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Minutes

of a meeting of the

Joint Scrutiny Committee

held on Thursday, 7 December 2023 at 6.30 pm
at Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon OX14 3JE

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Committee Members:

South Oxfordshire District Councillors: Stefan Gawrysiak (co-chair), Leigh Rawlins and Tony Worgan

Vale of White Horse District Councillors: Katherine Foxhall (co-chair), Andy Cooke, Ron Batstone and Judy Roberts.

Officers: Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Andrew Lane (Planning Policy Team Leader), Lucy Murfett (Policy Manager), Louise Brown (Environmental Services Technical Team Leader), Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer)

Also present: Cabinet members for South and Vale: Councillor Helen Pighills (Vale, Community Health and Wellbeing), Councillor Andy Foulsham (Vale, Corporate Services and Policy and Programmes), Councillor Anne-Marie Simpson (South, Planning), Councillor Mark Coleman (Vale, Environment and Waste Services) and Councillor Sue Cooper (South, Environment)

Guests: Francis Drew (Biffa)

Number of members of the public: four online, one in person

Online participants

Committee Members: Councillor Jo Robb (South Oxfordshire)

Officers: Paul Fielding (Head of Housing and Environment), Scott Williams (Environmental Services Manager), Diane Foster (Licensing and Community Safety Manager), Vivien Williams (Interim Head of Legal and Democratic, Tom Rice (Principal Planning Policy Officer) and Karen Brown (Community Safety Team Leader)

Cabinet members: Council Leader, Councillor David Rouane

Guests: Chief Inspector Rachel Patterson, Deputy Commander for South and Vale (Thames Valley Police)

Sc.16 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Ed Sadler, who was substituted in the meeting by Councillor Tony Worgan.

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Apologies were also received from Councillors Alexandrine Kantor and Andrew Skinner. Councillor Jo Robb would join later online.

Sc.17 Urgent business and chair's announcements

None.

Sc.18 Declaration of interests

None.

Sc.19 Minutes

Two references to 'RPI' in the minutes needed to be amended to CPI. It was also raised that the reference to Leisure Centre at the bottom of page 7 in the pack, related to Wantage not Faringdon.

Resolved:

Based on these amends being made, the minutes were agreed as a correct record.

Sc.20 Public participation

Public speakers spoke to the Joint Local Plan consultation document.

Councillor James Barlow (South Oxfordshire District Council) spoke to committee, welcoming the new variations to enable people to access the consultation and provided comments on the "Joint Local Plan in a nutshell" consultation document ("in a nutshell" for short).

Sue Roberts spoke about the different ways of getting the housing numbers down being shown in the "in a nutshell" document. She also spoke about housing subdivision to reduce need to build and retrofitting as benefitting the environment and wildlife.

David Marsh from Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE, for Vale) spoke about the consultation documents and how they align with the Plan and whether the right policies were covered in the "in a nutshell" document, as it covered a selection of the policies. He also mentioned ways to encourage groups to send combined consultations / single response documents, and ways to make the documents more user friendly.

Andrew Wilkins, Chief Executive of Lonestar Land, spoke to committee spoke about the Bayswater Farm allocation site. In response to the question on Cabinet approving the consultation document ahead of Scrutiny Committee, it was responded to Mr. Wilkins that the scrutiny meeting was rearranged but chair had been given assurance that comments from Scrutiny would be fed into Cabinet and amends considered before the consultation went live.

John Salmons spoke to committee about local green space allocations and asked about how such delegations would be covered in the Joint Local Plan. He felt that the councils should ask residents what they would like to see protected.

Sc.21 Work schedule and dates for Joint scrutiny meetings

Committee noted the work programme.

A discussion was had regarding the size of agendas and the balance needed for effective scrutiny.

Sc.22 Community Safety Partnership annual report 2022-23

Cabinet member for Community Health and Wellbeing (Vale) introduced the paper. Also attending virtually was the South Leader, who had responsibility for Community Safety.

Also present to answer any questions was Chief Inspector Rachel Patterson from Thames Valley Police, the Licensing and Community Safety Manager, and the Community Safety Team Leader.

The purpose of this report was to update the Scrutiny Committee on the progress that the South and Vale Community Safety Partnership (CSP) was making to reduce crime and the fear of crime, focusing on the benefits it generated for residents, businesses, and partner agencies in the two districts.

CSP was formed in April 2011, bringing together the two existing district CSPs that were created in accordance with the requirements of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. This was done so that the partnership corresponded with the local police area and mirrored the shared working across the district councils. Under the umbrella of the CSP, a wide variety of local agencies work together to maintain low levels of crime and protect vulnerable people in both districts to ensure residents feel safe and stay safe.

Committee were asked to consider the performance of the CSP for 2022-23 and to comment on the four key areas of focus proposed for the CSP.

Committee were informed by officers that they had secured £201k funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner towards a rural crime project with West Oxfordshire, running until March 2025. There will be further promotion and communication about this in due course.

Comments were as follows:

- Members discussed early interventions and were informed of work going on in schools and youth groups.
- Environmental visual audits were commented on as a good way of assessing issues and could we have more of them.
- Further promotion of safe places was raised.
- Diversionary projects to deter criminality – how do we measure the effects? Officer responded that after establishing need, we will look at the impact, but it was hard to measure.
- Modern Slavery rising figures and funding – how are we responding to this and also in light of new legislative changes. Officer responded that there was a resource through County Council – there was an Anti-Slavery Co-ordinator, and we work closely on cases reported to us. This was outside the CSP expenditure. Officer also noted higher figures as people are more trusting and aware of support services, and able to come forward as a result. It was noted by Council Leader that an increase can be a good thing as a sign of crimes being reported where they weren't before.
- Chief Crime Commissioner presentation was well received. Increased investment in Community Officers. How will the CSP monitor the delivery and effectiveness of this? Chief Inspector responded that there were Neighbourhood Officers in place to support existing neighbourhood teams. We were having an uplift of officers rather than Police and Community Support Officer (PCSO's).
- Discussed percentages being misleading if the numbers were low.
- Under 18's alcohol admissions to hospital. A member felt this was being diminished so questioned why the same numbers were showing on page 103 of the pack. It was explained by Chief Inspector that regular meetings were held (weekly for night-time economy) and also officer presence in Market Towns at night and working closely with Licensing officers and license holders. It was not necessarily a problem within licensed premises as it could be related to other ways of obtaining alcohol.
- Can we have heat maps of where crimes were happening and share them. Look for patterns in behaviour.

Chair asked for recommendations from members followed by a vote on the recommendation. Committee were asked “(a) To note the progress that the South and Vale Community Safety Partnership (CSP) made in 2022-23 in delivering its priorities and statutory functions, and (b) To support the CSP’s view that the 2022-25 plan will deliver core priorities and statutory functions and focus on these four key priorities:

- domestic abuse
- modern slavery/exploitation
- serious violence
- rural crime

Resolved:

Committee agreed to note recommendation (a) and to support recommendation (b). Committee’s main comment was that that they supported the direction of the CSP of “looking for patterns” to enable crime prevention. Committee added thanks for a very good report and for the hard work and professionalism of those involved.

Sc.23 Biffa contract performance 2022

Cabinet members for Environment and Waste Services (Vale) and Environment (South) presented the report. Also in support were the Environmental Services Technical Team Leader, Head of Housing and Environment, and the Environmental Services Manager. Biffa representative Francis Drew was in attendance.

This contract was of great importance and affected all residents. There were three key areas of performance measured within the report. The overall rating was considered ‘good’, but there were weaknesses that shall be monitored, such as street cleansing. The report was an assessment of performance, and contractual developments and purchase of waste vehicles was not a subject of this particular report.

Discussion was as follows:

- Street cleansing was discussed by members as being of significance and they discussed what the challenges were. For example, road edges – road sweepers can’t get around parked cars. Also, verges tend to be the issue. How do we prevent people from littering, for example, throwing rubbish from their car. There were complexities to cleaning A roads (A34). When the summer comes, longer grass hides some of the litter and it becomes more apparent in the colder months. Cabinet member for South explained that due to driver shortages, resources would be given to priority tasks – household bins. Biffa representative explained that there were more workers after a pay increase for staff, and at the end of 2022 they were in a better position and were currently nearly at full deployment.
- A member asked about communications and the role this played – for example, do the public know who to contact for various issues. Cited example of flytipping and the clear communications that mean these issues were reported correctly. Multi agency issues for example, it is either County, District, Thames Water - who is responsible for the infrastructure?
- A4130 issues over spring. Lots of complaints received. A member asked about the independent assessors and what their criteria was, noting that resident’s feedback was likely to differ from the inspector’s report. It was explained that Keep Britain Tidy assessed roads every three months and took photos.
- Can we tie in Christmas waste collection timetable changes communications with other waste contacts. Officer considered that we could tie in with the Keep Britain Tidy litter pick.
- Discussed the two complaints over the year, and an officer added that this was a very low complaint rate comparatively.
- Members discussed use of ‘Fix My Street’, which was independent. Head of Corporate Services added that this was being looked at with the environment team, and what was the best customer experience.

- Can we liaise with OCC timetable for cutting back vegetation?
- Discussed the reasons behind missed bins, and how this was rectified.
- Discussed blocked drains and flooding and who was responsible (confirmed to be OCC) – noting issues after grass cutting, which blocks drains.
- Can CCTV on roads help catch littering?
- A member thanked Biffa for excellent responsiveness. Biffa representative added there would be a comms piece on litter picking on the A34 – and they had been working with OCC, and it was considered that working together will bring improvements and more opportunity to get out onto the road for cleaning.

Committee were asked to “consider Biffa Municipal Ltd (Biffa) performance in delivering the household waste collection, street cleansing and ancillary services contract for the period 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022 (2022 calendar year) and make any comments before a final assessment on performance is made”.

Resolved:

Committee considered the performance report and provided their comments. Biffa and officers were thanked for their work and the report was well received. The main comment from committee was that they supported strong communication with residents to improve resolving of reported issues. Members discussed the need to identify responsible parties which can be complex for residents to navigate (for example, County Council, Thames Water, District Council) for different provisions (such as street cleansing, drain emptying, public bins, roads). Committee acknowledged that work was ongoing for this and supported this continuing. Street cleansing was a highlighted concern, but members recognised that work was progressing in this area.

Sc.24 Joint Local Plan Regulation 18 Part 2 - preferred options for consultation

Cabinet members for Corporate Services, Policy and Programmes (Vale) and Planning (South) were present to introduce the report. Officers present were Head of Policy and Programmes, Policy Manager, Principal Planning Policy Officer and the Planning Policy Team Leader.

Cabinet member for South explained that the consultation showed policy topics and the preferred options so far. Policy options had been tested and developed with shaping via Councillor roundtables and cross-party steering group meetings. Technical studies had been undertaken and others were in progress and officers will add the details of those and refine approaches as they emerge ahead of consultation stage Regulation 19 (draft plan stage) in Autumn 2024. This stage was to seek public views via consultation documents set out in the agenda pack.

Cabinet member for Vale explained that Corporate Plan ambitions were mirrored in the new Joint Local Plan and it was innovative. This plan pushes the envelope on climate and biodiversity. The consultation was interactive with maps and infographics, and the “Joint Local Plan in a nutshell” consultation document (“in a nutshell” for short), which helps the public to get to grips with the plan without needing to go through all the documentation if they don’t want to.

Comments from Scrutiny Committee would be considered ahead of publication of the consultation. Both Cabinets had set a meeting in the diary to discuss the outcome of this meeting.

Committee’s comments:

- IN1 – 7 policies: a member suggested that some of his residents were interested in infrastructure. IN3 – there was a long list of safeguarded transport schemes that some residents would be very keen to comment on. Was there a route to getting resident’s views on infrastructure? Cabinet member for South explained that the ‘in a nutshell’ document would help more people to engage and give their views. Section nine deals with community infrastructure, and they were also able to swap to the full document. Chair added that

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officers should ensure full communications to explain how the documents were intended to be used.

- Wording of the questions – please double check the wording to ensure no confusion. Officer did add that questions had been checked by other officers, but they would take this comment into consideration.
- Officers were thanked on the work done, as well as the Cabinet Members. Praised for the ambition in the document.
- Can we add heat transfer – noting the data centres we were expecting.
- Given the large proportion of AONB and green belt land in the districts - was there justification for going below the standard method as we had historic housing supply baked into our current plans. Cabinet member for South explained that standard method was recommended for housing need, no local exceptions justified going lower. These policies can be reviewed in full and such responses can be put into the consultation and taken into consideration.
- Bigger font size for the 'in a nutshell' document. Streamline the links to the main documents. Officer confirmed it will be an interactive webpage and you can adjust size as you wish.
- In response to Sue Roberts comment in public participation – can we take a constrained approach to housing numbers? Cabinet member for South replied that this would be something to look at in the Regulation 19 consultation stage.
- Member supported encouraging various response methods from groups as per David Marsh's suggestion in public participation. It was noted by Cabinet member for Vale that Town and Parish Councils were already being encouraged and signposted with planned events coming up for councils and seldom heard groups. Options will be available but online preferable. Chair suggested a hybrid option, by keeping to the layout of the online consultation, say, if a group plans on submitting a paper document.
- Suggest avoiding jargon – ask a non-professional to check the wording.
- The difference in the summary of the 'in a nutshell' document to the main document – officers explained that the 'in a nutshell' document was intended as a summary. We will analyse the responses to both documents separately, so essentially running two consultations. The 'in a nutshell' responses are allowed to be anonymous.
- Felt that the 'in a nutshell' document lost some of the vision and excitement of the full consultation document. For example, we need to challenge the perception that green technology was expensive, and that there were great benefits to gain from it. Cabinet member for Vale explained that the communications messages that will come out will contain the enthusiasm and vision to go with the documents.
- A member stated that they were glad to see the changes made since the last iteration of the Plans and that comments had been taken onboard about climate, renewables etc, and it was great to see the difference.
- Density per hectare was discussed and that it was felt to be too rigid – this question can be submitted in the consultation.
- Graphics related to allocations – it looked like a big difference between South and Vale. Concern of perceived imbalance. Officer explained that the diagrams were carefully considered to show spread of allocated sites, but we can take this point away.

Resolved:

As the meeting was close to reaching two and a half hours long, Committee voted on a 30-minute extension of the meeting to conclude business, which was agreed.

- Committee considered John Salmon's comment in public participation, about residents suggesting green spaces. It was confirmed there was space to make suggestions in the consultation under HP4 or the final question box at the end, and through the Neighbourhood Plan process also. There was a high level of protection in HP4 for green spaces.
- A suggestion was made that the tiers could be confusing – it was confirmed that an explanatory document would be provided – the settlement assessment.

- Consider the potential confusion of the aforementioned tiers and the retail tiers in different parts of the document.
- “Biodiversity was expensive”, members questioned this wording. Officer explained that we’d need to test the viability of the policies. If it were too expensive it would not be viable. The wording was an indication that we must test the policies. Cabinet member for South added that we were being ambitious, so pushing the boundaries with the hope that the policies test well.
- A box could be added to ask consultees whether they have any other suggestions that weren’t included in the documents.
- IN5, parking standards. Cycling facilities – can we use another word other than “internal”, it’s too wide. Was secure lockable parking structures meant? Member was asked to feed this into the consultation.
- It was confirmed by officers that a sewage map couldn’t be included as it was Thames Water documentation.
- Regarding James Barlow’s queries in public participation – was there opportunity to talk about carbon footprint of building? If we create tonnes of carbon, was there renewable energy offsetting? Cabinet member for South explained that the climate emergency was high priority, but we also had to work to get through examination and find a balance. Policy CE2 was quoted by Cabinet member for Vale, as covering this detail. Officer added that higher standard of building should be net zero carbon, therefore tackling the issue of carbon footprint.
- A member thanked Councillor Sarah James for providing a statement as she could not attend the meeting.

The Committee was asked to “review this report and share any comments or suggestions with the Head of Policy and Programmes, South Cabinet Member for Planning and the Vale Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Policy and Programmes, for consideration prior to the commencement of the consultation period”.

Resolved:

Committee were impressed by the ambition of the consultation document, and praised those involved for all the work and consideration that went into its development.

Comments were provided, and the main points highlighted for recommendation were:

1. Committee felt that there needed to be a way of capturing infrastructure concerns within the consultation (reservoirs, community facilities, roads etc)
2. Communications: Committee suggested that members of the public need to be made aware that you can dip in and out of the “Joint Local Plan in a Nutshell” consultation document – officers did explain that further guidance was planned ahead of publication.
3. Members recommended that the wording of questions should be double checked for the public’s understanding, for example, avoid use of double negatives. They recommended a final check with an independent officer/3rd party.
4. Committee commented on small fonts but were assured by officers that the digital outputs would be changeable to the reader’s requirements.
5. Committee agreed that the public should be able to submit responses in other formats, such as joint responses (where organisations respond together, such as Parishes), but did stress that such responses should follow the headings of the main consultation document for ease of reference.
6. Committee discussed putting the enthusiasm and excitement of the main document into the start of the “Joint Local Plan in a Nutshell” document – noting that the introduction to this document did not currently have the same impact. However, officers confirmed that the planned communications and guidance around the “in a Nutshell” document would add that enthusiasm, however this was the necessary downfall of creating a slim-lined document. However, the public have a choice of two documents which gives the public the benefit of choice.

7. Committee discussed the options available for people to identify areas they wish to designate as Local Green Spaces. It was confirmed that many communities do this through Neighbourhood Plans but the public could add suggestions in their consultation responses.
8. It was suggested that the final box of the consultation could be reworded to encourage more direct answers, for example “ Is there anything else you would like to see in the Joint Local Plan that hasn’t been covered already?” alongside the question “Is there anything else you’d like to say?”
9. Praise was given to the officers and Cabinet members involved in this work on the consultation, and that the plan was generating excitement from members.

The meeting closed at 8.27 pm