

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 7 January 2016

PRESENT

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

Also Present: R J M Bishop and R A Courts

53. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mr T N Owen and Mr B J Woodruff and the Chief Executive reported the following resignation and temporary appointment:

Mr E J Fenton for Mr P D Kelland

54. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2015 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

55. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

56. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

57. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

58. CALL IN OF CABINET DECISION - OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSED NEW MODEL FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN OXFORDSHIRE

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services regarding a call-in request relating to a Cabinet decision of 9 December 2015 in respect of a response to the County Council consultation on the proposed new model for Children's Services in Oxfordshire.

In introducing the report the Chairman acknowledged the concerns expressed by those signatories to the call-in but noted that the matter had been fully debated by the Committee at its last meeting prior to its consideration by the Cabinet. Mr Handley recognised the Cabinet's wish to respond to the consultation in a constructive matter and, by incorporating the relevant extract from the Committee's minutes, the draft response appended to the agenda fully reflected the earlier debate.

Mr Cooper indicated that widespread concern had been expressed across the full political spectrum at the last meeting when Members of the Cabinet had been present. He explained that the call-in had been initiated prior to the announcement of the local government grant settlement which had placed an even greater financial burden upon the County Council. Mr Cooper expressed his concern that, if local services such as those provided at the Woodstock Bowls and Tennis Club were withdrawn and centralised on the urban hubs, large numbers of individuals would be unable to attend and would be left isolated.

Mr Cooper suggested that, in expressing its preference for option 3, the Cabinet had failed to recognise the need to persuade the County Council to give greater priority to the provision of children's services.

Mrs Doughty expressed concern that the additional reduction in expenditure of some £20 Million occasioned by the grant settlement would threaten the outreach services proposed. Whilst hoping that the spending cuts would be deferred, Mrs Doughty feared that a further reduction in funding would result in additional cuts and threaten the proposed retention of the local hubs, not knowing how these additional savings could be found. Mrs Doughty recognised the need to respond to the consultation but stressed that it was imperative that the County Council was made fully aware of the Committee's concerns.

Mrs Doughty was disappointed that the County Council was not represented at the meeting and went on to suggest that OCC should give consideration to using its reserves to support this essential front line service.

The Chairman reminded Mrs Doughty that the Committee's role was to give consideration to the call-in request, not to the County Council's policy. He acknowledged that the financial landscape had changed as a result of the disadvantageous grant settlement that would require further cuts be made. However, this was not part of the call-in as submitted and the Committee had to consider whether or not to support the call-in request.

Mr Haine considered the proposed response to be an adequate reflection of the Council's overall position, indicating as it did that the Council's first preference would be to see existing levels of service maintained and incorporating the relevant extracts from the minutes of both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet in which Members' concerns were set out.

Whilst recognising Mr Cooper's concerns, Mrs Crossland questioned what other services he would see reduced if children's centres were to be seen as an absolute priority. Mrs Little concurred, suggesting that it was more appropriate for the County Council to take account of the wider picture and consider all services in the round.

Mr Beaney noted that the Cabinet had specified that the final response be agreed in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member and asked Mr Courts if he would be prepared to include an additional paragraph seeking a response to the specific questions raised and inviting the County portfolio holder and/or the appropriate Officer(s) to attend a future meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to explain in greater detail the way in which the proposed new arrangements were to operate. Mr Courts indicated that he would be happy to accede to this request.

In response to Mrs Crossland, Mr Cooper explained that, whilst he appreciated the conflicting demands facing the County Council and sympathised fully with the difficult decisions that would have to be taken by its Members, he considered that children's services should be given a greater priority as intervention at an early stage was cost effective, reducing future problems in large chaotic families. Expressing support for option 3 failed to fully recognise the benefits of the services provided by Children's centres.

Mrs Doughty asked Mr Courts whether he was aware of how the additional savings required by the County Council would be achieved. In response, Mr Courts advised that, at this early stage, it was not clear how such savings could be achieved. He went on to emphasise that, in its response, the Cabinet had sought to make it clear that it was equally concerned at the County's proposals. However, the consultation had not offered retention of the status quo as an option, nor did it give the opportunity to assess the running costs and range of services provided of individual centres. Whilst the Cabinet had clearly stated that the Council's first preference would be to see existing levels of service maintained, when faced with the options offered by the consultation, the Cabinet believed option 3 to be the least worst given that it gave rise to the possibility of allocating funding within West Oxfordshire through the voluntary sector.

In conclusion, Mr Handley indicated that he fully acknowledged and respected Mr Cooper's concerns. However, he was disappointed that the remaining signatories to the call-in request had failed to attend the meeting. Faced with the options set out in the consultation he believed that option 3 was indeed the least worst. By emphasising the Council's first preference was for the retention of the status quo and fully incorporating the minutes of the meetings, the draft response was both robust and reflective of Members' concerns. Accordingly, Mr Handley indicated that he was unable to support the call-in request.

It was proposed by Mr Haine and seconded by Mrs Little that the Call-in request be not supported and on being put to the vote the proposition was carried.

RESOLVED: that the Call-in request be not supported.

The meeting closed at 6:55pm

Chairman