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Minutes

of a meeting of the

Joint Scrutiny Committee

held on Monday, 18 November 2024 at 6.30 pm

at Meeting Room 2, 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), Alexandrine Kantor, Leigh Rawlins, Jo Robb, Ed Sadler

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

Officers: Suzanne Malcolm (Deputy Chief Executive – Place), Andrew Busby (Head of Development and Corporate Landlord), Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer)

Guests: Councillor Bethia Thomas, Council Leader for Vale of White Horse District Council (Vale)

Present online:

Officers: Nick Bennett (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services) and Andrew Down (Deputy Chief Executive – Partnerships), Andrew Down (Deputy Chief Executive – Partnerships).

Guests: South Oxfordshire District Council (South): Councillor Pieter-Paul Barker (Cabinet member for Finance and Property Assets) and Councillor David Rouane (South Council Leader)

Vale: Councillor Mark Coleman (Cabinet member for Environmental Services and Waste). Councillors: Anne-Marie Simpson (South), Sarah James (Vale) and Andy Foulsham (Vale)

Sc.36 Chair's announcements

The chair, Councillor Katherine Foxhall, ran through housekeeping matters and welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Sc.37 Apologies for absence

There were no apologies from the committee, all members were present. It was noted that Cabinet member for Finance and Property Assets (Vale), Councillor Andy Crawford sent his apologies.

Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of the Council (Vale) was present in person to introduce the report on Land Acquisition in the absence of Councillor Crawford.

Sc.38 Minutes of the last meeting

Resolved:

The minutes of the meeting on 30 September 2024 were agreed by committee as a correct record, and the chair would sign them as such.

Sc.39 Declaration of interests

The chair asked committee to provide any declaration of interests at the beginning of each agenda item.

Sc.40 Urgent business

None.

Sc.41 Public participation

None.

Sc.42 Work schedule and dates for Joint scrutiny meetings

Committee noted their work programme which was under regular review and development.

Sc.43 Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP) review

The report on “Future Oxfordshire Partnership refresh and devolution” was introduced by Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of the Council (Vale). Also present online was Cabinet member for Finance and Property Assets, Councillor Pieter-Paul Barker (South). Council Leader for South Oxfordshire, Councillor David Rouane, was also present online to assist with questions. The Deputy Chief Executive – Place was present in the meeting as lead officer.

Councillors Cooke, Robb and Rawlins were on the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP) scrutiny panel and one of the members asked about whether this was considered a conflict of interest. It was advised by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services that this was not a barrier to discussions today as the discussion would be broader with no decision making involved. Although expressing strong views would not be advisable, these members would provide valuable experience to the discussion, as long as they did not pre-determine any future decisions. The focus for members was the discussion from the perspective of a member of the district council.

The Vale Council Leader introduced the paper with some background to the review of the remit of the FOP and potential changes from central government on devolution, noting that this was unknown but something to be aware of. Leaders would consider advice from members and provide a response on endorsing a revised remit of the FOP. Changes to the Terms of Reference will require the formal approval of councils involved. The proposed changes included a reduced scope and reduced number of sub-groups. The Vale Council Leader considered it to be important that the FOP did not overrule the sovereignty of individual councils and there should be a reduced scope for the avoidance of duplication of work. South Council Leader added that we needed a mechanism for County-wide discussions, and with the unknown situation on devolution, FOP provided a mechanism for these discussions when required. Members were welcomed to ask questions.

- A member started discussions by asking why we needed to revise the remit. The Vale Leader responded that there was a list of items that were felt not appropriate, and we should reduce the list and create more focus. It was felt there could be some overlap already with other groups (on topics such as climate). The South Council Leader explained that for some projects e.g. Local area energy plan (LAEP) and PAZCO, the reporting was through FOP, it was the democratic oversight. The Vale Cabinet Leader added that the FOP had a sensible structure for discussions on devolution with council leaders already involved.
- In response to a member asking about potentially becoming a combined authority, it was responded that there would be a White Paper on this in future and that at County scale we were unlikely to become a combined authority. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services added that we could not predict at this stage. The focus of this report was to consider how we ensure the Terms of Reference (ToR) reflect what was needed.
- Members discussed which items made sense for the remit of the FOP. It was considered that LAEP made sense, and committee considered scope should be reduced where there was overlap with other organisations. The Vale Council Leader considered that FOP should strip back membership to democratically elected members. The South Council Leader explained that the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership (OLNP) and the Inclusive Economy Partnership reports went back to FOP for democratic reporting but the OLNP had their own boards but report into FOP to check on direction. FOP voted against the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. It was suggested that a well-written ToR would enable individual authorities to be able to have autonomy if needed or if not in agreement. Committee members considered housing to be inappropriate on the FOP remit and thought it should be tightly drawn on the ToR or removed altogether.
- Members considered that the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision that was produced was a good document. Members had much input into it and there was a good level of consultation. It was felt to be ambitious and that the outcomes should underpin the FOP moving forward.
- The Deputy Chief Executive – Place explained that on 26th November 2024 Leaders will endorse the direction of travel at the FOP meeting, then officers will rework the ToR. The reworked version would go via each full council and can come back to scrutiny at an appropriate time.
- There was a discussion over financing the FOP – generally, members considered that if there were reductions in focus, we should reduce payment per council.
- A member asked how do you consider keeping democratic check and balance if no there was no FOP scrutiny panel? The Vale Council Leader responded that we should expand on the reasons, but scrutiny should come through each council's audit and scrutiny meetings. The South Council Leader echoed this, considering that local scrutiny was more powerful. It was noted that FOP scrutiny was advisory and not as direct as local scrutiny.
- On LAEP, there was some agreement that this was a good area for focus. Another topic considered was flooding.
- A member provided a view that the scrutiny panel was good to get individual areas together for the broad view, and on the issue of cross boundaries.
- Should majority decision making be in TOR going forward? Was there a chair's casting vote?
- Members agreed that work programming should be led by the Council Leaders.

The committee moved to discussion and summarising their points to provide a recommendation to Cabinets and the Leaders of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils. Members were reminded that this was an interim arrangement and we could not predict the government position on devolution. Members would have the opportunity to see a revised ToR and the Leaders were grateful for scrutiny member input into what should be included in the revised remit.

Recommendations to Cabinet:

Joint Scrutiny's main points from their discussion to feedback to the Leaders and Cabinet are as follows.

1. Joint scrutiny advise the Leaders / Cabinet to limit the Terms of Reference (TOR) to where the FOP adds value and to avoid duplication. Devolution, Local Area Energy Plans (LAEP), PAZCO using task and finish groups were suggested as areas where the FOP can add value.
2. Joint Scrutiny considered the importance of the Strategic Vision as the democratic basis. Thematic priorities should be the delivery of aims of the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision, which was positively regarded.
3. More clarity wanted on accountability, transparency and scrutiny – Cabinet is advised to consider how to move forward with the loss of FOP scrutiny forum
4. Thematic priorities were considered as being too broad.
5. Leaders of Councils should be in charge of the FOP work programme and ensure real results on delivery.
6. Concern was raised over majority voting – officers and Leaders should look at what is done in other authorities.
7. Members considered that if less work is being carried out by FOP, there should be less cost to member councils of the FOP.
8. On discussing the name change of the FOP, it was suggested to name it as a forum, rather than a Board.

Sc.44 Exclusion of the public

Resolved:

Joint Scrutiny Committee agreed to exclude the public and the press to consider a confidential report on land acquisition.

Sc.45 Land acquisition

Committee considered a confidential report on land acquisition and made recommendations to South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council Leaders and Cabinets.

The meeting closed at 8.59 pm