

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee



held on Tuesday, 28 January 2025 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: Katherine Foxhall (Chair), Judy Roberts (Vice-Chair), Ron Batstone, James Cox, Oliver Forder, Hayleigh Gascoigne, Robert Maddison and Eric de la Harpe

Officers: Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer) and Simon Hewings (Head of Finance)

Cabinet members: Councillor Andy Crawford (Finance and Property Assets), Councillor Andy Foulsham (Policy and Programmes)

Also present online:

Officers: Anna Winship (Strategic Finance Manager), Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Nick Bennett (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate and Communities)

Cabinet members: Councillors Bethia Thomas and Mark Coleman

1. Chair's announcements

The committee chair ran through housekeeping matters.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Debby Hallett.

3. Minutes of the last meeting

Resolved:

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2024 were reviewed and committee agreed them as a correct record. The chair will sign them as such.

4. Declaration of interests

None

5. Urgent business

None

6. Public participation

None

7. Work schedule and dates for all Vale scrutiny meetings

A member asked about the item on Council-owned housing provision and who was responsible for this item in the committee process – it was recently discussed at Joint Audit and Governance Committee. Officers would review, and the chair added that the committee should revisit work programme items and develop the scope and rationalise items. Discussions had with the Cabinet member for housing items (Councillor Sue Caul) and officers had confirmed that questions raised by committee would be included in reports coming forward to scrutiny.

A member noted the item on financial relationships with tenants and asked about progress. The Cabinet member for finance and finance officers would follow up.

8. Update on recommendations from previous Vale Scrutiny Committee meetings

None.

9. Revenue budget 2025/26 and capital programme 2025/26 - 2029/30

The Cabinet member for Finance introduced the report, supported by the Head of Finance who was present in the room. The Strategic Finance Manager was present online.

The position was explained, also considering the context of a Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

Comments:

- Can we show the budget for the previous years and the performance against it, to show the accuracy of budgets and the pressures on the council. Monitoring of outcomes against the original budget. The Head of Finance confirmed a column could be added. The Cabinet member added that service area revenue figures were produced three times a year, and the outturn report was scrutinised. The Head of Finance explained that over recent years we had reigned in any over-budgeting. An extra column on the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) was confirmed as being an option.
- A member asked for information on the Community Hub service. The Cabinet member explained that there was no cut, but it was previously due to come to an end, but there had been a growth bid for this area of £120,000. Some areas of work will move to other areas such as the Housing team. No reduction on the offering for Community Hub was confirmed.
- National Insurance (NI) contributions. A member asked for an explanation of the settlement figure from government not covering the added cost of NI, noting that it was an estimate. Cabinet member explained that LG Futures had conducted work to come up with a figure. More detail may emerge on this figure in February.
- Point 35 in the report, on borrowing. It was confirmed to be internal borrowing. A member asked whether the future plan was to retain internal borrowing. The Cabinet member explained that if the capital programme progresses as expected, we do not expect to borrow externally. Capital receipts may be received in the meantime.
- A member asked about whether there was a calculated limit for council borrowing, as authorities such as West Berkshire do have a policy of external borrowing. The Cabinet member explained that West Berkshire was a unitary, so was a different organisation to our council. If a project came forward that was feasible and revenue generating, potential external borrowing would be considered, and sometimes it's necessary based on advice. The Head of Finance added that we are showing a borrowing line but we will use our cash balances. We have a borrowing need but it was a cash flow decision about whether we are

better off running down cash balances, rather than borrowing from the market and incurring borrowing interest fees.

- On The Beacon – a member asked about the costs of running the facility in light of the five-year projections. As a discretionary service it could crowd out other areas. The Cabinet member added that a report was due in March, and work was being done to help reduce the costs of the venue and improve revenue. All discretionary services would be reviewed as needed for their proportional worth.
- Discussion around projects in light of LGR occurring. The Cabinet member explained that this was unknown but it was expected that anything committed to and contracted for should be kept. His concern was the impact on officer time dealing with a merger and taking time away on other delivery.
- A discussion was had on business rates – we hold the rates and the interest, and we pay County the specified amount. There was a discussion on business rates for specific projects such as renewable energy.
- Discussion on council tax and the effectiveness of a referendum or dispensation. The council was not in financial difficulty, but there were these options to consider as the position becomes less stable as predicted over time. There was a further discussion about merger referendums and the outcomes for council tax. Bespoke decisions would be taken per unitary area and would take into account the impact on residents from areas with differing council tax rates.

Resolved:

Members agreed to note the report.

Officers and the Cabinet members involved were thanked by the chair, also noting the support provided by Councillor Coleman.

10. Council Plan

The report was introduced by the Cabinet member for Policy and Programmes, supported by the Head of Policy and Programmes and the Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate and Communities, who were present online.

Committee asked and commented the following:

- It was confirmed that annual delivery plans were not presented yet, as we await steer from government on LGR. A member asked about the impact of Local Government Organisation (LGO) on the Council plan delivery plan. It was explained that if we still existed in our current format for two years, there would be a two-year delivery plan. If we were confirmed to exist in our current format for longer, there would be a series of one-year delivery plans. There had been some tweaks made to the language of the plan, to reflect the current position, such as avoiding use of “long-term”.
- A member asked about Section 24 under LGR – this controls what we can do at the point of shadow authority / future unitary. Head of Legal explained that historically, they restrict councils to statutory duties, and matters already contractually bound to. We await the reality of what we are allowed to do from the direction of the Secretary of State. The Head of Legal explained that he was looking at the example of BCP Council when they merged.
- A member suggested changes should be made to the mention of Twitter. The Deputy Chief Executive replied that this wording was used in the engagement report only, so it was not part of the formal plan document.
- It was noted that committee and Cabinet reports do list the council plan themes they cover. A more granular level was not planned.
- Linking Council plan to budget – it was confirmed that the work of the plan was aligning with the budget. It was confirmed by Head of Finance that for discretionary growth, we ask for a

link to council plan priorities. Currently, the link was not as demonstrable under the current budget situation but has historically always linked up with the council plan.

- A member asked how the SODC plan aligns with the VWHDC plan, citing the example of residents utilising facilities in its neighbouring district. The Cabinet member explained that although the plans were distinct, the approach was similar.

Resolved:

Committee considered that the Council Plan had been reviewed over time with scrutiny committee input and were content to note this report before it goes to Cabinet.

The Cabinet member and officers involved were thanked for their work.

11. Scrutiny Review Actions

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services introduced his report. The 2024 review report from The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) provided suggestions for improved scrutiny at the council. The Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate and Communities was present online, as Lead Scrutiny Officer.

The committee was requested to nominate two members for a Joint Scrutiny task and finish group to consider the CfGS report and work towards making improvements where possible, and a prioritisation exercise in light of future LGR. The aim would be to create a document from this work. The Lead Scrutiny Officer and the Head of Legal and Democratic Services would facilitate, and the recommendations would be presented, discussed, debated and ultimately presented to Full Council.

The nominees were confirmed as Councillor Katherine Foxhall and Councillor Debby Hallett for Vale of White Horse District Council.

The meeting closed at 8.26 pm

Chair:

Date: