

# Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

## Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 6.00 PM ON TUESDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2013

COUNCIL CHAMBER, SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL  
OFFICES

### Present:

Mrs Celia Collett, MBE (Chairman)

Ms Joan Bland, Mr Steve Connel, Ms Kristina Crabbe, Mr Will Hall, Mrs Eleanor Hards, Ms Elizabeth Hodgkin, Mr Alan Rooke, Mr David Turner, Mrs Margaret Turner and Mr Michael Welply (as substitute for Mrs Pat Dawe)

### Apologies:

Mr John Cotton and Mrs Pat Dawe tendered apologies.

### Officers:

Ms Kate Arnold, Ms Emma Dolman, Mr Simon Hewings, Mr Paul Howden, Mr William Jacobs, Ms Miranda Laurence, Mr Matt Prosser Mrs Jennifer Thompson, Mr Miles Thompson and Mr Chris Webb

### Also present:

Mr David Dodds, Cabinet Member for Finance, Waste and Parks  
Mrs Ann Ducker, MBE Leader of the Council  
Reverend Angie Paterson, Cabinet Member for Planning and IT  
Mr Bill Service, Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Leisure and Grants

## 6 Minutes

**RESOLVED:** to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 4 June 2013 as a correct record and to agree that the Chairman sign them as such.

## 7 2012/13 performance review of GLL

The committee considered the report of the Head of Economy, Leisure and Property setting out GLL's performance in delivering the leisure management contract from 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013.



Listening Learning Leading

The committee also considered Annex D to the report, circulated after the agenda publication, setting out the contractor's comments.

Mr Chris Webb, Leisure Facility Development officer; Ms Kate Arnold, Leisure Manager; Mr Bill Service, Cabinet Member for Leisure, Grants and Community Safety; and Mr C James and Mr J Amat of GLL answered questions from the committee as follows:

- Cleanliness is one of the hardest targets for any leisure contractor to meet. In Annex B, Park's score for cleanliness of changing rooms should be 3.0.
- KTP7 measured how much the council paid (or received) per visit taking into account any income from fees, and KTP9 measured the total cost of a visitor to the sports centre not taking into account any fee charged.
- GLL had struggled to employ enough staff in the centres, especially at middle management level, and had addressed this by increasing salaries, holding recruitment days and increasing advertising. Staffing had improved. The industry was not well paid generally and the majority of staff stayed a relatively short time then left the industry altogether.
- Abbey sports centre had a new management team in place since March and had achieved their Quest rating.
- 'Other' complaints covered a wide range of issues affecting a minority of users from a lack of WiFi to timetable changes, prices, and disquiet at the reduction in sessions for sports halls from 60 to 40 minutes to accommodate more users.
- GLL senior management was working with their centres' management teams, meeting them weekly and trying to proactively address issues before these were raised at the monthly meeting with the council's client officers.
- Each centre offered different programmes and facilities and the pricing structure differed across this district and Vale of White Horse to reflect this.

Members of the committee commented:

- They were disappointed in the decline in performance from the previous year and the additional work imposed on officers which impacted on their ability to deliver other services.
- They appreciated that leisure facilities were difficult to staff and run, and the problems related mainly to staffing, but noted the concerns over the corporate culture's impact on performance.
- Everyone was aware of where the problems were and the agreed action plan should address these. The committee hoped to see a good improvement over next year.

**RESOLVED:** to recommend that the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Grants and Community Safety makes a final assessment of GLL's performance in delivering the leisure management contract from 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013 of **Fair**.

## **8 Draft housing distribution numbers for the larger villages**

The committee considered the report of the Head of Planning setting out the recommendation to Cabinet about the draft housing distribution numbers for the larger villages to inform the preparation of neighbourhood plans.

Mr A Winterbottom, a resident of Chinnor, submitted a written statement and addressed the committee about his concerns about the additional housing proposed

for Chinnor. The village had seen a large number of houses built recently and he considered it did not have the facilities or employment to support further development. A detailed look at the capacity of the village to accommodate more houses was needed before agreeing the figures. Additional housing should be for young people already in the village and assisted housing for older residents to allow both groups to stay. Residents had asked the parish council to reconsider developing a neighbourhood plan.

Mr Roger Bell, a ward councillor for Wheatley, sent a statement to the committee. He wrote that at Wheatley, the proposed allocation is a third of its proportional allocation because the village is entirely surrounded by the Oxford Green Belt and this limits the amount of land available. The core strategy Inspector ruled out a localised Green Belt review for Wheatley against any logic in the rest of the Core Strategy's aims and objects. There is now no more space within Wheatley for any more dwellings to be built except by sub-division. Over the years, unless changes can be made, lack of growth will slowly destroy Wheatley as a thriving, lively community as it will not be able to act as a centre of services and facilities as one of the identified network of key rural centres for the smaller villages. He found it very sad that the 'holy grail' of the Green Belt overrules common sense, logic and the real housing needs of this part of the district.

Mr Miles Thompson, Planning Policy Manager, and Rev'd Angie Paterson, Cabinet Member for Planning, introduced the report and answered questions as follows:

- Accommodating additional housing was a challenge for all villages and remedying existing deficiencies in infrastructure could not be required of new developers.
- While it was not now possible, following the Inspector's decision, to review the green belt around Wheatley, it would be possible to pursue exception sites if demand came forward.
- The consultation with parish councils and the public had produced the responses in Appendix B. While there were few responses, there was no reason to assume they were unrepresentative. Providing the percentage share may not be the best way to present this information.
- The draft allocations were made in accordance with the core strategy, to generate a strong network of larger villages across the district as service centres for smaller settlements. These would give communities some certainty about the distribution of new houses the district council was expecting at this stage.
- Communities developing a neighbourhood plan were running their own consultations to allocate sites. Our exhibitions had focussed on villages not developing a plan, to avoid confusing the issues. Exhibitions were held in Berinsfield, Sonning Common and Watlington as these had registered an intention to develop a neighbourhood plan but had not reached the first formal stage of being designated a neighbourhood planning area.
- Allocations were based on the numbers of existing houses and those with planning permission in 2011.
- Planning policy and development control considered the overall housing mix in terms of size and the balance between open-market and social rented houses. There is no control over who actually buys open-market housing. As the council is at the start of the process of deciding housing allocations, it would be premature to give assurances over securing specific allocations for local, young or elderly people.
- Local authorities in Oxfordshire were conducting a county-wide strategic housing market assessment. The outcome may modify the housing allocations to individual communities.

- Council would approve the final document for inspection in late 2014. Whether a neighbourhood plan was found sound would depend on the scale of the difference between the draft or final allocations and the plan, but in order to allow plans to proceed to inspections and to give some clarity to communities it was important to proceed with this draft distribution, despite the uncertainties.

Councillors commented:

- It would be useful if planning policy could clarify the position to neighbourhood plan steering groups so they could give the current and any amended draft figures proper consideration during their plan's development.
- Education infrastructure, especially access to secondary schools, needed to be considered.
- There has to be a district-wide approach to housing allocations and the best option was to have a proposal that communities could work with.
- There were benefits to making neighbourhood plans as these strengthened villages' positions if there was a major policy change, and gave some certainty in planning for development.

The committee agreed to recommend that Cabinet confirm its support for the proposed distribution for the larger villages as set out in the appendix to the officer's report.

## **9 Financial outturn: March 2013**

The committee considered the report of the Head of Finance setting out the financial out-turn for revenue and capital spending for the financial year 2012/13.

Mr Simon Hewings, Accountancy Manager, Mr William Jacobs, Head of Finance, and Mr David Dodds, Cabinet Member for Finance, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee as follows:

- Additional training for officers with budgetary responsibility about assumptions and forecasting in setting budgets was underway. This should help officers improve the forecasts used in setting the 2014/15 budget.
- In some cases services set their budgets based on worst-case scenario, and a corporate contingency is also budgeted for. It may not be necessary to set such a pessimistic budget.
- Just under half of the variance was additional and unexpected income such as central government grants and increased income from fees and charges.
- Underspends were transferred to reserves but are available to spend in future years.
- Insurance premiums fluctuated as these were recalculated annually after a review of assets and claim history.

Mr John Backley, Technical and Facilities Manager, answered questions about car park charges and council facilities:

- Income and expenditure on car parks was ring-fenced and income from car park charges was reinvested in maintenance, staff costs, and long-term upgrading. While there was no intention to generate a surplus, it was permitted provided it was used for work on the car parks in the long term.
- The £128,000 income shown was gross income, not profit.
- Initiatives such as charge-free periods and reduced price season tickets increased use and this could increase overall income.

- The income generated depended on the decisions taken by Cabinet when setting fees and on the overall use of the car parks;
- A new four year supply contract started on 1 October 2012 had reduced the cost of electricity. Fewer staff in the building reduced electricity use.

Members of the committee commented that:

- It was better to be looking at an underspend than an overspend.
- Was the council charging its taxpayers too much, considering that there had been underspends in each of the last nine years, and could the Cabinet realistically recommend a much lower level of council tax in one year?
- Training on budget setting was welcomed as it was not an easy task to set a prudent budget with correct contingencies.

The committee noted the report.

## **10 Council tax reduction scheme 2014/15**

The committee considered the report of the Head of Finance setting out the proposed council tax reduction scheme to be adopted for the financial years from 2014/15 onwards.

Mr Paul Howden, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Mr William Jacobs, Head of Finance, and Mr David Dodds, Cabinet Member for Finance, introduced the report and answered questions from the committee as follows:

- The proposed scheme from 2014/15 made minor changes to that operating in 2013/14. The scheme was predictable, stable and protected the income of vulnerable residents, while giving the council a predictable budget requirement.
- It was unlikely to be cost-effective to impose small charges on low-income households who would struggle to pay.
- The number of vacant homes had reduced from 470 to 400 since 1 April 2013.
- Checks were carried out to confirm the continuing eligibility of council tax benefit claimants.
- The government had no proposals to uprate the default scheme in line with other benefits, and Cabinet would agree any annual increase.

Members of the committee welcomed the scheme's reduction of the council tax burden on poorer residents.

The committee noted the report and the proposed council tax reduction scheme.

## **11 Review of the arts development strategy and action plan**

The committee considered the report of the Head of Economy, Leisure and Property setting out the delivery of the third year of the arts development strategy and the draft fourth year action plan.

Ms Miranda Laurence, Arts Development Officer, Ms Emma Dolman, Arts Manager, and Mr Bill Service, Cabinet member, introduced the report, gave a presentation on the wide variety of work carried out in the past year, and raised questions for the committee to consider:

- Which communities could the arts development officer talk to in the north and east of the district?
- What should be the main priorities of the new strategy?

- How could awareness of arts development work be raised?

Officers answered questions from the committee as follows:

- The arts development officer worked with schools but it took time to get schools involved and start working with them. It was easiest to develop links with young people through their schools.
- Arts development work had a budget of £10,000 annually, plus the cost of the part-time officer and some time from Cornerstone's events team.
- Most of the action plan was delivered in partnership with other groups and organisations, and while this was very effective, delivery of the strategy was to an extent reliant on these groups' ideas and capacity.
- It was worthwhile paying membership fees for networks and umbrella organisations as these gave a wider perspective, useful contacts, and up to date articles and information to distribute to local arts groups.
- The public art project for the Orchard Centre ('the Swirl') had local people on the steering group and the artist had discussions with the centre's shops. People had the opportunity to give their views at a public exhibition and through sessions with young people and there had been wide consultation. There will be further sessions planned in preparation for the installation of the work.
- The public art project for Great Western Park would involve local people as much as possible at each stage without limiting the artist or creating unrealistic expectations.
- There were plans for a project in Thame to tie in with existing events around Christmas.

Members of the committee commented:

- The River and Rowing Museum and Fire Station gallery in Henley could host touring exhibitions.
- District councillors and parish/town councils would appreciate information about arts projects in their areas.
- There was a need to get a wider cross-section of people (and councillors) involved in consultation events by extending these into the evenings and weekends.
- All councillors should have the opportunity to respond to the questions raised at the end of the presentation.

The committee noted the report and the action plan, and congratulated the arts development officer on the hard work she put in to the partnership working and the delivery of the strategy and wished the team every success.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm

Chairman

Date