

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Joint Scrutiny Committee

held on Tuesday, 12 September 2017 at 6.30 pm

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

Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members:

South Oxfordshire District Councillors: Richard Pullen (Co-Chair, in the Chair), David Dodds, John Walsh, Sue Lawson, David Turner and John Walsh.

Vale of White Horse District Councillors: Alice Badcock, Mike Badcock (in place of Chris Palmer), Ed Blagrove, Mohinder Kainth, Judy Roberts (In place of Debby Hallett),

Officers: Gerry Brough, Susan Harbour, Ian Matten and Chris Webb

Also present: Vale of White Horse Cabinet members Councillors Charlotte Dickson, and Mike Murray and South Oxfordshire District Council Leader, John Cotton.

Number of members of the public: 15

Sc.9 Apologies for absence

Councillor Debby Hallett sent her apologies; Councillor Judy Roberts attended as her substitute. Councillor Chris Palmer sent his apologies: Councillor Mike Badcock attended as his substitute.

South Cabinet members Lynn Lloyd (leisure) and Rob Simister (development and regeneration) sent apologies for their items. Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, John Cotton, attended in their places.

Sc.10 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2017 were agreed by the committee as an accurate record of the meeting and were signed by the chairman as such.

Sc.11 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Sc.12 Urgent business and chairman's announcements

The chairman changed the order of the agenda to allow the item involving external contractors (GLL) to be heard first. He informed the committee that members of the press were present but had confirmed that they would not be video recording the meeting.

Sc.13 Public participation

Three members of the public registered to speak on the Didcot Garden Town item and would be heard with that item.

Sc.14 2016/17 performance review of GLL

Steve Hercus and Ben Whaymand from the contractor GLL were in attendance.

Councillor Charlotte Dickson, portfolio holder at Vale of White Horse; Councillor John Cotton, leader, South Oxford; Chris Webb, Facilities Development Officer (Leisure) and Ian Matten, Interim Head of Waste, Leisure, Parks and Environmental Health attended the meeting.

The Cabinet members introduced the performance report which related to the 2016/17 financial year and provided the committee with the details of the performance from GLL in delivering the leisure contract.

The scores were based on the review framework used by the councils and these indicated improvements across the scoring criteria which would hopefully lead to an improved overall score in 2017/18.

The ongoing relationship between the councils and the GLL team remained strong and there were continuous improvements being made both to the facilities and the standards of service delivered to customers.

GLL had recently achieved Quest scores of Excellent for the White Horse Leisure and Tennis Centre: there were only 17 centres in the country with an excellent score. They had also achieved Quest scores of Very Good for Thame Leisure Centre, Wheatley Park and Abbey Sports Centre. Quest was the leisure industry externally validated scheme which defined industry standards and good practice and encouraged their ongoing development and delivery within a customer-focused management framework. Although these outcomes would be recognised in next year's report, the preparatory work to achieve those outcomes had been done in 2016/17. This outcome was a good example of the direction being taken across the contract.

There had been many examples of service improvements and developments between the councils and GLL in the reporting year, in particular the participation work and health improvement work which ran alongside the more traditional centre based work that GLL provided, which expands the range and activity base of the community with an ultimate aim of getting more people active and healthy.

Officers from the council and GLL continue to work to develop the leisure service and next year it was hoped the overall score would be one of excellent.

The committee discussed this item and the following matters were raised and responded to by the officers, Cabinet members and the contractor.

The divergence between the customer satisfaction (“excellent”) and officer satisfaction (“fair”) was due to the fact that customers were offering a snapshot, based on single visits, whereas officers have a long-term relationship with the contractor and are looking at different, broader criteria.

The scoring system used was based on the councils’ corporate system.

In order to improve staff retention and development, GLL had undertaken bench-marking of salaries to improve staff retention rates. They had undertaken a significant recruitment of apprentices. There had been supervisory staff training to reduce the attrition of staff. There had also been recruitment of more mature staff.

In order to ensure an accurate assessment of standards, council officers carried out spot checks at the leisure centres at “odd” hours and without notice. Mystery visits were also carried out by external organisations commissioned by GLL.

The committee asked for some examples of GLL’s plans for continuous improvement next year. Examples included: an improved café menu, upgrading services and introducing a customer service office at the White Horse Leisure and Tennis Centre in Abingdon. Vale Council was also planning to provide astroturf at the Faringdon Leisure Centre.

The committee raised some issues relating to specific KPTs (Key Performance Targets):

- KPT 2: “increased total activity visits year on year” had not been achieved due to unplanned closures of the White Horse Leisure and Tennis Centre pool due to the need for structural works which were identified, and of the refurbishment the gym.
- KPT 9: “Percentage of referrals completing the Healthwise programme (GP referral).” The committee raised concerns about people with mental health issues who had been referred on this scheme. GLL confirmed that front line staff had received additional training as had other staff including first aiders. They were considering introducing bespoke courses for groups of people with compatible referral reasons.
- KPTs 11,12 and 13: “Decreased year on year energy usage (electricity, gas and water)”. GLL had scored Excellent on all three of these KPTs. The committee was reassured that this performance was not attributable to the closure of the pool at the White Horse Leisure and Tennis Centre. The measure was in kilowatts per person per visit, so there would have been a reduction in the number of people coming through the door when the pool was closed. New elements of plant had been introduced which meant that energy usage was likely to decrease in the next year.

Members of the committee wished to know whether the geographical profile of centre users had been monitored and whether it had decreased since the removal of the Oxfordshire County Council bus subsidies. They also wished to know how this profile could be improved. GLL representatives confirmed that they were able to provide outreach services to village halls etc, for example the “Active Gold” programme. This was being further developed to provide more exciting opportunities.

RESOLVED

To accept the officers’ report and to recommend the scoring, including the overall score of “Good”, to the Cabinet members.

Sc.15 Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan

Neville Harris, an independent town and county councillor for Didcot Ladygrove, asked a question about the potential financial implications of this plan, given that South and Vale district councils were not signed up to the Oxfordshire Growth Bid for infrastructure funding.

Phil Armstrong, a resident of Didcot, raised issues concerning the potential relocation of the station and the impact on residents.

Simon Hewerdine, an independent town councillor for Didcot Ladygrove, spoke objecting to the Didcot Garden Plan which he claimed was inaccurate and misleading and that the public consultation was inadequate, particularly in consideration of the closure of Cow Lane.

South Oxfordshire District Council Leader John Cotton, Vale of White Horse District Council Cabinet member Mike Murray and Gerry Brough, Interim Head of Development and Regeneration, attended committee for this item.

Councillor John Cotton introduced the report which provided the Joint Scrutiny Committee with an opportunity to;

- review and comment on the contents of Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan;
- be informed of the results of the recent public consultation process; and
- be re-assured that officers had addressed the main constructive issues arising from the public consultation process.

The Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan had been produced over a one year period and had involved:

- a considerable number of interactions between local stakeholders, business and community groups and the external technical consultants employed to work on each of the document's main chapters;
- a number of large stakeholder group and resident group meetings, where ideas had been proposed and relevant feedback has been used to modify and improve these ideas (and in some cases to reject them and remove them from the plan);
- interaction between council officers, local schools, various community interest groups and parish councils;
- close working between council officers, to make sure the delivery plan was fully consistent with both councils' emerging Local Plans;
- close working with government civil servants in the Department for Communities and Local Government, to secure the capacity funding needed to pay for key staff and external technical consultancy assistance, so that the delivery plan could be produced, and a start could be made on implementing some key projects, at minimal cost to South and Vale council tax payers.

The delivery plan production process had been overseen by a project advisory board comprising the Leaders and lead Cabinet members for development of both Councils, South and Vale's Chief Executive and the councils' Interim Head of Development, Regeneration and Housing.

The vision for Didcot Garden was to:

- provide new houses, to meet the needs of a growing local economy;
- create more and better publicly accessible open spaces;

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- integrate advanced, sustainable technologies within Didcot;
- develop Didcot's two Enterprise Areas; and
- implement a number of key projects linked to four key programmes areas, namely:
 - The Town Centre
 - The Gateway Spine
 - The Cultural Spine, and
 - The Garden Line.

A final version of the Delivery Plan was due to be submitted to South and Vale cabinets on 5 and 6 October.

Councillors Mike Murray and John Cotton addressed the public comments.

Possible Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) Bid and the Oxfordshire Growth Bid

The County Council were of the view that these two funding bids were directly linked. However, South and Vale Councils were clear that the two bids were parallel, but not interdependent. Although the Vale Council was broadly supportive of the arrangements suggested by the County Council through the growth bid, there were some issues of sovereignty still to be resolved. Both South and Vale were of the view that there were alternative ways of accessing government funding than through the growth bid. The Didcot Garden Town plan had a high likelihood of being successful, if it were submitted as a priority HIF bid, as it offered significant job growth and new homes. South had not yet signed up to the growth deal because there were significant queries about the content of the deal. Both councils were fully supportive of the inclusion of Didcot Garden Town as one of the projects included in Oxfordshire's HIF bid.

The potential relocation of the railway station.

Wherever development was mooted close to where people live it causes concern and uncertainty, but this is an inevitable side effect of consultation. The station had no need to be an ugly and obtrusive building, visual impact would need to be taken into account, impact on local residents. The station relocation was only one of several options for improving rail services at Didcot, and a lot of work needed to be done before any decisions could be made in relation to potential redevelopment of the station. The onus was on the councils to resolve the station matter as soon as possible, to determine the best option, and to ensure good design and mitigation.

Green spaces

There was no plan to reduce the overall amount of green space but the green spaces might be moved around. The ambition of the plan was to make Didcot a much greener space overall.

Public Consultation

- Although only 38 percent of respondents had strongly agreed, or agreed with the project, overall there was a strong predisposition of those who oppose a project to respond negatively to a consultation. There were also a significant number of people who had chosen not to express an opinion one way or the other. There had been a significant amount of information provided about the project and people in Didcot were very well informed. Councillors were of the opinion that there was a strong sense of support from the residents for the overall project, and that most of these people had not participated in the consultation.
- A significant amount of public engagement had taken place, including with younger people, but these were more difficult to engage through traditional methods.

- The councils were committed to undertaking the project with the support and cooperation of the community, however, that did not mean that all parts of the project would be without controversy.

The committee explored the question of whether the project would be able to go ahead without further funding from the government. Cabinet members confirmed that other pots of money, such as S106 and CIL contributions, possible use of reserves, creative use of money, and enterprise zone money, were all options which could be explored to meet any funding gap.

There were some queries regarding details of the document. However, the committee accepted that this was a high level document which set out the broader vision for the plan.

The committee wondered why the proposed closure of Cow Lane had not been rejected from the plan given the level of public objection. It was explained that there was a limited range of options available due to the existing infrastructure and population. A full microsimulation model was being developed to examine the potential changes to the existing traffic management system. Once completed, this would produce more information which would be factored into future decision making. The potential closure of Cow Lane remained in the plan until sufficient data was available to determine whether or not this would be a viable and beneficial option.

The committee considered whether the surrounding villages would become suburbs of Didcot. It was clear that there would be an area of influence outside of Didcot, but decisions still needed to be made as to where the boundary of this should be and exactly what this would mean. It was likely that it would be better to be inside the area of influence rather than outside as all areas close to Didcot would be influenced by the garden town, but those villages within the area of influence would benefit from policies which avoided the coalescence of settlements etc.

RESOLVED

To commend the report and the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan.

Sc.16 Work schedule and dates for all South and Vale scrutiny meetings

This was noted by the committee.

The democratic services officer explained that scrutiny of the Five Council's Partnership would now be carried out by the Joint Scrutiny Committee (although members would continue to attend the Partnership Scrutiny Committee). This was to allow for more robust scrutiny and because the Partnership had no formal executive to scrutinise.

The meeting closed at 8.30 pm