

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held on Monday, 23 November 2020 at 7.00 pm
at the virtual meeting



Watch the recording here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msXia05UfNU>

Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Nathan Boyd (Chair), Jerry Avery, Ron Batstone, Cheryl Briggs, Hayleigh Gascoigne, David Grant, Robert Maddison and Max Thompson

Officers: Candida Mckelvey, John Backley, Jayne Bolton and Mark Hewer, Candida Mckelvey and Adrianna Partridge.

Also present: Cabinet members: Councillors Andrew Crawford, Neil Fawcett and Judy Roberts

Number of members of the public: two

Sc.78 Apologies for absence

None received.

Sc.79 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting on 14 October 2020 were agreed as a correct record, and will be signed by the chair as such.

Sc.80 Declarations of interest

None received.

Sc.81 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The chair had no urgent business or announcements.

Sc.82 Public participation

Hester Hand, from Friends of Abingdon Civic Society, addressed the committee.

"Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee.

I would like to raise concerns over the Cabinet Work programme and the scheduled decision on 4 December about Old Abbey House.

At the Council meeting on 7 October, the Chairman stressed the need for transparency over Old Abbey House. There is great public interest in this matter, and significant concern about the way it is being dealt with.

Sadly, there is a considerable gap between what the public has been told was going to happen, and what actually seems to be planned.

We were assured that the “market testing” exercise was simply that; no decision about the future of the building had been taken; once the market-testing exercise had been completed, the Council would be willing to discuss community groups’ plans with us; the Cabinet would consider all the options; and a decision about the future of the building would be taken in a meeting open to the public.

Then, In October, bids were invited. These had to be submitted by 9 November, and the stated aim is to complete the sale by 15 January.

The Cabinet work programme says that a decision on Old Abbey House will be taken on 4 December, it is a ‘key’ decision, and likely to be confidential under Category 3. However, in breach of requirements, the work programme does not say what the decision being taken is about, nor (in any detail) the reasons for confidentiality. There is little transparency here.

We are very concerned that two distinct decisions are being rolled-up together and pushed through in great haste. The Cabinet first needs to take a decision in principle on the future of the building, following consultation with interested parties, and taking into account all the options. There is no reason whatsoever for this decision to be taken in confidential session. If, and only if, the decision in principle is to sell the freehold, then a second decision, about which bid (if any) to accept, will be needed.

The approach adopted in the Cabinet Work Programme will mean that the Council’s reasoning and motivations for this very important decision are hidden from public view. That is not transparency.

We hope that the Scrutiny Committee will be consulted in advance about any proposed decisions on Old Abbey House. In any event, we trust that you will be ready to hold the Cabinet to account for using your constitutional powers. We would incidentally dispute any suggestion that the decision is urgent (and therefore in any way exempt), as the timetable is self-created.

We feel that the public has been seriously misled about how the future of Old Abbey House was to be considered. We respectfully request the Scrutiny Committee to use its powers fully, to ensure that any decision taken is in line with the Leader’s assurances and the need for transparency.”

Chair thanked Hester for her presentation. As scrutiny committee had not seen any reports, the committee could not ask questions at this stage. The committee looks forward to seeing reports for Cabinet and Council in due course.

Sc.83 Work schedule and dates for all South and Vale scrutiny meetings

A slightly updated version had been sent to the committee.

The committee may postpone or move the meeting in January as the two items listed for January, office accommodation and A34 rerouting, are not ready to come forward.

Sc.84 Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

Cabinet member for Development and Infrastructure, Councillor Judy Roberts, introduced the report on Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

Councillor Roberts ran through the main changes as follows:

CIL charging started in Vale in November 2017 and the spending strategy was approved in April 2019 as a two-year pilot. As of 30 October 2020, we have £3.5 million collected through CIL. Charging rates are being reviewed soon. This report is regarding how we spend it. There have been issues spending it, and we want to make sure it is spent to support the new developments in the Vale of White Horse District.

Alterations have been proposed to help us bring forward new projects, which still need to meet CIL criteria, which is quite strict with clear restrictions.

Current criteria for CIL is that it can be spent on new infrastructure and increased infrastructure due to a new development. Discretion can be used in the NPPF for maintenance of existing infrastructure, if the infrastructure is essential for the community where new development is taking place.

Allocations remain similar to the original strategy, but rather than breaking down the Vale of White Horse District Council (VOWH) section, we are putting all parts together into a pot, to give greater flexibility to amass funds to be able to proceed with projects. For example, the arts 2.5% allocation takes a long time for the pot to amass a good amount of money for a project. Still keeping sections (arts, leisure etc) at the forefront of our minds, especially green infrastructure, linked to corporate plan.

There is a widening of the geographic area - Didcot Garden Town (DGT) spans both South and Vale districts. Regulation 123 list has been removed, which allows pooling of CIL and Section 106 funds towards the same projects. Parish percentages remain as they are (25% for those with neighbourhood plans and 15% to those without).

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) asked us to include libraries and recycling centres – we are widening the scope to include this.

Under special circumstances, funding for SEND schools outside of the district could be considered. A new arrangement with OCC is proposed for them to submit projects for funding in time for budget setting which means changing the reporting period to end on 30 September so that we can consider projects as part of the budget setting process.

The aim is to get money spent for the benefit of the public.

Mark Hewer, Infrastructure and Development Team Leader, and Jayne Bolton, Infrastructure and Development Manager, were also present to answer questions.

Chair welcomed questions from the committee and asked to avoid specific ward examples – these can be handled outside of the meeting.

The discussions and comments for the Cabinet member to consider are summed up below

- Discretion on improvements maintenance and replacements – how much discretion do we have. e.g. cycle path improves access? It was replied that increased access needed for new residents would potentially meet criteria. Maintenance will be considered if it is end-of-life maintenance – an extensive maintenance that will keep a facility operational for the benefit of the public.
- Point 14 – crossing district boundaries – is South doing the same? Officers added that DGT residents use both areas and would benefit from both. Yes, South is proposing the same and is subject to approval at Cabinet.
- Committee members supported the changes to enable funds to be spent.
- A suggestion was made to include, in yearly CIL reporting, where money is spent and where are the developments are. Where has the money come from and does it match up? What safeguards are in place to protect areas that get less spend? It was replied that an annual statutory report is required by Government to show how funds are spent. An extra report would need to be internal and would require officer time. A forward plan of projects is

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planned. S106 has to be spent in the area it is generated. CIL is more flexible but we should consider locality scoring to ensure fairness.

- OCC aligned timing conversations were had – have conversations been had with OCCG also? Cabinet member referred to Appendix B. There is only one OCCG officer dealing with this matter. The proposed changes are intended to help the district to support health projects. Officer replied that OCCG had no objection to proposals. OCCG cannot own assets, and there are considerations to being unable to fund private companies, such as surgeries. Lots of effort has gone into talking to OCCG to try and spend the funding.
- Regulation 123 removal means CIL and S106 can be used to fund the same projects.
- Will maintenance spending mean that new projects will be delayed? It was replied that large new developments would have new infrastructure first. The new flexibility means that each development can be assessed individually. For example, a small development, in conjunction with S106, may just require extension to a current facility.
- Funding of heating schemes, ground source heat pumps for new developments – it was confirmed that this work tends to be put in place when the development is built. It can be difficult to align such projects. Would be a S106 agreement for onsite infrastructure.
- When was the infrastructure development plan (IDP) last updated? – it was confirmed it was 2016 with Local Plan part one. OxIS criteria has changed. Consultation has occurred, and the IDP won't be updated until the criteria is in place. The new criteria will allow for green and blue infrastructure.
- Geographical spend is wanted in reporting – Cabinet member to note for the Cabinet paper.

Officers and Cabinet member were thanked.

Sc.85 Car parking fees and charges

The car park fees and charges consultation report was introduced by Cabinet member for Finance and corporate assets, Councillor Andrew Crawford.

Also present was Liz Hayden, Head of Housing and Environment and John Backley, Technical Services Manager.

The recommendation is for Scrutiny to comment on the recommendations to Cabinet.

On page 32 are the nine separate decisions made by Cabinet. Scrutiny are asked to comment. Cabinet chose not to reduce the free parking from two hours to one hour. The motivation was the uncertainty for businesses during the pandemic.

The discussion points were as follows:

- It was noted the report is for 2020-21. Proposed implementation in March 2021. It was confirmed that some changes will take effect on 1 December 2020 and these have been publicised, such as putting up the permits fees and the parking fees by 40p.
- It was noted that the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee (CEAC) comments collected February 2020 were considered to be out of date and were for 2020.
- Officers confirmed the car parking fees are reviewed yearly as part of budget setting process.
- A view was expressed that the reduction to one-hour free parking could be considered at committee again in future.
- It was confirmed by officers that in part Covid-19 has delayed progress and that yearly reviewing is appropriate. The review for car park fees and charges always occurs yearly as part of budget setting.
- Customer Usage survey data in the cabinet report was viewed as out of date, will there be a new survey? It was confirmed that work will continue with Saba (carpark contractor) to find out what surveys will be completed annually. The potential impact of the introduction of Civil Parking Enforcement needs to be considered as well. Capacity of carparks and usage to be considered.

Chair thanked the Cabinet member and officers.

Sc.86 Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE)

Cabinet member for Strategic Partnerships and Place, Councillor Neil Fawcett, introduced the report on CPE. Councillor Fawcett noted that the councillor briefing was well attended.

Local authorities are responsible for enforcing parking infringements. VOWH is one of 12 districts nationwide which have not implemented CPE. We are working on a joint approach with OCC, South Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils.

There are advantages to doing this. It costs money to set up, but the set up will pay for itself in a couple of years. OCC are shouldering most of the cost, with our contribution being capped at £60,000.

We anticipate changes in behaviour as this is enforced, and residents may buy permits. This could have a knock-on effect of people using off-street car parks, which may positively impact revenue there, but it is difficult to predict.

Cabinet member mentioned that Cherwell had delayed a decision. County has supported the project, and it is expected that Cherwell will go ahead, but we are uncertain at present. Government would like all three councils to be involved but Cherwell non agreement could cause delays.

Revenue impacts from CPE are a County matter and the £60,000 is a one-off capital expenditure for set-up.

The committee asked the following:

Off-street pay and display parking – where is this planned? It was confirmed there is no definite list yet. Communications is highly important in this project, working County-wide.

If CPE is implemented, where is this to be advertised? Cabinet member answered we can tell people early, identify problem areas and give warnings early on, not tickets. Steadily and slowly educate on the changes.

Page 66 of the meeting pack – Hayleigh Gascoigne's name misspelled and appears twice.

If there are two contractors ticketing 'on' and 'off-street' parking – this is less efficient. Will this change in the long-term? Officers replied that expiry of the existing contracts aren't lined up and need to come to a natural expiry before deciding what to do next over the various phases of the project.

Double yellow lines – Parish and Town council consultations would be helpful. It was confirmed that consultation would occur on this to identify areas where these aren't enforced.

It was confirmed that the £60,000 payment to OCC would be a one-off capital expenditure rather than revenue.

The overall aim is for the scheme is to break even, the project pays for itself. It is not designed to be run for profit, any excess is recycled back into OCC highways infrastructure, such as cycle lanes.

Officers and Cabinet member were thanked for a comprehensive and transparent report and that all the cost options were clear.

The meeting closed at 8.22 pm