

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held at 6pm on Thursday 23 June 2011

at the Abbey House, Abingdon



Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Jim Halliday (Chair), Melinda Tilley (Vice-Chairman), Eric Batts, Andrew Crawford, Jane Crossley, Tony de Vere, Charlotte Dickson, Jason Fiddaman, Bill Jones, Sandy Lovatt, Julie Mayhew-Archer and Fiona Roper

Non-participating members: Councillors Reg Waite and Richard Webber

Officers: Steve Bishop, Steve Culliford, Ian Matten and Margaret Reed

Number of members of the public: Nil

Sc.1 Chair and Vice-Chairman

The committee noted that at the annual Council meeting held on 18 May 2011, Councillors Jim Halliday and Melinda Tilley had been elected as Chair and Vice-Chairman respectively of the Scrutiny Committee for the 2011/12 municipal year.

Sc.2 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

None

Sc.3 Minutes

RESOLVED: To adopt as a correct record the minutes of the committee meeting held on 22 February 2011 and agree that the chair signs them.

Sc.4 Declarations of interest

Councillors declared the following interests:

Councillor	Personal or prejudicial	Item	Interest
Jim Halliday	Personal	Grounds maintenance contract monitoring	He lived close to the Abbey Grounds and had been a member of Abingdon Town

Councillor	Personal or prejudicial	Item	Interest
			Council that had a sub-contract with the Vale for grounds maintenance.
Julie Mayhew-Archer	Personal	Grounds maintenance contract monitoring	She was a member of Abingdon Town Council that had a sub-contract with the Vale for grounds maintenance.
Jason Fiddaman	Personal	Grounds maintenance contract monitoring	He was a member of Abingdon Town Council that had a sub-contract with the Vale for grounds maintenance.
Sandy Lovatt	Personal	Grounds maintenance contract monitoring	He was the leader of Abingdon Town Council that had a sub-contract with the Vale for grounds maintenance. He was a member of Oxfordshire County Council also.
Andrew Crawford	Personal	Election review	He had been unable to vote at the recent district and town council elections due to not receiving his postal vote.

Sc.5 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The chair made the following announcements:

- In the past, this had been a working committee that looked at internal operations. It had been non-party political and the chair hoped that this would continue
- The timing of committee meetings was a matter for committee members to determine. The committee agreed that in future, its meetings should normally start at 7pm
- The next committee meeting would be held in Crowmarsh Gifford to consider the election review report jointly with South Oxfordshire District Council. This meeting would be held on Thursday 21 July at 6.30pm and would be webcast.
- Summaries of the service plans would be sent to all councillors so that they could understand the roles of each service. Prior to the next committee meeting, there would be an exhibition by each service. Councillors were invited to attend from 5pm on 21 July to discuss the service plans with service managers. At the following committee meeting on 24 August, the committee would be asked to devise its work programme for the remainder of the 2011/12 year.

Sc.6 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee

None

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Sc.2

Sc.7 Terms of reference

The committee noted its terms of reference, as laid down by the council's constitution. The main purpose of the committee was to hold the Cabinet to account. This involved looking at decisions made at cabinet meetings and decisions made by individual cabinet members. The committee could call in these decisions for review. The committee also had a role in policy formulation. It had an opportunity to comment on new policies before adoption or comment on their effectiveness once introduced. Forthcoming Cabinet decisions were set out in the forward plan each month. The chair asked that each committee member should receive the forward plan.

Sc.8 Review of recycling and waste collection over Christmas and New Year 2010/11

The committee considered a briefing paper on the outcome of an investigation into the problems experienced with recycling and waste collections over the Christmas and New Year period last winter. The committee recalled that heavy snowfall had occurred on Saturday 18 December 2010, leaving the roads too dangerous to operate large recycling and waste collections vehicles on two days, Monday 20 and Tuesday 21 December. The committee heard that the following Saturday being Christmas Day was not available to the contractor for catching up. In accordance with the pre-agreed winter plan, the contractor was instructed not to attempt to catch up missed collections as three days had been lost and there was already a publicised plan for catching up collections after the Christmas and New Year holidays. To disrupt this would affect all Vale residents, not just those with missed collections. The council announced updates on the changing situation through local radio and the council's website. Garden waste collection vehicles were diverted to help collect other waste.

The committee questioned the strategic director who was responsible for this service at the time and questioned the contractor. Councillors noted that there had been some cases where extra waste placed in bags had not been collected. The committee noted that this could have been due to the collection vehicle being for recycling only on the day in question. The contractor could not contaminate recycling collection vehicles with non-recyclable waste.

The committee asked how the council would cope with the worst-case scenario. The strategic director reported that the recycling and waste collection service was one of the best value in the country, being relatively low cost and yet the council was achieving the highest recycling rates. The contract had been set up to achieve best value for money, not to cope with sustained inclement weather. If councillors wished for a higher standard of service to cope with adverse weather conditions, this would cost the council significantly more and should be considered in next year's budget-setting exercise.

The committee believed that as recycling and waste collection was the council's highest profile service, the council should prepare contingency plans in the event of an unavoidable service disruption. The Cabinet should be made aware of the committee's concerns. The committee suggested that contingency plans should be made now, including:

- the contractor providing boots for its staff
- securing good stocks of salt for path clearing
- arranging for indoor storage of salt to prevent stocks freezing

- contacting Oxfordshire County Council to find out which roads were accessible
- using parish councils and district councillors to disseminate information by providing updates at least once a day where necessary
- using the same script to inform residents, the website, local councils and councillors to achieve consistent communication
- advertising collection dates in local newspapers
- finding out which collections were missed each day and prioritising them for the next day
- opening the call centre longer to accommodate residents that rang early in the morning or in the evening

Councillors noted that the contractor would be reviewing its business continuity plan.

The chair invited Councillor Reg Waite, the Cabinet member for the recycling and waste service, to address the meeting. Firstly, Councillor Waite thanked the committee for its suggestions. He agreed to consider these when formulating a contingency plan. He accepted that communication needed improving and agreed that keeping parish councils informed was important as many local councils had details of their parishioners' email addresses and could disseminate information quickly. He also reported that the county council had offered every parish one tonne of salt to distribute in its village throughout the winter. He reminded the committee that the council would never be able to plan to cover all eventualities but would do the best it could.

The Cabinet member reported that he had been discussing this matter at monthly meetings with the head of service. He would produce a contingency plan and was happy to bring this back to the committee in October.

RESOLVED: To refer the committee's suggestions for a contingency plan to the Cabinet member for the recycling and waste service, and request that he brings a contingency plan to the committee meeting in October.

Sc.9 Grounds maintenance contract monitoring

The committee considered report 4/11 of the head of corporate strategy. This set out the annual grounds maintenance contract monitoring report. The committee was asked to consider the performance of the contractor, ISS Facility Services Landscaping for the period 1 January to 31 December 2010. The options open to the committee were:

- to accept the report and recommend that the Cabinet member for corporate strategy agrees with the officer that the contractor should be awarded a 'good' assessment, or
- to require the council's contract monitoring officer, the contractor, and the relevant Cabinet member to attend a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to answer questions on the contractor's performance.

In answer to a question from a councillor, it was reported that the contractor's performance scores had dropped for no apparent reason. The scores were slightly lower than the previous year and had been provided by other council services. Not all services had responded; the committee asked all services to respond to internal questionnaires in future. The officer agreed to supply committee members with details of the questionnaire.

The committee supported the officer's recommendation.

RESOLVED: To accept the report and recommend that the Cabinet member for corporate strategy agrees with the officer that the grounds maintenance contractor should be awarded a 'good' assessment for 2010.

Sc.10 Leisure contract monitoring

The committee considered report 5/11 of the head of economy, leisure and property. This set out the 2010/11 leisure contract monitoring report for DC Leisure, which ran the White Horse Leisure and Tennis Centre in Abingdon. The options open to the committee were:

- to accept the report and recommend that the Cabinet member for economy, leisure and property agrees with the officer that the contractor should be awarded a 'fair' assessment, or
- to require the council's contract monitoring officer, the contractor, and the relevant Cabinet member to attend a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to answer questions on the contractor's performance.

At its meeting in January 2011, the committee had considered the last monitoring report and had requested trend analysis in future reports. However, this was not included in the latest report. The committee asked for the council's contract monitoring officer, the contractor, and the relevant Cabinet member to attend a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to answer questions on the contractor's performance. The committee asked for an action plan to improve the service at the centre, and asked for details of internal services that had responded to the survey questionnaire. The committee also requested that the report should look at usage of the leisure centre in 2010/11 and previous years and at how this could be increased in future years.

RESOLVED:

- (a) To require the council's contract monitoring officer, the contractor (DC Leisure), and the relevant Cabinet member to attend a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to answer questions on the contractor's performance; and
- (b) To request that the monitoring report should be amended to include trend analysis on usage of the White Horse Leisure and Tennis Centre, details of the internal services' response to the survey questionnaire, and an action plan to increase use of the centre and improve the service.

Sc.11 Scrutiny work programme

The committee considered its work programme. Councillors noted that prior to the next committee meeting on 21 July, there would be an exhibition by each service. Councillors were invited to attend to discuss the service plans with service managers. At the following committee meeting on 24 August, the committee would set its work programme for the remainder of the 2011/12 year.

In the meantime, the committee agreed to update the work programme as follows:

- Leisure contract monitoring of DC Leisure's management of the White Horse Leisure and Tennis Centre in Abingdon – 24 August meeting
- Leisure contract monitoring of SOLL's management of the Faringdon and Wantage Leisure Centres, the Abbey Meadows in Abingdon, and Tilsley Park – 24 August meeting

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RESOLVED: To update the scrutiny work programme as detailed above.

Sc.12 Election review

The committee noted that David Buckle, the Returning Officer, had commissioned an independent review of the way in which the recent local elections and Alternative Vote referendum had been conducted in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. The terms of reference of the review were appended to the agenda.

Tim Revell had been appointed to carry out the review. He was chosen from a short list of consultants provided by Solace Enterprises, having worked in local government at a senior level for over 15 years with extensive experience of running a variety of elections. He aimed to complete his review by early July and report to the committee at a joint meeting with South Oxfordshire District Council's Scrutiny Committee on 21 July.

The committee expressed some concern at the terms of reference, believing that they were too outward looking. Councillors believed that the terms of reference should be wider ranging, to include:

- whether the council had adequate staff resources to deal with all eventualities
- whether some poll cards had directed some electors to the wrong polling station
- whether poll cards should have been re-issued to areas where they had not been delivered
- whether the council should inform local councillors and parish councils of areas where poll cards had not been delivered
- looking at communication problems, such as ability to answer phone calls and whether there were contingency plans if all lines were busy
- considering options for postal voters whose votes had not arrived – what alternatives were available?
- questioning why a printing company with limited experience was chosen to print the election material?
- asking what was the cost of the printing contract compared to other tenders?
- looking at why the postal vote return envelope was too small to fit the postal votes?

The committee also expressed concern at why it had not had any influence over the appointment of the person appointed to carry out the review.

The committee asked whether the print contractor and the Royal Mail could be invited to the committee meeting on 21 July. The chair agreed to discuss this with the chairman of South Oxfordshire District Council's Scrutiny Committee.

The committee recognised the hard work of the staff involved in the elections and thanked them for this.

In conclusion, the chairman suggested that the committee's concerns were relayed to the Returning Officer. The committee would consider the review report on 21 July. If the committee believed that the report had not answered all of its questions, it could call for a further review.

RESOLVED: To alert the Returning Officer to the committee's concerns about the review's terms of reference.

Sc.13 Exclusion of the public, including the press

RESOLVED: That in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the remainder of the meeting to prevent the disclosure to them of exempt information, as defined in Section 100(l) and Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, to the Act when the following item is considered:

Leisure contract monitoring - appendix

(Category 3 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information.)

SUMMARY OF EXEMPT MINUTE

Sc.14 Leisure contract monitoring - appendix

The committee noted the exempt information contained in the appendix to the leisure contract monitoring report.