Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held at 7pm on Wednesday 24 August 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, Jane Crossley, Tony de Vere, Charlotte Dickson, Jason Fiddaman, Bill Jones, Sandy Lovatt, Julie Mayhew-Archer, and Fiona Roper

Non-participating member: Councillor Yvonne Constance

Officers: Kate Arnold, David Buckle, Steven Corrigan, Bev Lee, Claire Litchfield, Margaret Reed, Anna Robinson, Sally Truman, Chris Tyson, and Chris Webb

SOLL representatives: John Bates and David Rolls

Number of members of the public: Nil

Sc.25 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Andrew Crawford and it was noted that Councillor Dudley Hoddinott was in attendance as a substitute member.

Sc.26 Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on 23 June and 21 July 2011 were adopted and signed as a correct record.

Sc.27 Declarations of interest

None

Sc.28 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The Chair announced that on 15 September 2011 Members were invited to attend a briefing by officers about the service plans for the coming year. It was noted that the scrutiny committee would be asked to identify topics to include in the work programme following this briefing.

Sc.29 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee

None

Sc.30 Leisure contract monitoring - DC Leisure

The committee received and considered report 16/11 of the head of economy, leisure and property.

The committee was advised that the contract had not been set up with key performance indicators at its conception.

When asked whether there was any reason for the step down in usage figures, Chris Webb, (officer) reported that it was difficult to capture user data at the centre, given its open plan layout. He advised that there was no controlled access and that many customers using, for example, the café or spectating were not being included in the data. He added that spectator data would not be reflected in revenue.

It was reported that the centre performed as expected in respect of energy costs and usage, when considering its size and age.

One member asked why according to paragraph 16 of the report, there was no requirement for the contractor to improve performance. It was advised that this had not been written into the contract. Members commented that this was surprising and they would have expected a view to have been taken on performance by the officers. Chris Webb advised that he was content with the visitor numbers and that the centre performed well.

With respect to the customer survey, members commented that the numbers returned were so low that it would not give a true reflection of the customer experience. It was suggested that the contractor should offer incentives to customers to complete the survey.

One member asked for clarification on the issue of corporate identity. Officers advised that it was important that the centre be recognised as a council facility, given the strong Active Nation brand.

Members considered the trend monitoring data in open session, having been agreed by the head of economy, leisure and property.

One member questioned why there had been a drop in the standards of cleanliness. It was advised that following the contract for cleaning being contracted out the standards had fallen. It was reported that standards had improved since cleaning had returned in house. Mr Webb confirmed that the result of ad hoc visits to the site suggested that standards had improved.

One member questioned how the problems with telephone systems were being addressed. It was reported that from October the centre would be offering online booking and in addition the contractors would be looking at different options for the phone system.

Mr Rolls, from Active Nation, commented that he was disappointed with the scores, however it was an improving picture. He advised that the centre was recruiting more experienced staff and that the turnaround of staff needed to be reduced.

One member suggested that communication between the Vale and the centre should be improved, the Vale officers should be more proactive.

One member commented that the performance management of contracts should be more like the private sector model. He did not consider the current method adequate and suggested that the cabinet should be tasked with looking at how facilities in the future should be managed and assessed for performance.

RESOLVED: To recommend to the cabinet that it reviews how facilities such as the white horse leisure and tennis centre and should be assessed for performance.

Sc.31 Independent review on the conduct of the 2011 local elections

The Chair invited Members to ask questions of the officers, following on from the meeting which was held on 21 July.

Members asked a series of questions, outlined below and the chief executive, head of legal and democratic services, democratic services manager and elections officer assisted in answering them.

Question	**Answer**
Did officers consider the risk assessment in planning the elections and had this been updated since it was considered at Scrutiny last year?	Yes
The register had identified risks and means of mitigating them, had these been considered?	Yes, for example the contingency for failure to deliver postal votes was to hand deliver.
Did officers advise the public about the problems of non delivery of poll cards?	Yes, a notice was placed on our website and David Buckle did an interview with Radio Oxford
Did anyone look at samples of the print work?	Yes. Bev Lee and Marcia Beviere attended the printers in Sunderland and checked a series of samples and found them satisfactory.
Did officers look at the size of the envelopes?	Unfortunately officers had not witnessed the envelope being placed in the return envelope and therefore were unaware of the issue with size.
Were agents aware that they could attend postal vote opening?	Yes, agents had been briefed.
Why did the council not issue a letter to the public advising that poll cards were not required to vote?	At the time officers were unaware of the extent of the problem, and therefore would have had to send a letter out to the entire district, which would have been very costly.

Question	Answer
	Officers emphasised that the extent of the problem was not immediately apparent, and appeared sporadic in nature.
What would be done if there was a similar problem in future	It is difficult, because all experienced printers would be busy at election times. For the past three elections, three different companies had been used and each had let the council down in different ways.
Shouldn't the Vale have someone overseeing the distribution internally?	One option would be to get the printing company to print, then send to us for distribution, however the deadlines are incredibly tight and this option might delay the receipt of postal votes.
Were project management tools and plans applied	Yes, there was a project plan and it was on track, all of the tight deadlines had been met. The problem arose with the printers, not in the project planning. The problems arose because the printers had not completed some tasks. If the printers had come a week before the election to advise that these tasks had not been completed, the council would have known the extent and could have acted.
Why was the printer not being proactively managed?	Officers were asking for dockets to prove batches had been sent out, however it was accepted that more cross checking was required. There should have been more use of the Online Business Account, which would have checked the quantities of the documents supplied.
Did the chief executive think the non delivery was acceptable?	No, he was disappointed and angry with the printers.
Did the officers check for poll card dockets?	Not immediately, they were requested at a later stage.

One member commented that many people had been disenfranchised, which was unacceptable. She questioned whether the chief executive was taking responsibility. David Buckle advised that he had made a public apology. He further commented that the vast majority of voters did receive their postal packs, and that elections staff had reissued 400 votes to people reporting that they had not received their packs.

One member commented that the heart of the issue was that people felt that they were disenfranchised and it was important to go the extra mile to encourage people to vote, which was why sending out poll cards was so important.

One member questioned whether there had been adequate resources in the elections team at the time. The head of legal and democratic services responded that she did not believe this had been a problem, in fact there had been 2.5 full time staff at previous

elections and at this election there had been 3.0, working for both councils but supported by other staff across the service.

The chair proposed the establishment of a small task group, members to be nominated by the group leaders, to look at the election project and action plan. It was suggested that this group should report back to the committee in February 2012.

The committee considered the recommendations contained within the independent review and it was

RESOLVED: To support the recommendations set out in the independent review, with amendments (shown in italics)

1. that the returning officer puts in place a project plan for the development of the elections service, with regular reviews on progress, incorporating the following:

    i. an exercise to identify and select a suitably experienced printing firm be undertaken;

    ii. a suitable local printer be identified to deal with small scale elections printing and to provide back up in the crucial period immediately prior to an election;

    iii. a communications strategy be developed for all elections using the councils' facilities and a wide range of media and *in particular consider the use of adverts in the printed media.*

    iv. during the nominations process frequent communication take place with agents;

    v. the nomination process be reviewed to ensure a more efficient and effective use of resources and eliminate use of paper records;

    vi. clerks of parish and town councils should be advised that they are not required to handle completed nomination papers;

    vii. analysis take place to identify those activities which must be carried out by the core team and those which are peripheral and could be carried out by other parts of the organisation but shaped by the elections team;

    viii. during the election period the project plan and risk register be regularly updated to form part of short and focussed meetings of the core elections team chaired by the returning officer (or a deputy authorised to act on his behalf) to oversee progress;

    ix. the two separate IT systems used by the elections team be integrated as soon as possible;

    x. data be supplied to the printer in a timely manner so that the majority of postal vote packs are in future provided to Royal Mail on the day after the postal vote deadline;

xi. the Online Business Account be used by both the printer and the elections staff in a timely manner to check the quantities of documents supplied to Royal Mail *against the data file supplied to the printer and that future printing contracts specify exactly what regular reports are to be made to the council and when.*

xii. an exercise be carried out to identify colleagues outside the core elections team who can support the process in a variety of roles such as overseeing postal votes, inspecting polling stations, count supervision having received appropriate training;

xiii. all options for count venue(s) in 2015 be considered and each potential count venue be subject to a detailed written assessment and that a named person holds responsibility for the preparation of the selected venue(s);

xiv. a training course be developed for count supervisors encompassing all aspects of their role;

xv. the 'combination method' is not a recognised means of counting 'split votes' and should not be used;

xvi. the returning officer review the method used for counting 'split votes' *and inform all agents of the method to be used in the future.*

xvii. all staff employed by the returning officer be paid by BACS through the payments system; use of cheques becoming an exception;

xviii. the allocation of polling stations be reviewed in the light of the electorate and turnout figures;

2. the returning officer shall provide a report to the scrutiny committee in six months and in November 2014 setting out progress on implementing these recommendations, and the scrutiny committee should regularly monitor progress on implementation;

3. That the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators, and the two local Members of Parliament be asked to press:
   (a) for a statutory dispatch date for all postal votes (except those granted for late illness, etc.);
   (b) that in future no more than two elections/referenda take place on the same day;

4. That the Election Team's annual self-assessment for the 2011 elections be presented to the committee as soon as it is written;

5. That a small task group of four Scrutiny Committee members be set up to review how the 2011 elections were planned and delivered by the council's staff with the terms of reference to be agreed by the committee. The task group to report back before/at the February 2012 committee meeting, and that the Leader and the Leader of the Opposition be asked to nominate two councillors each;

6. as a general rule, there should be more councillor input into the terms of reference of referral reviews; and

RECOMMENDED to Council

7. To commission a report from the Association of Electoral Administrators or SOLACE Enterprises analysing best practice across a range of other councils to assure this council that it is using the best model for allocating and discharging the role of returning officer in delivering elections.

Sc.32 Annual equality and diversity update

The committee received and noted report 17/11 of the head of corporate strategy.

One member suggested the scrutiny committee should receive the impact assessments on vale budget cuts.

One member commented that he did not believe that the Mantra group had yet been introduced, he advised that he would be pushing this at the community safety partnership.

RESOLVED: To note the content of the report.

Sc.33 Review of progress against the energy efficiency (carbon management) plan 2010/11

The committee received and considered report 19/11 of the head of corporate strategy.

One member suggested that it would be helpful to get an overview of what the emissions were from other facilities in terms of usage so that a comparison could be made.

RESOLVED: To note the content of the report.

Sc.34 Scrutiny work programme

The committee agreed to review the work programme at its next meeting.

Exempt information under section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972

None

The meeting closed at 10pm