

Sc.1

**MINUTES OF A MEETING
OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT THE GUILDHALL, ABINGDON
ON THURSDAY, 20TH AUGUST, 2009
AT 6.00 PM**

Open to the Public, including the Press

PRESENT:

MEMBERS: Councillors Melinda Tilley (Chairman at the commencement of the meeting), Jim Halliday (Vice-Chair), Matthew Barber, Joyce Hutchinson, Julia Reynolds, Jenny Shepherd, Laurel Symons and Reg Waite

SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS: Councillor Janet Morgan (In place of Tim Smith) and Peter Saunders (In place of Yvonne Constance)

NON-MEMBERS BY INVITATION: Councillors Tony de Vere and Jerry Patterson

OFFICERS: Steve Culliford, William Jacobs, Matt Prosser and Paul Staines

NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC: Nil

SC.1 **ELECTION OF A CHAIR(MAN)**

Councillor Melinda Tilley reported that she had stood down as Leader of the Opposition and therefore she was also stepping down as Chairman of this Committee and she believed that the Leader of the Opposition should also chair this Committee. She thereupon proposed and Councillor Peter Saunders seconded that Councillor Matthew Barber be elected chairman of this committee for the remainder of the 2009/10 municipal year.

RESOLVED

that Councillor Matthew Barber be elected as Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee for the remainder of the 2009/10 municipal year.

SC.2 **NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

The attendance of substitute councillors who had been authorised to attend in accordance with the provisions of standing order 17(1) was recorded as referred to above with apologies for absence having been received from Councillors Yvonne Constance, , and Tim Smith. Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Andrew Crawford and Chris Wise.

SC.3 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 April 2009 were adopted and signed as a correct record.

SC.4 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

SC.5 URGENT BUSINESS AND CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman announced that a view on the preferred starting time of future meetings of this committee was sought. Councillors thereupon stated that future meetings of the Scrutiny Committee should commence at 6.00pm.

SC.6 STATEMENTS AND PETITIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None.

SC.7 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None.

SC.8 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered a draft scrutiny work programme which set out a series of topics for the committee to scrutinise during 2009/10.

The draft work programme included a named scrutiny councillor against each item. The names had been taken from the list agreed at the meeting in December 2008 when the committee had reviewed the service area half year reports. Councillors debated the merits of naming a lead scrutiny councillor for each work programme item but concluded that there should not be designated lead councillors and asked for the "lead scrutiny councillor" column in the draft work programme to be removed.

The committee agreed that the work programme should be submitted to each committee meeting for review, but in line with the council's constitution noted that it would need approval by the council.

Two further items were added to the work programme for April 2010, namely a review of progress against the equalities and diversities plan and a review of improvements to the planning enforcement service.

The committee also reviewed the list of scrutiny councillors allocated to service areas at its meeting in December 2008. The committee updated the list for future use, replacing Councillor Julia Reynolds with Councillor Jim Halliday for the leisure contracts element.

R E C O M M E N D E D

(a) *that the Scrutiny Work Programme be adopted, as appended to these minutes;*

RESOLVED

- (b) *that the Scrutiny Work Programme be reviewed at each Committee meeting;
and*
- (c) *that the list of Scrutiny Committee Members allocated to each service area be updated as follows:*
- *Corporate Strategy – Councillor Matthew Barber*
 - *Commercial Services for Waste – Councillor Yvonne Constance*
 - *Commercial Services excluding Waste – Councillor Joyce Hutchinson*
 - *Community Strategy element of Planning Services – Councillor Jim Halliday*
 - *Democratic Services – Councillor Jenny Shepherd*
 - *Economy, Leisure and Property – Councillor Jim Halliday*
 - *Finance – Councillor Matthew Barber*
 - *Health – Councillor Laurel Symons*
 - *Housing – Councillor Melinda Tilley*
 - *HR, IT and Customer Services – Councillor Reg Waite*
 - *Legal Services – Councillor Jim Halliday*
 - *Planning excluding Community Strategy – Councillor Andrew Crawford*

SC.9 IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECESSION – HOUSING AND THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

The committee considered report 38/09 of the Head of Health and Housing. The report looked at the impact of the economic recession on social housing providers and the implications of various interventions made by the government in response. The report also looked at local impacts and the council's response to the challenges.

It was reported that the global economic crisis had caused an unprecedented impact on the housing sector. The council was experiencing the same impact as authorities across the South East. This was affecting delivery of new affordable housing and the future for some low cost home ownership schemes. A drop in home ownership had increased demand in the rented sector, putting waiting and transfer lists under increased pressure. The impact of the mortgage-lending crisis had also affected the registered social landlords (housing associations). Sales of shared ownership homes had slowed considerably due to lending restrictions and reduced valuations and as a result demand for housing advice and assistance had increased markedly.

It was reported that the council was seeking ways to work with its registered social landlord partners, housing developers and the Housing and Communities Agency to unlock major sites to maintain delivery of affordable housing during the economic recession and also to ensure that the council was in a good position to meet demand in the event of economic conditions improving. To assist, the government had introduced several measures including:

- increasing stamp duty
- assisting housing associations offering shared ownership, shared equity or sale and rent back options
- assisting housing associations to increase their housing stock

- assisting first time buyers with incomes below £60,000
- offering “kick start” funding to help major housing sites to progress
- helping local authorities to build new council homes, although this was aimed at authorities that had kept their housing stock.

The committee noted the positive steps. Furthermore, it was noted that the council had managed to restrict the numbers of applicants placed in temporary accommodation through effective homelessness prevention measures. The five district housing authorities had secured £30,000 in government funding for a joint initiative with the other Oxfordshire district councils aimed at homelessness prevention and reduced use of temporary accommodation. In addition, the council had secured £38,000 government funding to provide advice aimed at preventing homelessness through avoiding repossession and the provision of hardship loans. Supplementary funding was available to the Citizens’ Advice Bureau to offset the cost of specialist debt advice. One councillor queried whether funding was also available for the Independent Advice Centre at Wantage. The head of service agreed to investigate whether the centre was accredited to give such advice and therefore eligible to receive funding on a case-by-case basis.

It was reported that having achieved the targets for reward grant funding from Local Area Agreement 1, the council was continuing to work with its neighbouring district councils in Oxfordshire towards further reward grant available through Local Area Agreement 2. This additional funding would enable the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership to assist directly with future housing projects. The committee noted that if the government awarded 100 percent of the due grant, there would be approximately £1.4m available for Oxfordshire. Around 50 percent of this would be available for housing schemes in the county, equating to around three or four homes for the Vale.

In answer to a question from one councillor, it was explained that the council had a low level of empty properties in its district and therefore bringing empty homes back into use was not a service priority. However, the council offered renovation grants to bring empty properties back into use in return for tenancy nomination rights.

Councillors noted that there was no evidence that homelessness was increasing because of the recession. One councillor asked about the effect on levels of rent arrears to which the head of service agreed to investigate this through the registered social landlords.

Turning to the impact of the recession on the local economy, councillors asked the Executive portfolio holder for finance to explain what the council was doing to help businesses in the Vale. He reported that businesses could apply for business rates hardship relief but any applications were subject to criteria. He reported that the council had to fund these discounts but had a limited budget to do so and therefore the scheme was not actively promoted. However, he explained that the Federation of Small Businesses gave advice to small businesses.

RESOLVED

- (a) *that the report be noted; and*
- (b) *that the head of health and housing be requested to investigate whether the Independent Advice Centre at Wantage is accredited to give debt advice and therefore eligible to receive support funding on a case by case basis and also investigate the effect of the recession on levels of rent arrears through the registered social landlords.*

SC.10 REVIEW THE ACTIVITY OF THE EXECUTIVE

The committee considered the minutes of the meeting of the executive held on 7 August 2009. No queries were raised on the activity of the executive it being noted that the two main items of debate were the corporate governance report and the revenue budget report, which had also been included on the agenda for this meeting for discussion.

SC.11 CORPORATE GOVERNANCE FOURTH QUARTER 2008/09

The committee received and considered report 31/09 of the Head of Corporate Strategy which had been considered by the executive on 7 August 2009. The report set out the corporate governance report for the fourth quarter 2008/09 (January to March 2009). This looked at progress against the council's corporate priorities; performance against national indicators; progress against service prioritisation plans; staff sickness and turnover data; progress with business process improvement reviews and a financial commentary. It was explained that the management team had highlighted exceptions to the executive and the committee considered the executive's response, together with the report.

Councillors raised several questions to which the officers responded as follows: -

- the predicted saving arising from the civic hall catering contract had not been achieved in 2008/09 but should be achieved in 2009/10;
- a corporate property review was taking place which would consider the effect of the new catering contract on users of the civic halls;
- the strategic director undertook to investigate the cost of time lost to staff sickness and advise committee members outside of the meeting;
- it was believed that exit interviews were conducted in most cases when staff left the council's employment but the strategic director undertook to confirm this outside of the meeting;
- the strategic director undertook to check the performance data in the report of the number of online payments (web/self-serve) made to the council and confirm to committee members outside of the meeting;

- the method of calculation of the government's planning delivery grant was unknown. However it was explained that it was related to development control applications considered within the performance indicator, the number of homes permitted and progress against the Local Development Framework target completion date; and
- issues about the performance of the waste management contractor needed to be reported to the client manager in the waste team.

Finally, the committee recognised that sickness levels had reduced and councillors congratulated service managers and human resources officers for their part in this.

RESOLVED

- (a) *that the report be noted; and*
- (b) *that the strategic director clarifies outside of the meeting:*
 - *the cost of time lost to staff sickness;*
 - *whether exit interviews are conducted in all cases when staff leave the council's employment; and*
 - *the performance data in the report of the number of online payments (web/self-serve) made to the council.*

SC.12 REVENUE BUDGET OUTTURN 2008/09

The committee received and considered report 33/09 of the Head of Finance, which set out the revenue budget outturn position at the end of 2008/09, which had been considered by the executive on 7 August 2009. The committee reviewed the executive's response to it.

The committee noted that the executive had queried the reasons for cost centre variances as provided by the budget managers. The executive had cited many examples where the reasons were inadequate and had asked for an amended appendix B to be made available for the this committee, with clearer explanations for the budget variances. This appendix had been prepared and circulated to the committee prior to the meeting.

Councillor raised a number of questions and responses were given as follows: -

- the executive portfolio holder for finance reported that the predicted level of underspend across salary budgets had been set at 6 per cent based on historical data but there would be a need to review it, as staff turnover had reduced due to the economic recession;
- the variance in the Guildhall budget had been partly caused by a delay in negotiating a new contract with the Theatre Organ Preservation Society; and
- negotiations were underway for a new contract for the electricity supply to reduce the impact of price rises on the council.

RESOLVED

that the report be noted.

Exempt Information Under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972

None.

SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

CONTAINING SCRUTINY WORK TO BE UNDERTAKEN 1 AUGUST 2009 - 30 APRIL 2009

The Scrutiny Work Programme belongs to the Council's Scrutiny Committee and sets out a schedule of scrutiny work due to be carried out over during period shown above. It is a rolling plan, subject to change at each Scrutiny Committee meeting; however, the Scrutiny Work Programme and changes to it are subject to the Council's approval.

Representations can be made on any of the following issues before an item is considered by the Scrutiny Committee. Representations must be made to the relevant contact officer shown below by 10.00 am on the day the Scrutiny Committee is due to meet. The dates for each meeting of the Scrutiny Committee are shown below.

Item title	Meeting date	Lead officer	Why is it here?	Scope	Notes
Implications of the Recession – Housing and the Financial Crisis	Scrutiny Committee 20 Aug 2009	Paul Staines, Head of Housing and Health Tel. 01235 547621 E-mail: paul.staines@so uthandvale.gov.u k	To scrutinise the effect of the recession on the Vale	To receive the report from the Head of Service and question as necessary	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Request attendance by Councillor Jerry Patterson (Executive Portfolio Holder)
Revenue Budget Outturn 2008/09	Executive 7 Aug 2009 Scrutiny Committee 20 Aug 2009	Alice Brander Tel. 01235 540429 E-mail: alice.brander@w hitehorsedc.gov.u k	To scrutinise the Executive's work following the Chief Finance Officer's report	To interview the Head of Service and Executive Portfolio Holder as appropriate	Background report 33/09 to the Executive on 7 August 2009 Request attendance by Councillor Jerry Patterson (Executive Portfolio Holder)

Item title	Meeting date	Lead officer	Why is it here?	Scope	Notes
Waste Contractor's Annual Report	Scrutiny Committee 15 Oct 2009	Mike Mackay, Head of Commercial Services Tel. 01235 540337 E-mail: michael.mackay@southandvale.gov.uk	To conduct an annual review of the waste contractor's performance	To interview the client team and contractor as necessary and to make any recommendations for corrective action or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber and the Chief Executive Require attendance by Councillor Jenny Hannaby (Executive Portfolio Holder)
New Waste Management Contract	Scrutiny Committee 15 Oct 2009	Mike Mackay, Head of Commercial Services Tel. 01235 540337 E-mail: michael.mackay@southandvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise preparations for the new waste management contract's implementation in the Vale in October 2010	To interview the contractor and the Head of Commercial Services and recommend any corrective action or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber and the Chief Executive Require attendance by Councillor Jenny Hannaby (Executive Portfolio Holder) Invite South Oxfordshire's Cabinet Member for Waste, Councillor David Dodds
Brown Bins	Scrutiny Committee 15 Oct 2009	Mike Mackay, Head of Commercial Services Tel. 01235 540337 E-mail: michael.mackay@southandvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise the management of the brown bins service	Interview the service manager and the Executive Portfolio Holder and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Require attendance by Councillor Jenny Hannaby (Executive Portfolio Holder)

Item title	Meeting date	Lead officer	Why is it here?	Scope	Notes
Local Services Points	Scrutiny Committee 15 Oct 2009	Andrew Down, Head of HR, IT and Customer Tel. 01235 540372 E-mail: andrew.down@outhandvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise the current and future operation of the Local Services Points	Interview the service manager and the Executive Portfolio Holder and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Require attendance by Councillor Richard Farrell (Executive Portfolio Holder)
Housing Performance Indicators	Scrutiny Committee November 2009	Paul Staines, Head of Housing and Health Tel. 01235 547621 E-mail: paul.staines@outhandvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise the housing performance indicators set in the Corporate Plan and the process involved in measuring performance	To interview the service manager and Executive Portfolio Holder and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Request attendance by Councillor Angela Lawrence (Executive Portfolio Holder)
Financial Services Contract	Scrutiny Committee November 2009	William Jacobs, Head of Finance Tel. 01235 540455 E-mail: william.jacobs@outhandvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise the financial services contract and make any recommendations for corrective action or improvements	Interview the Head of Finance, the contractor and the Executive Portfolio Holder as necessary and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber and the Chief Executive Require attendance by Councillor Jerry Patterson (Executive Portfolio Holder)

Item title	Meeting date	Lead officer	Why is it here?	Scope	Notes
Leisure Contractors' Annual Reports	Scrutiny Committee November 2009	Chris Tyson, Head of Leisure Economy and Property Tel. 01235 540378 E-mail: chris.tyson@south-handvale.gov.uk	To conduct an annual review of the leisure contractors' performance	To consider the leisure contractors' reports, interview the client manager and the contractor and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by the Chief Executive Require attendance by Councillor Richard Webber (Executive Portfolio Holder)
Corporate Property	Scrutiny Committee November 2009	Chris Tyson, Head of Leisure Economy and Property Tel. 01235 540378 E-mail: chris.tyson@whitehorsedc.gov.uk	To take a broad look at the future of the Council's corporate property	Interview the service manager and the Executive Portfolio Holder and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Require attendance by Councillor Richard Webber (Executive Portfolio Holder)
Partnerships - Process and Value	Scrutiny Committee November 2009	Toby Warren Tel. 01235 547695 E-mail: toby.warren@whitehorsedc.gov.uk	To scrutinise the process and value of partnerships. What partnerships are the Council involved in and what do they achieve?	Interview the service manager and the Executive Portfolio Holder and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillors Matthew Barber and Jim Halliday Require the attendance of Councillor Tony de Vere (Executive Portfolio Holder)

Item title	Meeting date	Lead officer	Why is it here?	Scope	Notes
Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership	Scrutiny Committee 17 Dec 2009	Liz Hayden Tel. 01235 540309 E-mail: liz.hayden@whitehorsedc.gov.uk	Sections 19 and 20 of the Police and Justice Act 2006 have given the Council powers to scrutinise the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership	To scrutinise the crime and disorder reduction partnership and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Police authority co-optee to be invited to attend Require attendance by Councillor Tony de Vere (Executive Portfolio Holder)
Policing in the Vale	Scrutiny Committee 17 Dec 2009	Clare Kingston, Head of Corporate Strategy Tel. 01235 540356 E-mail: clare.kingston@southandvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise policing in the Vale	Interview Thames Valley Police representative	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Request attendance by Andy Boyd (Thames Valley Police)
Budget 2010/11	Scrutiny Committee 17 Dec 2009	William Jacobs, Head of Finance Tel. 01235 540455 E-mail: william.jacobs@southandvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise the draft budget 2010/11	Interview the Head of Finance and the Executive Portfolio Holder and make any recommendations as necessary	Background papers: draft budget proposals for 2010/11 Require attendance by Councillor Jerry Patterson (Executive Portfolio Holder)

Item title	Meeting date	Lead officer	Why is it here?	Scope	Notes
Old Gaol, Abingdon (this may be a confidential item)	Scrutiny Committee 11 Feb 2010	Chris Tyson, Head of Leisure Economy and Property Tel. 01235 540378 E-mail: chris.tyson@south-handvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise work on the redevelopment of the Old Gaol, Abingdon	Interview the service manager and the Executive Portfolio Holder	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Require attendance by Councillors Richard Webber (Executive Portfolio Holder) and Tony de Vere
Bury Street, Abingdon (this may be a confidential item)	Scrutiny Committee 11 Feb 2010	Chris Tyson, Head of Leisure Economy and Property Tel. 01235 540378 E-mail: chris.tyson@south-handvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise progress on improvements to Bury Street, Abingdon	Interview the service manager and the Executive Portfolio Holder	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Require attendance by Councillors Richard Webber (Executive Portfolio Holder) and Tony de Vere
Partnerships - Effectiveness	Scrutiny Committee 11 Feb 2010	Toby Warren Tel. 01235 547695 E-mail: toby.warren@whitford-council.gov.uk	To scrutinise the effectiveness of one or more of the Council's major partnerships, e.g. the Vale Strategic Partnership, and the Choose Abingdon Partnership	Interview service managers and Executive Portfolio Holders and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Require attendance by Councillor Tony de Vere (Executive Portfolio Holder)

Item title	Meeting date	Lead officer	Why is it here?	Scope	Notes
Grounds Maintenance Contract	Scrutiny Committee 11 Feb 2010	Ian Matten Tel. 01235 540373 E-mail: ian.matten@whitehorsedc.gov.uk	To scrutinise operation of the Grounds Maintenance Contract	To interview the contractor, the client contract manager, the Head of Service and the Executive Portfolio Holder and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Require attendance by Councillor Richard Webber (Executive Portfolio Holder)
Carbon Management Programme - Review	Scrutiny Committee 22 Apr 2010	Mark Saunders Tel. 01235 547603 E-mail: mark.saunders@whitehorsedc.gov.uk	Scrutiny Committee requested a report to its meeting in April 2010	Monitor progress since April 2009 and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Background minute Sc.64 of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 23 April 2009 Potential update to Committee on 15 October 2009
Community Grants	Scrutiny Committee 22 Apr 2010	Toby Warren Tel. 01235 547695 E-mail: toby.warren@whitehorsedc.gov.uk	To scrutinise the operation of the Council's community grants scheme	To interview the service manager and the Executive Portfolio Holder and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber Require attendance by Councillor Tony de Vere (Executive Portfolio Holder)

Item title	Meeting date	Lead officer	Why is it here?	Scope	Notes
Equalities and Diversity Plan	Scrutiny Committee 22 Apr 2010	Katharine Doherty Tel. 01235 540342 E-mail: katharine.doherty@whitehorsedc.gov.uk	To undertake an annual scrutiny of the Equalities and Diversity Plan	To interview the Equalities Officer and recommend any corrective action or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber
Planning Enforcement	Scrutiny Committee 22 Apr 2010	Adrian Duffield, Head of Planning Tel. 01235 540340 E-mail: adrian.duffield@southandvale.gov.uk	To scrutinise the effectiveness of improvements to the planning enforcement service	To interview the service manager and Executive Portfolio Holder and recommend any corrective action or improvements	Requested by Councillor Matthew Barber
Annual Performance Review	Scrutiny Committee June 2010	Steve Bishop, Strategic Director and Section 151 Officer Tel. 01235 540332 E-mail: steve.bishop@southandvale.gov.uk	To annually scrutinise the performance of the Council	To interview the Heads of Service and Executive Portfolio Holders as appropriate and recommend any corrective actions or improvements	Requested by Councillor Jim Halliday