

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 11 September 2014

PRESENT

Councillors: J F Mills (Chairman), H G Davies (Vice-Chairman), M A Barrett, R J M Bishop, A S Coles; Mrs E M Coles, D A Cotterill, C Cottrell-Dormer, P J G Dorward, H B Eaglestone, Dr E M E Poskitt and A H K Postan

Also Present: A D Harvey

14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mr M Brennan and Mr P Emery

The Chief Executive reported the following temporary appointment:

Dr E M E Poskitt attended for Ms E P R Leffman

Mr H B Eaglestone attended for Mr H J Howard

15 MINUTES

Mr Coles asked if a letter had been sent to the local MP regarding continued concerns in respect of flooding issues. The Chairman confirmed that it had been sent but no response had been received to date, it was agreed that a copy of the letter be circulated to members.

RESOLVED: That, the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17 July 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

17 PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

18 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2013/2014

The Committee received and considered the report of Ralph Young, Strategic Director, providing an update on the work programme for 2014/2015.

Waste Contract

Mrs Coles expressed her thanks for the pink electrical recycling bin that had been provided in Chipping Norton.

Mrs Coles asked about the implications on the contract of Kier having to regularly clear excess material from the bring sites. The Interim Shared Head of Environment & Commercial Services advised that this was a problem throughout the district and that discussions were on-going with the contractor regarding responsibilities and options for future maintenance of the sites. It was further outlined that options for additional bring sites in Chipping Norton were being explored. Mrs Coles thanked officers for their work on the issues.

Mr Coles asked about CCTV and monitoring of sites where problems were being experienced. The Interim Shared Head of Environment & Commercial Services advised that enforcement was important but a determination needed to be made as to the cost effectiveness of CCTV.

RESOLVED: That, progress on the Committee Work Programme for 2014/2015 be noted.

19 CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Chief Executive giving the opportunity for the Committee to comment on the Work Programme published on 19 August 2014 was received and considered.

RESOLVED: That, the Cabinet Work Programme published on 19 August 2014 be noted.

20 OPEN SPACE GRASS CUTTING

The Chairman advised that he intended to take Agenda Item No. 8 before Item No. 7.

The Committee received a presentation from The Environmental Engagement & Landscape Manager of the mapping system used to identify areas of ownership and responsibility for grass cutting. It was explained that the system also allowed other things such as woodlands and planning matters to be identified.

The Interim Shared Head of Environment & Commercial Services advised that the main concern related to different organisations having responsibility for grass cutting in the same area. As a result there could be a difference in the frequency and standard of maintenance and it was hoped in the longer term to achieve uniformity of cutting.

Mr Harvey outlined the background to the mapping exercise and that detail of ownership and frequency of cutting was important in looking to improve the situation. It was clarified that the district council was contracted to undertake grass cutting five times a year by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) but this was actually done more frequently.

The Environmental Engagement & Landscape Manager advised that the mapping system could be updated to ensure data was always accurate. Mr Coles reported that he had used the system and it had been very useful in identifying who was responsible for particular parcels of land.

Mr Mills highlighted that cuts in funding by OCC for grass cutting could be significant and so it was an opportune time to look at the issue. In response to Mr Barrett it was confirmed that the system could identify trees that were subject to preservation orders.

Dr Poskitt asked whether maintenance schedules were in place. It was confirmed that schedules were in place but it was reiterated that the frequency and standard varied between the responsible bodies. Mr Mills reminded the committee that a full report would be presented in due course to look at options for a more cohesive approach.

Mr Harvey highlighted the work already undertaken and that there could be a wide range of options to consider in making the process more efficient. Mrs Coles highlighted the problems with unadopted highway and verges and that lack of maintenance could lead to highway safety issues.

Mr Postan asked how the accuracy of the information was checked. The Environmental Engagement & Landscape Manager confirmed that information could be checked with Land Registry and this had been done in respect of all district council owned land. In response to Mr Cottrell-Dormer confirmation was given that the mapping system covered the whole district and not just the main settlements.

Mr Mills suggested that queries from the public regarding grass cutting were increasing and further budget cuts may exacerbate the situation. Mr Harvey advised that discussions were on-going with OCC and all the district councils were making representations.

RESOLVED: That the information be noted.

21 RESPONSE TO DRAFT LOCAL FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The report of the Interim Shared Head of Environment & Commercial Services seeking consideration of a response to the Oxfordshire County Council Draft Local Flood Risk Management Strategy was received.

Mr Mills advised that he had received representation from the Witney Anti Flood Group who had hoped to speak at the meeting but were unable to do so due to other commitments.

Mr Mills reported that the group had recently received a copy of the Initial Witney Flood Alleviation report produced by the Environment Agency (EA) into possible flood prevention measures to protect the centre of town. A copy had also been circulated to members of the committee. It was highlighted that there had been enormous disruption to local traffic that resulted from the 2007 floods as well as the extensive damage to properties in Bridge Street. The group considered that a major cause was displacement of flood water from its previous collection areas of the Aquarius housing development.

The EA report identified the option of creating flood defences, referred to as the West End flood barrier (Option 5) as a comprehensive solution to protect the town centre of Witney from flooding. The group highlighted that whilst it states that the present cost-benefit calculation do not justify this option, it notes that it could be linked to the West End link road project or be funded locally.

The Witney Anti Flood group believed that trying to move forward on the Option 5 basis should be our main aim, particularly as it will also alleviate some of the major traffic problems in the Witney area.

On behalf of the Witney Anti Flood group and all the local Witney residents who are potentially affected by flooding, the group requested support and involvement in adopting the West End Flood barrier as part of the local transport, housing and flood prevention strategy.

The Interim Shared Head of Environment & Commercial Services introduced the report and explained that Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) was now the lead flood authority and they had been tasked with producing a strategy document. It was emphasised that it was a high level strategic publication and was not dealing with specific wards and areas. The Sub-Committee was advised that the views of officers were outlined in the report for consideration.

The Strategic Director advised that this was the first draft of the document and was a big task for OCC to co-ordinate. It would provide a framework and over time the information would be more detailed and priorities agreed. It was emphasised resources would also need to be clearly identified.

Mr Cotterill referred to the difficulty in identifying the large number of riparian owners. Mr Mills suggested that some kind of register of owners would be beneficial. Mr Postan concurred and then highlighted the work done by the district council, particularly Lawrence King, in helping local communities. Mr Postan indicated that full hydrological surveys of rivers were important particularly in light of the increasing number of development proposals.

Mr Harvey reminded members that a lot of work had been undertaken and reports published following the 2007 floods. Mr Harvey expressed concern that the strategy did not appear to acknowledge the issue of rurality and the impact this had when undertaking a cost benefit analysis. Mr Harvey further suggested that there should be more reference to the impact of flooding on businesses.

Mr Mills referred to page 3 of the strategy and suggested that there needed to be more focus on the issue of sewer flooding as this was a significant problem. Mr Mills highlighted that Thames Water had data on the extent of sewer flooding but this had not been made publicly available and suggested that OCC as lead authority may be able to access it. Mr Mills also suggested that OCC could show a lead to riparian owners by maintaining their own areas better and highlighted problems at Bridge Street, Witney where there had been a build-up of silt under the bridge as an example.

Mr Coles concurred and highlighted that document was not very detailed regarding finance and often referred to projects only going ahead if funding permitted. Mr Coles suggested that the impact of a flooding incident would cost a lot more in the longer term. Mr Coles referred to new development being encouraged only in low risk areas and suggested this needed to be strengthened further.

Mr Cottrell-Dormer that without an action plan the document had no real impact. Mr Mills reminded members that once the strategy was in place then aspects of it could be challenged further. Mr Harvey suggested that a proper timescale needed to be included.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet be recommended:

- (a) That a response be sent to Oxfordshire County Council in line with the officer views shown in the Strategy Document Feedback table and Appendix B to the report; and
- (b) That the following additional comments be submitted as part of the response:
 - That the strategy document should make reference to the rural nature of West Oxfordshire
 - That greater emphasis should be given to the impact of flooding on businesses
 - That there should be more detailed information regarding sewer flooding resulting from excess rainfall.
 - That a timescale in respect of the strategy should be included

22 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

There were no member's questions.

The meeting closed at 2.58 pm

Chairman