

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 26 May 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, D S T Enright, E J Fenton, J Haine, P D Kelland, T N Owen and B J Woodruff

4. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

The Chief Executive reported receipt of the following resignations and temporary appointments:-

Mr E J Fenton for Mrs L E C Little
Mr D S T Enright for Mrs L C Carter

5. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings held on 17 March and 18 May 2016 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

7. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

It was reported that, in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure, Mr Sharone Parnes had given notice of his wish to address the Committee in relation to elements of the Committee and Cabinet Work Programmes relating to the development of the Local Plan.

Mr Parnes thanked Members for the opportunity to speak and explained that, although a Member of the Woodstock Town Council, he was doing so in a personal capacity as a local resident. He was pleased to note that the Local Plan had been identified as a priority for strategic review but reminded Members that there were other groups engaged in this process. A number of groups comprised of members of the public had become engaged, knowledgeable and proficient in the Local Plan process as evidenced by the level of response received during the consultation process.

Mr Parnes commended the scrutiny toolkit and assessment criteria devised by the Council and welcomed the desire to respond to local concerns and engage with local residents and businesses. However, Mr Parnes suggested that there was a certain anomaly between this approach and the Council's response to questions raised in relation to the Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA).

He advised that the Woodstock Town Council had requested that land to the east of the town be withdrawn from the SHELAA but had been advised by Officers that this was not possible as the SHELAA would be used to inform modifications to the Local Plan.

Mr Parnes made reference to the two Town Polls that had been held, the results of which showed an overwhelming majority opposed to the development of this site and questioned how this position could be reconciled with the considerations set out in the toolkit. He went on to question how Officers could continue to place reliance upon the viability appraisal from the previous Local Plan, indicating that Woodstock was in economic decline and suggesting that an updated viability appraisal could evidence such a change.

Mr Parnes suggested that there was some confusion in certain quarters over the description of the SHELAA as a 'high level assessment' that had fuelled the proliferation of public concern and controversy. In conclusion, Mr Parnes questioned how the Council could re-examine the SHELAA without reviewing the viability appraisal.

The Chairman acknowledged the concerns expressed and thanked Mr Parnes for his contribution. He advised that the Council would take account of all concerns expressed as part of the current review of the Local Plan and explained that the Local Plan was not before the Committee at this juncture but that a workshop was to be held on 8 July to which all members of the Council had been invited, prior to a report being submitted to the Cabinet..

Thereafter the outcome of the Cabinet's deliberations could be the subject of review by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee through the Council's usual procedures once the outcome of the current review was known.

Mr Cooper made reference to the question he had raised at the last Council meeting and indicated that the Committee was not solely confined to responding to Cabinet decisions but was at liberty to raise questions independently. He suggested that the Committee might wish to explore areas such as the consultant's brief, housing figures or the greenbelt study.

Mr Handley considered that it would be premature to consider individual aspects prior to the conclusion of the review and Mr Owen suggested that Mr Cooper might wish to obtain this information from Officers on an individual basis.

The Strategic Director advised that work was currently underway on the review of the Council's housing figures as required by the Local Plan Inspector and confirmed that this work was not, as yet, concluded. She advised that arrangements had been made for a Member Workshop to be held to receive the results of the review in July.

Mr Cooper reiterated his contention that the Committee should consider the basis upon which the consultants had been appointed and Mr Beaney enquired if Members could be provided with a copy of the brief. In response, the Strategic Director advised that this was primarily a technical piece of work and questioned whether there would be any benefit in scrutinizing the brief. However, she undertook to establish whether this document could be made available to Members.

8. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2016/2017

The Committee received the report of the Strategic Director seeking consideration of a work programme for the committee for 2016/2017.

Mr Enright suggested that the Committee could give consideration to the procurement of the leisure management contract and delivery of the current service and proposed that these be included within the Work Programme. Mr Beaney suggested that this was a matter that might well be better addressed by a working party.

Mrs Doughty concurred but Mr Woodruff considered that it should be considered at a special meeting of the Committee.

The Strategic Director indicated that the intention was for the Committee to consider its Work Programme for the forthcoming year and advised that, in addition to the leisure contract, there were a number of significant issues identified within the Cabinet Work Programme which fell within the purview of the Committee. These included the review of arrangements for the provision of the housing and rural advice service, arrangements for the future funding of supported accommodation for homeless adults and consideration of the annual Local Plan Monitoring Report. In addition, there was the annual meeting with the Area Police Commander, the meeting with partner registered social landlords and the forthcoming review of Community Hospitals. It had also been suggested that the Committee might wish to receive a demonstration of the new choice based lettings system.

Mrs Crossland expressed her dissatisfaction at the absence of the usual scheduled Work Programme, indicating that there were other matters that had yet to be concluded.

Mr Barrett suggested that the operation of the Ambulance Service be added to the Work Programme and Mr Eaglestone suggested that the West Oxfordshire Medical Centre also be invited to attend a meeting to provide an update on its progress.

Mrs Crossland suggested that activities at RAF Brize Norton should also be considered by the Committee, together with issues relating to education. In view of its impact upon the Local Plan and the availability of rented accommodation, Mr Cooper emphasised the importance of keeping abreast of the position in relation to the redevelopment of MOD properties and land in Carterton. Mr Cooper also drew attention to the forthcoming Blenheim World Heritage Site Management Plan and Mr Handley made reference to the difficulties faced by the Fire Service in recruiting fire-fighters.

(Mr Woodruff left the meeting at this juncture to attend the Ducklington Parish Council's Annual Meeting)

Members returned to the question of the leisure contract and it was **AGREED** that a working party be constituted to give consideration to the procurement of the leisure management contract and delivery of the current service.

A number of Members expressed their interest in sitting on the working party which gave rise to concern that a large membership could give rise to practical difficulties in arranging meetings. It was explained that there was no restriction on the size of working parties, nor was there a requirement for them to be politically balanced. However, it was acknowledged that such difficulties were an unavoidable consequence.

Mrs Crossland emphasised the importance of putting arrangements in place to ensure that matters arising from the Working Party were followed up and that relevant Officers attended. It was also suggested that the Working Party could meet in the various leisure facilities throughout the District. Mrs Fenton indicated that the difficulties associated with the Windrush Leisure Centre in Witney arose primarily as a result of it being too small to meet the increase in demand occasioned since its construction, suggesting that a new facility was now required.

The Strategic Director assured Members that the appropriate Officers would be in attendance and undertook to make arrangements for the first meeting of the Working Party, at which a scoping exercise could be undertaken, to be held without delay.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That a Working Party comprised of Mr Beaney, Mrs Carter or Mr Enright, Mr Cooper, Mrs Crossland, Mrs Doughty, Mrs Fenton and Mr Kelland be constituted to give consideration to the procurement of the leisure management contract and delivery of the current service.
- (b) That the Strategic Director be requested to prepare a draft Work Programme, incorporating the matters referred to above, together with any other issues outstanding from the previous year, for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee.

9. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Chief Executive giving an opportunity for the Committee to comment on the Work Programme published on 24 May 2016 was received.

In response to a question from Mrs Fenton, the Council's Business Development Officer advised that four objections had been raised to the Article 4 Directions authorised by the Cabinet in February. There were objections from owners of office park sites which would be reported to the Cabinet for further consideration in June.

In addition to the potential loss of employment sites, Mr Enright expressed concern over the impact that incompatible residential use could have upon the viability of industrial sites.

The Strategic Director outlined the work undertaken to identify relevant premises and the process involved in making and confirming Article 4 Directions and it was explained that the consultation process referred to in the report was with the relevant landholders as prescribed by statute.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Work Programme published on 24 May 2016 be noted.

10. REVIEW OF BUSINESS SUPPORT

The committee received the report of the Business Development Officer outlining support available for small businesses in the district.

Mrs Fenton questioned what steps were being taken to support the retention of small retail units when businesses were faced with increasing competition from the internet. In response, the Business Development Officer acknowledged the impact of the internet on small retailers and advised that the Oxfordshire Business Support Group ran subsidised courses designed to assist small businesses to develop their presence on the web. These were more general in nature and there could be merit in developing a programme directed specifically towards retailers.

Mr Enright suggested that, whilst presenting a challenge, the internet offered significant opportunities to businesses. He congratulated the Council on the range of business support it provided and expressed his personal appreciation of the work carried out by Mr Barton. Mr Enright went on to suggest that more emphasis should be placed on developing links between schools and colleges and local businesses, indicating that it was often difficult for students to secure work experience.

In response to a question from Mr Beaney, it was explained that the threshold at which businesses could apply for rate relief had been revised so that more premises would be eligible to receive relief. In response to a question from Mr Kelland, it was confirmed that rate relief would not be automatic and that an application would still have to be made.

Mr Kelland then made reference to the efficacy of satellite broadband and enquired whether the Council would support its use. The Business Development Officer noted that the scheme to which Mr Kelland had subscribed would not have secured external Government Funding and reminded Members that the Council had made a significant contribution towards the introduction of superfast fibre optic broadband, work on which was now underway. This project would secure close to 100% superfast broadband coverage across the District using a technology that was stable, resilient and future proof.

Mr Cooper noted that satellite broadband could provide a solution for isolated properties and the Business Development Officer confirmed that the current project offered a mixed technology solution. Whilst the widest possible access to fibre optic technology was considered to be the optimum solution, phase 2 of the scheme would provide wireless connection to any remaining hard to reach properties.

Mr Cooper made reference to the forthcoming 'Country File Live' event at Blenheim Palace and enquired what efforts were being made by the Council to promote other aspects of tourism within the District. The Strategic Director advised that the Council's tourism team had prepared a range of information and undertook to make this available to Members.

Mr Kelland expressed concern at the impact of the loss of public transport on the local economy and recalled that an update was to be submitted following the outcome of the withdrawal of county council subsidies. Mr Haine advised that discussions were still ongoing between the County Council and local bus operators and Mr Enright indicated that, as operators had to give 56 days' notice of any change to services, for revisions to take effect for the new school year, announcements were imminent.

Members thanked Mr Barton for his report and expressed their appreciation for his efforts on behalf of the District.

RESOLVED: That the update report be noted.

11. START TIME OF MEETINGS

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Democratic Services regarding the start time of meetings for the remainder of the 2016/2017 municipal year.

Members considered that it was positive to retain the current start time as it allowed members who worked during the day the opportunity to attend.

RESOLVED: That meetings for the remainder of the municipal year commence at 6.30pm.

12. MEMBERS QUESTIONS

12.1 Witney Community Hospital

Mrs Doughty advised that it had been suggested to her that the Witney Hospital was operating with a limited number of beds. The Strategic Director undertook to make enquiries and advise Members further. Mrs Doughty went on to express concern over the operation of Chipping Norton Hospital and the Chairman advised that it would be more appropriate to consider this in light of the general review of community hospitals.

12.2 Monitoring of Refuse Disposal Sites

In response to a question from Mr Kelland, the Strategic Director undertook to make enquiries as to where the responsibility for Monitoring of Refuse Disposal Sites lay.

12.3 Redevelopment of MOD Land in Carterton

Mrs Crossland advised that she had been informed that building on the REEMA North site was not now to commence before 2020/2021 – 2021/2022. She had approached the local Member of Parliament seeking his assistance in securing the release of that portion of the site destined for civilian development and enquired what steps the Council was taking to secure agreement for the division of the land.

In response, the Strategic Director advised that arrangements were being made for an Officer level meeting to be held following which the matter would be taken forward as appropriate.

Mr Handley noted that, given its relevance to the development of the Local Plan and the impact upon local school places, it was imperative that the Council was kept informed. The Strategic Director undertook to update Members at the next meeting.

The meeting closed at 8:00pm

Chairman