked if Marriott's Walk and the redevelopment at the Woolgate Centre had changed the focus of retail in the town and impacted on rents. The Strategic Director advised that there were now a larger number of national retailers and the two developments had created a fresh impetus to retail investment. It was agreed that the impact on secondary retail areas was something that should be monitored.

Mr Snow referred to car parking, which was cited as a major draw to many shoppers, and asked whether the car park behind the hospital would be retained. The Strategic Director clarified that the council owned the land and it was originally intended to be a temporary car park but there were no immediate proposals to change its use.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That, the report be noted; and
- (b) That, the committee continues to monitor performance by way of an annual report in the future.

41. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – QUARTER TWO 2014/2015

The report of the Shared Head of Business Information and Change providing information on the Council's performance at the end of the second quarter of year 2014/2015 was considered.

The Strategic Director updated the committee on staffing in the planning department and also the introduction of a new computer system. It was considered that it was

transitional phase and performance should improve once all staff were in place and the new system was fully operational.

In response to Mr Kelland it was clarified that the majority of planning services were not shared and the major reason for staff leaving was to go to the private sector.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

42. MEMBERS QUESTIONS

South Central Ambulance Service

The Chairman circulated a recent press article relating to the performance of the ambulance service and also the large number of paramedic vacancies. Members expressed their disappointment that despite the committee raising concerns with the Trust on a number of occasions there did not appear to be an improvement in performance.

It was suggested and agreed that the Cabinet be advised of the continued concerns of the committee and that Councillor Martin Barrett, the council representative on the joint health scrutiny committee, also be made aware and invited to attend the next meeting to provide an update on this and other health matters.

Thames Valley Police (TVP) – Crime Recording

Mr Kelland referred to the presentation given at the last meeting by representatives of TVP and the recent inspection of the force that had indicated problems with the accuracy of recording of crime.

The committee considered that it would be appropriate to draw their concerns regarding this situation to the attention of Cabinet and also to specifically make Councillor Mark Booty, the council representative on the Police and Crime Panel, aware of the issues and ask him to provide an update to a future meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.35pm

Chairman