

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held on Monday, 30 January 2023 at 7.00 pm
at Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon OX14 3JE

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Nathan Boyd (Chair), Ron Batstone (Vice-Chair), Hayleigh Gascoigne, David Grant, Max Thompson, Eric de la Harpe, Ben Mabbett and Patrick O'Leary
Officers: Candida Basilio and Simon Hewings (Head of Finance), Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive – Transformation and Operations)
Guests: Cabinet member for Development and Regeneration – Councillor Judy Roberts.

Also present:

Councillors: Jerry Avery
Officers: Adrian Duffield (Head of Planning), Richard Spraggett (Strategic Finance Manager) and Paula Fox (Planning Development Manager)
Guests: Council Leader, Councillor Bethia Thomas

1. Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence, but it was noted that Councillor Avery was joining the committee remotely. It was noted that Cabinet member for Finance could not attend. Council Leader attended in his absence.

2. Minutes

Resolved:

The minutes of the last meeting held on 14 November 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

3. Declarations of interest

None.

4. Urgent business and chair's announcements

Chair ran through procedure for the meeting.

5. Work schedule and dates for all Vale and Joint Scrutiny meetings

Chair explained that the property item on the work programme was not going to be presented to committee until after June 2023, as the reports would not be ready for then.

Resolved: Chair will ask for the relevant officer to provide a written response to committee with explanation.

This could be the last scrutiny meeting for Vale, ahead of the elections. There was a final joint scrutiny committee on 28 February

6. Public participation

None.

7. Revenue Budget 2023/24 and Capital Programme to 2027/28 - budget briefing

Chair explained that Head of Finance was presenting a budget briefing to committee, supported by the Council Leader, who was covering items seven and eight in place of the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Assets, who could not attend the meeting. If any confidential items needed discussing, committee could vote for a confidential session at the end of the agenda. Strategic Finance Manager was present virtually.

A presentation was given using slides and can be viewed on the YouTube recording for the full information: <https://www.youtube.com/@SouthandValeCommitteeMeetings>

Head of Finance briefed the committee on the following:

Section 1: Revenue

- Context of budget setting – our legal duties, what a balanced budget means - appropriate reserves without heavy reliance on them. Over recent years there had been improvement in having less reliance on reserves at the council.
- Appendix A1 – base budget 2023-24, what formed part of the base budget. A net expenditure decrease of £1.1 million. There were beneficial effects of the interest rate rise, but also needed to consider cost increases in conjunction.
- Appendix B1 and B3 – discretionary items, such as temporary grant funding for 2023-25.
- Core revenue spending power had increased 4.9% - settlements, government grants and council tax. Increase in core revenue spending power in response to economic climate. New Homes Bonus had gone down, reduced to four years from six overall. Uncertainty from central government on the future of this. Through increased grant funding and interest rates, a fair sum was put to reserves.
- Extra surplus on collection funds. Council tax will go up via increasing tax base and within referendum rules on increasing council tax rates.
- Included a one-off funding guarantee of £2.3 million. Revisions to council tax were in line with the council tax referendum principles.

Section 2: Capital

- Details of schemes in Appendix D1 (internal funding) and D2/D3 (CIL funded).
- Wantage teaching pool will be funded by S106 receipts from the Valley Park development.
- Didcot Wave pool and Didcot North-East Leisure centre (in South Oxfordshire) – Valley Park S106 receipts would be used from Vale of White Horse District Council. Due to these leisure facilities being the nearest catchment area for Valley Park (Vale) residents to make use of, as there would not be those facilities on site. Didcot was Valley Park resident's nearest town (South Oxfordshire)

Section 3: Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)

- Key variables/assumptions shown of expenditure and income
- Inflation – applied what we see as inflation. Consideration given to contracts ending over time.

- See appendix F – row 28 expectations of inflation. Row 40 shows cost increases offset with inflationary increases.
- Core government funding assumptions – uncertainty, assumption was that government funding will reduce and council tax rises.
- 2025 onwards, the balances looked challenging but there were many variables that could not be predicted with much certainty. However, the assumptions made were prudent regarding lack of certainty on government funding.
- Alternative scenario was given where the one-off funding was left in the MTFP.
- Strong progress on transformation work, leading to financial stability - including IT strategy, Cornerstone, grounds maintenance, customer service and front-of-house and development management.

Committee discussed the prudent approach and asked for clarification, discussing the balance between potential government funding decreases and increases in council tax. With reduction of New Home Bonus, the one-off funding figure from central government was the balancing number after council tax increases were factored in (bespoke figures for each council provided to central government).

Discussion was had regarding borrowing options. It was explained that potential borrowing was to fund capital programmes only when capital receipts had been used. Borrowing against the life of an asset.

8. Revenue Budget 2023/24 and Capital Programme to 2027/28 - Cabinet report

Council Leader opened this item and welcomed comments. Cabinet member for finance, Councillor Crawford, who was unable to attend, had welcomed committee members to email him if they have further questions.

Discussion:

- Appendix E4 – Increasing utility costs – had decarbonisation projects been factored in? Officer response was that it was based on current prices, and that decarbonisation projects could not be factored in yet. Also, GLL handles utility costs as part of their management contract for leisure centres, so will not be seen in the council budget.
- A query raised on car parking costs increasing and less income generated. Car parks were being used less after the pandemic.
- Savings from the move to Abbey House. Appendix A5 - Rows 9 and 10 showed Oxfordshire County Council leaving the building, but they haven't yet so the income remains currently. Rows 11 and 12 showed income from SODC's use of Abbey House until 2025/26. After this, we were back to the expectation that we will have moved to Didcot Gateway headquarters.
- Appendix A4 – staffing – essential growth to meet service delivery needs approved by Head of Paid Service. Line 32 – this related to environmental health officers post pandemic.
- Appendix A2 – District Community Centre at Great Western Park: Head of Finance explained that there were expectations on usage, and now it was an established facility, we were seeing the realistic expectations of use.
- D1 Capital programmes – Civil parking enforcement – this was the works to change the signage etc – the capital element. Revenue budget deals with the changes to income.
- Community Hub – Leader spoke to this - this was a service set up in response to pandemic to support residents, including many vulnerable residents, with staff being seconded to support. This would be continuing with cost-of-living crisis and refugee intake being considered. It was funded for two years, and we will be working on planning ahead with a programme of work, as it had been a reactive service previously. Separate to housing

homelessness team. Partnership work – Hub signposts to CAB and other charitable organisations.

Resolved: Committee noted the budget report

9. Planning Enforcement Statement

The Planning Enforcement Statement and 12-month performance reporting was introduced by Cabinet Member for Development and Infrastructure. Head of Planning and the Planning Development Manager were present to support the item in place of the Development Management Team Leader (Enforcement), who could not attend.

Chair explained that it was an update from the triage system that scrutiny reviewed 12 months ago. It was not the place to discuss individual cases.

Cabinet member and officers explained that the triage service had helped officers to focus on the cases with the most planning harm. Cases stay open until compliance with the enforcement decision made was proven. Shortage of resources had caused some performance issues, but we now had a full team currently of eight full time equivalent staff.

Parishes had got answers and updates on cases quicker than previously, so they were more inclined to wait rather than chase for updates – this should become even swifter over time.

The item was opened to the committee for comment.

- It was explained that closer working between officers in planning applications and enforcement was occurring in terms of what can be asked for and where challenge may be raised. Head of Planning explained they were following best practice from other authorities in England and other authorities were following our example as well.
- Feedback from Parish Councils – Cabinet member explained that they were understanding the new system and getting used to how the updates work, considering protecting confidentiality etc.
- There had been a maximum of five formal complaints on the process, which was a good result, the lowest officers had seen in a 12-month period.
- Clarification given on open, on hand and closed cases. There was a flow chart provided in the report regarding process steps (page 67 of the agenda pack).
- The figure the enforcement team want to improve was regarding deciding on a course of action within the first six weeks after someone applied for an investigation. Physical investigation should begin in this period to obtain more balanced facts of the case, in order to make a decision. Resolve what needed to be done on balance by assessing the facts, considering planning harm and benefit to the public to pursue an investigation.
- Can updates be sent to councillors also, to be aware of their ward? Officer would look into this. Needed to consider GDPR restrictions on sharing data.
- Officers were asked to consider having a column/graph showing data for over 36 months.
- There will be one more annual report and then reporting going forward would be reviewed depending on need of the service identified at the time, and capacity.

Council Leader thanked all officers and cabinet members involved in tonight's agenda items. Cabinet member for Development and Infrastructure added her thanks as well.

Resolved: Committee noted this report and were pleased with the planning enforcement statement and the 12-month performance reported.

10. Exclusion of the public

To consider whether to exclude members of the press and public from the meeting for the following items of business under Section 100A and 100I of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that:

- (i) It is likely that there will be disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A, and
- (ii) the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Resolved:

Committee voted in favour of holding a confidential session for the remainder the meeting in order to consider budget items for which the above exemptions apply.

11. Confidential appendix D2

Committee asked for clarification on some exempt items on the budget papers.

The meeting closed at 20:52

Chair:

Date: