

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held on Thursday 28 November 2019 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 Nathan Boyd (Chair), Jerry Avery, Samantha Bowring, Cheryl Briggs, Andy Foulsham, Robert Maddison, Mike Pighills and Max Thompson

Officers: Steve Culliford, Adrian Duffield, Phil Ealey, Liz Hayden and Emma Turner

Also present: Councillor Jenny Hannaby and Councillor Emily Smith

Sc.12 Apologies for absence

Councillor Ron Batstone had sent his apologies for absence.

Sc.13 Minutes

RESOLVED: to adopt as a correct record the minutes of the committee meeting held on 19 September 2019 and agree that the chairman signs them as such.

Sc.14 Declarations of interest

None

Sc.15 Urgent business and chairman's announcements

None

Sc.16 Public participation

None

Sc.17 Planning enforcement annual review 2018/19

The committee considered the head of planning's report, which reviewed performance of the planning enforcement service from 1 April 2018 to 30 September 2019. The report set out the role of the service, the legal requirements, and the relevant local plan policies.

The report also set out the limitations of the service. The focus was on remedying planning harm, but not to ‘police’ the district or punish those that had followed the rules. Other than unauthorised works to listed buildings, protected trees and the unauthorised display of advertisements, breaches of planning control were not criminal acts. The service provided by the council was set out in the planning enforcement statement, which was published on the council’s website. This explained how the council monitored implementation of planning conditions and how the council investigated unauthorised development. The statement was being reviewed to update it in line with the latest guidance.

The report also set out the enforcement workload, analysed the unresolved cases, and showed performance against the council’s targets. The committee noted that the service had just missed the target to investigate and determine the cause of 80 per cent of cases within six weeks of the original enquiry: 75 per cent had been achieved. However, the increase in voluntary compliance was over twice the target as more people were engaging with the planning system.

The team aimed to get the public to engage rather than to impose immediate penalties. On larger sites, officers would attempt to be proactive by monitoring development as it happened to pick up issues in a timely manner. The enforcement team had taken formal action where necessary and had defended successfully its decisions at appeal. Officers gave examples of their more complex cases.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Emily Smith, attended the meeting on behalf of the Cabinet member for planning. The leader asked the committee for its comments on the report and for any suggestions on how the team should prioritise its work in the future.

The committee noted that ability to improve performance was restricted by resourcing difficulties. However, performance compared favourably against benchmark councils. Although the South and Vale team was larger than average when fully staffed, it had a larger number of planning applications to monitor and more strategic housing sites than other benchmark authorities.

One area that the committee suggested required attention was construction traffic management plans agreed as part of a planning permission. Officers recognised the problems with traffic management routing, the enforcement of which was partly the Vale’s responsibility and partly the county council’s responsibility as highway authority. Councillors noted that the officers were in ongoing dialogue with the county council to improve these and make the plans more meaningful.

South Oxfordshire’s Scrutiny Committee had suggested that a councillors’ round table session should be held to revise the joint planning enforcement statement. This committee agreed, supporting a joint round table session with South’s councillors. This would help define where resources were currently targeted and also help determine which issues the planning enforcement team should prioritise in future.

The committee also considered that the council should do more to promote its planning portal and online guide planning enforcement. This could coincide with the publicity for the revised enforcement statement.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) note the head of planning's report and thank the planning enforcement team for its work over the past 18 months;
- (b) recommend that the Cabinet member for planning organises a joint South and Vale councillors' round table session to help revise the planning enforcement statement; and
- (c) recommend that the Cabinet member publicises the council's online planning enforcement portal following the councils' adoption of the revised planning enforcement statement.

Sc.18 Homelessness and rough sleeping strategy

The committee considered the head of housing and environment's report on the draft homelessness and rough sleeping strategy 2020 to 2025. The strategy was the subject of public consultation; Scrutiny Committee was asked to feed its views back to Cabinet.

The Homelessness Act 2002 required the council to review its strategy every five years. The current joint homelessness strategy with South Oxfordshire District Council would expire in September 2020. As part of this review, officers had taken into account the government's intention to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eradicate it by 2027. The addition of 'tackling rough sleeping' was the biggest difference compared to the current homelessness strategy. The strategy and action plan must be submitted to the government for approval.

The Cabinet member for housing and environment reported that although homelessness and rough sleepers had increased nationwide, this was not reflected in the Vale. In 2018/19 alone, the council had assisted 420 households at risk of homelessness. The number of households in temporary accommodation had also fallen, and the number of rough sleepers recorded in the Vale in November 2018 was nine. Against benchmark authorities, the Vale's figures were very low.

The council had adopted a preventative approach rather than reactive. This was continued in the draft strategy, which had the following aims:

- To prevent homelessness whenever possible
- To end incidents of homelessness at the earliest opportunity
- To end the need for rough sleeping

To achieve these aims, the strategy had five objectives:

1. To improve county-wide partnership working to prevent and reduce homelessness
2. To minimise the use of temporary accommodation
3. To further develop the council's housing needs service to prevent and relieve homelessness at the earliest opportunity
4. To improve access to emergency accommodation and increase support for rough sleepers
5. To improve access to sustainable accommodation for households that are either at risk of homelessness or who are homeless

Officers reported that they worked in close collaboration with partner councils and organisations. The council relied on these partnerships for its success. Officers did not use a gatekeeping approach, rather households at risk of homelessness were encouraged to approach the council at the earliest opportunity, as early intervention was a key

ingredient in preventing homelessness. A range of solutions were available to suit differing circumstances. The portfolio of options was set out in the strategy.

The new strategy had a bigger focus on tackling rough sleeping. Officers intended to increase both the housing and support available for rough sleepers, including a Housing First model, that provided accommodation together with support for rough sleepers. Officers were investigating the possibility of a Housing First project in the Vale.

The committee supported the aims and objectives of the draft strategy and reviewed the action plan. The success of the strategy would be measured against key performance indicators and targets, which would be set annually. The strategy would also be reviewed annually, and the findings published on the council's website.

Councillors suggested that the strategy should strive for better connections with other agencies to provide fast response for those in need. Councillors also suggested exploring best practice on how to establish accurate numbers of homeless people and rough sleepers; this could be included as an additional objective. Further, councillors suggested that the strategy should refer to how the council would engage and help people with specialist needs. It should also cross-reference the work of the Community Safety Partnership.

The committee suggested that the strategy or its action plan should include key performance indicators. Alternatively, the strategy should state that the aim was to build on current targets. The strategy should also set out the level of resourcing required to deliver the action plan. Officers agreed to take these suggestions into account when updating the strategy prior to its submission to Cabinet for adoption.

The committee also noted that officers would be publishing a guide on how to help homeless people.

In answer to a question from a councillor, officers agreed to find out whether the council enforced the empty home provision and advise committee members outside of the meeting.

The chairman asked councillors to make any further suggestions to the officers to take into account in the strategy and action plan. Councillors were also asked to inform officers of any specific case issues where they had concerns.

The committee noted that following the consultation period, the final strategy would be submitted to Cabinet for approval on 31 January 2020.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) welcome the draft homelessness and rough sleeping strategy 2020 to 2025; and
- (b) recommend the Cabinet member for housing and environment and officers to consider the following suggestions to further improve the draft strategy before submitting it to Cabinet for adoption:
 - explore best practice on how to establish accurate numbers of homeless people and rough sleepers
 - strive for better connections with other agencies to provide fast response for those in need

- refer to how the council could better engage and help people with specialist needs
- include a reference to the work of the Community Safety Partnership
- include key performance indicators or state that the aim is to build on current targets
- set out the level of resourcing required to deliver the strategy and its action plan

Sc.19 Scrutiny work programme

The committee reviewed and updated its work programme, adding an item to review the routing of A34 traffic diversions.

The meeting closed at 9.00 pm