

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Scrutiny Committee



Listening Learning Leading

HELD ON TUESDAY 23 JANUARY 2018 AT 6.30 PM

MEETING ROOM 1, 135 EASTERN AVENUE, MILTON PARK,
MILTON, OX14 4SB

Present:

Richard Pullen (Chairman)

John Walsh, Steve Connel, Anthony Dearlove, Caroline Newton and Ian Snowdon
and John Walsh

Apologies:

Elaine Hornsby, David Turner and Ian White tendered apologies.

Officers:

Andrew Down and Susan Harbour

28 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 November 2017 were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting and were signed by the chairman.

29 Declarations of interest

None

30 Urgent business and chairman's announcements

None

31 Public participation

None

32 Work schedule and dates for all South and Vale scrutiny meetings

The committee reviewed the work schedule and dates.

33 Ask The Leader

John Cotton, the leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, came to the table to answer questions from the committee. This was an open session and, although he had had advance notification of some of the questions, this was not the case with all of the questions. In addition, there were a number of supplementary questions asked. Councillor Cotton explained to the committee that he would be responding to questions both in his role as leader of the council, but also with his personal opinions, or in his role as portfolio holder. He would try to indicate where this was the case.

Question:

Are we on track to submit our local plan?

Response:

- The timetable has slipped, in part due to an extension of the consultation period and negotiations over leaseholder agreements at Chalgrove. The submission was likely to slip back until mid March, at the earliest (from late Jan/Feb). The Council needs to issue six weeks' notice to the planning inspectorate, which had not yet been given. It was likely that the plan would be adopted early next year, rather than later this year.
- The Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) powers of Homes England had been increased to enable focus on housing delivery. Progress with CPOs would be quicker.

Question:

Could we have an update on the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth deal?

Response

- The Oxfordshire authorities had the only successful deal to date. The original timetable aimed for 31 January 2019 for completion and was still on track. It was due to come to Cabinet in early February and Full Council on 15 February for approval.
- £150 million for infrastructure.
- £60 million for affordable housing.
- £5 million for early funding.
- Up to 100,000 homes.
- An issue was how the government would respond if the authorities do not deliver on their commitments.

Question:

Could South Oxfordshire District Council evaluate whether it is possible for it to build affordable homes?

Response:

- There are examples of this happening elsewhere such as "Urban Street" at South Cambridgeshire District Council.
- The potential exists to form a housing company and to invest. But the council would need to be clear on what could we add to what is done elsewhere. Where are the gaps?
- It is unlikely to provide a major income stream.

- There needs to be an overhaul of treasury management policy to address issues of risk aversion.
- Not just looking at financial returns, but also at the public good.

Question:

Do you see the government agreeing a devolution deal for Oxfordshire in the current climate?

Response:

- The Dorset councils' bid is at the forefront of devolution deals. If this bid is successful then it is likely that other councils will look for responses to their bids. Oxfordshire's councils' submission is still "live" with the Secretary of State, and waiting for a response.

Question:

What approach has been decided on for Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) money? Would it be allocated on a local basis or regarded as a centralised pot?

Response:

- No decision has yet been made. The CIL spending strategy needs to be brought to Full Council for a decision. It needs to be flexible and to support local needs without ring-fencing it to the areas where houses were built, especially as 40 percent goes to education.
- The council needs to take a strategic look at the needs in the district and where CIL money can go to support that.
- The leader was against drawing arbitrary lines within the district and against locking out the money on a geographical basis. However, it can and should be reviewed and audited to look at efficiency and fairness.

Question:

Regarding facilities at Great Western Park Didcot: the infrastructure was not in place as early as it should have been particularly the leisure centre and the northern perimeter road. Why was this?

Response:

- Regarding the leisure centre, there had been difficulty in finding and acquiring a site on which to build.
- The northern perimeter road has a current budget of approximately £15 million. The money is available but the cooperation of the County Council is required including the £1 million revenue costs to build the road. There is currently not a County Council planning permission in place. There is a knock on in terms of delivering the housing at this site.

Question: Can you update us on the county wide plan?

Response:

- There is a great degree of pragmatism and cooperation between Oxfordshire Leaders on the Joint Statutory Plan, part of Housing and Growth Deal. Progress is held up by wider partnership working and the difficulties faced by other organisations, and their financial concerns etc.

Question:

What is your view on the likely route of the Oxford-Cambridge route: South or North of Oxford?

Response:

- It is not clear at this stage. There is a meeting with Highways England next week with the leaders of both South and Vale Councils and Jacobs, the engineering company. By this summer the corridor will have been identified. However, it may be too wide to be able to identify whether the road is going North or South. It is likely that the north/south issue will be decided a year after that with the road likely to be finished 2030. There are a huge number of constraints around flooding, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), protected woodlands etc.
- Need to think about what problem the government is trying to solve. Is it about creating an extra arc to relieve traffic on the M25? And if so, what are the implications of this?

Question:

Is the proposed "Harrington" new settlement idea a serious consideration as either an alternative to Chalgrove Airfield, or as part of the Oxford to Cambridge Corridor package, or at all?

Response given in capacity as portfolio holder, not leader.

- Although this new settlement option was previously not favoured, given the issues with Chalgrove, it is one of the areas outside of the green belt which might make the Harrington settlement more appealing. It is very close to the motorway and it could become a dormitory settlement which would be at odds with the aim of getting people to work close to where they live. However, it would fit with the Oxford to Cambridge corridor, should it come near that area, and would be an option if the proposed Chalgrove development did not go forward.
- About one third of South Oxfordshire District Council is green belt, and there are also a lot of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and also a lot of flood areas. There are very few areas suitable for development.
- Highways England have a holding objection but might withdraw it for a smaller development.

Question: What is happening with the possible Grenoble Road development?

Response:

- A scoping application has been received from Magdalen College which is, tactically, a sensible first step for a potentially interested developer. It is possible other competitors will put their applications in for other areas.

Question:

What is your view on the future of outsourcing given the recent collapse of the outsourcing company, Carillion?

Response:

- It is necessary to look at how to most effectively achieve the council's objectives. The ability to ensure that contracts are effective can be hampered if there are not enough good staff working directly for the council. It is important to get the right balance.
- Shared services between South and Vale have worked well because they were joined incrementally. There is additional risk and difficulty in taking on super-large outsourcing in a more instant and dramatic way.

- It is important to know at where the council's strengths lie.

Question:

What is your view on SODC building and operating a crematorium with income from this source to support future projects?

Response:

- Other councils do this and they tend to make quite a lot of money.
- This would be a potentially interesting element in the discussion about revenue. There are no immediate plans but it is an interesting option.

Does the council have the ability to enforce national design space standards in the Didcot Garden Town development?

Response:

- Any development would need to comply with the new space standards in order to be building control compliant.

Question:

With the Didcot Garden Town becoming more and more of a reality, at what stage do you anticipate the need for a Boundary Review of the District's Wards?

Response:

- 2014 was the last time that a major review was conducted, and that included looking ahead at planned development for these areas.
- There is a need to look at the existing variances and see whether there is a need for such a review, but nothing is planned before the next district elections in 2019.

Question:

Didcot is now crossing the boundary into Harwell, but most services are based in Didcot. Is there a need to review wards and whether areas should be in South or other districts?

Response:

- A boundary review between districts is far more complex than one within the district.
- If we became a unitary authority, at least with Vale, then it would be easier to undertake the review within the parishes.

Question:

What more can we do to support the development of the Culham science centre? Are we already doing enough?

Response:

- There are some issues as the County Council may object to planning applications.
- The question is also relevant to other business and science parks who want their businesses to grow. As an authority we want to support the economic growth because it provides higher paying jobs within the district.
- It is important to support and to be proactive with businesses that want to expand.

Question:

Please can you continue to ensure that SODC has a substantive response to air quality in the coming budget?

Response:

- The budget is a matter for the Council itself rather than for the leader.
- Air quality is a key matter for this authority, however, not all things which would improve air quality are within the district authority's control. There are a number of options for moving this forward. The Low Emissions Strategy is important.

Question:

Do you think that autonomous vehicles are likely to have a significant impact on traffic in the district?

Response:

- It is likely that autonomous vehicles would have a significant impact on traffic and this would probably be in the near future. Proper trials are scheduled within the next 12 months.
- Technology is in place, but there are outstanding regulatory and ethical issues to be resolved.

The meeting closed at 7.45 pm

Chairman

Date