

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee  
held in Committee Room 1, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon  
at 2.00pm on Thursday 30 March 2017

### PRESENT

Councillors: Mr D A Cotterill (Chairman) A H K Postan (Vice-Chairman), R J M Bishop, M Brennan, A S Coles, P J G Dorward, H B Eaglestone, P Emery, E J Fenton, H J Howard and Ms E P R Leffman.

Also Present: Mr D S T Enright and Mrs C E Reynolds

#### 46 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs E H N Fenton and Miss G R Hill.

#### 47 MINUTES

**RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2016 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### 48 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

#### 49 PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

#### 50 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2016/2017

The Committee received and considered the report of the Strategic Director which gave an update on progress in relation to its Work Programme for 2016/2017.

#### 50.1 Waste Collection Contract

Mrs Reynolds provided an update on the introduction of the chargeable garden waste service. She advised that the service had been launched in January when letters were sent to all households inviting them to register for the service. As at 23 March, some 19,380 households had signed up for the service, a figure which exceeded expectations and generated an income of £666,360 to the Council. In addition, there had been just over 50 requests for sack collections from households unable to accommodate a wheeled bin.

Mrs Reynolds advised that the only problem experienced was the result of the overwhelming initial response which had led to people having to wait for long periods on the telephone when calling customer services. Additional staff resources had been deployed to address this additional workload. The new service was to commence on 1 April.

Mr Cotterill noted that, prior to the introduction of the chargeable service; some residents had a number of bins but had only obtained one licence. He enquired whether the Council would collect the bins no longer required. In response, Mrs Reynolds advised that the Council would adopt a flexible approach, collecting unwanted bins on request but allowing their retention for other purposes if required.

Ms Leffman asked if residents could change to a sack collection if they had already obtained a licence for a wheeled bin. In response, Mrs Reynolds advised that, as a sack collection was proportionately more expensive, it would only be available where the property layout prevented the use of a wheeled bin.

Ms Leffman also indicated that she had received complaints from a number of residents who were unable to access the internet to pay on-line. Mrs Reynolds advised that a handful of complaints had been received and that Officers had sought to resolve these where possible. On-line payment had been adopted to avoid the cost of raising invoices.

Ms Leffman also made reference to difficulties experienced by the Woodstock Town Council in accessing the new service.

Mr Coles advised that he had received some complaints that it had not been possible to pay for the service by cash or cheque at the Town Centre Shop. He suggested that this situation needed to be addressed and questioned why paying in cash should give rise to additional costs. In response, Mrs Reynolds undertook to provide Mr Coles with a detailed response.

Mr Coles also suggested that it was unfair that residents moving within the District could not transfer an existing licence to their new address. In response, Mrs Reynolds advised that this had not given rise to any issues when the service was introduced in Cotswold District. She undertook to revisit the arrangements in the event that particular difficulties arose. The Strategic Director advised that residents moving within West Oxfordshire would be able to rely on the licence at their new property should such exist. She reaffirmed that the Council would review the position if necessary.

Finally, Mr Coles questioned whether the Council could introduce a single payment arrangement for a one-off collection service. Mrs Reynolds agreed to explore the suggestion further once the service became established.

Mr Howard noted that recent local press reports indicated that some 22,000 licences had been issued, not 19,000 as previously indicated. Mrs Reynolds explained that some households had purchased multiple licences

## 50.2 Thames Water Flood Prevention and Infrastructure Issues

The Committee noted that Thames Water had advised that the company had completed all sewer flow surveys and, whilst some signs of infiltration within the sewers had been detected, ground water levels had been falling over the monitoring period. The company had commissioned some CCTV surveys of the sewers running next to or under watercourses in order to identify infiltration as these sites were likely to have the highest probability of inflows.

In February a CCTV survey of the foul sewer that parallels the watercourse between Carterton Road and Brize Norton Sewage Pumping Station on Station Road was undertaken. This identified one occurrence of gushing infiltration where a sewer joint had failed and a degree of sediment, roots and debris built up. This information had been passed to Thames Water Operations for action.

The two drier than average winters experienced since the start of this work had inhibited some of the investigations as it is the nature of infiltration that it is extremely difficult to investigate when it is not actually occurring. This was likely to have an impact on the programme

Over the summer Thames Water would continue to enhance the long term monitoring of flows within the rising mains and permanent depth monitors within the sewers. Rather than trying to define the strategy based on what had been found to date and reporting in November this year as originally planned, the intention was to extend monitoring and investigations over the winter of 2017/18. However, the additional funding required to extend these investigations was subject to Board approval, which it was hoped would be secured by the end of next month. If the programme was extended, an interim report would be produced towards the end of the summer detailing the findings thus far and the plan for the next year.

The Chairman reminded Members that the Committee had agreed to invite representatives of Thames Water to attend a future meeting and, whilst it was acknowledged that the sewer flow surveys remained inconclusive, suggested that they attend the next meeting.

Ms Leffman made reference to on-going problems in Ramsden, indicating that it was important for Members to know how the Company was dealing with known problems. The Chairman suggested that, as this specific issue had already been reported, the matter should be referred to Ofwat as it could bring pressure to bear to resolve the issue.

Mr Howard agreed that representatives of Thames Water should be invited to attend the next meeting and suggested that it would be helpful if the Head of Planning and Strategic Housing was also present given that, whilst there were recognised capacity problems in the District, Thames Water never objected to new developments as part of the development control process.

Mr Emery concurred, suggesting that the Council should be more explicit when framing requests for observations from Thames Water and also develop arrangements to follow-up applications to ascertain whether measures proposed by the company had been both implemented and successful.

The Strategic Director advised that the Council took technical guidance from Thames Water in the determination of planning applications but agreed that it appeared that, in responding to consultations, the Company failed to take account of the cumulative impact of individual developments. She suggested that it was important to invite representatives from the operational side of the Company and acknowledged the need to monitor Grampian conditions to ensure compliance.

Mr Fenton reiterated the need to assess the cumulative impact of developments and Mr Postan questioned whether the Council's own officers could play a greater role in evaluating the technical aspects of applications. The Chairman noted that Thames Water often required applicants to undertake survey work at significant cost and the Strategic Director reminded Members that Thames Water held the primary responsibility for such issues; the Council did not have the necessary resources to carry out this work.

The Strategic Director suggested that it might be beneficial for a Member Workshop session to be held to consider these issues further. Given the difficulties encountered in his Ward, Mr Howard suggested that Mr Good be invited to attend.

Mr Emery cautioned that the Council could be faced with further speculative applications in the event that its emerging Local Plan failed to be approved by the Planning Inspectorate.

### 50.3 Open Space Grass Cutting

Mrs Reynolds advised Members that the County Council was to provide an additional £170,000 for its grass cutting programme. The Chairman enquired whether this funding was to be made available to other authorities or applied directly by the County and noted that his local council raised a precept to fund additional grass cutting to supplement the County Council's programme. Mrs Reynolds undertook to make enquiries and advise Members further.

Ms Leffman noted that a number of towns and parishes supplemented the County Council's programme and suggested that those that did could achieve economies of scale by letting combined contracts. Mr Cotterill advised that there could be legal constraints precluding them from doing so.

Mr Coles questioned whether there had been any progress in discussions between the Council and Witney Town. In response, Mr Eaglestone advised that it had not been possible to reach an agreement regarding the division of costs. Mrs Reynolds advised that the Town Council could take on more work if the County Council would provide funding. (Mr Enright joined the meeting at this juncture)

Mr Howard questioned whether any progress had been made with Carterton Town Council in this area. The Strategic Director advised that further progress in discussions with Witney were dependent upon the Town Council and undertook to advise Members as to the position in Carterton.

Mr Emery noted that it had taken a considerable length of time for the County Council to agree to relinquish responsibility for the maintenance of landscaping on a roundabout in Eynsham to a sponsor.

Ms Leffman questioned how the Council could bring local councils together to explore the possibility of joint working, indicating that this could be done through the parish liaison meetings. Mr Fenton noted that many parishes had established local arrangements that were not suited to collaborative working and Mrs Reynolds suggested that the matter was perhaps best left in the hands of the town and parish council clerks.

### 50.4 Car Parking Strategy

Mrs Reynolds acknowledged that, whilst the Car Park Strategy had been approved by the Cabinet in December, a number of specific local concerns continued to give rise to concerns. Mr Cotterill suggested that the conclusions of the Strategy had been evident from the outset and enquired what it could be expected to deliver in real terms. In response, the Strategic Director advised that the work that underpinned the Strategy was necessary to provide an evidence base to support the emerging Local Plan. The Strategy had highlighted two issues; the question of introducing permit parking and the need for additional off-street parking, both of which required time and money to progress. The Council would need to establish its priorities through the formal decision making process but Officers were already looking at permits, the review of on-street regulations and priorities for additional off-street parking and ways in which this could be accommodated.

Mr Coles expressed his disquiet at the proposed loss of the temporary car park in Woodford Way for residential use as proposed in the emerging Local Plan. Mr Fenton suggested that parking provision needed to be addressed through development and indicated that he remained unconvinced as to the efficacy of permit parking which tended to displace rather than resolve problems.

Mr Emery advised that he and Mr Postan were in the process of preparing a paper on the provision of electric vehicle charging points in Council Car Parks. Mrs Reynolds questioned whether such a scheme would be financially viable given that it could have significant initial start-up costs. Members were advised that this project had been incorporated into the Finance and General Purposes Committee's Work Programme and Mr Coles suggested that it would be helpful if the Committee was kept informed of progress.

Mr Howard questioned whether additional off-street parking could be provided by reducing the amount of landscaping in car parks.

**RESOLVED:** That progress with regard to the Committee's Work Programme for 2015/2016 be noted.

#### 51 CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Chief Executive giving an opportunity for the Committee to comment on the Work Programme published on 21 March 2017 was received.

**RESOLVED:** That the Cabinet Work Programme published on 21 March 2017 be noted.

#### 52 OXFORDSHIRE STATE OF NATURE REPORT

Mr Coles, the Council's representative to Wild Oxfordshire, provided Members with an update on the launch of the Oxfordshire State of Nature report held at Blenheim Palace on 21 March.

Mr Coles advised that the Oxfordshire State of Nature report was the result of two years of intensive research by 60 wildlife experts and 14 environmental organisations which drew together a wealth of experience from the county's professional and volunteer base in biodiversity and nature conservation. The best information available had been used to paint a picture of the state of Oxfordshire's natural habitats and species, including long-term trends and more recent losses and gains. Oxfordshire is the most rural county in the South East with 36 current conservation target areas, 146 UK legally protected species and 260 species recognised as conservation priorities.

The report focused on five specific areas:

- Grassland
- Freshwater & wetlands
- Woodlands & trees
- Agricultural land
- Settlements & buildings

The report highlighted four key findings;

- Despite widespread historic loss of species-rich semi-natural grasslands, Oxfordshire still has some of the rarest and finest grasslands in the country.

- Local rivers are much cleaner than they were 30 years ago, although only 5% of the county's rivers are classified as 'good'. Targeted action has helped the recovery of local populations of threatened species such as the water vole and otter.
- Long-term declines in farmland and woodland biodiversity continue, with some associated species at serious risk of extinction, such as the turtle dove which has declined by more than 93% in the last 20 years. However the area of woodland recorded in the county over the last 30 years has increased.
- There is continued fragmentation and loss of connectivity across the county's landscapes, affecting the future viability of habitats and species.

In addition, the report identified the following key actions;

- Urgently create larger and more connected areas of high quality habitats
- Help farmers to find financially viable ways of managing land to provide greater benefits to nature.
- Improve practical advice and support for communities and landowners.
- Ensure better planning for blue and green infrastructure that benefits both people and nature.
- Put sustainable development that invests in nature at the heart of decision making.
- Increase access to green space and volunteering opportunities to keep people in touch with the health and well-being benefits of nature.
- Develop more collaboration within our strong and diverse environment sector.
- Continue to improve the methodology for monitoring the state of nature across Oxfordshire.

In conclusion, Mr Coles advised that, not only did the report outline the losses and gains in Oxfordshire's biodiversity, but it represented a serious call to action. There was a need to encourage a greater, collective ambition for increasing the network of wild spaces, reducing devastating pressures on the environment and halting the continued loss of biodiversity in the county in order to secure a 'net positive' direction of travel in the future. The principles highlighted in 2010 'Making space for nature' report were fundamental to achieving this and could be summarised as:

- MORE wild spaces
- BIGGER areas for landscape-scale conservation
- BETTER management of our current reserves
- JOINED and interconnected wildlife areas

The Chairman thanked Mr Coles for his presentation and enquired when the group would meet again. Mr Coles advised that this had been a one-off launch event but that Wild Oxfordshire met regularly and would continue to do so together with organisations such as the Lower Windrush Valley Project. Groups such as these undertook a lot of collaborative working but the State of Nature report had been intended to establish key facts against which the future position could be assessed.

Mr Cotterill enquired whether there was anything within the Council's emerging Local Plan that conflicted with the report. Mr Coles confirmed that this was not the case, explaining that the event sought to bring various environmental initiatives together. Mr Coles made reference to environmental initiatives incorporated into recent development by Barratt Homes in Aylesbury Vale District.

Mr Postan enquired whether the project would help to protect environmentally sensitive areas from development and Mr Coles advised that it related more to work on land under the Council's control as discussed by the Council's Biodiversity Officer at the previous meeting.

Mrs Reynolds informed Members that the Wychwood Project was seeking volunteers to assist in a mapping project and Mr Enright advised that the project was also holding a meeting to discuss the possibility of re-foresting agricultural land in the Cogges and Madley Park area that had originally formed part of the forest of Old Wychwood. Mr Enright also highlighted the problem of the loss of retained historic planting on new estates and expressed the hope that the project would help develop sustainable plans for bio-diversity. Mrs Reynolds confirmed that she would be happy to discuss this project further as it developed.

The Strategic Director advised that it was explicit in the design philosophy that new Garden Villages would be very green and the Council's submission to the north of Eynsham offered a significant opportunity to incorporate environmental initiatives. Mr Emery stated that he believed that, in addition to offering such opportunities, the indicative plan had some significant flaws. In particular, City Farm included a number of grade II Listed Buildings and operated in a non-commercial manner. It enjoyed EU protected status in respect of its flora and fauna yet the indicative plan showed residential development in the immediate vicinity. In order to take advantage of the opportunities offered by new development, it was vital that care was taken to accommodate this major feature within the proposed Garden Village. Mr Cotterill advised that this concern had been raised previously and the Strategic Director confirmed that Officers were cognisant of the farm's significance.

Mr Howard reminded Members that the applicants seeking consent for development to the west of Carterton had offered to fund environmental improvements in the Shill Valley. In response, Mr Postan advised that effective management of biodiversity relied upon discouraging human interference. The development proposed, together with increased public access would have been detrimental to Alvescot Downs and, whilst the developers intent may have been good, the proposals were unsustainable.

Mr Coles indicated that the District needed development and examples existed of how this could be provided with nature in mind. Such initiatives had to be seen as the way forward.

53 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Mr Howard questioned how the green waste collected was disposed of and enquired as to the costs that fell to the Council; suggesting that there might be more economic methods of disposal. The Strategic Director advised that the position had changed following the County Council's decision to withdraw recycling credits for green waste and undertook to provide Mr Howard with more detailed information.

The meeting closed at 3.10pm

Chairman