

Minutes



Listening Learning Leading

OF A MEETING OF THE

Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 6.00PM ON 21 AUGUST 2012

AT COUNCIL OFFICES, CROWMARSH GIFFORD

Present:

Mrs E Hards (Chairman)

Ms J Bland, Mrs C Collett, Mr S Connel, Mrs P Dawe, Mr L Docherty, Mr P Harrison, Mr S Harrod, Mr D Turner

Apologies:

Mr J Cotton, Ms K Crabbe, Mr W Hall and Mrs E Hodgkin submitted their apologies.

Officers:

Mr S Hewings, Mr M Prosser, Mrs C Reeves, Ms H Saunders, Mrs J Thompson, Mrs S Truman

Also present:

Mrs A Ducker, Leader of the Council
Mr D Dodds, Cabinet member for finance, waste and parks

7. Minutes, 7 June 2012

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2012 as a correct record and agree that the Chairman sign these as such.

8. Financial outturn 2011/12

The committee considered the report of the head of finance setting out the final year end position for revenue and capital expenditure against budget for the financial year 2011/12.

Mr S Hewings, Shared Accountancy Manager, and Mr D Dodds, Cabinet member, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee.

The committee noted and commented that:

- The difference between the projected outturn in December 2011 and the actual position at the end of March was explained largely by the practice of including 100 per cent of anticipated salary costs for the year until the year-end and then adjusting for the actual lower salary costs. As South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils worked more closely together savings were ongoing but not always quantifiable in advance.
- The underspend was now nearly half of the income from council tax but there were no incentives to have a one-off reduction in council tax or an ongoing reduction. Options to reduce or rebate the costs may be considered depending on the longer term financial position.
- Payment of the new homes bonus to the council would be deferred for a year and paid in arrears.
- The committee welcomed the reduction in bad debt and levels of housing and council tax benefit debt. The committee noted that housing and council tax benefit payments were subsidised by central government, and for overpayments paid a subsidy and allowed the council to keep any money recovered. Therefore, a reduction in the amount of benefit overpaid reduced the overall income.
- Officers took account of the likely effect of new legislation when considering staffing and resources to make sure the council had the capacity to carry out new duties such as the impact of the National Planning Policy Framework and neighbourhood planning on planning services. Cabinet members took advice from heads of service on staffing requirements.
- Didcot growth point funding for the Didcot station forecourt improvements had been carried forward.
- Court costs chiefly related to cases of fraud and debt and the income received did not offset the whole of the costs incurred.
- Some of the council's contracts allowed the payment of bonuses to contractors for good performance and the accrual for 2010/11 bonuses related to potential payments to Biffa for delivering the waste contract.
- Councillors sought assurance that resources were adequate to deliver the capital programme.
- Many capital schemes were delivered over a number of years and actual expenditure could differ from the profiling.
- The council had about £80 million in total useable capital and revenue reserves.
- The council was not aware that there was an unmet need for disabled facilities grants This budget had overspent for the past few years and officers have taken tighter control. The 2011/12 budget was fully committed but not spent at year end and officers had discussed better processes and profiling of costs with the contractor who carries out the work.

The committee noted the report and asked for:

- further information on the reasons why the costs of the district elections and referendum had not been better estimated when the budget was set in February and
- further information on the breakdown on income and expenditure for planning services.

9. Review of progress against the Carbon Management Plan 2011/12

The committee considered the report of the head of corporate strategy setting out progress towards meeting the council's carbon emissions reduction target of 30 per cent over five years to 2012/13.

Ms H Saunders, Mrs S Truman, and Mrs A Ducker, Leader of the Council, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee.

The committee noted that:

- Most of the larger savings from retrofitting energy saving technologies have been made. Only smaller changes will be possible in future, outside of more substantial building refurbishments. Resources are available to address the additional items in the action plan. After this plan concluded in 2012/13 a new plan for further energy reductions would be put in place.
- Junior staff could claim for extra commuting mileage if their place of work was either altered permanently or shared between the two councils. There had been an increase in business mileage as staff had moved offices. A new baseline is being taken in 2012/13 now that most services have reorganised. Officers were encouraged to car share and to reduce travel where possible, and teams had made efforts to streamline and reduce travel. Accurate emissions figures by category of vehicle can be calculated using national guidelines and information collected from staff.
- Waste and leisure services were the biggest drivers of carbon emissions and the council's contractors had worked to reduce these.
- Biffa had successfully trialled using biofuels in waste collection vehicles in another district and may use it in South Oxfordshire. Upfront costs will be involved for the contractor.

The committee noted the report and congratulated the officers on the progress made in reducing the council's carbon emissions.

10. Annual equality and diversity update

The committee considered the report of the head of corporate strategy setting out the progress the council has made on delivering its corporate equality action plan during 2011/12.

Mrs C Reeves, Mrs S Truman, and Mrs A Ducker, Leader of the Council, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee.

The committee noted that:

- The impact on rural areas was considered in the council's equality impact assessments.

- Oxfordshire County Council had extended the Dial-a-Ride service to South Oxfordshire and this had been advertised to disability groups and in the council's Outlook magazine.
- Ongoing improvements to the council's website included adjusting text size and contrast to improve readability, highlighting disability information, and increasing the BrowseAloud service.
- Council vacancies were advertised and could be applied for online, but vacancies will also be posted at the JobCentre in future and paper application forms could be supplied and accepted.
- An access audit of the council's leisure facilities has been carried out.
- The council's specific budget for equalities work was half a post and a small budget for consultation work as each department carried out its own work with the support of the equalities officer.
- There was no direct link with parish councils or voluntary groups to ensure compliance with legislative requirements or best practice but advice could be offered on request. Building control officers could advise on access and capital grants were available for some schemes.
- Information on volunteer disability groups could be passed to the council's equalities officer.

Councillors commented that:

- The 2011 census was likely to show demographic changes and there would need to be work done on tackling the problems faced by a larger elderly population in rural areas.
- It was important to work with Oxfordshire County Council to provide support and information on services to elderly residents who did not currently need intensive care services.
- Consultation sessions should not solely be held during working hours as this disadvantaged those at work.

The committee noted the report and the progress made in delivering the council's corporate equality action plan during 2011/12.

11. Board report – a graphical summary of the council's performance to the end of June 2012

The committee considered the board report showing the council's performance in key areas from April 2012 to June 2012.

Mr M Prosser, Strategic Director, Mrs A Ducker, Leader of the Council, and Mr D Dodds, Cabinet member, answered questions from the committee.

The committee noted that:

- Installation of the Ocella system in planning services had caused some delays in processing. This was an entirely new system for Vale and an upgraded system for South users. The initial problems were now resolved.

- Planning performance agreements between applicants, the council, and sometimes key stakeholders provide a project management process for handling large scale or complex major planning applications and identify the timescales for delivery of a planning decision which is likely to take longer than the 13-week target to make.
- The targets for net homes and affordable housing completed were based on the mix of housing in schemes known or expected to be under construction during the year. The council still required 40 per cent of homes in larger developments to be affordable.
- An additional member of staff and more resources were available to work to reduce fly-tipping in South Oxfordshire.
- The garden waste service was converting to payment by direct debit only on renewal so would take a year or more to complete. While most people took up the option, some preferred to stop receiving the service. Alternative payment methods would still be available for the few customers who could not pay by direct debit.
- Data on debts at South Oxfordshire District Council had been collected in a different format prior to November 2011 and while available was not readily comparable to the current format.
- More information about the impact of Oxfordshire County Council's tradesman's van licensing scheme on fly-tipping in the district had been requested by Councillor David Dodds and would be passed to the committee when available.

The committee noted the report and the council's performance to June 2012.

The meeting closed at 7.20pm

Chairman

Date