

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee**



held at 6.30 pm on Thursday, 28 November 2013
at the Council Chamber, The Abbey House, Abingdon

Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillor Jim Halliday (Chairman), Charlotte Dickson (Vice-Chairman), Tony de Vere, Debby Hallett, Mohinder Kainth, Sandy Lovatt, Julie Mayhew-Archer, Fiona Roper, Richard Webber, Substitutes: Yvonne Constance, Bill Jones and Robert Sharp

Officers: Steve Bishop, David Buckle, Susan Harbour, Paul Howden and William Jacobs

Number of members of the public: 0

Sc.72 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Eric Batts, Jason Fiddaman and Alison Thomson.

Councillors Yvonne Constance, Bill Jones and Robert Sharp attended as substitutes.

Sc.73 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 October 2013 were agreed as an accurate record and the chairman signed them.

Sc.74 Declarations of interest

A number of councillors present are "dual hatted", being elected to both the district and/or the county. These councillors were aware of the need to consider the issues raised by the office move from the position of the district council.

Sc.75 Urgent business and chairman's announcements

None.

Sc.76 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee

None.

Sc.77 Proposed letting of Abbey House and relocation of Vale staff

Steve Bishop, Strategic Director; David Buckle, Chief Executive and Matthew Barber, Leader of the Council were present for the discussion of this item.

The committee discussed this item and the following points were raised:

- The intention is to agree an arrangement with South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) which is compatible with the lease arrangement on Abbey House with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC);
- At the end of the lease period with OCC the Vale will have an improved asset;
- The purpose of the project is to make better use of public offices and public finances across the three councils;
- The Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) has, at this point, not made a firm commitment to premises sharing as CABx philosophically prefer visible independence from councils. The Vale will retain 31.177 percent of the space in Abbey House (which may include the CAB) and OCC will have 68.23 percent;
- There will be a Joint Cabinet Board (JCB) meeting (made up of members of both Vale and South Oxfordshire Cabinets) on 2 January 2014 which will look at formal arrangements between the two councils;
- There will be no separate lease agreement with SODC, but rather a variation of existing working agreements between the two councils;
- The JCB will agree an acceptable recharge methodology and possible recharge amount which will then be assessed by the councils' Section 151 officer from an accountancy perspective and will also need to be agreed by the external auditor to ensure that the deal did not involve one set of tax payers subsidising another;
- Public services including: paying bills, housing and benefits will still be available at Abbey House;
- The final proposals and the location of services and staff will be published for councillors and staff to comment;
- It is more efficient for staff within a service area to be located close together, and for certain teams to be located close to other teams;
- Management are looking at ways to mitigate the effects of moving on staff through various schemes;
- If Old Abbey House is sold, what would happen to the gardens? David Buckle to respond to this outside of the meeting.

The committee made the following recommendations:

- The front of Abbey House should show the following signage: Abbey House, Vale of White Horse District Council; Oxfordshire County Council. External/ street signs should also be amended accordingly.
- Scrutiny wish to see the detailed arrangements after they have been to JCB and been reviewed by relevant officers;
- The final draft plans of who remains in Abbey House should be available to all councillors.
- Staff should be recognised as a valuable asset and all efforts should be made to mitigate the effects of the move on staff and to make the transition as easy as possible.

Meeting adjourned at 7:45pm to allow for a Cabinet meeting to make a decision on the above issue.

Sc.78 Council tax reduction scheme

The meeting reconvened at 8.00 pm.

Paul Howden, Revenues and Benefits Client Manager; William Jacobs, Head of Finance and Matthew Barber, Cabinet member for finance, were present for the discussion of this item.

The shortfall between the current benefits scheme and re-imburement from central government is approximately £59,000. The costs of the benefit scheme will fall on other council tax payers.

New proposals to amend the scheme would amount to a projected net saving of £28,063 for Vale, although over £200,000 additional savings would arise for the county council and Thames Valley Police.

Any scheme which reduces benefits to customers carries the risks of:

- Potentially greater administrative costs;
- Additional hardship applications;
- A greater number of non-payers;
- Increased use of bailiffs.

The Cabinet member for finance suggested, and the committee agreed, to delete the suggestion or removing benefit from people who would receive it because they have more than £6,000 in capital. This measure was projected to save the council £3,757 per annum and would affect 62 people; however it would be complex and expensive to administer and was projected to cost the council more in administration costs than it would be likely to save.

The Cabinet member for finance suggested, and the committee agreed, to delete the suggestion or removing benefit from people who will no longer have their child maintenance disregarded. This measure was projected to save the council £6,546 per annum and would affect 125 people; however it was considered to be contentious and difficult to implement: in particular, the CAB's comments that maintenance payments were "made in a variety of different ways, both formal and informal" and "ignored for other benefits purposes which means that there is no established method for verifying them" were considered to be relevant.

Scrutiny Committee asked that the scheme be reviewed on an annual basis, in particular to achieve the following:

- To ensure that the administration involved in the scheme was substantially less than the savings to the Vale of implementing it
- To ensure that both the county council and the police continue to meet their share of the costs;
- To review information on complaints.

Scrutiny wish to receive a report back one year into the implementation of this scheme, and sooner if significant problems are identified.

Sc.79 Council tax reduction scheme: grant for town and parish councils

Paul Howden, Revenues and Benefits Client Manager; William Jacobs, Head of Finance and Matthew Barber, Cabinet member for finance, were present for the discussion of this item.

The committee discussed this item and supported option 2 from the officer's report, as follows:

1. The CTRS effect could be recalculated again for 2014/15 using up to date CTRS figures.
2. The council would then use the 2012/13 town and parish band D figures to calculate the notional shortfall upon which their share of the grant would be based.
3. The Government's model for calculating the amount of grant attributable to town and parish councils was based on 2012/13 council tax levels and this is why the council will continue to use 2012/13 as the baseline.

This option was supported by the town and parish councils at the briefing sessions held with town and parish councils on 15 October 2013 and 21 October 2013.

Sc.80 Councillor's access to IT facilities at the council

Councillor Mohinder Kainth presented the interim findings of the survey which he and Councillor Jim Halliday had undertaken on councillors' use of IT. So far, about 60 percent of councillors had responded to the survey. It was agreed that there would be a further push to encourage all councillors to fill in the survey and that the results would be reported to the January scrutiny meeting.

Sc.81 Action List

Noted.

Sc.82 Scrutiny work programme

Noted.

Sc.83 Dates of meetings

Meetings will take place on the following dates:

- Thursday 23 January
- Wednesday 12 February
- Thursday 20 March
- Thursday 17 April
- Thursday 29 May

Democratic Services Officer's note:

- Meetings after 1 March 2013 are expected to take place at Wantage Civic Hall, further information to be provided.
- The meeting on 29 May 2014 has been rescheduled from 22 May 2014, the date of the European elections.

Sc.84 Exclusion of the public, including the press

In accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, were excluded from the remainder of the meeting to prevent the disclosure to them of exempt information, as defined in Section 100(I) and Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, to the Act.

Item 14 Proposed letting of Abbey House and relocation of staff

Category 3 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information.)

Sc.85 Proposed letting of Abbey House and relocation of staff (exempt)

There were no additional matters to note under this item, and therefore no exempt minute.

The meeting closed at 9.05 pm