

**Vale of White Horse Scrutiny Committee
Annual Report to Council 2017/18**



Foreword by the Chairman



Councillor Debby Hallett, Chairman of Scrutiny Committee

Last year I wrote, “Scrutiny is a powerful mechanism for providing a ruling party with some checks and balances. Scrutiny provides a place for the public to bring their concerns to council to be heard and their questions answered. All of this leads the council to making better policy decisions and bringing more effective strategies to inform the work we do on behalf of people who live and work in the Vale of White Horse.”

I still believe this. In 2017-18, unintended consequences were obviously rich and fertile grounds for learning. Unintended consequences are seen in our own councils, where the 5 Councils Partnership outsourcing contracts were signed based on inaccurate costs-benefits information, and contractor performance has been unacceptable. And the unintended consequences at Northamptonshire County Council led to a discovery of shallow budget scrutiny that let through some poor decisions leading to financial meltdown.

We learn by contextualising our current issues; we see our current state as a result of past decisions, and we are confident today’s decisions lead to tomorrow’s situations. By applying good practices that let us learn from both our successes and our failures, we give ourselves a chance at better performance tomorrow.

We learned from our external auditors in this year that we didn’t always have all the information we needed to make well-informed decisions. The consequences are apparent today in the remedial work around the Corporate Services Contracts. This is a potentially rich source of information for Cabinet to use to improve; I’d like to see Cabinet work more closely with Scrutiny to identify where we can do better to ensure the relevant information is available when big decisions are being considered.

Learning points from management of the Corporate Services Contracts could help us better manage other collaborative projects with other authorities. Think of the Growth Deal, and the upcoming Joint Spatial Strategy Plan. What have we learnt from the Five Councils Partnership that would help us make a success of our future joint working with our neighbouring authorities via the Growth Board?

We also learned from our external auditors that past decisions about management-level staff led to our inability to handle business as usual. Councils are currently in the final steps of a complete organisational restructure which will help to address this. Once again, lack of enough information led to decisions with unintended consequences. If Scrutiny can find ways to point out anything that is in danger of being overlooked, that would be a help to council’s governance.

We can learn from the experience of Northamptonshire County Council, where the auditors discovered inadequate budget scrutiny contributed to poor financial decision making. This year in Vale, Scrutiny has set up a task group to explore our budget setting process, with a mind to seeing what we can do to improve budget scrutiny.

All of this is important work that contributes to good governance.

What is Scrutiny?

The national advisory body, the Centre for Public Scrutiny, defines 'scrutiny' as follows:

Public scrutiny is an essential part of ensuring that government remains effective and accountable. Public scrutiny can be defined as the activity by one elected or appointed organisation... examining and monitoring all or part of the activity of a public sector body with the aim of improving the quality of public services.

Scrutiny ensures that decision-making processes are clear and accessible to the public and that the people taking decisions are held accountable for those decisions.

All of this leads the council to making better policy decisions and bringing more effective strategies to inform the work we do on behalf of people who live and work in the Vale of White Horse.

Membership of the Scrutiny Committee 2017/18

Councillor Debby Hallett (Chairman)

Councillor Alice Badcock (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Mike Badcock

Councillor Ed Blagrove (until December 2017)

Councillor Vicky Jenkins

Councillor Mohinder Kainth

Councillor Ben Mabbett

Councillor Chris Palmer

Councillor Judy Roberts

Scrutiny Committee is a politically balanced committee

In addition, Vale members also serve on other Scrutiny committees:

- Councillors Debby Hallett (co-chairman), Alice Badcock, Ed Blagrove (until December 2017), Mohinder Kainth, and Chris Palmer serve on Joint Scrutiny Committee (with South Oxfordshire District Councillors) which considers matters that affect both councils' areas or their residents.
- Councillor Monica Lovatt serves on the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which looks at the health services provided by the NHS and other providers in the county.

The Committee appointed a Task Group comprising Councillors Chris Palmer (Chairman), Mike Badcock, Ed Blagrove, Debby Hallett and Judy Roberts to gain greater understanding of the budget process and make recommendations for future improvements. Ed Blagrove was appointed to Cabinet so ceased to be a member of the Task Group, prior to its first meeting. The Task Group is due to report in 2018/19

Training

During 2017/8 Scrutiny members have attended the following training:

Course	Provider	Attendees
Scrutiny Best Practice 22.06.17	South East Employers	Debby Hallett Alice Badcock Mike Badcock Dudley Hoddinott Mohinder Kainth Chris Palmer Judy Roberts plus South Oxfordshire members
Scrutinising Council Performance	Centre for Public Scrutiny	Chris Palmer

Summary of Scrutiny Activity

During 2017/18 the Vale Scrutiny committee met on 8 occasions. Here is a summary of the key information promised and recommendations committee made to Cabinet members:

27 July 2017

- Corporate Delivery Plan 6 monthly review of progress: Committee made a number of recommendations to provide more consistency across all areas of the Corporate Delivery Plan.
- Temporary Accommodation Provision 2017-2022: Committee requested that:
 1. the transitional plan come back to Scrutiny if Cabinet approve the report and recommendations, and
 2. the officers add actions to the Corporate Delivery Pan for Vale
- Joint Housing Strategy: following discussion with the Scrutiny Chairman, it was decided to change to title of the document to 'Housing Delivery Strategy', as this was more accurate. This is a high-level document setting out the direction of travel over the next ten years that would enable the councils to take a proactive approach in driving the delivery of the housing numbers and types needed.
 1. The Cabinet member reported that a detailed action plan with further details would be implemented following the adoption of the Strategy.
 2. Committee recommended:
 - a) to commend the strategy to Cabinet, together with the comments of the members of the Committee as part of the consultation process;
 - b) to send the comments of Vale Scrutiny Committee to South Cabinet as part of the consultation process as it is a joint strategy;
 - c) to recommend that the Strategy is updated and comes back to Scrutiny Committee for review in the light of any major infrastructure projects

such as the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway and the possible reservoir;

- d) to request that the Action Plan should come back to Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis, to keep the committee abreast of progress;
- e) to request that joint strategies come to the Joint Scrutiny Committee in future;
- f) to add the Joint Housing Delivery Strategy to the Corporate Plan.

20 September 2017

- Local Plan 2031 Part 2 – detailed policies and additional sites. Scrutiny resolved:

(a) to advise Cabinet that:

1. the section on spatial standards as set out in Chapter 3 of the Local Plan requires further clarification;
2. the numbers of the core policies need to be checked to ensure that they are correct;
3. further consideration should be given to ensuring that sufficient land is safeguarded to enable a viable public transport and cycle link between Dalton Barracks and the Lodge Hill Park and Ride site;
4. Appendix I: Registered Parks and Gardens should be reviewed to ensure that all registered parks and gardens and, in particular, Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee sites are included;
5. Appendices N & O need to be completed; and
6. officers should review the Sustainable Transport Study to ensure consistency with the Local Plan.

(b) to request officers to:

1. circulate information on recent traffic surveys to Committee members; and
2. report to a future meeting, after the Local Plan Examination, on the costs of the process.

(c) to thank the officers for all their hard work and, in particular, for producing a Local Plan in plain English.

28 September 2017 –

- Review of annual performance report of The Beacon. Committee noted the report and requested that next year's performance review include information on:
 1. income and expenditure budgets;
 2. environmentally friendly and energy saving measures; and
 3. The Beacon's role as a community asset.
- Financial outturn 2016/17. Scrutiny Committee:
 1. requested that the interim head of development, regeneration and housing attend a future meeting to report on the reasons for the delay in implementing his service's capital schemes
 2. welcomed the under achievement of income on temporary accommodation due to a reduction in demand, and
 3. congratulated the officers on the accuracy of the budget forecast.

- Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2016/17. Scrutiny committee noted the report and requested that a further update be submitted to the committee in a year's time, which would include details of the savings apportioned to the council, Oxfordshire County Council and the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner in 2017/18.

26 October 2017

- New Leisure Centre for Wantage and Grove area: Committee heard the results of the recent public consultation on options for the new leisure centre. Scrutiny Committee resolved to:
 1. congratulate the officers and consultants on the consultation exercise;
 2. support the proposed facility mix for the new leisure centre for the Wantage and Grove area; and
 3. request officers to explore all possible sources of grant funding for the new leisure centre.
- Oxford to Cambridge Expressway – Vale options. Committee considered the five potential routes, noting that these routes were the officers' interpretation of potential options rather than firm proposals. It was also noted that this was a major project that would have economic, transport and environmental implications for much of the south-east of England. Committee's view was that most of the five potential routes under consideration would decimate the green belt. It therefore urged the Cabinet member and officers to request Government to consider ways in which the green belt and green open space might be preserved. Committee resolved to:
 1. advise the Leader of the Council and officers that the committee considers Indicative Route 2 merits further attention insofar as, in the Committee's view, it is the least damaging potential option and has strategic housing and employment sites allocated along the route; and
 2. urge the Cabinet member and officers to request Government to consider ways in which the green belt and green open space might be preserved if and when a proposed route is identified.
- Appointment of a task group to gain greater awareness of the budget process and make recommendations for future improvements, Cllr Chris Palmer to chair.

30 November 2017

- Reviewed the changes in planning procedures and their efficacy. Committee recommended:
 1. to the head of planning services that all future reports to Planning Committee should set out in the introduction the reasons why they have been referred.
 2. to the Cabinet member that the Committee is satisfied that the changes to planning committee procedures have had a positive outcome and welcome the closer working with parishes that has resulted.
- Reviewed progress to date on the Corporate Delivery Plan and requested several reporting changes to increase clarity and understanding.
- Reviewed the plans for a Joint Strategic Spatial Plan. Committee recommended:
 1. The JSSP should be prepared under section 28 of the Planning and Compulsory purchase act of 2004;

2. The JSSP should show clear evidence of benefits to both Oxfordshire County and the Vale of White Horse; and
3. any motion to Council would need to provide further detail of what the Government would provide in return for the Oxfordshire councils' commitments.

14 December 2017

- Housing Delivery Update: Committee received a report from the head of planning services which detailed the council's housing delivery performance since 2011 compared with the housing requirements in the Adopted Local Plan 2031 Part 1. Committee requested the head of planning services to submit the Authority Monitoring report to a future meeting.
- Slippage of housing and development capital schemes: The Committee was informed that some of the budget identified as slippage had actually been spent. However, at the time of the outturn report, some expenditure had not been invoiced or payment for invoices had not yet been received. Once invoices had been received and paid, the changed position would be reflected in the next quarterly budget report. Committee requested the Cabinet member for finance and head of finance to consider the feasibility of including the reasons for the slippage of capital schemes in future budget reports.

25 January 2018

- Partnership Grants: The report to Scrutiny Committee 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.
- Ask the Leader: Cllr Matthew Barber made himself available for any questions. There were many questions from members, which brought interesting information but it wasn't really a proper scrutiny opportunity.

8 February 2018

- Houses that People Can Afford. Committee received a report from the interim head of development, regeneration and housing which set out actions that were being taken and which could be taken, within the Vale of White Horse, to increase the number of houses for rent or sale that were truly affordable to the average working family or person. The report contained the following information:
 1. in order to buy a lower quartile property costing £255,000 in Vale, an income of £57,000 p.a. is needed, which is an upper quartile income. So only those on the highest incomes can afford to buy the lowest priced properties.
 2. only 18% of ownership options, i.e. shared ownerships, first time buyers, help to buy, starter homes etc., are comfortably affordable at all, and then only to the highest incomes. So four out of five ownership options are basically unaffordable to most people.
 3. Help to buy schemes make houses affordable only to those earning over £56,000 p.a.

4. Private rentals and any sort of ownership tenure are unaffordable to lower quartile income households. Only social rent is affordable to them, and there isn't enough social housing.

Committee recommended that Cabinet:

1. take all necessary steps to seek a better relationship with Central Government in order to influence national planning policies; and
 2. respond to the review panel led by Sir Oliver Letwin looking at the gap between the number of planning permissions granted and homes built in areas of high demand.
- Revenue Budget 2018/19 and Capital Programme to 2022/23. The Committee was informed that:
 1. West Way capital receipt was not yet allocated so was funding the capital programme in general, reducing the borrowing requirement at this time.
 2. potential leisure investment projects in the Botley area were under review with a report anticipated in 2018/19. Consideration would also be given to a suitable investment opportunity should one arise.

In addition, the Joint Scrutiny Committee met on 3 occasions. Its work included:

- Reviewing the performance of contractors Biffa Municipal, Sodexo Ltd (Horticultural) Services and GLL.
- Reviewing the proposed Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan.
- Considering and commenting on an update on the corporate services contracts.
- Considering and commenting on the proposed management restructure and senior staff appointments

Progress Tracker

Last year's annual report set out a number of aims for 2017/18.

The extent to which these were met is set out below.

Aim	Achieved?	Comments
Hold a Scrutiny best practice workshop	Completely	Facilitated workshop held on 22 June 2017
Commission at least one "task and finish" group to carry out a detailed review of an important topic.	Completely	Budget Task Group appointed; due to report in 2018/19
Introduce an annual "Ask the Leader" meeting for the Leader of the Council to answer questions from the committee and members of the public	Partially	Held in January 2018. Agreed that it would be more appropriate for future "Ask the Leader" events to be discrete public meetings rather than on Scrutiny committee agendas.
Develop closer working relationships with the Cabinet/Cabinet members for to enable Scrutiny Committee to add value to the decision making process	Partially	Attendance by Cabinet members at Scrutiny committees has been excellent. The Chairman has attended Cabinet meetings and been invited to speak on behalf of the committee.
Continue to encourage members to take up training opportunities	Partially	Members are encouraged to take up Scrutiny training opportunities but there is a general reluctance to do so. It is intended to circulate a self-assessment questionnaire to members in 2018/19 in order to shape a tailored development programme.
Publish the committee's work programme on the Council website	Not achieved	Due to technical issues this has not been possible. It is now intended to publish the work programme on a Sharepoint site which Scrutiny members can access