

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held on Tuesday, 15 December 2020 at 7.00 pm

this was a virtual meeting



Watch the recording here:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTj2pCic8vzucpzlaSWE3UQ>

Open to the public, including the press

Present:

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

Officers: James Carpenter, Emily Cockle, Pat Connell, Simon Hewings, Suzanne Malcolm, Catrin Mathias, Candida Mckelvey, Adrianna Partridge and Margaret Reed.

Also present to speak: Councillors Andrew Crawford, Andy Foulsham and Simon Howell.

All Vale councillors were invited to attend.

In attendance were: Councillors Eric De La Harpe, Amos Duveen, Neil Fawcett, Alison Jenner, Debby Hallett, Bethia Thomas, Emily Smith and Catherine Webber.

Sc.87 Apologies for absence

There were no apologies.

Sc.88 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Prior to the meeting, committee member Councillor Bowring was notified that she could not take part in the meeting due to familial links to a Cabinet member who was involved in the decision to be discussed.

Sc.89 Urgent business and chair's announcements

Chair ran through housekeeping and virtual meeting procedure. Chair noted that other councillors were invited to this meeting. If a non-member did wish to speak, they would need to ask in the online chat facility. Chair would prioritise scrutiny members to speak and would invite non-members to ask questions accordingly.

At item six, the committee would decide whether to exclude the public. Chair emphasised that exclusion of the public is not due to anything being hidden, or secret discussions, but necessary due to the confidential nature of commercial negotiations.

There will be public minutes available, but they will not include the confidential, commercially sensitive details.

Sc.90 Minutes

The minutes of the scrutiny committee on 23 November 2020 were agreed as correct and the chair will sign them as such.

Sc.91 Public participation

Chair reminded committee that only questions of clarification could be asked of speakers.

Hester Hand, of Friends of Abingdon Civic Society, addressed the committee to express her objections to the decision on Old Abbey House. Her concerns included a lack of engagement with the community and a lack of updates and contact with interested parties. She asked the committee to scrutinise the decision and suggested doing so in public session and then refer to back to Cabinet or full Council for a full and open debate.

Roger Thomas, a local resident, addressed the committee to express his objections to the decision on Old Abbey House. It was felt that that the marketing exercise was not publicised enough. Mr Thomas felt there was a gulf between what officers and Councillors were saying.

Julie Kelly, a resident who previously issued a petition on this issue, addressed the committee to express objection to the decision on Old Abbey House.

She felt that the public were not aware of plans for the building and she started a petition named "Save Old Abbey House". There were 1,700 signatures. She explained that there is a strong need to bring communities together- is selling Old Abbey House the right decision for the community? We want an open and honest account of the facts and figures. What are the proposals, with bids made anonymous?

Sc.92 Exclusion of the public

Chair informed the committee that due to the nature of the report, it could not be discussed in public. If the committee votes to not exclude the public, the meeting would need to be adjourned.

Councillors discussed the need to be open and transparent where possible, and some councillors felt that some information could be disclosed and discussed. It was explained that it would be difficult to separate the public elements from the confidential elements.

The Head of Legal and Democratic recommended that the report be considered after excluding the public. Non confidential elements could be revealed at an appropriate time. If this item was discussed in public, officers would need to advise the committee to not discuss certain items further, and this would impede the decision making of the committee. Cabinet made their decision in confidentiality, so the discussion remains confidential. There will be a public set of minutes which would reveal the non-confidential information to the public.

Councillor Howell, a non-committee member, wished to speak and expressed the view that it would be difficult for committee members to flip between confidential and non-confidential items in public. Councillor Howell explained that he felt a confidential session was required for good decision making, but the public minutes should be diligently written to include all information that can be disclosed.

There was some reluctance to exclude the public, but the committee voted in favour of exclusion of the public to allow the scrutinising of the decision on Old Abbey House.

The public were thanked for their attendance.

RESOLVED: to exclude members of the press and public from the meeting for the following item of business under Part 1 of Schedule 12A Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 and as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 on the grounds that:

- (i) it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1-7 Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, and;
- (ii) the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Sc.93 Old Abbey House

The committee discussed the Cabinet decision of 4 December 2020 to dispose of Old Abbey House, Abingdon. The committee accepted that the Cabinet decision had been properly made, the process had been fair, and no information was unduly kept from the public. However, the committee asked Cabinet to consider for the future the communication with the public on such decisions as the committee supported complete transparency where possible.

The meeting closed at 9.08 pm