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MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE

HELD AT THE GUILDHALL,
ABINGDON ON FRIDAY, 3RD
FEBRUARY, 2006

Open to the Public, including the Press

PRESENT:

MEMBERS: Councillor Jerry Patterson (Chair), Tony de Vere (Vice-Chair), Mary de Vere, Richard Farrell, Joyce Hutchinson, Roz Smith and Tessa Ward

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Katie Barrett, Helen Bishop, Steve Bishop, Steve Culliford, Nikki Malin, David Quayle, Tim Sadler, Terry Stock, Rodger Hood, Katie Barrett and Helen Bishop

NON-PARTICIPATING MEMBERS: Councillors Julie Mayhew-Archer, Derek Rawson and Melinda Tilley

NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC: 2

Ex.188 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None

Ex.189 MINUTES

The public minutes of the Executive's meeting held on 6 January 2006 were adopted and signed as a correct record.

Ex.190 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Jerry Patterson declared a personal interest in item 13 'Local Development Framework: Draft Statement of Community Involvement' as he was a member of the South East England Regional Assembly and its Regional Planning Committee and Executive (minute Ex.200 refers). Councillor Roz Smith declared a personal interest in item 17 'Reservoir' as she was a member of the County Council's Domestic Water Use Review Group, which amongst other things was looking at the proposed reservoir (minute Ex.204 refers).

Ex.191 URGENT BUSINESS AND CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair asked all those present to ensure their mobile phones were switched off during the meeting.

Ex.192 STATEMENTS AND PETITIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

The Chair announced that three petitions had been received from three town centre churches in Abingdon, namely St Nicholas' Church, St Helen's Church and The Baptist Church. All three petitions were strongly opposed to the planned introduction of pay-and-display parking charges at Abingdon town centre car parks on Sundays and weekday evenings. The petitioners believed the charges would have a negative impact on those attending the churches for services, other voluntary activities, meetings and community and cultural events.

Mrs Susan Scott, on behalf of St Helen's Church in Abingdon, made a statement opposing the introduction of the car parking charges on Sundays and weekday evenings. The congregation from St Helen's Church was from a wide area and many people drove to Abingdon town centre to attend services and other events. The Church was also let to the community and

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had 600 visitors during the year. Parking charges would make this much more difficult. The churches were custodians of the history of the town and it was important they were available to the public.

Ex.193 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None

Ex.194 REFERRAL UNDER THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PROCEDURE RULES OR THE BUDGET AND POLICY FRAMEWORK PROCEDURE RULES

(Time: 2.40pm to 2.50pm)

In accordance with the Budget and Policy Framework Rules, the Executive received feedback from consultation on the budget as follows:

1. from the consultant undertaking focus group consultations
2. businesses which attended budget briefings
3. Abingdon Town Council - a letter regarding the Market Place refurbishment
4. the Strategic Review Committee from its meeting held on 24 January 2006

The Opposition Group Leader, Councillor Melinda Tilley, also addressed the Executive as part of the budget consultation. She welcomed the Chair's invitation but did not expect to tell the Executive how to do its job. Consultation this year had been good and she hoped that feedback would be taken in good faith. Referring to the consultation feedback received by the Executive, she could not comment on something she had not yet looked at. However, different political philosophies meant that her group would not have started from the same point and would not have had to make such tight savings. Councillor Tilley hoped that the Executive would listen to the debate about the car parking charges. She was worried by the current proposal to introduce charges on Sundays and weekday evenings. Maybe other car park charges could be increased instead. She was also worried about the proposal to introduce charges for rat catching as this could cause arguments between residents over who was liable to pay. As this would generate just a small amount of revenue, she considered this should be reconsidered as it was a public health problem.

Councillor Tilley said that the main budget issues would be discussed at the Council meeting but it was disappointing that the capital spend was not clear. To spend as much on capital projects as was indicated in the draft budget proposal would require further hard revenue cuts with the consequential increase in Council Tax to maintain service levels. She was surprised to see the Green Travel Plan on the Executive's agenda, during this time of financial constraint. This would divert staff resources to something that was not explicitly a Council priority. She did not intend to provide more detail on the Opposition Group's proposals as in previous years these has been included in the Executive's proposals the following year. She thanked the Chair for the opportunity to address the Executive and looked forward to the continuation of this approach to openness by receiving the final budget proposal in good time to have an informed debate in the Council chamber.

The Chair reported that the responses to the budget consultation would be taken into account in the preparation of the final budget proposal to the Council.

Ex.195 REFERRALS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES AND OTHER COMMITTEES

Scrutiny Committee – 19 January 2006
Audit Service Area Annual Report 2004/05
(Time: 2.50pm to 2.52pm)

The Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting on 19 January 2006, considered issues arising out of the Audit Service Area Annual Report 2004/05. Councillor Roz Smith, the Executive Member with responsibility for Audit, had been in attendance at the meeting to assist the Committee to better understand the working relationship between a Portfolio Holder and an Assistant Director. In considering this matter, the Scrutiny Committee referred the following to the Executive for consideration:

- The Executive should ensure that in the interests of transparency there was an adequate public debate at its meetings on issues contained in individual Annual Reports and that such discussions were recorded in the minutes of the meeting
- Operational reports, such as Service Plans, should be drafted so that acronyms were spelt out in full in the first instance. Such reports could also include a glossary of terms used. Furthermore, a rolling glossary of terms used across the Council should be held on the Council's website

The Executive considered that 'discussion' would have been a better term to use in the first bullet point above, rather than 'debate'. There was always a balance to be struck between which points to discuss at the Executive and the need to avoid prolonged discussion at the meeting. Members always attempted to discuss the highlights of each Annual Report.

On the second bullet point, the Executive agreed with the need to spell out acronyms, at least on the first occasion. A glossary of terms in the reports and on the website was also supported.

RESOLVED

that operational reports, such as Service Plans, be drafted so that acronyms used are spelt out in full in the first instance and that such reports also include a glossary of terms used. Furthermore, a rolling glossary of terms be used across the Council be held on the Council's website.

Ex.196 ITEMS DEFERRED FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

None

Ex.197 FINANCIAL MONITORING
(Time: 2.52pm to 2.58pm)

The Executive received and considered an agenda report detailing requests for six permanent budget adjustments totalling £47,680 and requests for two virements totalling £24,690. Also set out were details of ten other virements and one supplementary estimate approved under delegated authority.

RESOLVED

that the requests for permanent budget adjustments and virements be approved, as set out in the agenda report.

Ex.198 FORWARD PLAN
(Time: 2.58pm to 2.59pm)

The Executive received the Forward Plan setting out Executive decisions to be taken from February to May 2006. It was noted that since the publication of this Forward Plan, the report on Tugwell Field, Wantage had been delayed and would now be considered on 3 March 2006, as would the report on the Five Year Audit Plan, which was being submitted to the Scrutiny Committee first. The report on the Tree Strategy would now be submitted to the meeting on 7

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April 2006. These changes would be reflected in the next Plan. Finally, Members asked that the 'Decision Maker' description for the last item on the current Plan should be amended in the next Forward Plan to read 'Executive at Annual Council on 17 May 2006'.

RESOLVED

that the Forward Plan for February to May 2006 be received.

Ex.199 FINAL BUDGET PROPOSALS 2006/07

(Time: 2.59pm to 2.59pm)

The Executive was requested to consider how its final budget would be presented to the Council.

RESOLVED

that the Chair of the Executive be invited to delegate authority to himself to prepare and submit to Council the final budget proposals for 2006/07.

Ex.200 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK: DRAFT STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

(Time: 2.59pm to 3.07pm)

(Councillor Jerry Patterson declared a personal interest in this item and in accordance with Standing Order 34 he remained in the meeting during its consideration.)

The Executive received and considered an agenda report regarding the draft Statement of Community Involvement: a core document of the new Local Development Framework under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. At its meeting held on 23 January 2006, the Strategic and Local Planning Advisory Group had received and considered report 213/05 (attached to the Executive's agenda for information) regarding the draft Statement of Community Involvement. The draft Statement had been placed on deposit for public consultation from 25 November 2005 to 6 January 2006. The report summarised the responses received and recommended changes to the draft document. The Advisory Group had considered these in detail and agreed with the recommended changes.

The Advisory Group had considered an additional representation received from a local resident for a reference to be made to the issue of a potential air quality management area (AQMA) declaration as a result of any planning application being explicitly included in paragraph 6.4. However, the Advisory Group felt this was unnecessary. In relation to Thames Water's proposed reservoir, the officers had been asked by the Advisory Group to update the draft Statement as further information became available. The Advisory Group had also noted that the Ramblers' Association would be consulted as part of the Local Development Framework despite not appearing in the list of consultees in Appendix 1.

The Executive was requested to note the deliberations of the Advisory Group and adopt the recommendations for the draft Statement of Community Involvement to be updated and submitted to the Secretary of State. The Executive made amendments to the recommendations in the schedule and consequential amendments to the draft Statement in Appendix A to the report.

RESOLVED

- (a) *that the recommended responses to representations made to the draft Statement of Community Involvement be agreed, as set out in the schedule appended to report 213/05, subject to the following amendments:*
- *The first recommendation on page 25 of the agenda be amended to read 'The Draft Regional Spatial Strategy (the South East Plan) is being prepared by the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) for approval by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister...'*
 - *Just preceding the last recommendation on page 27 of the agenda, the text be amended to read '...in overcoming Drayton Parish Council's concern.'*
 - *The first recommendation on page 28 to be amended to read 'People unable to communicate in writing or in English to the Council...'*
 - *The last recommendation on page 35 to read '...and for integrated transport strategies...'*
- (b) *that the draft Statement of Community Involvement be approved for submission to the Secretary of State as amended in Appendix A and as a result of the changes in resolution (a) above; and*
- (c) *that prior to the publication of the draft Statement of Community Involvement, authority to make minor and editorial and presentational amendments be delegated to the Assistant Director (Planning).*

Ex.201 LOCAL PLAN TO 2011: GROVE DEVELOPMENT FORUM

(Time: 3.07pm to 3.14pm)

The Executive received and considered an agenda report regarding the proposed Grove Development Forum. At its meeting held on 23 January 2006, the Strategic and Local Planning Advisory Group had received and considered report 212/05 regarding the establishment of the Grove Development Forum. The report confirmed that in March 2004, the Council had agreed to investigate setting up a forum to help with the delivery of the proposals for the development of the strategic housing site to the west of Grove. The report proposed that the Forum should consist of local council representatives and other stakeholders and suggested the principles of establishing a process of information dissemination, discussion and consultation with local people.

The Advisory Group considered that the Forum should consist of twelve elected members representing the local community (1 County Councillor representing Wantage/Grove; 3 Grove Parish Councillors; 1 East Challow Parish Councillor; 1 East Hanney Parish Councillor; 1 Wantage Town Councillor; 3 District Council Ward Members for Grove; 1 District Council Ward Member for Wantage Segsbury; 1 District Council Executive Member). However, when wider transport and flooding/drainage issues were discussed, there should be an invitation to other local Parish Councils from the surrounding area to send a representative. As the Forum would be advisory only with no voting ability, the Advisory Group suggested that it was not necessary for there to be proportional representation under the Widdicombe Rules. The Advisory Group agreed with the report's proposals for the role of the Forum and the employment of independent external facilitators to manage it. The lowest estimate for the employment of external facilitators was £2800, plus expenses. The Group agreed that this could be met from the Planning Delivery Grant. The suggested scope and content of the first two meetings was also supported.

The Executive concurred with the Advisory Group's recommendations but added that the Executive Member should be the Planning Portfolio Holder. The Executive considered that in each category of representatives above, substitutes should be able to be appointed.

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However, it was recognised that the three District Ward Members for Grove would be unable to appoint a substitute as all three Ward members would be members of the Forum.

The Advisory Group Members also asked that the Executive sought legal guidance as a matter of urgency for elected Members of the Forum. Members should be advised of what they could do and should not do in their role as a Forum member, bearing in mind that some might be Members of the Development Control Committee that determined the planning application.

Members asked that Grove Parish Council was advised that its comments, in its letter appended to the report, were noted. When planning new developments there was a need to balance the views of existing residents with the needs of future residents.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the Grove Development Forum be established, as set out in paragraphs 5.1 to 5.9 of report 212/05;*
- (b) that authority be delegated to the Chief Executive to appoint an external facilitator to lead the Forum, funded from the Planning Delivery Grant;*
- (c) that the number of elected representatives be limited to 12 (1 County Councillor representing Wantage/Grove; 3 Grove Parish Councillors; 1 East Challow Parish Councillor; 1 East Hanney Parish Councillor; 1 Wantage Town Councillor; 3 District Council Ward Members for Grove; 1 District Council Ward Member for Wantage Segsbury; 1 District Council Executive Member being the Planning Portfolio Holder) for the core group of the Forum, with substitutes being allowed from each representative category, but when wider transport and flooding/drainage issues are to be discussed representatives from other surrounding Parish Councils should be invited to attend and participate as appropriate; and*
- (d) that legal guidance be sought as a matter of urgency for elected Members of the Grove Development Forum. Members should be advised of what they can do and should not do in their role as a Forum member, bearing in mind that some may also be Members of the Development Control Committee that determines the planning application.*

Ex.202 DRAFT PLANNING POLICY STATEMENT 3: HOUSING

(Time: 3.14pm to 3.20pm)

The Executive received and considered an agenda report regarding consultation on the draft Planning Policy Statement 3: Housing. The Strategic and Local Planning Advisory Group had considered report 211/05 (attached to the Executive's agenda for information) regarding the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's consultation paper on this new Planning Policy Statement. This, together with good practice guides to be published alongside it, would replace the old Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) statement 3 and its updates. The closing date for comments was 27 February 2006. The Executive's comments were sought.

The key sections of draft Statement were attached at Appendix 1 to the Advisory Group's report for information. The report highlighted the key areas which the Council might support and where objections and concerns could be raised. In summary, the Advisory Group had serious reservations about the document and considered that the proposed PPS3:

- moved from a plan-led system to one of responding to market demand
- was contrary to the Government's objectives of ensuring sustainable development, community involvement in the planning process, prioritising the development of brownfield sites, the efficient and timely provision of infrastructure, and securing the maximum amount

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- of affordable housing through the planning system
- lacked clarity and would significantly increase the complexity of the processes for preparing development plans with major resource implications

The Advisory Group had considered that:

- low cost market housing could have a role to play in providing affordable housing in areas where house prices were not as high as the Vale (paragraph 4.1 of the report)
- additional resources would be needed to complete the studies and assessments introduced in the draft Statement in a reasonable timescale (paragraph 4.3)
- investing in areas of low demand would help to bring forward brownfield sites for redevelopment (paragraph 4.5)
- car ownership was not the same as car use and adequate car parking needed to be provided in residential areas (paragraph 4.9)
- the Government should be more explicit about the funding to be available for affordable housing (paragraph 4.10)
- paragraph 4.12 of the report should be strengthened before a response was made to the Secretary of State. The demand-led planning ethos set out within the draft Statement must not allow the precious rural environment to be destroyed

The Advisory Group felt strongly that the draft Statement was seriously shortsighted in its principles. This was an all-party view. It suggested that copies of the Executive's resolved position should be sent to the Local Government Association, the Planning Officers' Society, all Oxfordshire Members of Parliament, other Oxfordshire District Councils, and should be posted on the Council's website. There should also be a press release and a 'user-friendly' executive summary for the website and the press.

The Executive concurred with the Advisory Group's concerns at the proposals. As this was an all-party view, the Chair of the Executive agreed to liaise with the Leader of the Opposition on the wording of the press release. Members considered that the Executive's resolved position should also be sent to the County Council, as the existing strategic planning authority, and the South East England Regional Assembly, as the future strategic planning authority.

RESOLVED

- that the comments contained in the bullet points above, Section 4 and Appendices 2 and 3 to report 211/05 all be sent to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as the basis of this Council's comments on draft Planning Policy Statement 3 and its associated draft guidance, subject to paragraph 4.12 being strengthened to urge protection of the precious rural environment; and*
- that copies of the Executive's resolved position be publicised by being sent to the Local Government Association, the Planning Officers' Society, all six Oxfordshire Members of Parliament, other Oxfordshire District Councils, Oxfordshire County Council, the South East England Regional Assembly, and an executive summary be posted on the Council's website and a press release issued.*

Ex.203 GREEN TRAVEL PLAN (Time: 3.20pm to 3.30pm)

The Committee received and considered report 221/05 of the Assistant Director (Planning) regarding the development of a Green Travel Plan for its staff and elected Members. The Plan embraced travelling thoughtfully to, from and whilst at work. In doing so, the Council acknowledged the frequently held view that the success of a Green Travel Plan depended on its ownership by staff and Members alike.

The first Plan, developed in 2004/05, had received limited support. In listening to the comments made on the original Plan, it was now intended to take forward a new Plan containing a range of more moderate measures, which would be easier to implement, and to proceed at a more measured pace whilst continuing to signal the Council's commitment to green travel. The report updated Members on the development of the revised Plan and sought endorsement from the Executive on the measures proposed in phase 1.

It was noted that the 2006/07 budget had allocated £9,000 to the Green Travel Plan, brought forward from the current revenue budget, together with a £30,000 allocation in the capital programme. Members thanked Gordon Willcox, Rodger Hood, Nikki Malin and Councillor Bob Johnston for their work on the Plan. The Portfolio holder, Councillor Tessa Ward, welcomed the submission of further feedback or any new ideas.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the measures for phase 1 of the Vale's Green Travel Plan, as set out in appendix C of report 221/05, be endorsed and the Assistant Director (Planning) be requested to commence the detailed planning of the individual measures within phase 1 of the Plan, subject to budgetary constraints and the availability of staff resources;*
- (b) that authority be delegated to the Assistant Director (Planning), in consultation with the Executive Member responsible for the Vale's new Green Travel Plan, at the appropriate time, to determine the launch date for the Plan, and advise the Executive accordingly;*
- (c) that expressly for the purpose of Regulation 3 of the Town and Country Planning General Regulations 1992, the necessary deemed consent be sought for the provision of new cycle parking adjacent to The Abbey House, Abingdon; and*
- (d) that the Chief Executive be requested to undertake a review of the Council's existing Flexible Working Arrangements Policy and report to the next appropriate meeting of the Personnel, Regulatory and Appeals Committee.*

Ex.204 RESERVOIR

(Time: 3.30pm to 3.45pm)

(Councillor Roz Smith declared a personal interest in this item and in accordance with Standing Order 34 she remained in the meeting during its consideration.)

The Executive received and considered report 222/05 of the Reservoir Advisory Group which met on 17 January 2006 to consider the latest position regarding Thames Water's reservoir proposal.

The Advisory Group had discussed the status of its papers and deliberations with regard to probity and concluded that its business must remain confidential until the Advisory Group had indicated otherwise and so recommended to the Executive.

The Advisory Group noted details of Thames Water's project and the two planned phases of consultation. The first consultation was on the needs case and site selection for an 'Upper Thames Major Resource Development'. The second was on Thames Water's preferred scheme and the construction and design options. Further consultation would also be carried out on the scoping of the Environmental Impact Assessment. If the result of the consultation process was Thames Water's confirmation that the construction of a reservoir was its preferred option, it would progress towards the formal submission of an application,

provisionally programmed for September 2007. A public inquiry would hear objections to the proposal, likely some time in 2008.

Thames Water had confirmed that the proposal for a single large reservoir to the south-west of Abingdon was its "provisional preferred option". It was updating its earlier work on the need for a major new water resource in the Upper Thames area, the analysis of options, and the analysis of alternative sites. On-site ecological and geological surveys were also taking place. Thames Water's current proposal was to submit an application for a Compulsory Works Order under Section 167 of the Water Industry Act 1991. This would bring together all of the consents and authorisations required for the construction of the reservoir, including deemed planning permission. If given the go-ahead, construction of the reservoir could start around 2010-2011 and was likely to take around 10 years to complete. The alternative route was for a planning application to be submitted. Any such application was likely to be called in by the Secretary of State for determination.

Members also discussed the possibility of a periodic briefing note to update Members on the Reservoir. It was suggested that this should coincide with reports from the Advisory Group to the Executive.

Under the Compulsory Works Order procedure, this Council would be a statutory consultee but the County Council would not. The Advisory Group considered that this Council should be the lead local authority and should act as if it was the determining authority in any application for a reservoir proposal.

The Executive agreed with the Advisory Group's views. However, it was considered that the Advisory Group should consider organising a site visit to another large scale reservoir and possibly meet with representatives from the local authority to discuss the issues they had to tackle.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the Advisory Group's business remains confidential until the Advisory Group has indicated otherwise and recommends so to the Executive;*
- (b) that this Council should act as if it were the determining authority in any application for a reservoir proposal; and*
- (c) that the Advisory Group be recommended to consider organising a site visit to another large scale reservoir and possibly meet with representatives from the relevant local authority to discuss the issues they had had to address.*

Ex.205 EMPTY HOMES (Time: 3.45pm to 3.48pm)

The Executive received and considered report 223/05 of the Strategic Director setting out a draft empty homes strategy. The approved Housing Strategy for 2004/05 - 2007/08 contained an action to develop a specific strategy to reduce the number of empty homes in the private sector across the District. The report introduced this strategy and considered the implications of its implementation.

The draft strategy was based upon working with owners of empty homes in the District to enable these homes to be brought back into use. The reduction in the number of empty homes was a specific Best Value Performance Indicator (no 64); the Council had set a target of 4 for 2005/06. Over 440 visits had been made, details and photographs recorded, and over

85 letters sent to owners. This had resulted in 14 properties coming back into occupation over the past three years.

The Housing Act 2004 was to introduce an additional power in 2006, namely an Empty Dwelling Management Order, to bridge the gap between voluntary measures and existing enforcement procedures, such as compulsory purchase. This discretionary legislation would operate alongside measures such as voluntary leasing schemes run by local authorities and Registered Social Landlords. It could provide an effective back up where owners turned down offers of assistance and did not have plans of their own to bring the property back into use. A further report would be made to the Executive when more detail on their operation was available from Central Government.

The Executive noted that there was not a serious problem concerning empty properties in the District when compared to many other Districts; a view endorsed by the 2005 House Condition Survey. However, the low base line would make it difficult to improve on the Performance Indicator. A number of properties had been identified that were empty long term and an options appraisal of the merits of securing their return to use was needed. The work associated with reducing Empty Homes was also labour intensive with numerous, continual checks at each stage in the procedure to avoid abortive visits being made. As empty property numbers reduced, this would yield less results and the relative priority of the work would need to be considered.

The Executive welcomed the strategy but considered that it should be reviewed following the implementation of the relevant parts of the Housing Act 2004. Members asked that the table showing housing need by parish was amended to clearly show each parish name.

R E C O M M E N D E D

that the Empty Homes Strategy, as attached as appendix 1 to report 223/05, be approved, subject to the table showing housing need by parish being enlarged and/or amended to clearly show each parish name.

Ex.206 CUSTOMER CONTACT STRATEGY (Time: 3.48pm to 3.54pm)

The Executive received and considered report 224/05 of the Strategic Director setting out a draft Customer Contact Strategy. The rationale behind the strategy was to give clear direction and set clear expectations regarding the development of access to services, local service points, contact centres and how service re-engineering, workflow and use of the contact centre would improve customer satisfaction, services and efficiency.

The aims of the strategy were:

- To develop cost effective channels to encourage as many customers as possible to self-serve or use our call centre services
- To co-ordinate customer service to ensure a quality repeatable service which reflected the adopted service standards
- Take opportunities to re-design processes and workflow to create efficiencies
- To continue to develop access channels to reflect changing customers preferences

The following principles underpinned the strategy:

- A small number of reliable access points of contact
- Consistent delivery of service standards
- Automation of transactions
- Removal of duplication and overlap
- From an efficiency point of view, self serve was the Council's preferred channel

The cost savings achievable from the strategy were estimated at £40-50K per annum. However, as the actual cost savings after implementation were yet to be identified, the working assumption in the budget was that in the medium term, after implementation costs, the strategy would be cost neutral. The cost of implementing the contact centre had been estimated at £240K. This sum had been included in the Executive's Initial Budget Proposition spread over three years.

The officer had concluded that a customer contact strategy was appropriate for this Council and requested that the Executive confirmed this and recommended it to Council in order that work could proceed on the detailed implementation plan.

The Executive considered that a customer contact strategy, which continued to implement the Local Services Point Stage 2 customer contact centre under a "broad and shallow" strategy approach, was warranted by the non-cashable benefits achievable and by the modest cash savings that were likely to accrue.

R E C O M M E N D E D

that the Customer Contact Strategy, as set out in Appendix A to these minutes, be adopted.

Ex.207 FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT (Time: 3.54pm to 4.08pm)

The Executive received and considered report 225/05 of the Monitoring Officer and Solicitor regarding a draft charging policy for information requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. This legislation came into force on 1st January 2005, giving the public the right to request information from the Council. The authority would then have an obligation to respond promptly and within 20 working days by either disclosing the requested information or refusing to disclose based on one of the statutory exceptions.

The charging provisions were different between the more general 2000 Act and the more specific 2004 Regulations. Under the Environmental Information Regulations 2004, the Council had the power to charge the applicant for making the information available subject to two exceptions:

- (a) there was no charge to look at public registers or lists containing environmental information held by the Authority and
- (b) there was no charge to examine the information at the Council offices

If the authority invoked a charging system, it would be obliged to publish a schedule of charges and information on the circumstances in which a charge might be made or waived.

Under the Freedom of Information Act and the related Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limits and Fees) Regulations 2004, the Council had the ability to refuse a request if the estimated cost of compliance exceeded the appropriate statutory limit, which was set at £450. The Regulations indicated how the estimate should be calculated. There should be a presumption in favour of refusing a request where the statutory threshold was exceeded but there was discretion for officers to grant an application in exceptional circumstances where the estimate was only marginally over the £450 threshold. The Council had the power to charge a fee for a Freedom of Information request, but it must not exceed the maximum determined by the Council in accordance with the requirements of the Regulations. The Council could aggregate the costs it reasonably expected to incur in informing the applicant whether it held the information and the cost of communicating the information to that person. These costs could include the cost of reproducing any document,

postage or similar costs but the Council could not take into account the costs which were attributable to staff time expected to be spent on dealing with the request. Thus, the scope for recovery of the Council's full costs was limited. The draft policy took account of the statutory provisions.

Noting that other Councils charged for such information requests, Members welcomed the draft policy and considered that charging should be introduced. The Executive agreed to recommend to the Council the adoption of the policy for implementation as soon as possible and in any event by the beginning of the next financial year.

The Executive noted that this would be the last Executive meeting attended by the Monitoring Officer and Solicitor, David Quayle. Members thanked him for his work for the Executive.

R E C O M M E N D E D (with Councillor Tessa Ward abstaining)

that the draft Charging Policy for Freedom of Information Act Environmental Information Regulations, as set out in Appendix B to these minutes, be adopted.

Ex.208 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 to the Act when the following items are considered:

Minutes

(Category 7 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (other than the authority).

(Category 9 - Any terms proposed or to be proposed by or to the authority in the course of negotiations for a contract for the acquisition or disposal of property or the supply of goods or services).

Property Matters

(Category 9).

SUMMARY OF THE EXEMPT ITEMS CONSIDERED AT THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE HELD ON FRIDAY 3 FEBRUARY 2006 AT 2.30PM

Minutes

The Exempt minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 6 January 2006 were adopted and signed as a correct record.

Property Matters

The Executive considered an update on property negotiations and approved arrangements, subject to the agreement by a third party.



APPENDIX A

CUSTOMER CONTACT STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

Access to Services is a theme in the **Vale Community Strategy**. The Council has previously adopted an **Access to Services Strategy** which drove improvements in three areas of access to the Council's and Partners services:

- Physical access
- Opportunity and
- Electronic

Progress under that strategy has been good. The Council has:

- Developed its Local Services Points in Abingdon and Wantage
- Improved physical access to the buildings from which it delivers services
- Reached Level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government improving equality of access to services
- Implemented Customer Relationship Systems and workflow to streamline customer contacts and improve quality of service
- Introduced a call centre and laid the foundations for online self service
- Improved the Council's web presence
- Introduced, with the other Oxfordshire authorities, the Community Information database www.oxfordshiregateway.co.uk

This strategy builds on the Access to Services Strategy and takes forward our Corporate aim of improving and modernising access to our services by providing a clear vision of how the Council wants to see access to services further developed and how new technologies and ways of working will be engaged.

Background Information

The Vale Council has around 700,000 contacts with customers a year. The channels for these contacts are set out in Table 1 below.

Current Contact Numbers by Enquiry Channel

	2003/04	2004/05
Face-to-Face		
Abingdon LSP	25964	27427
Wantage LSP	16276	16028
Cashiering – front and back office		
Abingdon	75000	71555
Wantage	17041	14980
Faringdon	6000	6190
Telephone		
Incoming Calls	294000	274000
Post In		
	261323	257967

Self-Serve	7000	7000
Total	708604	701147

The Council fully expects the number of contacts to grow reflecting both increasing demand and growth in the breadth of services but, most significantly, growth in 'new business' as contacting the Council is made easier and more convenient and more people utilize the services on offer.

The Vale is an affluent area with a well educated population.

Only 1.6% of the Vale population is unemployed, as compared with the rate of 3.4% for England and Wales. The population is generally better educated than average across the UK with 28.2% of people of working age educated to degree level or higher (England and Wales average 19.8%). (Source: Census 2001)

This profile is reflected in a high take up of new technology and broadband internet penetration in the area

PC ownership in Western Europe is around 70%¹. 99% of all premises in the UK are technically able to be connected to broadband internet² and take-up of broadband services is expected to settle at around 60% by 2008.³ The last survey of online take-up in the Vale was undertaken in 2002, when 59% of citizens had access to the internet from home. It is likely that this figure has risen since then. In addition, all libraries in Oxfordshire provide free access to the internet, as do VWHDC's two Local Service Points.

This places the Council in an ideal position to exploit new technologies to improve customer contact and gain efficiencies. The Council is aware that not everyone is able to make use of these technologies over the internet. However, the same underlying technologies can be applied to make face to face and telephone contact effective, efficient and of the desired quality.

Having said that, since the Council has introduced its Choice Based Lettings scheme, which is internet based, (see Valehomechoice.org.uk) and has a client group which includes many who are relative to the bulk of the population, disadvantaged. 72% of 'bids' reviewed under the scheme have been received on the internet.

AIMS

The aims of this Strategy are that:

- Cost effective channels will be developed and marketed to encourage as many customers as possible to self-serve or use our call centre services

¹ ZDnet news, 25 November 2005

² BT.com

³ ZDnet news, 25 November 2005

- Customer service will be, as far as practicable, coordinated and process managed to ensure a quality repeatable service which reflects the adopted service standards
- Opportunities will be taken through process re-design and workflow to create cashable and non-cashable efficiencies.
- The Council will continue to develop access channels which reflect the changing preferences of our customers

The Principles

These aims lead us to the following principles which underpin the Strategy:

- A small number of reliable access points of contact
- Consistent delivery of service standards
- Automation of transactions
- Removal of duplication and overlap
- From an efficiency point of view self serve is the Council's preferred channel

Current Position and Way Forward

The diagrams in Appendix 1 set out our thinking about our current position and the way forward. Diagram 1 represents where we were. Customers funnelled through a small number of access channels making contact directly into the service departments with little opportunity for control over consistency or opportunities from economies of efficiencies of scale.

Diagram 3 shows what most local authorities are aiming for. Broad access channels to a single point (or small number of points operating identically), contact information captured on a Customer Relationship Management system, backed up by a content management system which co-ordinates the same information as available from the front of house and call centre and "self serve" facilities.

Diagram 2 shows what it is feasible for the Vale, and the vast majority of local authorities to achieve for the foreseeable future. The front end is provided but there is little or no integration of the CRM and CMS into the back office systems. We refer to this as the "Broad and Shallow" approach. The reasons for this approach are the technological challenges and high capital costs of deep integration. We intend to follow the broad and shallow approach combined with a watching brief on developments, particularly through the national "connectors club" projects, looking for cost effective opportunities for deeper integration.

With this approach, without compromising service quality and customer satisfaction, the benefits are likely to be focused in the "non-cashable" elements set out on the grid attached – Appendix 2. In the light of this the Council will be cautious about firming up potential savings that would be achieved until identifiable savings steps have been identified.

LINKS TO OTHER INITIATIVES

This strategy should be read in conjunction with other initiatives across the organisation.

- Customer Focus – with initiatives around
 - Building understanding of modern approaches to customer care
 - The development of service standards
 - Consultation and customer feedback
- Re-organisation of central administration functions
- Re-organisation of processing functions such as land charges and licencing
- Financial transactions
 - The Council has introduced debit and credit card payments for those services transferred to the contact centre. This development presents opportunities to streamline payments to the Council and make efficiency savings. The Council's preferred methods of payment are:
 - regular payments by individuals – direct debits
 - one-off payments – debit or credit cards
 - regular payments on business or business basis – BACS payments

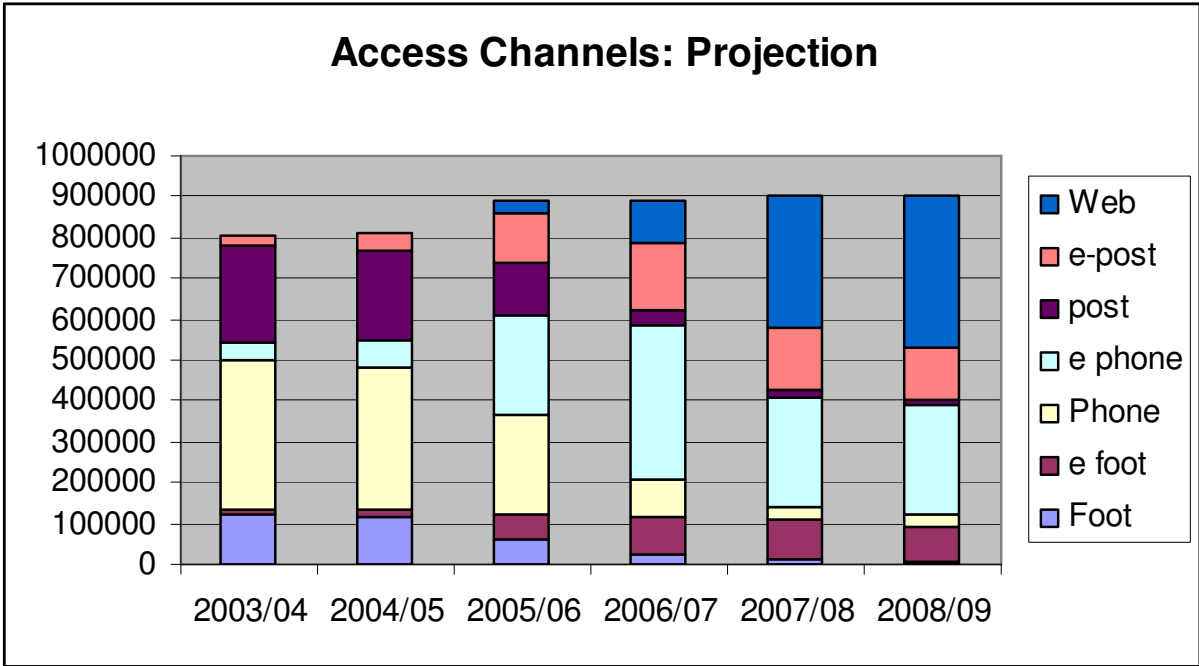
In implementing this strategy and the development of services these preferences will be taken into account. Over time this will significantly reduce the amount of cheques and cash handled by the Council. This will enable rationalisation of our cash and post handling functions.

Taken together there is expected to be significant opportunities for efficiencies and costs savings.

MILESTONES FOR STRATEGY

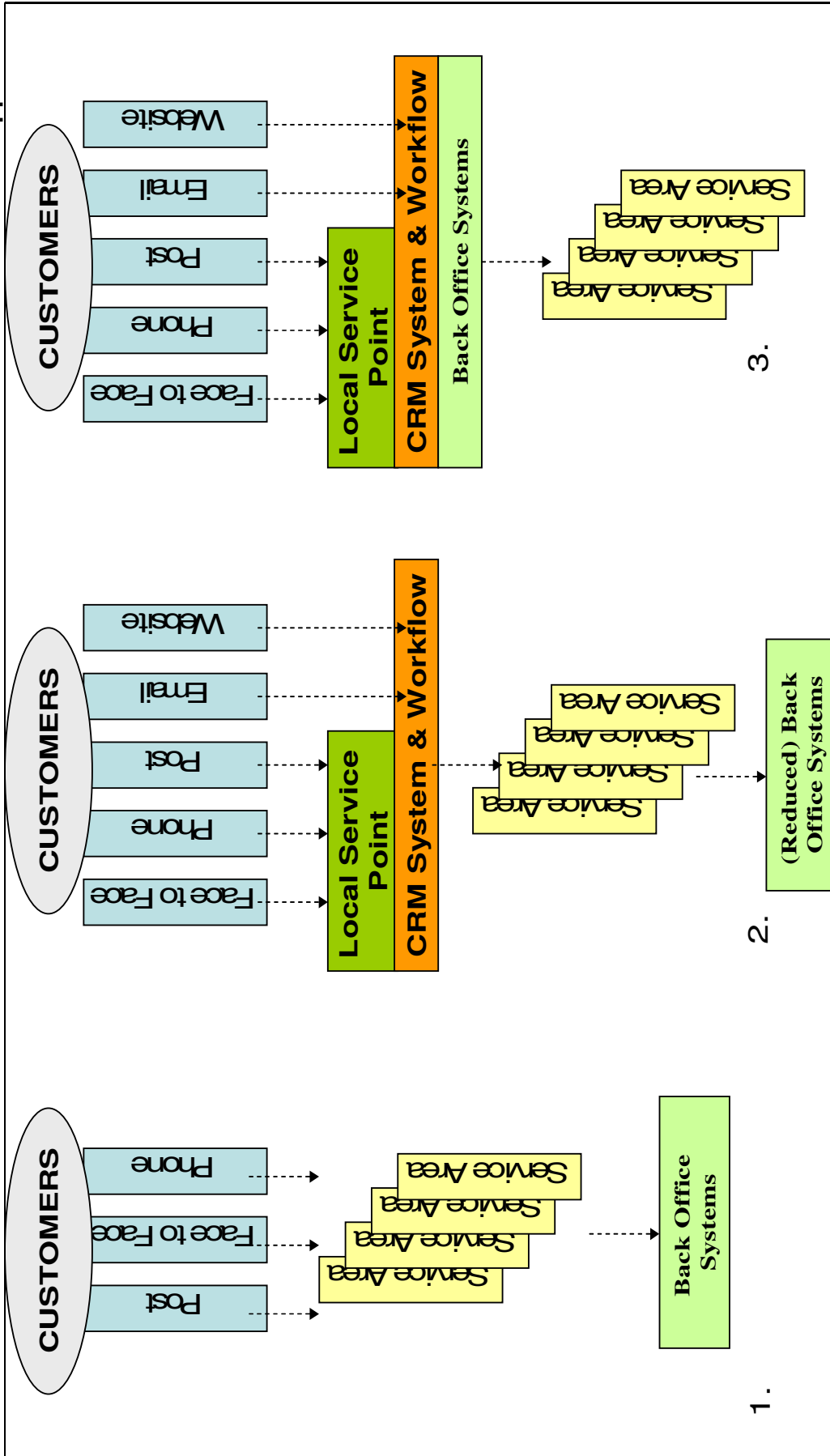
- Roll out LSP2 to remaining high call volume areas of the Council
- Implement service standard methods for those transactions which are essentially paying the Council.
- Review deep integration of services/transactions on an individual business case basis.
- Promote and incentivise the cheapest methods of transaction for the Council.
- Seek opportunities i.e. to build economies of scale through working in collaboration.

The graph below shows projected trends in usage of various access channels over the next 3 years, based on the current model of Council service provision.:

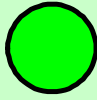





A separate business case investigating the costs, benefits and risks of the Strategy has been produced.

That business case will be used as the starting point for the project management of this Strategy.



What are the benefits?

		CRM Benefits Matrix	
Financial	Yes	<p>Cost Reduction & Efficiency Savings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in number of queries resolved first time • Reduction in repeat calls • More cost-effective use of channels • Queries quickly directed to subject matter experts (improved use of resources) • Single team of customer facing council staff (greater efficiency across entire council) 	<p>Service Improvement/ Added Value</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services delivered more effectively across the organisation • Development of re-usable skills • Enterprise-wide processing of information • More efficient production and effective use of MI • Use of MI for predictive management of services • Earlier cash collection 
	No	<p>Service Improvement/ Added Value</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved customer satisfaction • Improved customer response • Use of new, more effective channels • Improved BVPI 	<p>Strategic & Intangible Benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved public perception • Increased awareness of quality of local services • Improved information about citizens and authority customers • Catalyst for organisational change 
		Yes	No
		Quantifiable	

VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCIL**FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION CHARGING POLICY****1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Vale of White Horse District Council (“the Council”) has a Vision to build and safeguard a fair, open and compassionate community and has a number of stated aims designed to turn this Vision into action. The Council aims to provide high quality services to the people of the Vale and is committed to strengthening local democracy and freedom of information.
- 1.2 The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 set out a national framework to regulate public access to information held by the Council. The legislation allows Public Authorities; like the Council to charge applicants who request information and the Council has decided that a Charging Policy should be introduced to cover applications for information in the future.
- 1.3 This Policy was considered by the Executive on 3rd February before being approved by the Council on 22nd February 2006. The Policy comes into effect on 1st April 2006.

2.0 Policy Statement

- 2.1 **The Council aims to strengthen local democracy and public involvement to access to information and therefore welcomed the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 when they came into force on 1st January 2005. The Council acknowledges there is a duty to applicants who exercise their “right to know” to respond to their requests in accordance with the legislation. This Policy therefore applies to all applications made under the 2000 Act or the 2004 Regulations.**
- 2.2 **As and when the Information Commissioner produces Codes of Practice or other Guidance relating to charging applicants for requesting information, the Council will normally follow the Commissioner’s Codes or Guidance unless there are exceptional circumstances justifying a departure from the recommended approach. Any Code or Guidance issued by the Commissioner will be taken into account when dealing with specific charging issues.**
- 2.3 **The Council recognise that requests for information can be diverse and varied and therefore need to be dealt with by the relevant Service Areas subject to obtaining advice from the Council’s Monitoring Officer on any legal issues raised by the application. The Strategic Directors will have overall responsibility for compliance in their relevant Service Areas, but it will be the responsibility of the Deputy/Assistant Directors to deal with day-to-day requests for information which are relevant to the services they deliver. The adoption of this Policy should be regarded as giving both the Strategic Directors and the Deputy/Assistant Directors the delegated power to deal with such applications including the power to charge or waive charges in accordance with the legislation and the provisions of this Policy.**

- 2.4 Assistant/Deputy Directors shall normally refuse a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 if the estimated cost of dealing with that case exceeds the statutory maximum set out in Regulations made by the Secretary of State. However, this presumption of refusal is not irrebuttable and may be overridden if the Deputy/Assistant Director is of the opinion that the circumstances warrant a departure from the normal approach.**
- 2.6 Subject to the statutory restrictions set out in legislation, the Council will normally charge for requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and will publish the relevant charges as soon as possible after the Council's annual budget meeting in February each year. The Strategic Director who is for the time being designated as the Chief Finance Officer of the Council shall determine the charges both for the Freedom of Information and Environmental Information applications, following consultation with the Council's Monitoring Officer.**
- 2.8 This Policy shall come into effect on 1st April 2006 and shall be reviewed at least once every 4 years and also when circumstances warrant it.**
