

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee
held in the Council Chamber, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon
at 2.00pm on Thursday 26 November 2015

PRESENT

Councillors: D A Cotterill (Chairman), P Emery (Vice-Chairman), R J M Bishop, M Brennan, A S Coles, H B Eaglestone, Mrs E H N Fenton; E J Fenton, Miss G R Hill, H J Howard, Dr E M E Poskitt, A H K Postan and Mrs C E Reynolds

Also Present: A D Harvey and R A Langridge

31 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mr P J G Dorward

The Chief Executive reported the following temporary appointments:

Mrs E H N Fenton attended for Mr M A Barrett

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

32 WOODLANDS AND OPEN SPACES – VOLUNTARY GROUPS

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Juliet Curry and Mr David Colbourne, representing Witney Woodland Volunteers, and Ms Sharon Williams, Project Director for the Wychwood Project to the meeting.

The committee then received a presentation from Witney Woodland Volunteers in respect of work they were undertaking in the district. A copy of the presentation is attached to the original copy of these minutes.

Mrs Curry outlined the history of the group, maintenance work and planting that was undertaken in the town and links to other organisations.

Mr Howard asked if the volunteers had considered obtaining charitable status as this could provide benefits to an organisation. Mrs Curry advised that this had not been considered to date but was something that they could look at in more detail.

Mr Harvey thanked the volunteers for their hard work and in particular the initiative to attract more bees to sites. Mr Harvey expressed disappointment that there had been issues with the council contractors collecting rubbish and green waste for the volunteers and that he could be contacted if problems continued.

Mr Langridge referred to the provision of interpretation boards and suggested that the Community Grants Scheme may be able to assist in this regard. Mr Coles expressed his support for the work that had been undertaken in his ward and the improvements that had been made to the environment of the area.

Mr Fenton asked if the volunteers had considered seeking support from garden centres to help with their work. Mrs Curry advised that the trees needed to be of a native species and they had a reliable supplier who offered a good price on plants. Mr Howard suggested that sponsorship of schemes or trees may help. Dr Poskitt reported that trees had been planted in Woodstock and second hand tree guards used which had saved money.

Ms Williams then gave a presentation which is appended to the original copy of these minutes. The governance of the project, area covered, financial issues and key achievements of the project were outlined.

Mr Harvey suggested that West Oxfordshire was lucky to have such vibrant groups working together in the area. Mr Cotterill expressed his support for the project and in particular the wide range of innovative schemes being undertaken.

Mr Howard asked if any assessment was made of improvements delivered as a result of particular schemes. Ms Williams advised that a system for monitoring and evaluating projects was being developed.

Mr Cotterill thanked Ms Williams for her attendance at the meeting and for the work being undertaken by the Wychwood Project.

33 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That, the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17 September 2015 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

34 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

35 PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

36 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2015/2016

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director providing an update on progress with the committee work programme for 2015/2016.

Waste Contract

The Strategic Director advised that, to date, over 2000 online responses had been received to the public consultation on the waste service. Members were encouraged to make constituents aware of the consultation. It was noted that a workshop was to be held for town/parish councils on 7 December 2015.

The Strategic Director clarified that responses would be assessed and an options paper presented to the next committee meeting for consideration. The committee was advised that the current contract expired in October 2017.

Mr Cotterill asked about the tender process and possible implications for the timescale. The Strategic Director advised that once options were identified then timescales could be agreed. Mr Harvey clarified that the timescale could be impacted depending on whether there was an open tendering process which would require advertising.

Mr Postan asked about recruitment issues for the contractor due to pay rates. The Strategic Director acknowledged the concern and advised that this was not unique to this contract and she would respond in due course once further information was available.

Flood Prevention

Mr Coles advised that he was in contact with the Environment Agency regarding river flooding issues in Witney. Mr Harvey highlighted de-silting and other works that were being undertaken in Bridge Street and that these should be completed soon.

Open Space Grass Cutting

Mr Fenton asked about progress with mapping responsibility for grass cutting in the district. The Strategic Director referred to the pilot scheme with parishes but it had been problematic getting responses to progress matters.

Mr Harvey advised that a lot of mapping work had already been done and that work was on-going with Witney Town Council and Eynsham Parish Council. Dr Poskitt indicated that the map did not appear to be available online as yet. The Strategic Director undertook to clarify the position and advise members accordingly.

Mr Coles advised that he understood that some land exchanges were being considered in Witney. Mr Harvey confirmed that a report was scheduled to be considered by Cabinet but no decisions had yet been made.

Mr Howard suggested that the most efficient solution would be for responsibility to lie with the local town/parish council or group of councils. Mr Harvey responded that the project had started some time ago and concurred that a single contractor in a parish would be the ideal. Mr Harvey however reminded members that often responsibility was outside the control of individual councils and this could cause issues.

Mr Langridge highlighted budget cuts being proposed by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) with regard to grass cutting and that this council would have to make decisions as to whether it wished to absorb costs.

Car Park Strategy

The Strategic Director reported that the consultants were continuing their work and this would then be analysed for consideration in April/May 2016. Mr Cotterill asked about the terms of reference for the strategy and how the timescale would fit in with possible capital funding requirements. The Strategic Director undertook to respond separately but acknowledged that a strategy needed to be in place before the financial implications could be assessed.

Recycling Bring Sites

Mrs Reynolds asked if there was any update regarding problems with the site at Sainsbury's in Witney. The Strategic Director responded that she was not aware of any further issues but would clarify the position with the responsible officer.

Mr Brennan referred to the new Asda supermarket in Carterton and asked if the bring site was to be retained in the car park. The Strategic Director reported that initial indications had been positive and generally Asda had a good reputation for hosting such facilities.

Mr Fenton asked about progress with the introduction of CCTV at Carterton. Mr Harvey indicated that this would form part of any discussions with Asda. Mr Harvey also highlighted a recent successful prosecution for fly-tipping and that another case would be forthcoming.

Mr Howard highlighted the pressure on the site on the council car park in Carterton and suggested that larger receptacles may be required. The Strategic Director agreed to look at the situation further.

Mr Cotterill referred to fly tips that were being investigated and asked how long the labelled rubbish was left. The Strategic Director indicated that it would remain for as long as the investigation was on-going but would check as to whether any specific timescales were also in place.

RESOLVED: That progress with the Committee Work Programme for 2015/2016 be noted.

37 CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Executive giving the committee the opportunity to comment on the Cabinet Work Programme published on 10 November 2015.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Work Programme be noted.

38 BUDGET 2016/2017

The report of the Strategic Director seeking consideration of consider the initial draft base budgets for 2016/17, draft fees and charges for 2016/17 and the latest Capital Programme for 2015/16 revised and future years was considered.

The Go Shared Service Head of Finance introduced the report and drew attention to the issues facing the Council over the next four years. It was highlighted that an issue facing the Authority was the reduction in Business Rates income as result of appeals. The Go Shared Service Head of Finance advised that a reduction in Rate Support Grant had been assumed in the preparation of the budget in line with the current Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and loss of the New Homes Bonus would have a significant impact upon the Authority.

The Go Shared Service Head of Finance further advised that budgets had been reviewed and re-based saving £454,800 whilst the unavoidable growth implications of OCC budget cuts would need to be carefully considered during the budget process.

Mr Langridge, Cabinet Member for Resources, indicated that he was happy to respond to any questions and highlighted that the implications of the Autumn Statement would also need to be taken in to account.

Mr Langridge drew attention to the proposed 2% uplift on fees and charges, where the market would bear, and advised that he would be recommending a freeze in fees for market traders to try and encourage trade.

Dr Poskitt referred to staff costs and asked if recent changes to the level of the living wage had been taken in to account. The Go Shared Service Head of Finance confirmed that the draft budget and calculations reflected the changes.

Mr Postan highlighted the potential implications of OCC budget cuts. The Go Shared Service Head of Finance confirmed that this was reflected as far as possible in the MTFS. Mr Langridge referred to changes in green waste credits and whilst not impacting on this budget this could be significant in the future.

Mr Howard referred to the possible closure of waste facilities, increased fly-tipping, recycling of some materials and trade waste and suggested that these could have financial implications for the council.

Mr Harvey reminded members that the council had objected in the strongest possible terms regarding the potential closure of Dix Pit. In respect of recycling materials Mr Harvey advised that this would be an important part of the new contract. Mr Harvey indicated that trade waste was a matter to be considered in light of the transfer of responsibility to Ubico.

Mr Coles highlighted the possibility of charging for green waste in the new contract and asked if figures were available for uptake when the council previously charged. Mr Harvey confirmed it was approximately 3,000 households compared to 33,000 for the current free scheme. Mr Bishop indicated that informal feedback from local councils in his ward was that people would be prepared to pay for a green waste service.

Mr Coles referred to the work of Wild Oxfordshire (formerly Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum) and suggested it would be positive to restore a grant of £1,000 to the organisation to support their work. Mr Langridge thanked Mr Coles for his suggestion and it would be considered as part of the process.

The Go Shared Service Head of Finance highlighted the recent Comprehensive Spending Review and advised that a lot of additional information was required before the impact on the MTFs could be assessed and was something that would need to be borne in mind at the budget setting meeting.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet be advised that the committee endorses the current budget proposals.

(Mr Langridge left the meeting at this juncture)

39 DRAFT COUNCIL PLAN 2015 - 2019

Consideration was given to the report of the Joint Head of Business Information and Change Services seeking views on the revised Council Plan for 2016 to 2019.

Mr Howard referred to the commitment to construct Phase 2 of Carterton Leisure Centre and expressed the hope that it be built to the highest environmental standards with any initiatives such as solar panels being incorporated at the construction stage and not retrospectively. Mr Howard asked that this be reflected in the plan.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet be advised that the committee endorses the Council Plan subject to consideration of the addition regarding Carterton Leisure Centre.

40 THAMES WATER UPDATE

The report of the Head of Democratic Services providing the committee with an update in respect of issues that have previously been discussed with regard to Thames Water was received.

Mr Howard advised that the site meeting had been very positive and Thames Water now had a better understanding of the current and proposed level of development in the Brize Norton/Carterton area. As a consequence Thames Water was revising their approach regarding the disposal of sewage. Mr Howard suggested that the level of development may require consideration of a new treatment facility in the area.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted

41 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – QUARTER 2 2015/2016

Consideration was given to the report of the Shared Head of Business Information and Change providing information on the Council's performance at the end of Quarter 2 2015/2016.

Mr Coles referred to indicator PP5 and asked if the staffing issues had been resolved. The Strategic Director confirmed that the team was now at full strength.

Mr Fenton questioned whether it was necessary to have both PP5 and PP6 as they appeared to cover the same area. The Strategic Director advised that the indicators were currently being reviewed and this could be considered as part of the review.

Mrs Reynolds sought clarification regarding changes to monitoring as shown in the commentary to indicator SS6. The Strategic Director indicated that when a change was first implemented then it needed to be assessed over a period of time to get an accurate baseline.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted

42 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Buffer Zones

Mr Postan referred to the presentations earlier in the meeting and the work that was being undertaken to plant trees in buffer zones to protect them. Mr Postan suggested that it was important for communities to protect such areas particularly when development was being considered.

Publicity of Prosecutions

Mr Howard suggested that it was important to publicise to the public that there had been successful prosecutions for environmental issues such as fly-tipping. The Chairman advised that press releases were issued and the council advised local councils so plenty was already being done. Mr Harvey concurred and emphasised that the council would always act in such cases.

The meeting closed at 3.45pm

Chairman