

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 14 July 2016

PRESENT

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

13. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs L C Carter and Mrs J C Baker and the Head of Paid Service reported receipt of the following resignation and temporary appointment:-

Mr E J Fenton for Mr M A Barrett

14. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 May 2016 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

15. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

16. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

17. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATE REPORT

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

18. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2016/2017

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

18.1 RAF Brize Norton

The Strategic Director advised that she was to attend a meeting with the Commanding Officer and his staff at RAF Brize Norton the following week during which the delay in housing development would be discussed. She undertook to update Members on the matter at the next meeting.

Mr Handley raised concerns over the levels of traffic entering the station and the impact on the cost and availability of private rented accommodation. Mrs Crossland made reference to correspondence received from the Secretary of State for Defence regarding the delay in residential development and asked the Strategic Director to press for an early start. The Strategic Director agreed to do so.

Mr Kelland indicated that he had heard that the on-going rationalisation of bases in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire could result in certain USAF assets being redeployed to RAF Brize Norton. The Strategic Director undertook to make enquiries at the meeting.

Mr Cooper enquired whether the Strategic Director had any remit to offer Council funding to unlock residential development. In response, the Strategic Director advised that there were various reasons for the delay and, whilst she had no remit to commit the Council to providing funding, the meeting would explore possible ways in which the Authority could assist.

Mr Handley advised that he had been informed that development was not now planned to commence until 2022 and Mrs Crossland indicated that the regular changes in command at Brize Norton meant that continuity was lost.

18.2 Quality of Care/Review of Community Hospitals

The Strategic Director advised that, following suggestions at the last meeting that the Witney Hospital was operating with a limited number of beds, enquiries had been made and a response had been received from the Service Director, Older People's Services, in the following terms:-

We currently have 18 beds open on each of the wards at Witney community hospital, and are aiming to get to 24 beds open on each ward. This is not the full bed capacity possible on this site, but does reflect our commitment to safer staffing, i.e. having one nurse per 6 patients. Our experience is that is necessary to provide the right responsive care for patients in this inpatient setting.

We have five new registered nurses starting over the next few weeks, and once they are inducted will be able to increase the inpatients on one of the wards to the safe maximum of 24.

We aim to follow suit in the coming weeks as we recruit and induct to the remaining nursing posts.

When we met I talked about how important it is that we have re-establish both wards at a pace which is safe, especially as we train and induct new staff. This is going a little slower than we had hoped (due mostly to some retirement due to ill-health which was not predictable).

However, we are committed to getting both wards up to 24 inpatients each as we are confident we have a full staffing establishment of properly inducted nurses.

I hope this update is helpful – please do let me know if there are any further queries, or if meeting up again soon would be useful.

Mrs Doughty advised that staffing issues had been discussed at a recent meeting of the County Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Whilst assurances had been given at that meeting, she remained concerned that recruitment difficulties, staff morale and absence rates at the unit needed to be addressed.

At the suggestion of the Chairman it was **AGREED** that the Service Director, Older People's Services, be advised that the Committee remains concerned over the under-utilisation of facilities at the Witney Hospital and would wish to see both wards capable of operating at their full capacity of 24 beds as soon as possible.

(Mr James and Mr Courts joined the meeting at this juncture)

Mrs Fenton proposed that the Committee request Officers to investigate proposals for changes to the provision of maternity and paediatric services at the Horton Hospital, Banbury, and possibly to other services across the county, and to prepare a robust response on behalf of the Council, at the appropriate time, to be agreed by either the Cabinet or the relevant Cabinet Member, depending upon any deadlines for responses, given the importance of these services in the districts.

The proposition was seconded by Mrs Doughty who advised that the Oxford University Hospital was seeking to develop outpatient facilities to offer residents the option of attending the Horton Hospital as well as the John Radcliffe in Oxford. Day surgery appointments were also to be decentralised and more services were to be available at Witney.

Mrs Fenton emphasised the importance of the Horton Hospital to those residents in the north of the District and, in response to a question from Mr Kelland, confirmed that her proposition was directed towards any and all existing facilities.

Mr Handley noted that public transport to the Horton Hospital could be difficult and suggested that the Committee needed to keep this in mind as there were often instances in which patients had little choice as to where they were to receive treatment.

18.3 Marriotts Walk

It was noted that retail premises both in the Marriotts Walk development and in the remainder of the town appeared to be trading well. Mr Handley noted that the provision of free car parking was a significant boost to the economic vitality of the District's market towns. The Committee **AGREED** that there was little merit in receiving further updates as a matter of course and to delete this item from the Work Programme.

Mrs Doughty thanked Officers for their efforts to resolve the concerns expressed by local residents and traders regarding recent unauthorised use of the Woodford Way car park.

18.4 Police, Fire and Ambulance Services

Given the suggestions made at the previous meeting, the Strategic Director indicated that, as arrangements were in place for the Committee to receive an update from the Police Area Commander in September, that meeting could concentrate primarily on the emergency services and representatives of the fire and ambulance services could also be invited to attend. The Committee **AGREED** to this approach.

18.5 Welfare Reform Act – Meeting with Registered Social Landlords

Given the foregoing decision, it was **AGREED** that arrangements be made for this to be dealt with at a special meeting of the Committee.

18.6 Integration of Public Transport

The Chairman invited Ms Leffman to address the Committee regarding the possibility of the Council providing assistance in response to the withdrawal of County Council subsidies to bus services.

Ms Leffman outlined the impact of the withdrawal of subsidised bus services, indicating that there had been a particularly severe impact upon those in rural areas reliant upon these services. She advised that a local group had been formed to consider ways in which assistance could be provided. It had been suggested that a co-operative be formed to commission local services across the District.

Initial set-up costs would be in the region of £800 and, whilst acknowledging that there was no defined budget provision for the purpose, Ms Leffman expressed the hope that the Council might consider funding this initial expense to enable the project to commence.

In response to a question from Mrs Crossland, Ms Leffman advised that County Council funding to the Voyager service had also been withdrawn but that the group had links with those operating that service and would be able to seek suggestions from them. Mrs Crossland also advised that the group could seek funding from local councils and Mrs Doughty suggested that local supermarkets might be prepared to offer assistance.

Mr Haine advised that, whilst local councils may well be prepared to assist, he had found local supermarkets unhelpful in relation to other transport initiatives.

Mr Eaglestone advised that the Witney Town Council had established a working party to consider this issue and Ms Leffman confirmed that the group had been in touch. Mrs Little noted that the withdrawal of transport subsidies was not only an issue in rural areas as the service between Carterton and Swindon was also being withdrawn.

Mr Handley indicated that the District Council was not able to pick up the county council funding and noted that the discontinued services could not be run on a commercial basis as they did not attract sufficient numbers of passengers.

Mr Cooper indicated that the withdrawal of local services led to a loss of cohesion in the public transport network as a whole. He considered the initiative was worthy of further exploration and questioned whether the Cabinet could be requested to make a contribution towards establishing the project.

Mr Handley advised that the Committee could make such a request and suggested that such a project would enable towns and villages to help themselves by working collaboratively. Mr Handley questioned whether there was a need for a working party or whether it would be more appropriate to make a request directly to the Cabinet.

In response, the Strategic Director advised that, as there was already an established group looking to pursue the project, there was little merit in the Council duplicating their work. Given that the sum involved was quite small, she suggested that the Committee might wish to submit a request to the Cabinet directly.

In response to a question from Mr Handley, Ms Leffman confirmed that the group was looking at services throughout the District. Mr Handley then proposed that the Cabinet be requested to give consideration to providing financial assistance to the group in the sum of £800 to meet the initial set up costs. The proposition was seconded by Mr Haine and on being put to the vote was carried. Ms Leffman thanked Members for their consideration and support.

18.7 Leisure Management Contract Working Party

In response to a question from Mr Kelland, the Strategic Director advised that the current leisure management contract with GLL had been extended to August 2017 and explained that the procurement process designed to establish a new contract had to accord with procurement regulations.

Mrs Crossland indicated that there were still issues with the current contractor in terms of service delivery and suggested that contract monitoring should be more robust. Mrs Doughty agreed that performance indicators needed to be closely monitored.

It was noted that arrangements were to be made for the next meeting of the Working Party to take place in early September and Members expressed a preference for an evening meeting on a Wednesday.

18.8 West Oxfordshire Medical Centre

It was noted that Mr Eaglestone had agreed to undertake further enquires before seeking to have this matter included in the Committee Work Programme.

18.9 Blenheim World Heritage Site Management Plan

In response to a question from Mr Cooper, the Strategic Director undertook to investigate and provide an update on the timescale for the review of the Management Plan

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Service Director, Older People's Services, be advised that the Committee remains concerned over the under-utilisation of facilities at the Witney Hospital and would wish to see both wards capable of operating at their full capacity of 24 beds as soon as possible.
- (b) That Officers be requested to investigate proposals for changes to the provision of maternity and paediatric services at the Horton Hospital, Banbury, and possibly to other services across the county, and to prepare a robust response on behalf of the Council, at the appropriate time, to be agreed by either the Cabinet or the relevant Cabinet Member, depending upon any deadlines for responses, given the importance of these services in the districts.
- (c) That the Cabinet be requested to give consideration to providing financial assistance in the sum of £800 to meet the initial set up costs in establishing a co-operative to commission local public transport services across the District.
- (d) That, subject to the amendments detailed above, progress with regard to the Committee's Work Programme for 2016/2017 be noted.

19. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Head of Paid Service giving an opportunity for the Committee to comment on the Work Programme published on 24 June 2016 was received.

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

20. DIGITAL NOMINATIONS SCHEME

The Committee received a demonstration of the new Digital Nominations Scheme.

Mr Andy Glaves and Mr Iain Silverton of Locata outlined the operation of the software and responded to a range of questions raised by Members. In particular, concerns were expressed over the possibility that those without access to the internet or with limited IT skills would be disadvantaged or excluded from the bidding process.

It was explained that the system was designed to highlight those who appeared to be having difficulty accessing or using the system.

Where individuals found difficulty in operating the system, arrangements could be put in place for bids to be made automatically or for staff to manage bids on their behalf.

When it was highlighted that people were unable to complete applications, arrangements could be made for staff to conduct home visits to support them in getting access to the system.

Whilst the system was easy to navigate, it was also designed to bring those who were vulnerable out into the open. Once identified, it would be easier to support individuals through the system.

It was noted that the system functioned equally well with all operating systems and was automatically optimised for a full range of devices.

In response to a question from Mrs Doughty, it was confirmed that training would be given to Members to enable them to help their constituents. Mr Cooper suggested that local councils should also be kept abreast of developments to enable their staff to deal with enquiries.

Whilst Members expressed a range of views regarding the presentation of the site, it was noted that the site as displayed was not in the final form. The design could be tailored to individual authorities' requirements and was solely based on functionality, not corporate branding.

In response to a question from Mr Handley, it was confirmed that staff would continue to make home visits to support those who found difficulty on accessing the system and that printed information could still be provided. The Group Manager of Revenue and Housing Support Services advised that there would be two dedicated Officers to undertake this work.

Housing was recognised as a very important Council service and it was vital that the Authority looked after the needs of those most vulnerable.

Mr Courts indicated that the cost savings secured as a result of the majority of applicants becoming self-managing meant that more resources would be available to help the most vulnerable. The time saving offered was gigantic and would allow Officers to prioritise those in greatest need of help. Mr Courts reiterated that staff would continue to make home visits and provide printed documentation where required.

(Ms Leffman left the meeting at this juncture)

Mr Glaves indicated that, whilst the concerns expressed by Members were valid, previous experience in many different areas had shown that they were not realised. The intention was to include rather than exclude vulnerable individuals and the system was designed to do this by identifying those in need so that staff resources could be directed towards them.

Mr Glaves also advised that Locata would undertake a health check of the system and associated processes 12 to 18 months after it became operational to identify any areas in which improvements could be made.

RESOLVED: That the information provided be noted.

21. LOCAL PLAN MONITORING REPORT

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Planning and Strategic Housing giving details of the Council's Local Plan Monitoring report covering the two year period from 1 April 2014 until 31 March 2016.

The Planning Policy Manager advised that a total of 246 residential units had been completed in 2015/2016 with a significant additional number in the pipeline.

Mr Fenton noted the discrepancy between the number of residential units approved and the number completed and questioned whether there was anything the Council could do to encourage developers to build out approved schemes. It was explained that, not only could the Council not dictate the market, it was assessed against the number of completions, not the number of consents.

The Strategic Director advised that recently published information suggested that, nationwide, there were some 100,000 approvals yet to be commenced. It was difficult for a Local Planning Authority to be judged on delivery when the Council was not the deliverer. The Planning Policy Manager also advised that the time taken to conclude Section 106 agreements also contributed to delays on larger sites.

Mrs Crossland questioned to what extent delays in delivery were caused by delays in finalising legal agreements between developers and the County Council. In response, the Planning Policy Manager advised that, whilst it was difficult to quantify, he was certainly aware that resource pressure at the County Council was a contributory factor.

It was **AGREED** that Officers be requested to write to the County Council and the local Member of Parliament to advise of the Committee's concern with regard to delays in the completion of Section 106 agreements.

Mr Cooper thanked Officers for a comprehensive report and went on to express his concern that, despite the efforts and costs involved in their development, the Planning Inspectorate did not appear to be giving great weight to Neighbourhood Plans. He questioned why few Rural Exception Sites were coming forward, emphasised the need to address the impact of traffic on the A4095 in Bladon, drew attention to the number of applications refused as contrary to policy and the level of contributions derived through S106 agreements, questioned the increase in private housing rents and noted that the list of heritage sites made no reference to Blenheim Palace.

Mr Cooper also enquired whether representations had been made to Oxford City Council encouraging them to address the issue of unmet housing demand through their housing market assessment. In this regard, the Strategic Director advised that, at its last meeting, the Oxfordshire Growth Board had agreed an estimated figure for the City's overspill, although the City Council considered this to be under-stated as areas identified did not include sites in the City. The First consultation document on the review of the City's Local Plan acknowledged the need to look at sites within the City. The City Council's assumptions would be challenged by both Members and Officers.

In terms of Neighbourhood Planning, the Planning Policy Manager indicated that the onus was on the Local Planning Authority to evidence that it held a five year housing supply and that in the absence of an adequate supply, planning appeal decisions could potentially run counter to emerging Neighbourhood Plans. Mr Handley noted that Neighbourhood Plans could not be used to preclude development but must have a commitment to growth. The Planning Policy Manager indicated that Neighbourhood Plans could be used to address a variety of issues and could be as comprehensive or as focussed as their sponsors wished.

There was reluctance amongst landowners to release land as exception sites when there was the hope of securing designation for market value housing. Mr Handley questioned whether it was possible to pay a premium above exception site values to secure sites. In response, the Planning Policy Manager advised that, whilst the NPPF recognised cross subsidy, landowners often sought to maximise their returns.

Mr Fenton noted that the percentage of heritage assets deemed to be at risk had reduced and questioned whether this was because certain properties were no longer at risk or, conversely, whether they had in fact been lost.

(Post Committee Note: The main types of entry on the heritage at risk register for West Oxfordshire are places of worship and archaeological remains. In relation to places of worship there is naturally 'churn' in the number of properties held on the register as issues are periodically identified (e.g. the need for a roof replacement) and addressed (e.g. through heritage lottery funding). In relation to archaeological remains, the majority are on agricultural land and Historic England have undertaken more detailed work to ascertain the precise extent of risk to particular sites and have concluded that some sites can be removed from the register e.g. where shallow or no ploughing is employed thereby reducing the risk).

In response to a question from Mr Kelland, the Planning Policy Manager explained that the letter recently sent to local councils regarding the Local Plan was advisory only and intended to elicit their views on potential development sites within their areas.

Mr Handley advised Members that a further Member Seminar on the Local Plan would be held in September

RESOLVED: That the content of the Local Plan Monitoring report be noted

22. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – YEAR END 2015/2016

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Leisure and Communities providing information on the Council's performance at the end of the year 2015/2016.

In response to a question from Mr Fenton, it was explained that there was no particular reason for the relatively low number of decisions upheld at appeal during the first quarter of the year.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

23. LEISURE MANAGEMENT CONTRACT WORKING PARTY

The notes of the meeting of the Leisure Management Contract Working Party held on 7 June 2016 were received and noted.

24. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Mr Kelland noted that it was important to ensure that questions raised by the Committee received a response.

Mr Haine made reference to difficulties that had been encountered by the Villager bus service in securing parking provision in the Woolgate car park in Witney and enquired whether there was anything that the Council could do to assist. In response, the Strategic Director advised that Officers were aware of the problem but had established that the Council was not in a position to influence matters.

The meeting closed at 8:45pm

Chairman