

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee



held on Wednesday, 12 July 2023 at 5.00 pm
at The Beacon, Portway, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 9BX

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Committee members: Councillors Katherine Foxhall (Chair), Judy Roberts (Vice-Chair), Hayleigh Gascoigne, Ron Batstone and Sally Povolotsky and Kiera Bentley (substitute)

Cabinet Member: Councillor Mark Coleman (Environmental Services)

Officers: Andrew Busby (Head of Development and Corporate Landlord), Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer), John Backley (Technical Services Manager), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance) and Dominic Lamb (Climate and Biodiversity Team Leader)

Also present: Councillor Patrick O'Leary

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Oliver Forder, with Councillor Kiera Bentley standing in as substitute member.

Apologies were also received from Councillor James Cox.

2. Urgent business and chair's announcements

Chair welcomed the committee and stated that there was no urgent business.

3. Declaration of interests

Councillor Sally Povolotsky declared that in relation to agenda item six, she works for Ford, and was a vehicle engineer.

4. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting on 30 January 2023 were agreed as a correct record and the chair will sign them as such.

5. Public participation

Mr John Salmons addressed the committee regarding agenda item six. The committee were invited to ask questions of clarification, and the chair thanked Mr Salmons for his contribution to the meeting.

6. Call in of Delegated Officer key decision: The provision of grounds maintenance, toilet cleaning and facilities service vehicles

The chair welcomed Simon Hewings (Head of Finance), John Backley (Technical Services Manager), Andrew Busby (Head of Development and Corporate Landlord), and Dominic Lamb (Climate and Biodiversity Team Leader) and Councillor Mark Coleman, Cabinet member for Environmental Services, who introduced the delegated officer key decision and gave a summary of the context of the decision.

The call-in request was made by Councillor Katherine Foxhall as chair of Scrutiny Committee, vice-chair Councillor Judy Roberts, and scrutiny committee members Councillors Hayleigh Gascoigne, Robert Maddison and Sally Povolotsky, for the following reasons:

Reason a) The rationale for the decision was unclear and further explanation was required to address the climate and ecological implications of this decision – as laid out in the officer comments.

Reason b) While this decision taken in itself is relatively minor, there are clear implications for future decision-making in relation to waste contracts (e.g. EV charging on the council estate), and the Vale's commitment in its Climate Action Plan to reducing its carbon emissions by 75% by 2025.

Members of the committee were invited to ask their questions. The following is a summary of the discussion and responses to the above reasons for the call in:

Explanation for call-in reason a)

In response to questions, officers and the cabinet member explained the rationale for the decision in more detail. The rationale was that the Pretium framework for vehicle leasing provided much more flexibility, meaning that the council could opt-out by giving 28 days' notice. This meant that the council would be able to trial a variety of different vehicles with no long-term commitment. There was financial benefit to the move – currently, the leasing day rate was higher than the new contract proposed. The decision also supported the transformation project to move grounds maintenance in-house and create efficiencies. Therefore, a delay would cause further expense. The new Pretium framework benefits were explained by officers as being a gradual move to more zero emissions vehicles, whilst reducing the cost to the public (£12k per year). Officer felt that the Pretium Framework will improve likelihood of meeting targets, as you can change vehicles as desired, and test the vehicles before commitment to purchasing in the future.

The Pretium framework had many companies listed from a shortlist of suitable options, and officers evaluated that one was easily the best option. The choices had already been through a value for money exercise. The rationale was to benefit multiple areas – for cost savings, a move towards trialling zero emissions vehicles on a flexible basis (vehicles for public toilet cleaning, facilities and parks teams are the first to become EV and can be charged in carparks) and making sure that we continue to keep grounds maintenance' operational with suitable vehicles for staff to carry out their work efficiently.

Regarding the climate implications, the Climate and Biodiversity Team Leader was present to give his views, as members were conscious of the comments provided by the Climate Action team, within the comments section of the decision notice. In 2022 the councils' climate action team commissioned the Energy Saving Trust to provide advice on how the councils' could transition towards a zero emissions fleet. The findings of this report had been used by officers to help inform decisions around the leasing and purchasing of new vehicles.

It was explained that the Climate Action team worked with all teams in the council – encouraging and advising teams to achieve the climate targets, it was a collaborative effort. The team leader acknowledged that this decision was a step towards a zero emissions fleet. Officers confirmed they worked towards targets Climate Action Plan action SD6 – To develop a business case and implement a delivery plan for council vehicles to be zero emission by 2025, where available on the market and action SD7 – Install EV charge points in council depot and other locations as necessary to meet the needs of the council fleet.

Explanation for call-in reason b) The council's carbon targets were discussed by committee. A discussion was had about the issue raised on grounds maintenance vehicles, where a variety of attachments (such as diggers, towing, mowers and trailers) made charging more complicated in public car parks, therefore options for zero emission vehicles of these nature needed to be explored further by officers. There was a lack of current suitable options on the market. Committee discussed the many variables that affect vehicle suitability. A member of committee raised the issue that as a council, we should have more knowledge of vehicle payload and usage, and whether certain vehicles were necessary.

There was discussion about vehicle routes and charging EV vehicles. It was debated that there were enough charge points in the district, however there was another view from other members and officers that the argument for charging EV vehicles on council land (such as public car parks or office car parks) was not as practical in reality. Officers explained that where there were multipurpose vehicles with trailers and other attachments, there was not enough room in standard car parks for these, and if this was put into action, the likely result would be that trailers would need to be dropped somewhere else before the vehicle charges – thus adding mileage and therefore frequency of charging. The grounds maintenance service required vehicles to have an operating range of around 100 miles, without which, EVs are impracticable because of a lack of charging infrastructure.

Cabinet member added that staff would need to be considered as they would need somewhere to park their personal vehicles before using the council maintenance vehicles.

The bullet points below summarise other points and questions raised by committee members:

- Knowledge of payload and vehicle usage was important – including future use. Officer confirmed that route data was gathered, and it was expected that feedback from operators would be gained when trialling new fleet.
- Suggestion of zero emissions subscription models as an option
- Can we potentially share charging infrastructure with other authorities? Cabinet member did suggest that this would depend on what funding would be allocated to the area for EV infrastructure.
- New fuels and technology will come onto the market, and we should be ready to consider them
- It was important to add more detail in reports and decision notices on the rationale and in particular, all the benefits of decisions (such as in-house savings, transition to zero emissions) and weighing out of options to make the process clear.
- It was acknowledged that staff needed the right tools to do their jobs effectively and that had to be considered.
- A member suggested the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee could conduct a deep dive on transition of heavy vehicles to zero emissions
- A member asked whether a cabinet advisory group was possible to report on zero emissions fleet
- A member asked whether the team would be monitoring the impact of the new arrangement, and if so, how they would be doing that. Officer confirmed they would get feedback from the operators, as well as the regular monitoring arrangements, such as journey logging and manager's meetings.

Members were assured by the officer team that there was no prevailing benefit in delaying the decision, as it had an immediate benefit in bringing more zero emission vehicles into the council's fleet, and an immediate cost saving. The 28-day opt-out meant that council had flexibility if a change to approach was needed, whilst allowing the council to trial new vehicles and decide whether they were adequate for the council's operational needs. This would allow assessment before commitment to buy vehicles.

A motion was moved and seconded, and was supported by the committee when being put to the vote:

Recommendation

In accordance with the Scrutiny Committees Procedure Rules, the Scrutiny Committee did not wish to refer the matter back to the decision-maker, therefore the decision may take effect immediately. The Head of Development and Corporate Landlord was asked to provide an update report on the use of the Pretium Framework, six months after implementation.

Note: The committee chair advised that this would be added to the committee work programme for monitoring, and that the timings of a report would be discussed to find a mutually suitable time for committee and officers.

The meeting closed at 6.20 pm

Chair:

Date: