

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee  
held in Committee Room 2, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon  
at 2.00pm on Thursday 20 July 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, Mrs E H N Fenton, E J Fenton, A M Graham, Miss G R Hill, H J Howard and Ms E P R Leffman.

Also in Attendance: Mr H E T St John

#### 15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

There were no apologies for absence or temporary appointments.

#### 16 MINUTES

Mr Coles advised that the traffic survey referred to in minute No. Env/10/2017/2018 in the final paragraph on page 4 had been conducted in Mill Street only, not Mill Street and High Street. He also enquired whether any response had been received from the post office delivery office managers in response to the concerns raised at the last meeting with regard to discarded elastic bands and was advised that no responses had been received.

**RESOLVED:** That, subject to the amendment of minute No. Env/10/2017/2018 as detailed above, the minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2017 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### 17 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

#### 18 PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no submissions from members of the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

#### 19 THAMES WATER FLOOD PREVENTION AND INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES

Mr Huw Thomas and Ms Dagmara Weatherall of Thames Water gave a presentation outlining the importance of strategic water resource management planning, the company's role in the planning process and providing an update on the West Oxfordshire drainage strategies. A copy of the presentation is attached as an appendix to the original copy of these minutes.

(Mr P J G Dorward joined the meeting at this juncture)

Mr Cotterill enquired as to progress in measuring flows to inform the Carterton, Witney and Standlake drainage strategies. In response, Ms Weatherall advised that the operations staff had identified specific constraints and impact studies had commenced. Flow monitoring had taken place at known sites identified by the operations staff but the unusually dry winter hampered these investigations as no groundwater infiltration had been identified. Further monitoring would be necessary before options appraisals could be carried out.

Mr Cotterill made reference to on-going difficulties in the Brize Norton area where tankers were frequently used to address instances of sewage flooding. He reiterated concerns previously expressed that development in north Carterton had resulted in flooding in the Manor Road area and enquired when these issues would be addressed. In response, Ms Weatherall advised that there were no specific plans in place as the problems in Brize Norton required a strategic solution informed by flow data as yet unavailable. However, investigative work had identified a series of quick wins which were to be addressed as soon as possible.

Mr Thomas confirmed that he would make the strategy documents available to Members and advised that the company was employing a find and fix solution whereby issues identified by the operations team were addressed as they went along. However, it was necessary to identify a long term solution which required further information and, whilst information on storm and base flows was available, without experiencing high groundwater levels, it was a challenge to gather data on surface water infiltration.

Mr Cotterill expressed some concern that responses to development control enquiries failed to take account of issues identified by the operations section. The Council's Development Manager outlined concerns expressed by Members of the Development Control Sub-Committees regarding the planning consultation process. These included the use of standardised responses that gave the impression that no real consideration had been given to known on-site issues, replies of no objection or reliance upon Grampian style conditions and the absence of any definitive objections to development proposals in circumstances in which Members believed that development should be resisted until known issues had been resolved. Responses of 'no objection' were submitted when there were known issues in the vicinity and Members questioned the widespread use of Grampian conditions by a private company requiring developers to undertake survey work and fund local improvements but then applying funding received to the general capital programme rather than addressing specific local requirements. To do so appeared to favour shareholders.

In response, Ms Weatherall explained that Thames Water could not raise absolute objections as developers had a statutory right to connect to their system under the Water Industry Act. The only option was to seek to influence developers through planning conditions and, whilst developers were required to fund impact studies, any works were managed by Thames Water using their own knowledge to find solutions. Ms Weatherall confirmed that the Company did review data and concerns raised by its operations team but that strategic issues were dealt with by Developer Services. The Company also used its own resources to partially fund solutions.

Mr Thomas confirmed that the Company could only raise conditional objections, precluding development until certain specified requirements had been met. The provisions of the Water Industry Act were intended to enable, not prevent growth and it was inevitable that there would be a time lag between funding and the implementation of works. The only way to ensure that problems were resolved was to address them in a strategic fashion.

Mr Thomas acknowledged that Thames Water was a commercial concern that sought to make a profit but advised that the Company invested some £20million a week in infrastructure improvements. He indicated that the Company had not paid a dividend to shareholders in the previous year and noted that the BT Pension Fund was the largest

single investor. As a commercial concern, the Company had an obligation to provide a return for its shareholders.

The Development Manager suggested that the Company should do more to promote the work it had carried out to improve local infrastructure as there was a perception that resources were principally directed towards the Thames Tideway. In response, Mr Thomas acknowledged the level of investment directed towards that project but stressed that London was by far the largest centre of population served by the Company. However, the Company also invested significantly in projects in the Thames Valley. The 32 Drainage Strategies currently in progress were all in the Thames Valley and, whilst the outcomes remained uncertain at present, these would be delivered independently and the Company was certainly not afraid of spending in the region. However, before committing expenditure, the Company required empirical proof to ensure that money was used effectively.

Given the projected level of development in the Eynsham area, Mr Emery enquired whether a local Drainage Strategy was being developed. In response, Mr Thomas advised that there was no specific strategy for the area as the first step was to establish what was required to service the new development. Ms Weatherall explained that an impact study would be required to understand the implications of development on the existing network. This would identify potential ways in which this could be addressed; for example by the provision of a new treatment plant. Thames Water would work with the developers to devise a strategy as the site progressed. The Company had to align capital expenditure with need, not speculation.

With regard to forecast water usage, Mr St John indicated that housing growth had outstripped that originally envisaged and enquired whether the Company's Asset Management Plan incorporated provision for growth. Mr Thomas advised that, whilst the Plan did not make provision for growth, it was reviewed on a regular basis.

Mr Graham asked whether compulsory water metering would have an impact upon the rural economy; how the Company intended to address the missed targets relating to leakage and what security arrangements were in place to respond to the threat of terrorism. In response, Mr Thomas advised that, since April, Thames Water had no commercial customers; supply to commercial organisations being made through Castle Water. Consequently, this was not an issue for rural businesses. Commercial customers had been using water meters for the past 20 years and meters had been installed in domestic properties for the last 10. The intention was to shift the way in which people used water and to align charging methodology with other utilities. Whilst this could give rise to issues for some domestic customers by way of 'bill shock', metering was considered to represent the fairest way of charging.

Mr Thomas acknowledged that the Company needed to do more to resolve leakage but noted that rates in the Thames Valley were some 7% to 8% less than in London where ageing infrastructure and soil composition combined to make the problem more acute. Mr Thomas advised that visible leakage was less of a problem being easier to identify and address than major leaks from large supply pipes deep underground which would only be revealed through the introduction of metering.

Whilst not able to discuss specific issues in any detail, Mr Thomas advised that Thames Water worked closely with the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure, a division of the Home Office, to protect the water supply.

Mr Howard suggested that canal infrastructure could be employed to transfer water to areas with relative shortages. In response, Mr Thomas confirmed that such a solution was under consideration but that the need for pumping increased complexity and cost. Mr Howard also expressed concern at the use of Grampian conditions, expressing a preference for unconditional objections. In response, Mr Thomas reiterated that the relevant legislation only permitted conditional objection.

Mr Bishop raised concerns over the impact of recent and impending development in Stonesfield on what was already over-stretched and inadequate infrastructure. He made reference to recent flooding events and the continued use of tankers to transport sewage from the local treatment plant. He also indicated that water pressure in the village was low and stressed that it was imperative that these issues were resolved. In response, Ms Weatherall indicated that the cause of these problems needed to be established and Mr Thomas undertook to investigate further and advise Members accordingly.

Ms Leffman questioned whether the Company took account of incremental growth. Ms Weatherall confirmed that Thames Water looked at every individual site when developing solutions in order to understand the issues involved. Any specific problems experienced needed to be reported to the Company's Customer Services in order that they could be linked into solutions in the future.

Mr Coles noted that, whilst Castle Water was responsible for billing, it was Thames Water that still supplied water to farms. He enquired whether anything was being done to reduce water usage. In response, Mr Thomas advised that charging was the primary means of controlling usage but noted that Castle Water was a commercial concern with no incentive to reduce use of its product.

Mr Coles also made reference to the proposed new reservoir at Steventon, suggesting that this was intended to supply London, not Oxfordshire. Mr Thomas advised that the new reservoir was intended to supply two areas suffering supply shortages; London and Swindon and Oxfordshire. 10% of the mass would be directed towards Swindon and Oxfordshire with the rest serving London: the area with the greatest population growth.

Mr Fenton suggested it would be helpful if standard letters in response to planning consultations could be made to appear more site specific and Ms Weatherall indicated that she would encourage her staff to do so.

The Development Manager indicated that recognition of existing known problems would be helpful and suggested that, where Grampian conditions simply required a financial contribution from developers, Members would find it useful to know what work had been undertaken as a result. Ms Weatherall indicated that she would encourage developers to address this with the local planning authority when discharging conditions.

The Development Manager asked if an end of year update could be provided to enable Members to draw a connection between planning permissions granted and infrastructure work carried out. Ms Weatherall agreed to consider this.

Mr Postan stated that nothing had been done to address sewerage problems experienced in Brize Norton and, in light of further development in Carterton, questioned how and when these issues would be addressed. He also made reference to the development at Bradwell Village constructed some 12 years ago and noted that the sewerage network ran along Hen and Chick Lane joining at Shilton some 10 yards from the ford and suggested that the pumps serving the system were worn out. He also noted that Black Bourton village was not on a mains sewerage system. Whilst the Company might have a duty to

accept connections, it was not addressing existing problems. Mr Thomas advised that the Company had a first time sewerage programme and he would look at the question of provision at Black Bourton.

Mr Brennan enquired whether RAF Brize Norton was metered but Mr St John advised that it had its own water supply from boreholes.

Mr St John made reference to the statement of common ground approved in connection with the recent Examination in Public which indicated that all sewage treatment plants save one were adequate. He enquired what needed to be done to address both additional growth and existing problems. In response, Mr Thomas advised that existing difficulties were network issues rather than problems with treatment works. Once the Local Plan had been adopted Thames Water would have a better idea of future strategic requirements.

The Chairman thanked Ms Weatherall and Mr Thomas for their contribution to the meeting.

## 20 REVIEW OF MEMBER STRUCTURES AND DEMOCRATIC COSTS

The Committee received and considered the report of the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service which invited Members to make comments upon the report submitted to the Council on 26 April in response to the Leader of the Council's commitment to a review of the current committee structures, electoral cycle and the number of Members of the Council.

Ms Leffman indicated that the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower in London highlighted the importance of effective scrutiny. She stated that she would not wish to see any erosion of scrutiny in areas for which the Council was responsible and would prefer to see the scrutiny function strengthened rather than decreased.

Mr Graham indicated that he would wish to see the existing development control arrangements retained as the two sub-committees reflected the division within the District. Whilst he would not wish to see a loss of democratic involvement, Mr Graham emphasised that the Council should ensure that its scrutiny arrangements were effective and considered that there could be scope to combine the Audit and General Purposes and Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

In response to Ms Leffman's comments, Mr Howard indicated that no local authority would have been able to cope with a disaster on the scale of that experienced in Kensington and Chelsea. He went on to express concern at the potential for a loss of continuity should the Council move to whole council elections. Mr Howard made reference to comments made at the Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee to the effect that, given recent development, a boundary review was likely to take place in the foreseeable future and suggested that the Council should continue with its current arrangements until then.

Mr Bishop indicated that the role of the overview and scrutiny committees was central to the Council and that he had been impressed with their work. He opposed any reduction in the role and agreed that the function should be strengthened. Mr Eaglestone concurred.

Mr Fenton expressed his support for the retention of the existing arrangements pending a boundary review and questioned whether this would give rise to an increased number of single member wards.

With regard to Ward boundaries, the Head of Democratic Services advised that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) conducted periodic boundary

reviews. West Oxfordshire had last been subject to a review in 2001 as a result of which Ward boundaries had been revised but the number of Members remained unchanged. He confirmed that it was his expectation that a periodic boundary review would be called by the Commission within the next two or three years, particularly if there were any significant inequalities between the electorates in different Wards. Determining the number of Councillors would be one of the first steps for such a review, the previous review having been based on 49 members and an average electorate per councillor of around 1,500, plus or minus no more than 10%.

As and when a review was called the Commission would take account of electorate forecasts for the following five years only, a period likely to be shorter than that covered by the emerging Local Plan which was due to run until 2031. The Local Plan would not in itself trigger a review, nor impact upon the forecasting methodology employed.

The Head of Democratic Services further advised that, since the last review, district councils were now able to change from elections in thirds to whole council elections more easily. However, there was a presumption that authorities with elections in thirds would move to three member wards which would increase electoral costs significantly. A move to whole council elections would reduce existing costs by approximately one third over a three year period.

Mr Brennan proposed that the current structure should be retained pending the outcome of a periodic boundary review. The proposition was seconded by Mr Postan and on being put to the vote was carried.

**RESOLVED:** That, the Council be advised that the Committee is of the opinion that the current Member structures should be retained pending the outcome of a periodic boundary review.

Mr Coles stressed the significance of the scrutiny function and expressed the hope that at least one of the overview and scrutiny committees would be chaired by a member of an opposition group in the future.

## 21 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2017/2018

The Committee received the report of the Strategic Director which gave an update on progress in relation to its Work Programme for 2017/2018.

### 21.1 Open Space Grass Cutting

Members noted that work towards developing a more cohesive approach to open space grass cutting had been adjourned to be revisited when resources allowed.

### 21.2 Implementation of Car Parking Strategy

Members noted that a report regarding the implementation of the Car Parking Strategy was to be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

### 21.3 Waste and Recycling Contract

Mr Graham made reference to concerns expressed by Ms Leffman over arrangements for the collection of recycling and, in particular, whether residents would be able to continue to use recycling boxes in preference to wheeled bins. In response, the Head of Environment and Commercial Services advised that the Council would not be operating a dual service and would only collect recycling using boxes from those properties which were unsuitable for wheeled bins. The cost of operating a dual service as a matter of choice would be prohibitive as two types of vehicle would be required for each round,

significantly increasing operating costs. However, where premises had no external access to the kerbside, collections would continue to be made using recycling boxes.

The Head of Environment and Commercial Services explained that the majority of such premises were already known to the Council through the existing arrangements for refuse collection and indicated that residents concerned that their property could not accommodate a wheeled bin should contact Customer Services.

Mr Fenton questioned whether smaller recycling bins would be made available and if recycling boxes would be collected. The Head of Environment and Commercial Services advised that recycling boxes would still be required for glass which would be collected separately to avoid contaminating other recyclates. Residents would be encouraged to retain recycling boxes but any surplus to requirements could be collected at a later stage on request. She also explained that whilst all properties would receive a standard sized bin for recycling in the first instance, the Council would consider providing smaller bins in future should it prove necessary. Mr Emery stressed the importance of ensuring that sufficient resources were available in Customer Services to deal with enquiries on the introduction of the new service.

Mr Coles questioned whether the wheeled bins provided would be of sufficient capacity to accommodate the move to fortnightly collections. The Head of Environment and Commercial Services advised that the capacity had been calculated to be sufficient and reminded Members that glass would continue to be collected separately.

Mr Howard suggested that residents should compress recyclable material and enquired whether larger households would be provided with an additional receptacle. The Head of Environment and Commercial Services indicated that appropriate arrangements would be made if necessary.

**RESOLVED:** That progress with regard to the Committee's Work Programme for 2017/2018 be noted.

## 22 CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Chief Executive giving an opportunity for the Committee to comment on the Work Programme published on 22 June 2017 was received. It was noted that the Cabinet meeting to have been held on 26 July had been cancelled as the Oxford City's consultation on the unmet housing need had yet to be received. In consequence, the report regarding the award of the contract for the provision of refuse and recycling products would be considered at the meeting on 23 August.

**RESOLVED:** That the Cabinet Work Programme published on 22 June 2017 be noted.

## 23 WITNEY SHOPMOBILITY SCHEME

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Environment and Commercial Services regarding the operation of the Witney Shopmobility scheme, copies of which had been circulated.

Mr Emery indicated that this was an appropriate break point and that the Council should wind up the scheme in its current format and seek to identify alternative funding arrangements.

Mr Graham indicated that the Council should continue to provide a service for the minority, even if the cost was disproportionate. More could be done to promote the scheme and the Council should encourage greater use rather than considering winding the

project up other than in its current form. Whilst efforts could be made to secure additional funding streams, the scheme should continue in its present form until alternative arrangements could be put in place.

Mr Coles agreed that retention of the scheme was important and that greater publicity should be given to promote its use. He suggested that, in addition to local retail outlets, the bus companies could also be invited to support the project.

Mrs Fenton suggested that the Council should seek to secure sponsorship from local businesses and questioned whether staffing costs could be reduced. In response, the Head of Environment and Commercial Services advised that the service had to be staffed to ensure that users were trained and competent in the use of equipment. She also suggested that the scheme should be promoted through local councils.

Mr Brennan noted that publicity for the scheme appeared to be limited and agreed that a partnership approach to funding should be adopted. Whilst it was important that the service was retained, given the unit costs it was necessary to consider the form in which it was to operate in the future. He also questioned whether the voluntary sector would be able to assist through organisations such as Age UK or Volunteer Link-up.

In response to a suggestion from Mr Postan, the Head of Environment and Commercial Services indicated that it would be more appropriate to seek to identify alternative funding streams rather than to set a deadline for winding up the current scheme.

Mr Graham suggested that the Council should explore and adopt best practice from other similar schemes and the Head of Environment and Commercial Services confirmed that consideration had been given to a number of local arrangements as outlined in the report.

Mr Howard acknowledged the social benefits of the scheme but expressed concern over the current costs. He agreed that the Council should approach the voluntary sector to seek assistance.

## 24 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Mr Coles expressed concern over the extent of illegal parking experienced in Corn Street and the surrounding areas in Witney. In response, the Head of Environment and Commercial Services advised that a comprehensive report was to be submitted in due course.

To enable Members to discuss the matter in more detail it was:-

**RESOLVED:** that the Committee being of the opinion that it was likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted, that if members of the public were present during the following items of business there would be a disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 6 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting.

The Head of Environment and Commercial Services then outlined the various options available to the Council to address this and associated issues.

The meeting closed at 4.40pm



CHAIRMAN