

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 19 November 2015

PRESENT

Councillors: P J Handley (Chairman), Mrs E H N Fenton (Vice-Chairman), M A Barrett, A C Beaney, Mrs L C Carter, J C Cooper, Mrs M J Crossland, Mrs J M Doughty, H B Eaglestone, J Haine, P D Kelland, Mrs L E C Little, T N Owen and B J Woodruff

Also Present: R A Courts, R A Langridge and G Saul

39. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

There were no apologies for absence or temporary appointments:

40. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2015 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

41. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

42. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

43. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATE REPORT

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

44. BUDGET 2016/2017

The Committee received and considered the report of Frank Wilson, Strategic Director, setting out the initial draft base budgets for 2016/17, draft fees and charges for 2016/17 and the latest Capital Programme for 2015/16 revised and future years.

The Go Shared Service Head of Finance introduced the report and drew attention to the issues facing the Council over the next four years. The Strategic Director advised that the detailed position remained uncertain pending the outcome of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. Whilst the Chancellor's initial statement was expected on 25 November it would be some weeks before the necessary detail would be available to the Council.

One issue facing the Authority was the reduction in Business Rates (although West Oxfordshire had benefited from the development of solar farms in the District). The Government had indicated its intention to allow local authorities to retain 100% of Business Rate Growth but had yet to confirm how this would be divided between district and county councils. This change would not impact the budget in 2016/17 but would have a bearing in future years.

The Strategic Director advised that a 30% grant cut had been agreed between the Department of Communities and Local Government and the Treasury but it was not yet clear how this reduction would impact upon local authorities. Whilst an on-going reduction in Rate Support Grant had been assumed in the preparation of the budget, loss of the New Homes Bonus would have a significant impact upon the Authority.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Director and the Council's Officers for their work in the preparation of the budget but noted that it was difficult for the Committee to make any specific observations until details of the central funding position became clear.

Mrs Doughty questioned whether the Council would be faced with any unavoidable growth given the County Council's financial position and consequent reduction in services. In response, the Go Shared Service Head of Finance advised that, whilst trade waste disposal charges could be increased by the County, Green Waste Credits had already been withdrawn in their entirety. A reduction in the frequency of highway maintenance grass cutting had already been agreed by the County and the budget assumed an estimated reduction of 10% in the Government Admin Grant.

In response to a question from Mr Owen, the Strategic Director advised that the draft budget assumed a 1.99% increase in Council Tax for 2016/17 in accordance with the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy. At present, details of the Rate Support Grant and New Homes Bonus were uncertain and the final decision on the level of Council Tax would be taken later in the budget process when the overall funding position was clear. Should the Council decide to opt for a freeze in Council Tax as it had in the previous five years it would be necessary to place greater reliance upon the use of reserves.

Mr Beaney noted that the budget assumed a 2% increase in fees and charges where the market would bear and questioned how market resilience was determined. In response, the Go Shared Service Head of Finance advised that fees and charges were benchmarked and assessed against market trends in consultation with the relevant Heads of Service. Mr Beaney indicated that he had heard suggestions that the current 80% - 20% division of New Homes Bonus Funding between District and County Councils was to be reversed. The Strategic Director advised that, whilst there had been a degree of conjecture surrounding this issue, such a decision would be unexpected. However, the application of the New Homes Bonus was to some extent dependent upon the Government's decision on Business Rates.

Mrs Carter noted that, during consideration of the 2015/16 budget, the Committee had asked the Cabinet to consider the possibility of providing funding to support the domestic violence service in light of reduced funding from Oxfordshire County Council. Mrs Carter questioned the County's current intention in this respect. In response, the Strategic Director advised that, whilst the County had considered reducing funding for domestic violence outreach services in 2015/16, it had deferred the decision to do so for a year. He indicated that he was unaware of any intention on the part of the County to implement such a reduction in 2016/17 and advised that, should that position change and Members wish to support the County Service, a growth bid would have to be submitted and considered as development of West Oxfordshire's budget progressed.

Mr Cooper agreed that it was difficult to assess the position fully in the absence of crucial funding information and went on to express some concern that the introduction of the New Homes Bonus had given rise to an inappropriate influence on the planning process. He suggested that Thames Valley Police would also wish to take an increased share in any reallocation of central funding.

In assuming a 1.99% increase in Council Tax, Mr Cooper questioned whether it was envisaged that the Government grant previously made available to authorities freezing their tax level would no longer be available. In response, the Strategic Director advised that it was not known if such an incentive would be available in the future. If such a grant was offered the Council would have to reassess its position as the budget process evolved.

Mr Langridge noted that the overall position remained unclear hence the Council had to plan for the worst. The key decision on the level of Council Tax remained dependent upon factors as yet unknown and the impact cuts in County Council expenditure equally uncertain. The position would be kept under review as further details emerged.

Mr Handley drew attention to the increase cost of the dog warden service. It was explained that the increased figure represented the total cost of the joint service put in place between Cotswold and West Oxfordshire District Councils through UBICO and did not reflect the income provided by Cotswold for the service or UBICO for the use of Council equipment and facilities.

In conclusion, Mr Handley reiterated the difficulties facing Members in responding to the draft budget in light of on-going uncertainties.

RESOLVED: That the current budget proposals be endorsed.

(Mr R A Langridge left the meeting at this juncture)

45. DRAFT COUNCIL PLAN 2016 - 2019

The report of the Joint Head of Business Information and Change Services was received and considered, together with the revised Council Plan for 2016 – 2019.

Mr Handley expressed the hope that Phase II of the Carterton Leisure Centre development could be delivered within the life of the plan.

Mr Beaney questioned whether reference to Primary Schools in the section regarding 'Quality of Life' ought just to refer to schools. In response, the Strategic Director advised that this was a specific measure of deprivation. In response to a further question, she acknowledged that there was an error in the date of the 'Key Task' regarding means of increasing international visitors to the Oxfordshire Cotswolds, indicating that this should relate to the term of the Plan.

Mr Beaney also questioned the impact of the projected increase in levels of Council Tax within the Medium Term Financial Strategy upon the Council's objective to continue to be in the lowest 10 councils nationally. The Strategic Director undertook to investigate further and respond to Mr Beaney directly.

In response to a question from Mr Handley, it was confirmed that the financial support offered by the Council to Cotswold Broadband to facilitate the provision of high speed broadband throughout the District was to be by way of an interest bearing loan, not a grant.

In response to a question from Mrs Little, the Strategic Director advised that the Council would be prepared to consider assisting in the preparation of master plans if appropriate to do so.

RESOLVED: That the draft Council Plan 2016 - 2019 be endorsed.

46. OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL CHILDREN'S' SERVICES – CONSULTATION

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Leisure and Communities which set out a recommended response to the County Council's consultation on proposed changes to Children's' Services.

The Head of Leisure and Communities introduced the report and explained that, faced with reduced budgets and increased pressure for the provision of intensive services such as safeguarding, the County Council proposed to protect services for those in greatest need by reducing universal services. The proposed new service would see a reduction in the number of children's centres in the County from 42 to eight, reducing their role in delivery whilst focusing on targeted schemes. These proposals envisaged the retention of the centre in Witney, together with the Early Intervention Hubs.

The report's recommendation was that the Council supported option three as detailed in the report on the basis that it would bring in external funding and build resilience within the community.

Mrs Doughty indicated that she felt unable to consider any of the options until the consultation process was complete and it was clear exactly how the new service was to operate. Mr Owen questioned how the financial support proffered by the County would be allocated within Oxfordshire.

The Head of Leisure and Communities advised that, whilst the County proposed to support the community in delivering Children's Services, it was not yet clear how funding would be allocated. She acknowledged that the Council needed to know more about the detail of the operation of the service and the allocation of funding and suggested that it could respond in support of option three as suggested with a caveat to that effect.

The Strategic Director cautioned that, in failing to respond to the consultation, the Council could be perceived as divorcing itself from the process. In consequence, she encouraged Members to formulate a response.

Mrs Doughty noted that £1 Million was not a significant sum in the context of providing such services and emphasised the importance of establishing how funding was to be allocated. She also drew attention to the potential impact upon other services (including those provided by West Oxfordshire) occasioned by the loss of children's centres.

Mr Beaney concurred, questioning whether funding was to be allocated based upon population. He also expressed concern over continuing funding arrangements in the future. In response to a further question it was explained that, whilst retaining the centre in Witney, it was proposed to close those in both Abingdon and Bicester.

Mrs Carter suggested that the role played by universal children's services was not properly recognised and, whilst there was a place for the voluntary sector in supporting certain service provision, this was not the case in respect of children's services where issues involved could be a matter of life and death. Universal children's services needed to be valued and understood.

As they were at the cutting edge of communities, Mrs Carter suggested that the loss of children's centres was short sighted and would have a highly detrimental effect upon other services. There was no evidence to suggest that the extension of Early Intervention Hubs would be effective. Current provision for teenagers was failing and Mrs Carter questioned whether a mix of age groups would be appropriate.

Those members of the public who had protested against the closures felt that their concerns had not been recognised and the review of services had been carried out during the summer months when demand for services was reduced. Mrs Carter also made reference to the valuable contribution made by the service to families of those in the armed forces currently deployed in the service of their country.

Mrs Carter indicated that she was unable to support any of the options put forward by the County Council and proposed that the Cabinet be requested to respond to the consultation in the following terms:-

It is essential that we maintain universal services at our well used and desperately needed children's centres. The Council believes this to be one of the most important services undertaken by the County Council and should therefore receive a high priority.

The Council therefore resolves to work with the County Council to ensure universal services remain a key feature of service provision in our district"

The proposition was seconded by Mr Cooper.

Mr Handley suggested that the Council should make it clear that it did not support any of the suggested options and would wish to see all the existing children's centres remain open. The Council had been placed in an impossible position by being asked to respond to a consultation, the details of which were not available. Each centre had differing requirements and district councils should be afforded the opportunity to consider the matter further having been provided with further information detailing exactly how the new service would operate before any decision was taken by the County Council.

Mrs Little noted that the service helped more than just children, offering assistance to families throughout the District. She suggested that the County could look at reducing budgets within individual centres before implementing wholesale closures, perhaps reducing hours of operation. She reiterated the importance of ensuring that the service was staffed by trained professionals rather than volunteers and in conclusion, reassured Mrs Carter that service families at Brize Norton were catered for by OXPIPS, an organisation funded through SAAFA and the Carterton Town Council.

Mrs Fenton indicated that she would wish to see the existing centres remain open, emphasising the rural nature of the District. She noted that, with limited public transport, those from outlying areas would find it particularly difficult to access a centralised facility.

Whilst expressing her sympathy for Mrs Carter's position, Mrs Crossland reminded Members that it was important to remember that there were many other vulnerable groups throughout the District. Whilst important, Children's Centres were not the only

priority service provided by the County Council and Mrs Crossland cautioned against supporting these to the exclusion of all else.

Mr Cooper noted that increased mobility in the workforce meant that traditional support networks had been diminished as people became detached from their families. He suggested that any allocation of funding ought to recognise the rural nature of West Oxfordshire by applying an appropriate rural weighting.

Mrs Doughty suggested that the request for County Council representation at the Committee should be renewed and reiterated her view that all centres should remain open.

Mr Beaney stressed that all centres should be retained and expressed his support for the generality of the proposition. However, he suggested that the second paragraph could be seen as placing a burden on the District Council and should be deleted. He supported the introduction of a rural weighting and, given the lack of detailed information available to Members, agreed that the County Council be invited to address the meeting before a decision was made.

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

(Mr T N Owen requested that his abstention from voting on the proposition be duly noted)

Thereafter, having been proposed and duly seconded it was:-

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet be advised of the concerns expressed by Members as detailed above and requested to take these into account when formulating the Council's response.

47. FUTURE PROVISION OF INTERMEDIATE CARE BEDS AT CHIPPING NORTON HOSPITAL

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Leisure and Communities regarding the Council's response to the current consultation on proposals for future provision of intermediate care beds in Chipping Norton Hospital.

Mr Beaney expressed his support for the proposed response as set out at paragraphs 5.6 and 5.7 of the report and proposed that the Cabinet be requested to respond to the consultation in those terms.

In seconding the proposal, Mr Barrett advised that there was no evidence of sub-acute beds being provided at present, the unit providing only intermediate care. He indicated that some staff had already been transferred from the NHS to the Order of St John and agreed that the future of the unit ought not to be considered in isolation but in conjunction with the wider consultation on Community Hospital provision currently underway.

Concern was expressed that, whilst existing NHS staff would transfer to the Order of St John and be able to maintain existing levels of professional care, they would, over time, seek to return to the NHS and leave the unit without the capacity to maintain that service.

Mrs Doughty expressed concern that the transfer of the service to the Order of St John would result in the hospital becoming an adjunct to the existing care home and a loss of hospital facilities. Mrs Carter concurred, indicating that the current proposals represented a U-turn in the face of assurances given in the past that intermediate care beds would be retained at Chipping Norton. Given the increasingly elderly population in the area, there would be a growing need for such facilities.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet be requested to respond to the consultation in the following terms:-

Whilst the Council appreciates that OCC and OCCG are right to review the provision at Chipping Norton Hospital, it cannot support either of the two options recommended and support the continuing of the current provision until it can be satisfied that either of the options put forward will:

- provide appropriate high quality care **and beds** for local residents;
- address staff and GP concerns about the future needs of local residents;
- deliver genuine efficiencies while continuing to deliver the services people need.

Furthermore, consultation on the provision at Chipping Norton Hospital should be part of wider consultation that is planned for community hospital provision across the County.

48. DIGITAL NOMINATIONS SCHEME

The Committee received and considered the report of the Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support regarding the introduction of a digital nominations scheme on a trial basis.

Mr Owen expressed support for the introduction of the trial scheme in principle but questioned what arrangements would be put in place to assist those who were homeless or otherwise without access to the internet. In response, it was explained that two dedicated officers would be employed to assist applicants in applying on-line through public computers at the Council's offices. In addition, paper copies of application forms would be made available if required and Officers would visit applicants at their homes to assist them as necessary. In the case of the most vulnerable applicants, Officers would be able to manage the application and bidding process on their behalf using information provided by the applicants at interview.

In response to questions from Mr Beaney, the Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support advised that the larger Registered Social Landlords would be able to utilise the system upon payment of a lump sum whilst the smaller providers would pay on a cost per

unit basis. In addition, Cottsway Housing had agreed to provide a one-off payment of £25,000 to support the introduction of the scheme. With regard to Hazard assessment/disrepair, he advised that any issues caused by the tenants themselves would be dealt with through the housing provider's policy. Where two or more applicants have the same band, effective date and application date a decision on the allocation would be made by the housing provider in conjunction with the Council's Officers. In the event that a property would not be available for occupation for a considerable time this would be made clear in the advertisement. The scheme made arrangements for those occupying tied accommodation to be afforded an appropriate priority when the need arose.

Mr Beaney also identified a number of minor amendments to the policy document which the Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support undertook to incorporate when submitting the report to the Cabinet.

In response to a question from Mr Handley, the Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support confirmed that the Council's Officers would continue to provide an outreach service to ensure that the diverse needs of applicants were addressed.

Mrs Crossland expressed her support for the scheme in principle but suggested that, when two or more applicants have the same band, effective date and application date, preference should be given to those with a direct local connection. Mrs Crossland went on to express concern over the use of temporary accommodation out of the District for those who became homeless, emphasising the importance of securing accommodation close to a person's employment and support network. The Council's Officers explained that these factors were taken into account and that every effort was made to find suitable accommodation in an appropriate location. However, in some instances, when people became homeless there was no accommodation available locally and no alternative to providing temporary accommodation elsewhere.

The Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support emphasised that the new scheme would not alter the Council's approach to the allocation of properties in any way.

Mrs Little expressed her thanks to the Council's Officers for their responsiveness to individual cases in the past and was pleased to be assured that the current 'hands on' approach was to be retained.

Mr Cooper expressed surprise at the limited level of response received from Members to current allocation proposals and stressed the importance of ensuring that the introduction of the new system did not result in any group or individual becoming unable to access the necessary levels of support. He suggested that the prospective review of the trial scheme should include an assessment of the amount of time spent by staff in assisting and supporting users of the new system. The Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support acknowledged that it would be key to the success of the scheme to monitor its operation so as to ensure that those who found it difficult or were unable to engage with the process continued to be catered for.

Mrs Carter expressed her support for the scheme and, in particular, the transparency, privacy and control it offered to applicants. In response to a question, the Joint Head of

Revenues and Housing Support advised that the Shared Ownership Scheme and Help to Buy would be linked into the new system.

Mr Kelland was pleased to note that various access options would be available to address the needs of all applicants and questioned whether the site would be open to all. The Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support advised that people would only be able to view the site once their application for registration on the Housing List had been accepted but that those in under-occupied properties would be encouraged to register as experience in other areas suggested that they would be more likely to seek a transfer to a more suitable property.

Mr Woodruff expressed his support for the scheme but questioned whether the banding could be described in an alternative manner. In response, the Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support advised that the proposed banding had been found to work satisfactorily in many other areas.

Mr Eaglestone expressed the hope that the new scheme would lead to a greater degree of satisfaction amongst applicants.

Mrs Doughty expressed her support for the scheme and Mrs Crossland was pleased to note that support and assistance would be given to former members of the armed forces under the Armed Forces Covenant.

Mr Courts thanked Officers for their work in developing the scheme and Members for their comments. He saw the introduction of a Digital Nominations Scheme as a significant opportunity that would not only give rise to greater levels of efficiency within the Authority but also a far greater level of transparency for the public who would now be able to see which properties were available and make applications accordingly.

In response to a question from Mrs Fenton the Joint Head of Revenues and Housing Support confirmed that, if the project went ahead, Members would be offered the opportunity to test the operation of the system.

In conclusion, Mr Handley acknowledged that the new arrangements would deliver financial savings. He stressed that the Council's partner housing providers would need to support the new arrangements as they bedded in. Finally, Mr Handley emphasised that time and effort would be required from all those involved to ensure that all those on the Housing List were comfortable about impending change.

RESOLVED: that the recommendations set out in the report be endorsed.

49. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2015/2016

The Committee received the report of the Strategic Director providing an update on the work programme for the committee for 2015/2016.

Leisure Contract Review

The Strategic Director advised that Greenwich Leisure Limited were keen to receive feedback from Members on any matters they felt needed to be addressed.

RESOLVED: That progress on the Committee Work Programme for 2015/2016 be noted subject to the issues raised at the meeting.

50. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Chief Executive giving an opportunity for the Committee to comment on the Work Programme published on 10 November 2015 was received and noted.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Work Programme published on 10 November 2015 be noted.

51. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS –SECOND QUARTER 2015/2016

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 2015/2016 was considered.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

52. MEMBERS QUESTIONS

There were no questions from Members on matters relating to the work of the Committee.

The meeting closed at 8.45pm

Chairman