

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE



Listening Learning Leading

Scrutiny Committee

HELD ON TUESDAY 1 OCTOBER 2024 AT 6.00 PM
ABBEY HOUSE, ABINGDON

Present:

Councillors: Ken Arlett (Chair), Sue Cooper, Mocky Khan, Tony Worgan, Leigh Rawlins, Katharine Keats-Rohan and Andrea Powell and Ed Sadler

Cabinet members: Sam Casey-Rerhaye (Cabinet member for corporate services) and David Rouane (Leader of the council and Cabinet member for cross council themes including climate action, communications, and legal and democratic services)

Officers: Steven Corrigan (Democratic Services Manager)

Remote attendance:

Councillors: James Barlow

Officers: Simon Hewings (Head of Finance), Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate and Communities) and Anna Winship (Strategic Finance Manger)

51 Chair's announcements

Councillor Ken Arlett, Chair of the committee, provided general housekeeping information.

52 Minutes of the last meeting

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes and confidential minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2024 as a correct record and agree that the chair sign them as such.

53 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Kate Gregory with Councillor Ed Sadler attending as substitute and Councillor David Turner with Councillor Sue Cooper attending as substitute.

54 Declaration of interests

None.

55 Urgent business

None.

56 Public participation

None.

57 Work schedule and dates for all South scrutiny meetings

The committee noted the Scrutiny Committee work programme.

58 Corporate Plan Annual Performance report 2023-2024

The committee considered the Corporate Plan Performance Report 2023-2024 (the Plan) as attached to the agenda.

Councillor Casey-Rerhaye, Cabinet member for corporate services, introduced the item. She noted that most of the projects had been delivered which was a great reflection on the focus of the council over the last four years to ensure the council's policies had been seen through to implementation. The focus was now on preparing the Plan for the next four years, the format of the report and how progress is reported to all members via timely and useful reports whilst balancing the need for officers' time to be spent on the delivery of the projects.

Members welcomed the delivery, indicated by a green rating, and progress in delivery, shown by an amber rating, of the majority of actions included in the Plan.

The committee noted that the document before the committee was the annual performance review for 2023/24 which provided a high-level evaluation of the actions during the preceding 12 months (April 2023 – March 2024) and progress made towards the objectives specified in the Plan. Detail of the specific actions and their delivery was included in the quarterly reports.

Councillor Casey-Rerhaye, Cabinet member for corporate services, and Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, responded to questions and observations from members of the committee:

- They noted the welcome for the delivery of the Wheatley Flood Alleviation Scheme. Future measures to assist other communities with flood alleviation measures would be delivered in partnership with other bodies, recognising that Oxfordshire County Council was the responsible local authority for flood alleviation work, and via Local Plan policies.
- The success of the 'Let it Bee' and 'No Mow May' campaigns required the co-operation of local communities and the parishes to identify suitable locations for rewilding. They acknowledged community confusion in respect of the above campaigns and unmanaged verges which could reduce support for the projects.
- Working at the grass roots with parish/town councils and small businesses was important in the delivery of actions in Theme 4: Improved economic and community well-being, particularly engaging volunteers.
- In noting that there were delays in the delivery of some actions this was partly due to prioritising work on the Joint Local Plan.
- Scrutiny Committee members would have the opportunity to review the draft Corporate Plan and have an input on what actions could be included. This could include ideas for the inclusion of specific actions and targets. They advised that

individual service teams had action plans for their projects that fed into the Corporate Plan.

- Agreed that reference to the existence of the Council Charter could be included in the forthcoming Plan.

In welcoming the progress, committee members discussed how the council could better communicate the successes to residents. Members noted the work undertaken by the Communications Team and acknowledged that all ward members had a role to play via their parish councils and constituents. Views were expressed specifically welcoming the receipt of external funds to deliver actions, the emphasis on addressing climate change in the themes and support for the homeless.

59 Budget scene setting

The committee considered the report of the head of finance on the budget setting process for 2025/26 including the proposed timetable for activities and future cabinet reports to meet the requirement for officers to propose a revised base budget, reflecting the previous decisions of council. All members of the council were invited to attend a briefing on the process prior to the meeting.

Simon Hewings, Head of Finance, and Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, introduce the item. They highlighted that the council was at the technical stage of the budget setting process. The report highlighted some challenges facing the council and the fact that the council had no indication as to what the future local government funding settlement would be. The expectation was that most of the budget, including savings, would continue to fund the council's priorities in the Corporate Plan with little room for growth.

The committee welcomed the report, which was the first time a scene setting report had been brought forward to the committee, and the transparency of the process.

The committee noted that the setting of base budget was slightly behind schedule.

RESOLVED: to note the contents of the report.

60 Financial outturn report

The committee considered the report of the head of finance on the final year position for revenue and capital expenditure against the budget for the 2023/24 financial year.

Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, introduced the item. He noted that there was a £5.3 million favourable variance to budget. However, he noted that whilst this could reflect that the council was doing things better it could also reflect that council had not delivered on anticipated projects or reflect accountancy practice of accounting for a project in year one. It was therefore necessary to review each budget line. He welcomed the positive news on investment income whilst noting that this was not anticipated to continue.

In welcoming the report, the committee requested faster reporting in future years. The view was expressed that the council should consider using the general convention for variances – red for negative and black for positive. In using red for positive and black for negative the view was expressed that this could confuse readers of the report. The committee welcomed the encouraging National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) income.

Responses were provided to a number of questions as set out below:

- The cancelled project referenced in paragraph 20 of the report related to Abbey Sports Centre in Berinsfield. A potential alternative project was being brought forward.
- Savings had been made to staffing budgets in the planning service as a result of the transformation programme but the fall in planning fee income had off set this.
- The commercialisation budget did not currently include any specific projects for income generation.
- In response to a question in respect of an anticipated increase in planning fees, officers responded that the government had recently consulted on increasing national planning fees, but no figure had been agreed which made it difficult to anticipate an income budget. In addition, the Joint Local Plan did not propose any additional housing and therefore it was unlikely to impact future fee income. Due to the instability in the housing market a number of large application sites had not come forward which had also impacted income.
- In response to a suggestion that the treasury management outturn report should be brought to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration, officers responded that Council had agreed that the Joint Audit and Governance Committee, in line with most other local authority arrangements, should have responsibility for ensuring effective review of the treasury management strategy and policies. Whilst the committee is a joint committee only South members consider and vote on matters specific to South Oxfordshire.

Committee members expressed concern regarding the slippage in a number of capital projects with particular reference to the delayed flood alleviation scheme in Wheatley (now implemented) and the Wallingfod cemetery repairs. The committee noted that officers were undertaking a capital programme challenge to address this. Officers undertook to provide the committee with details of the profiling for capital projects together with updates on their delivery and an explanation for any delays.

RESOLVED: to

1. welcome the report,
2. note the overall outturn position of the council as well as the individual service areas subject to the issues raised by the committee and detailed in the minutes of the meeting.

The meeting closed at 7:20pm

Chair

Date