

# Minutes

of a meeting of the

## Scrutiny Committee

held at 7pm on Thursday 22 December 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, Sandy Lovatt, Julie Mayhew-Archer and Fiona Roper

Substitute member: Councillor Margaret Turner (in place of Councillor Bill Jones)

Non-participating members: Councillors Matthew Barber, Jenny Hannaby, Dudley Hoddinott and Richard Webber

Officers: Steve Bishop, Steve Culliford, William Jacobs, Anna Robinson, Sally Truman and Bob Watson

Number of members of the public: Nil

### **Sc.59 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence**

Councillor Bill Jones had sent his apologies for absence and had appointed Councillor Margaret Turner as his substitute.

### **Sc.60 Minutes**

#### **RESOLVED:**

- (a) To adopt the minutes of the committee meeting held on 24 August 2011 and agree that the chair signs them, subject to:
- resolution 5 in minute Sc.3 being amended to require the committee to agree the elections task group's terms of reference;
  - before submitting recommendation 7 in minute Sc.3 to the Council, the elections task group be requested to consider the best way of achieving the aim while being mindful of the cost. The task group to make recommendations back to the committee. The recommendation sought the commissioning of a report to ensure that this council was using the best model for allocating and discharging the role of returning officer in delivering elections.

- (b) To adopt the minutes of the committee meeting held on 24 November 2011 and agree that the chair signs them, subject to the replacement of the word 'understating' with 'undertaking' in minute Sc.44.

### **Sc.61 Declarations of interest**

Councillor Sandy Lovatt declared a personal interest in the corporate plan review item as he was a member of Abingdon Town Council.

### **Sc.62 Urgent business and chair's announcements**

None

### **Sc.63 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee**

Councillor Dudley Hoddinott had requested to ask questions on the customer service performance and budget items. The chair agreed to take these questions later in the meeting.

### **Sc.64 Corporate plan review**

The committee considered a summary of its views expressed at its last meeting on the corporate plan review. The officers asked the committee to endorse this document as its response to Cabinet. The committee agreed to add a reference to the financial services contract in its response. The chair asked the committee to advise the officer of any further comments by 3 January 2012.

The committee noted that the consultation draft document produced by Cabinet was in need of more detail and SMART objectives. The consultation draft had been intended to stimulate debate. With the consultation responses, Cabinet would revise the draft corporate plan and the committee could review this further.

**RESOLVED:** To submit the summary of the committee's views on the corporate plan review to Cabinet, with the addition of a reference to the financial services contract and taking into account any further suggestions by committee members outside of this meeting but before the consultation deadline on 3 January 2012.

### **Sc.65 Customer service**

The committee considered report 54/11 of the head of corporate strategy, which set out details of customer service performance in 2010/11. The report looked at performance against the corporate customer contact standards and identified areas for improvement.

The chair invited Councillor Dudley Hoddinott to ask his question. Councillor Hoddinott asked how valid were the results, how did they compare to other councils, was there an action plan to improve customer service, and would there be a service manager with responsibility to make improvements. In response, the officer reported that the survey results were valid and had been tested. The committee noted that the council's citizens' panel had been asked for its views on customer service performance. This was the first report of its kind and it was difficult to compare outcomes against previous years or with

other authorities. The action plan was included in the report. Its actions would be monitored by service managers.

The committee questioned the level of response from the citizen's panel and encouraged a greater return next year.

Councillors noted that progress had already been made in implementing the actions; in the customer service centre, performance monitoring and staff training had been introduced and customer service training was to be rolled out across the council. Staff had been given training on the best use of email and the staff who's who was now being regularly updated. There was also some monitoring of telephone calls. Despite this progress, the committee noted that the council was working towards accreditation and would need around six months to implement all actions. It was noted that officers were working to introduce common standards with South Oxfordshire District Council.

The committee welcomed the report but concluded that another year's survey was needed to determine trends in customer service performance. The next survey results might be available in autumn 2012. Cabinet members would also monitor this.

**RESOLVED:** To note performance on customer service in 2010/11, including performance against corporate customer contact standards, and the areas for improvement identified for further work.

## **Sc.66 Budget 2012/13**

The committee considered report 55/11 of the head of finance, which set out the politically neutral budget position for 2012/13. This showed the draft medium term financial plan and its supporting papers, the draft growth bids, and the draft capital programme. The strategic director briefed the committee on the budget position and the options open to the council to balance the budget both in the short and medium term.

The chair invited Councillor Dudley Hoddinott to ask his question. Councillor Hoddinott asked (1) where in the budget papers were the costs of introducing free car parking, and (2) how would the council modify the draft budget and medium term financial plan to find £4.98 million to satisfy the legal requirement to produce a balanced budget.

In response, the strategic director reported that car parking was one of many council services, the costs of which were in the relevant service costs section of the medium term financial plan (under 'Economy, Leisure & Property' in the case of car parking). The council had options to balance the medium term financial plan over its five-year period. The council has always had options such as reducing service costs, increasing income, or raising Council Tax. The council also had the option of using the new homes bonus from the government to help balance the revenue budget. These were political choices. Cabinet would recommend its solution to the Council in February 2012. Councillors noted that the committee could scrutinise Cabinet's proposals in February.

The government had effectively capped Council Tax increases at 3.5 per cent for 2012/13. If the council chose not to increase its Council Tax for 2012/13, it would qualify for additional government funds.

The committee noted that the officers had made a best estimate and had taken a cautious view of the budget position, based on the latest information available. The officers were

reasonably confident this position would not significantly change before Council approved the budget in February but the committee noted there were many variables that could affect the council's budget, such as government grant and the cost of housing benefit. The officers regularly monitored the current year's budget; they would feed any changes in to the draft budget for 2012/13.

Councillors asked for details of last year's investment income figures. The officers agreed to provide these outside of the meeting. Officers reported on their estimated rate of return on investments in the draft budget; some committee members questioned these estimates and suggested that the officers reviewed these.

In answer to a question, the leader of the council and Cabinet member for finance reported that with regard to the proposed reduction in partnership grants, the affected organisations had been contacted and the officers were in discussions with them. However, these were draft proposals at this stage; the final detail would be included in the Cabinet's budget proposals in February.

**RESOLVED:** To note the report.

### **Sc.67 Scrutiny work programme**

The committee reviewed its work programme and received a paper from the strategic director. This analysed the suggestions made by councillors for possible scrutiny topics. The strategic director had made recommendations on which topics should be considered by the committee and how the other suggestions could be dealt with, e.g. by an all-councillor briefing. The chair asked committee members to feedback to him or the vice-chairman outside of the meeting but before 10 January, so that a revised work programme could be brought forward to the next committee meeting.

The committee noted that at its next meeting, it would consider a revised format for reporting on the performance of major contracts, and on billing for garden waste collection.

### **Sc.68 Date of next meetings**

The committee reviewed the date of its meeting in February and agreed to move it forward to Thursday 16 February 2012 to allow the committee to feed in any comments to Council on the Cabinet's budget proposals.

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

None

The meeting closed at 9.35 pm