

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee
held in Committee Room 1, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon
at 2.00pm on Thursday 20 March 2014

PRESENT

Councillors: J F Mills (Chairman); H G Davies (Vice-Chairman); M Brennan; Mrs E M Coles; D A Cotterill; C Cottrell-Dormer; P J G Dorward; W A Goffe; Mrs L E C Little; and Dr E M E Poskitt

Also Present: Councillor A D Harvey

56 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mr M A Barrett, Mr H J Howard and Mr D E Millard

57 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 30 January 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

58 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

59 PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

60 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2013/2014

The Committee received and considered the report of Ralph Young, Strategic Director, giving an update on progress with regard to the Work Programme for 2013/2014.

The Chairman noted that the 2013/2014 Work Programme was substantially complete and invited Members to consider cancellation of the next scheduled meeting. The Committee could then consider its annual report and 2014/2015 at the first meeting of the new Municipal Year.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the meeting of the Committee scheduled to be held on Thursday, 1 May 2014 be cancelled.
- (b) That progress on the Committee Work Programme for 2013/2014 be noted.

61 CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

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

The Strategic Director advised Members that the report on options for the future delivery of public protection services related to the production of an initial business case. Whilst the full scope of the service had yet to be finalised, it included the Environmental Health and Licensing Functions. The report was still in the course of preparation and may slip back in the Cabinet Work Programme.

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

62 UPDATE ON FLOOD RESPONSE AND FUTURE ACTION

The report of the Head of Environment and Commercial Services providing an update on the Council's response to flood events during December 2013 – February 2014 and highlighting the actions undertaken to mitigate flood risks was received and considered, together with an update on the continuing discussions with Thames Water.

In response to a question from Mr Cotterill, the Strategic Director advised that whilst costs incurred in responding to the events of Winter 2013/2014 had been in excess of those expected in less extreme weather conditions, they would be mitigated to some extent by Central Government funding through the Bellwin scheme. In any event, costs had been significantly less than those incurred during flooding in 2007.

The Chairman advised that the Council would continue to maintain pressure upon the Environment Agency to dredge the sand-bar upstream from Bridge Street in Witney. Mr Harvey indicated that the Environment Agency had intended to carry out this work last autumn but had been compelled to respond to more pressing issues. The work was to be undertaken once the river level fell. The Environment Agency was also continuing its dialogue with the Parish Council over flood attenuation and alleviation measures in Crawley on which the District Council's comments had been sought. The final flood assessment report was expected to be published shortly.

Mr Harvey also advised that the County Council, as the lead flood authority, had held a flood forum on 1 March at which the District Council had made representation on flooding in Witney and the Environment agency had outlined its plans for flood alleviation work on the River Windrush. He noted that difficulties arose when flooding closed the highway bridges at Minster Lovell and Crawley, directing all traffic through Bridge Street with the consequent detrimental impact upon air quality.

The Chairman expressed his appreciation of the work carried out by the District Council's Officers since 2007 and Mr Harvey reflected that recent events had demonstrated that this work had paid dividends. The Council would continue to schedule the maintenance of those ditches for which it was responsible and take steps to ensure that other riparian landowners fulfilled their responsibilities.

The Committee then went on to consider issues relating to Thames water and the response received to the questions that had been raised by Members.

Mr Mills made reference to the recent meeting that he and the Vice-Chairman and Strategic Director had held with the Company and stressed that, whilst the Council had limited statutory powers, it would continue to maintain pressure upon Thames Water to address problems within the District.

(Mrs E M Coles joined the meeting at this juncture)

Mr Cotterill invited the Area Planning Manager to comment upon the impact of further development upon flooding in Brize Norton. In response, the Area Planning Manager indicated that this could well be dependent upon scale. Whilst Thames Water frequently raised objection to development on grounds of inadequate capacity, it did not raise objection to development itself. In such instances, whilst the Company might secure developer funding to undertake survey work, piecemeal development did not give rise to sufficient funding to address the issues identified. It was more likely that large scale development would provide the critical mass at which sufficient developer funding would be secured to enable infrastructure improvements to be made.

Mr Cotterill also questioned whether it could be argued that the lack of sewerage capacity was grounds for reducing residential development targets.

Mr Cottrell-Dormer enquired whether steps could be taken to make individual property owners ensure that surface water was kept out of the sewerage system. In response, the Strategic Director advised that this was to be addressed in the future through impending legislation requiring larger new developments to have sustainable drainage systems. However, there was an historic problem in older properties arising from combined sewers and illegal drainage connections which were difficult to identify. Thames Water were fully aware of this and were working to identify and resolve such issues.

In response to a question from Mrs Little, the Chairman explained that Thames Water had been delayed in offering a response to Members as priority had to be given to dealing with recent flooding events.

In response to a question from the Chairman, the Strategic Director advised that water companies were obliged to accept flows from developments once planning permission had been granted.

If there was a failure in the drinking water supply, companies were under a statutory duty to make alternative provision within 24 hours. However, should the sewerage system fail, there was no such requirement upon the water companies, the responsibility for alternative provision falling to the District Council. Mr Cotterill noted that water companies were penalised by OFWAT when sewage entered a property and it was confirmed that a record of such instances was maintained.

Members concurred with the Chairman's suggestion that the Committee draw this anomaly to the attention of the local Member of Parliament, seeking his support for a change in the legislation.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the information set out in the report be noted.
- (b) That the local Member of Parliament be advised of the Committee's concern in respect of the disparate statutory responsibilities outlined above.

63 SERVICE REVIEW – PROVISION OF PUBLIC CONVENIENCES

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Environment and Commercial Services detailing the findings of a public convenience service review and making recommendations to improve service provision and better manage service costs.

Mrs Coles reminded Members of the significance of tourism to the local economy and emphasised the importance of providing facilities for visitors. Dr Poskitt noted the recommendation not to provide or operate any additional toilet facilities and suggested that, given their wish to see such facilities provided in the Parish, the Bladon Parish Council be formally advised of this proposal.

In response, Mr Harvey advised that West Oxfordshire had sought to identify a suitable site within the parish and had been unable to do so, particularly as any new facility had to be Disability Discrimination act compliant. The Parish Council was well aware of the position as the Council had sought suggestions from them in the past. Dr Poskitt also stressed the importance of adequate signage indicating hours of operation.

Mr Davies expressed surprise at the costs associated with certain facilities and his support for the recommendation to close one of the conveniences in Eynsham. He acknowledged the importance of tourism to the District but suggested that financial constraints might require the Council to reconsider the issue in the future.

Mr Harvey thanked the Head of Environment and Commercial Services for her report, indicating that he believed it was the right time for the Council to review its policy. He expressed support for the proposed rationalisation of facilities in Eynsham and consultation with the Parish Council. He indicated that charges needed to rise to help offset increasing costs and noted that instances of vandalism were more prevalent in areas with urinals than in those where only cubicles were provided due to access arrangements.

Mr Mills noted that the facilities in Langdale gate were well used and asked that this be taken into account in reaching any decision as to their future. In response to a question from Mr Brennan, the Head of Environment and Commercial Services advised that the installation of water free urinals would be considered as part of a wider range of energy and resource saving measures.

In response to concerns raised by the Chairman, the Head of Environment and Commercial Services advised that any instances of anti-social behaviour resulting from a change in opening hours would be monitored and noted that hours could be revised to address any difficulties that arose. She also indicated that no significant problems had been experienced in other areas that had reduced opening hours.

Mr Cotterill noted that the conveniences in the car park at Burford were widely used and noted that an increase in fees to 20p was comparable to that charged by Cotswold District Council.

In response to concerns expressed by Dr Poskitt, the Strategic Director confirmed that, whilst they could not give change, the units would accept various denominations of coinage.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Cabinet be recommended to:-
 - (i) approve policy option A - that the Council maintains existing discretionary provision of public conveniences but does not provide or operate any additional toilet facilities unless a suitable source of funding or delivery can be identified which does not place additional pressure on existing service budgets.
 - (ii) approve the provision of baby changing facilities and Radar locks for disabled cubicles at all sites.
 - (iii) adopt a policy to maintain existing separate urinals in addition to cubicle provision, but to install no further urinals and replace urinals with cubicles when they require routine replacement.
- (b) That, subject to consultation with the Parish Council, the Cabinet be recommended to close one of the Eynsham facilities to generate estimated direct revenue saving of £9,100 per year, with the potential to make additional savings on overheads in addition to building maintenance cost savings. Whilst building maintenance planned and reactive costs vary, it may be possible to achieve an average reduction in expenditure of £2714 per year. Accordingly, the Cabinet be further recommended to consider the feasibility of closing both existing conveniences and their replacement with one central facility
- (c) That, subject to consultation with the relevant Town and Parish Councils, the Cabinet be recommended to reduce opening hours to 07:30 – 19:30 year round at all facilities except High Street, Burford, Guildenford Car Park, Burford and Hensington Road, Woodstock which will remain open until 21.00 during the summer to support the tourist trade.
- (d) That the Cabinet be requested to recommend to Council that charges be increased to 20 pence per use from 1st April 2014, with charges applied at all facilities as soon as alterations can be made.
- (e) That the Cabinet be requested to recommend that the Council approves the one-off Capital provision of up to £25,000 (including contingency sum) required to fund the recommendations above which will generate an annual saving estimated at £27,331.

64 UPDATE ON WASTE SERVICE CONTRACT

The report of the Head of Environment and Commercial Services updating members on the current waste and recycling collection contract was received.

Mrs Coles made reference to an information leaflet produced by the Council which classified non-recyclable materials left at the bring sites as 'fly tipping' and questioned whether the designation had been changed from 'side waste'. In response, the Strategic Director advised that the description in the leaflet was intended to discourage residents from leaving non-recyclable materials at the bring sites by emphasising it to be unacceptable behaviour. However, for both contract and DEFRA reporting purposes such material remained classified as 'side waste'.

Mrs Coles enquired when 'pink bin' recycling facilities would be provided to collect small electrical equipment in Chipping Norton. In response, the Head of Environment and Commercial Services advised that the Council would seek to identify a suitable location. Mrs Coles suggested that the New Street Car Park could be an appropriate site. Mrs Coles then made reference to a request submitted by the Mayor of Chipping Norton that the District Council provide skips for the collection of bulky waste. In response, Mr Harvey advised that this facility had been discontinued some years ago as changes in legislation required that such arrangements were continually supervised. He went on to explain that the Council was seeking to identify ways in which the problems experienced in New Street Car Park could be addressed.

Dr Poskitt expressed surprise at the cost of providing the 'fly away plastic' recycling service. In response, Mr Harvey explained that such costs were incurred as this material was difficult to handle and had a limited residual value.

The Chairman suggested that the introduction of co-mingled recycling collection in place of the current method of kerbside sorting could reduce some of the problems experienced and ensure that public support for recycling was maintained. Mr Harvey advised that this option was under discussion as a potential way forward and noted that waste collection and recycling was a rapidly developing field in which preferred operational methods could quickly change.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

65 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

The Head of Environment and Commercial Services undertook to respond to concerns regarding damage to grass verges by recycling vehicles raised by Mr Goffe on behalf of a local resident. Mr Goffe went on to express his appreciation of the litter picking carried out on highway verges throughout the District.

Mr Dorward raised similar concerns regarding damage to verges and Mr Harvey undertook to raise these with the Council's contractors.

The meeting closed at 3:05pm

Chairman