

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Joint Scrutiny Committee

held on Monday, 29 January 2024 at 6.30 pm
at Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon OX14 3JE.

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Members:

South Oxfordshire District Councillors (SODC): Alexandrine Kantor, Leigh Rawlins, Jo Robb and Kate Gregory

Vale of White Horse District Councillors (VOWHDC): Katherine Foxhall (co-chair), Andy Cooke, Ron Batstone, Judy Roberts and Andrew Skinner

Officers: Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive - Transformation and Operations) and Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer)

Also present: Cabinet members for Environment - Councillor Sue Cooper (SODC) and Councillor Mark Coleman (VOWHDC), Councillor Andrew Crawford (Finance, VOWHDC)

Virtual attendance:

Officers: Sally Truman (Customer Services Manager), Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services), Paul Fielding (Head of Housing and Environment)

Cabinet Members: Councillors Andrea Powell (Corporate Services, SODC), Maggie Filipova-Rivers (Community Wellbeing, SODC), David Rouane (South Leader)

Sc.25 Apologies for absence

Councillor Stefan Gawrysiak gave apologies. Councillor Ed Sadler sent his apologies, and Councillor Kate Gregory attended in his place as a substitute member of the committee.

Sc.26 Urgent business and chair's announcements

Chair ran through housekeeping matters and reminded members of meeting etiquette.

Sc.27 Declaration of interests

None

Sc.28 Minutes

Resolved:

The minutes of the meeting on 7 December 2023 were agreed a correct record, and these would be signed by the chair at the end of the meeting.

Sc.29 Public participation

None.

Sc.30 Work schedule and dates for Joint scrutiny meetings

Chair reminded members that ideas were welcome for the work programme, and recent ideas were to ask Thames Water and the Environment Agency to speak to us. Members previously mentioned how other authorities had invited Police to scrutiny.

A member asked if they could invite the Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) back to tackle concerns over health centres. Chair asked members to help form the context / scope of a potential conversation and what Scrutiny Committee would like to achieve from discussions. The co-chairs would discuss this further.

There were no further comments raised about the Joint Scrutiny work programme.

Sc.31 Garden waste permit

Joint Scrutiny was asked to review and provide comments for Cabinets on the proposal to implement a garden waste permit model from 1 April 2025.

Chair opened this item by explaining that although this seemed a small agenda, this item affected many residents. Although it was a discretionary service, the Environment Act would make the garden waste provision a service that must be provided by councils from 2026 (however it would still be optional for residents to take up).

Cabinet Members for Environment (South and Vale) were present to introduce this item. Officers present online were Head of Corporate Services, Head of Housing and Environment, and the Customer Services Manager. Cabinet member for Corporate Services (South) was also online.

Cabinet member for Vale briefly summarised the report. The aim was to move all customers to one payment date and move away from direct debit. It was proposed to move all customers to the same renewal date of 1 April, with payment to be made in February-March for the service to be provided from 1 April to 31 March as of 2025 (municipal year). It was felt that moving to a single payment date would be less confusing for customers. Residents would be given a tamper-proof permit sticker to label their brown bin. The sticker system would make it easier for waste crews to identify who had paid for the service. The councils were committed to improving operational efficiency and creating customer service improvements.

The new system was considered by officers to provide efficiencies in administering the service, simplifying the process for both customers and staff. There would be a comprehensive communications plan in place to inform residents of the transition to this new system. The cost of the permit system to the council was expected to be slightly lower than the existing costs to the councils, and the cost of the sticker would be part of the consideration when setting the annual garden waste fee. Staff would remind residents on a yearly basis to pay for their new permit(s).

Committee commented as follows:

- A member raised the issue of residents updating/paying for the service yearly and queried whether this was really a simpler method for residents, as direct debits were a rolling

payment. The removal of the minimum collections rule was queried, and the Cabinet member for Vale explained that the intent was to avoid administrative burden of, for example, calculating the refund for one missed bin. Legal officers had explained that the method proposed was used in other authorities. Customer Services Manager responded on direct debits – councils across the country use a variety of methods. Officers were concerned about the difficulties of collecting non-payment from direct debits. 1,600 cases were open where the direct debits had failed and fees were not collected, and this created a burden on administrative resources.

- Another member echoed the above comment on the yearly payment - if we were investing in a CRM system, can we use it to its capacity and send out a communication to residents where direct debits fail. If they do not respond, they wouldn't get the permit. The CRM should assist with the issues around lack of customer data that was present. Customer Services Manager explained that there were issues caused if any details changed at the bank, such as an address or name. This would cause a direct debit to fail. The officer was concerned about the significant amount of manual work for staff when this occurs. Officers were hoping to encourage use of Pay360 online payments as a more manageable alternative.
- A member expressed an opposing view, that as an optional service, if you were motivated to use the service it should not be difficult to pay annually. The member also raised a potential issue, that if someone moves house, they might need to chase an overpayment if it auto renews, so paying yearly gives more control as you wouldn't forget about a renewing payment. Therefore, they felt there was a case for a one-off yearly payment. Can there be an app for this service?
- Another member commented on internet use and the elderly, which could be an issue. 'Digital only' was raised as a risk to consider. It was confirmed that customers would continue to be able to call our customer service centre as they can at present, and a customer service advisor could help set up the payment for them.
- Much discussion was had around the payment schedule and integrating existing payment into the new yearly payment. Head of Corporate Services explained that offering a 6-monthly fee in the first year made sense due to the seasonal nature of the service.
- A member felt customer goals were not met by this and they raised bin micro chipping as a future proofing method. The costs of micro chipping were unknown in the meeting, but this was thought to be a longer term solution.
- A member asked what would happen when collection staff encounter a bin with no sticker yet? It was responded it would not be emptied and a pink hanger would be put on the bin, for the resident to ring up and sort any issue around payment/non-payment. It was expected that stickers would be issued in February/March 2025, well ahead of April 2025, when the system starts. Head of Housing and Environment added that bins not paid for can be collected/removed over time if not paid for (assumed not wanted). He also explained that crews would continue to empty unstickered bins in the first few weeks of the new scheme whilst customers got used to the new approach.
- On the proposed 'no minimum number of collections' – a member asked for clarity on this. The committee member added that there should be multiple methods of communications – letter, telephone, and also consideration given to cash payments. Customer Service Manager explained that the current minimum collection number was 20 and we actually undertook 25. She explained that operational flexibility was needed to enable the Waste team to prioritise statutory collections if for instance there was a prolonged period of bad weather or staff shortages. The cost of one missed bin was worth around £1.20, so the cost in staff time of making a refund for one collection was disproportionate to its value. It was added that refunds would be offered for a serious failure in the service, for example a rebate was given during Covid lockdowns.
- Single point of failure risk – a member asked about the sticker supplier. Customer Services Manager explained that a procurement process was followed, including requesting samples to check for quality and the stickers used by the main suppliers in the market were tamper-proof and fit-for-purpose.

- A member questioned how far can we go with automating via the system (transformational IT)? Head of Corporate Services explained that the transformation programme was a journey and this was a step towards it, building up an customer online account, and adding other services and reporting over time as functionality develops. He explained that with the proposed system we would not hold any customer bank details which as sensitive personal data, presents a number of risks.
- Committee were informed that a perk of paying a one-off annual permit was that if you move into a new home, you may have a period of free use. The permit may have been paid by previous owner for the year and stays with the property.
- A member suggested we allow payment for three years at a time – Cabinet member explained that the colour of the sticker changed per year. It was asked whether there can be a multi-year sticker? Cabinet member raised the issue of the councils calculating garden waste fees yearly and the impact of taking payments early could have on the financial viability of running the service.
- A member asked whether the payment could start with an initial joining fee.

A member expressed a view that on balance, as an optional service, those wanting the service can take the time to make a payment, and also reduce cost by lessening the officer time administering the process. However, some members were concerned about the one-off annual payment and moving away from direct debits. Cabinet member for Corporate Services (South) added that this new system was to help all to access the service but also not to make it more difficult for council staff.

A member motioned that micro chipping bins should be looked into before proceeding, but other members did not agree that there was time to do this – it was felt that we needed to continue to progress efficiencies with a new CRM system and getting better customer records. Cabinet member for Environment (South) felt this could be a future consideration.

Members further discussed their concerns along with the positives of the new method, concluding with the following motion that committee agreed on.

Recommendation:

Scrutiny committee request that South and Vale cabinets consider continuing to offer direct debit payments, and scrutiny committee also supported other payment methods such as cash and over the phone payments.

Committee asked that both Cabinets consider retaining the minimum number of collections per year, for customer assurance. Cabinets were asked to ensure that a clear communications plan be put in place to:

1. show residents how to pay and
2. keep residents updated on the changes

Further comments:

Separate to the recommendation, it was noted that future consideration should be given to the following methods:

- Bin microchipping
- An initial joining fee

The meeting closed at 8.00 pm