

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held on Thursday, 25 January 2018 at 7.00 pm

at the Meeting Room 1, 135 Eastern Avenue, Milton Park, Milton, OX14 4SB



Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Debby Hallett (Chairman), Alice Badcock (Vice-Chairman), Vicky Jenkins, Sandy Lovatt, Chris Palmer, Judy Roberts, Ben Mabbett (In place of Mike Badcock) and Yvonne Constance (In place of Mohinder Kainth)

Officers:

Jayne Bolton, Andrew Down, Adrian Duffield, Liz Hayden, Adrianna Partridge, Margaret Reed and Ron Schrieber

Also present:

Councillors Matthew Barber, Helen Pighills and Emily Smith
Councillor John Cotton (South Oxfordshire District Council)

Sc.52 Apologies for absence

Councillors Mike Badcock (substituted by Ben Mabbett) and Mohinder Kainth (substituted by Yvonne Constance), submitted apologies.

Sc.53 Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on 30 November and 14 December 2017 were agreed as an accurate record and were signed by the Chairman.

Sc.54 Declarations of interest

Councillor Sandy Lovatt declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 6: Partnership Grants, as his wife was the council's representative and/or trustee on organisations in receipt of partnership grants.

Councillor Chris Palmer declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 6: Partnership Grants, as he was the council's representative on an organisation in receipt of a partnership grant.

Sc.55 Urgent business and chairman's announcements

None.

Sc.56 Public participation

None.

Sc.57 Partnership Grants

The committee considered the report of the interim head of corporate services on the partnership grant scheme.

Jayne Bolton, interim communications and grants manager, introduced this item. Also present to answer questions was Councillor Matthew Barber, Leader of the Council.

The report stated that, historically, award decisions had been informal and the budget for the scheme had been based on these decisions and then agreed as part of the council's budget setting process. In recent years, the Cabinet member for grants determined the awards based on officer advice about each organisation's financial situation, performance targets and business cases, where relevant.

In response to members' questions, the committee was informed that:

- Over the last three years, there had been a move away from revenue grant funding.
- The number of organisations receiving partnership grant funding had reduced significantly in recent years. With the exception of the Albert Memorial (Abingdon) Trust, where was a legal commitment to continue grant funding until 2021, the only organisations receiving these grants were providing services that, if they ceased to do so, would put pressure on the council to provide.
- Due to financial pressures and the annual requirement to secure funding for this scheme, new applications were not being accepted. Organisations seeking funding were directed to other council grant schemes including festival, capital and new homes bonus.
- Last year, officers gave an update to Cabinet members on partnership grants and arranged presentations by representatives of South and Vale Citizens' Advice Bureau and Wantage Independent Advice Centre. This year, similar presentations could be arranged for all councillors if members wished.

RESOLVED: to note the report.

Sc.58 Ask the Leader

Councillor Matthew Barber, Leader of the Council, attended to answer questions relating to the business of the district.

Councillor Helen Pighills had submitted the following question:

"The Upper Reaches has been empty now for a number of years. Could the Leader please give an update regarding its future? Also while it is empty, who is responsible for the maintenance of the buildings including the part of premises that is listed?"

Councillor Barber replied that the council was the freeholder but that the maintenance of the building was the tenant's responsibility. Whilst he was of the view that the best option

would be to retain the building as a hotel, there was no legal obligation on the tenant to keep the hotel open. He understood that the tenant was in pre-application discussions with the planning department.

Councillor Emily Smith had submitted the following question:

“The announcement that Old Abbey House in Abingdon will be used for council housing marks a change in approach for the Vale. What policies and strategy are the council using, or developing, to guide the Vale in providing housing for social rent directly?”

Councillor Barber replied that, in accordance with the Corporate Plan objective to support all types of affordable housing, the council was considering a range of options for Old Abbey House.

Councillor Judy Roberts had submitted the following question:

“On the Vale of White Horse corporate risk register only a quarter of the areas are in the green. One third of the areas are red, most of these highlight a need of effective management. What plans do we have to address these risks especially in the light of area 11? A breach of personal information as stated by the data regulations in place by May would leave the Council exposed to a maximum fine of 4% of gross turnover.”

Councillor Barber replied that the colour coding of risks in the risk register illustrated their significance rather than the likelihood of occurrence and he would be more concerned if the council was not identifying various risks as serious.

The council’s risk management strategy and framework had been approved and a progress report on the development of the corporate risk register would be considered by the Joint Audit and Governance Committee on 29 January. The committee would also receive progress reports at regular intervals.

Councillor Debby Hallett had submitted the following question:

“In the aftermath of the Carillion collapse, I’ve been looking into the wider issue of outsourcing public services as a decision and the associated risks. Whenever a decision is made to outsource public services to an external provider, we outsource the work but not the responsibility. It is still Vale that must meet payroll, manage HR issues, Keep the IT systems working, replace batteries in officers’ mobile telephones, and repair or replace wobbly tables in our offices. I see places where performance is falling short, yet the KPIs are still green.

When Cabinet decided to outsource this work, who at Vale took on the responsibility of managing the contracts with the outsourcing companies to ensure we were still delivering our services? What issues have arisen in contract management and what’s been the cost of that? For example, how much have we had to spend on retained officers’ work in keeping the Capita KPIs green? And now that we see what happens when a company goes bust, what sort of contingency plans have council developed us to protect us in the event of a Capita collapse?”

Councillor Barber replied that the council had outsourced many contracts most of which were working well. However, it was sensible to have plans in place in the event of the potential collapse of any of these contracts.

A joint client team operated across the Five Councils’ Partnership and the client relationship director had delegated authority to act for each of the partner councils in

managing the performance of the contractors. Most of the operational problems with the Capita contract had occurred in the transformation activities in HR and IT rather than in services operating on a “business as usual” basis. There were rectification plans (within the provisions of the contract and at no cost to the council) in those areas where the required service standards had not been achieved.

Councillor Sandy Lovatt had submitted the following question:

“I want to ask about your ideas on economic development in the Vale. I am aware of the big programmes such as Science Vale and the Didcot Garden Town, which provide the wider context for economic development. However, I would like to challenge your SME Strategy, which has the following four main components:

- Business Support
- Skills & Labour Force
- Infrastructure Planning
- Business Space.

I suggest that there is a missing element; namely “Supporting the SME Markets”.

I say this because Small Businesses (less than 50 employees) make up 98% of the business population. Even more significant Micro Businesses (less than 10 employees) make up 95%. Less than 30% of Micro businesses can benefit from your SME strategy. Do you have any ideas for supporting the market environment of small and micro businesses in the Vale?”

Councillor Barber replied that the business investment strategy action plan themes provided a range of ways in which the council could offer support and guidance to all businesses, from the smallest to the largest in the district.

Councillor Roberts had submitted the following question:

“The Expenses claim system was out sourced as part of the 5 councils joint contract. It is still not working reliably. What measures have been taken to correct this?”

Councillor Barber referred to his previous answer to Councillor Hallett’s question.

Councillor Hallett had submitted the following question:

“Last year the external auditors found that Council decision makers had let too many managers leave the council without replacement, to the extent that we didn’t have enough people left to do the required work of council. I’ve personally heard of a few service areas that had delays in delivering their planned work for the last two years or so due to lack of resources. For example, Environmental Health team was mentioned in full council, and the Communications team have delayed their Communications Strategy work. Which other service areas are suffering in performance due to lack of resources? What’s being done to remedy this situation?”

Councillor Barber replied that the question related to two separate issues, capacity at senior management level and financial resources. With regard to the former, it was recognised some time ago that there was a lack of capacity at senior management level. Regrettably, the required management restructure had been delayed for reasons that councillors were aware but was now in progress and would result in an increased number of heads of service.

With regard to the latter, the council continued to perform well given its limited resources and was allocating increased funding for additional posts.

Councillors Yvonne Constance and Chris Palmer asked questions about the household waste collection, street cleansing and ancillary services contact.

Councillor Barber replied that Biffa's performance was, generally, very good and that the build up of litter along some roads may have more to do with the contract specifications rather than poor performance. He urged members to report any such issues to Biffa.

Councillor Barber acknowledged that there had been problems with textile collections but did not believe that the expansion of other collections should be put on hold until these problems were ironed out. He also acknowledged that there had been some missed bin collections recently. He believed that this was mainly due to changes in the collection rounds and that the situation would improve.

Councillor Barber advised councillors to submit bids if they wanted to increase the number of deep cleans.

Councillor Ben Mabbett asked a question about the council's recycling rates.

Councillor Barber replied that the Vale continued to have one of the best recycling rates in the country but a number of other authorities were catching up. He believed that the best way to maintain and/or improve the Vale's performance was to ensure that the collection process was as simple as possible.

Councillor Alice Badcock asked a question about problems accessing the council email system on android devices.

Councillor Barber replied that this was likely to be a software problem.

Councillor Vicky Jenkins asked a question about the impact on the council of China's decision to restrict imported waste.

Councillor Barber replied that, whilst this council collected the waste, Oxfordshire County Council was responsible for its disposal. However, he did not believe that it should be financially beneficial for local authorities to transport waste produced here to China, given the environmental costs. In his opinion, a review of the Government's policies on waste disposal, including the cost of landfill, was required, to ensure that recycling was economically as well as environmentally rewarding.

Councillor Palmer asked a question about the "Refill UK" initiative.

Councillor Barber replied that drinking water was already available in council facilities.

Councillor Mabbett asked a question about parking standards.

Councillor Barber replied that the council sought to adhere to Oxfordshire County Council's recommended parking standards. However, his personal view was that parking standards in rural areas of the district, with little or no public transport, should differ from those in more built-up areas with good transport links. He also noted that the parking standards used to recommend a minimum provision but now set out the maximum.

Councillor Roberts asked a question about cycle networks.

Councillor Barber replied that, whilst resources were limited, he would support CIL money being directed towards a number of cycle paths along key routes.

On behalf of the committee, the chairman thanked the Leader for answering councillors' questions.

Sc.59 Work schedule and dates for all South and Vale scrutiny meetings

The committee considered its work programme and noted that the review of the joint communications strategy, which had been scheduled for submission to Joint Scrutiny Committee on 6 March, had been deferred to a later date.

The committee agreed:

1. To cancel the scrutiny committee meeting which had been scheduled for 29 March.
2. That a longlisting workshop, to identify potential topics for the committee's future consideration, be held on 10 April.

The meeting closed at 9.00 pm