

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee



held on Thursday, 18 September 2014 at 7.00 pm
at The Lockinge, The Beacon, Portway, Wantage, OX12 9BY

Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Jim Halliday (Chairman), Charlotte Dickson (Vice-Chairman), Eric Batts, Tony de Vere, Jason Fiddaman, Debby Hallett, Mohinder Kainth, Sandy Lovatt, Jerry Patterson (In place of Julie Mayhew-Archer), Fiona Roper, Alison Thomson and Richard Webber

Officers: Susan Harbour and Anna Robinson John Backley, Yvonne Cutler Greaves, Peter Dela, Susan Harbour, William Jacobs, Clare Kingston and Bob Watson

Also present: Councillor Matthew Barber, Councillor Mike Murray. Dave Baldwin (Monson Engineering), Bethan Morgan (Oxfordshire County Council emergency planning), Gordon Hunt (Oxfordshire County Council drainage engineer), Huw Thomas and Spencer Whiteley Thames Water, Sarah Underhay (Environment Agency)

Sc.144 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

Apologies were received from:

- Councillor Julie Mayhew-Archer; Councillor Jerry Patterson was her substitute

Sc.145 Minutes

Consideration of the minutes of the meeting of 26 June was deferred to the next meeting.

Sc.146 Declarations of interest

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests or other interests declared by members of the committee.

Sc.147 Urgent business and chairman's announcements

There would be a special meeting of the Scrutiny Committee next week on 25 September to discuss the Local Plan: this would be considered under the following topic headings:

- Housing numbers
- Site selection, including Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Greenbelt issues
- How deliverable is the plan
- Proposed ring fencing

- The five year housing land supply
- Transport infrastructure
- Affordable housing issues.

Councillor Mike Murray agreed to provide a response to Councillor Debby Hallett's question regarding the means by which a community organisation could submit a report or a commissioned study as a supplemental document or as evidence for the Local Plan.

Sc.148 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee

The action list, setting out matters outstanding from previous meetings, was noted.

Sc.149 Action List

The action list, setting out matters outstanding from previous meetings, was noted.

Sc.150 Indicative Scrutiny work programme

The following items were to be added to the work programme:

- Housing Associations and their relationship with Vale of White Horse District Council
- The IT Procurement Panel.

Sc.151 Review of Financial Services Contract: Capita

Matthew Barber, Cabinet member for finance, and William Jacobs, Head of Finance, formed the panel for the presentation of the report and the following committee discussion.

They reported that the targets for the percentage of council tax and national non-domestic rates collected were set at a high level. With regard to benefits, the figure for speed of processing new claims came in at 12.90 days (under the 16 day target) compared to 12.46 days against a target of 19 days in 2012/2013. This was the second best ever in-year performance. Processing changes in circumstances came in at 6.26 days against a very challenging target of 8.5 days, compared to 5.45 days against a target of 9.5 days in 2012/2013. Again, this was the second best ever in-year performance. NI 181 (combined new claims and changes processing) came in at an excellent 7.06 days (and under the 10 day target) compared to 6.36 days against a target of 13 days in 2012/2013. This was also the second best ever recorded performance. Generally, the council received more changes in circumstances during 2013/14 and, although there was a 50 per cent take up in on-line reporting through the council's website

Capita's focus on getting benefit assessments "right first time" continued during 2013/14. The financial accuracy performance rate for 2013/14 was 96.91 per cent (based on the council's statutory checks), 0.98 per cent improvement upon the 95.83 per cent recorded in 2012/13. This was above the target of 95 per cent and was the best performance since the inception of the contract.

The customer satisfaction survey was based on a sample of 99 out of a customer base of over 46,000.

The committee raised concerns that customer satisfaction with the phone service had reduced over the last period. Calls had become more complex and took longer; therefore, Vale of White Horse District Council – Scrutiny Committee minutes

despite increased numbers of staff, customers may have had to wait longer. Changes to the benefit system such as the introduction of the social sector size criteria rules had led to an increase in the number and duration of calls.

The committee was concerned that Capita staff seemed to be in a rush when dealing with customers and that 27 per cent of customers were not sure that the information given to them by Capita staff was correct. However, the data demonstrated that, on average, staff spent longer on each individual call. Capita did everything possible to ensure that staff gave the correct responses to customers; however, customers were not always happy with the answer as it may not have been what they wished to hear.

23 per cent of respondents were experiencing difficulties in filling in the applications, a similar figure to the previous year. Capita now issued a summary letter containing only the most relevant information to assist claimants.

With regard to financial management systems, the committee raised issues about communication between Capita and the Council's Accountancy team and were assured that systems had been put in place to improve this.

It was reported that Capita staff had implemented the significant changes to pensions and auto enrolment.

Actions: To advise the Cabinet member for finance:

- i. That the number and percentage of respondents to the customer satisfaction survey should be included in next year's report.
- ii. That scores of be awarded for the next year of:
 - Excellent for Revenues
 - Excellent for Benefits
 - Excellent for Exchequer
 - Good for Financial Management System
 - Good for Payroll
 - Excellent for Customer Contact
- iii. To further improve communications between Capita and the council's accountancy team during the next year.
- iv. That the contractor be requested to be more proactive over the next year of the contract.

Sc.152 Vale Flooding Review

John Backley, Technical and Facilities Manager, Peter Dela, Principal Engineer, Dave Baldwin, Monson Engineering, Bethan Morgan, Oxfordshire County Council emergency planning, Gordon Hunt, Oxfordshire County Council drainage engineer, Huw Thomas and Spencer Whiteley, Thames Water and Sarah Underhay, Environment Agency, formed the panel for the presentation of this item and for the committee discussion.

The committee was advised that a revised version of the joint severe weather plan was due to be published in November 2014.

Following the officers' report, the committee requested the following action points:

- To achieve successful flood prevention and alleviation work by district council officers working with other agencies to ensure good communication between all the agencies, parish and town councils and local flood groups.
- To communicate via the "In Focus" news bulletin that the Environment Agency welcome feedback from the public and local bodies to ensure that their data is as up to date as possible.
- Further work needs to be done with flood groups and parish councils as follows:
 - The Oxford and Abingdon flood alleviation scheme goes through Hinksey and Kennington, so these parish councils need to be consulted.
 - Not all town and parish councils have responded to requests for information on flooding.
 - A review of the flood barrier trigger points (especially in Kennington) and to ensure that local parish councils are kept well informed if the flood barriers are to be activated (Oxfordshire County Council/VoWHDC). Up to date information from local residents assist in the decision on when to activate flood barriers: this information also needs to be communicated to parish councils.
 - Oxfordshire County Council encourages parish and town councils to have emergency flood plans in place: this to include places of safety, key contacts and sandbag stores. Localised flood plans help to improve community resilience.
- Logos to be added to sand bags to discourage people from stealing and reselling them.

The committee commended the agencies on their joint working.

Sc.153 Financial outturn 2013/14

William Jacobs, Head of Finance and Bob Watson, Accountancy Manager (Technical), formed the panel for the presentation of the report and the following committee discussion.

It was noted that, after unexpected grant income was stripped from the outturn, there was still an underspend of £1.34 million. The committee raised concerns over the reasons behind the underspend, and wished to know what was being done to ensure a more accurate outturn for next year.

The accountancy team advised the committee that several measures had been put in place to improve next year's outturn, including:

- £2 million had been taken out of base budgets
- Contingency funds had been centralised
- Training had been improved for budget holders to assist them in setting their budgets more accurately and profiling them across the year.
- More emphasis had been placed on budget holders to provide accurate budgets.

However, it would remain difficult to accurately predict income from, inter alia, planning and grants.

The committee was informed that there was a large variance between budgeted and outturn capital expenditure. In future, the capital programme would be split between provisional and approved capital projects.

The committee requested that the full capital programme be circulated to Scrutiny Committee members.

Sc.154 Councillor Development Programme

Clare Kingston, Head of Corporate Strategy and Yvonne CutlerGreaves, Corporate Projects Officer, presented this item to the committee.

The committee was given information about the pilot programme, which would take place in early November. The committee asked that, in addition to Scrutiny Committee members, recently elected (mid-term) councillors should be included in the pilot. Democratic Services would co-ordinate volunteers to take part in the pilot programme.

Actions

- Officer actions pertaining to Councillor responses to be sent out to members of Scrutiny by Democratic Services.
- Councillor champions be co-opted onto the project board by the project manager.

Sc.155 Dates of meetings

The committee noted the dates of future meetings.

The meeting closed at 9.30pm