

Sc.20

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT THE GUILDHALL,
ABINGDON ON THURSDAY, 12TH
FEBRUARY, 2009 AT 7.00 PM

Open to the Public, including the Press

PRESENT:

MEMBERS: Councillors Melinda Tilley (Chairman), Matthew Barber, Andrew Crawford, Yvonne Constance, Joyce Hutchinson, Jenny Shepherd, Tim Smith, Laurel Symons, Reg Waite, Chris Wise and Jim Halliday (Vice-Chair).

SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS: Dudley Hoddinott

EXECUTIVE MEMBERS: Councillor Jerry Patterson

OFFICERS: Steve Bishop, Ian Forster and Claire Litchfield

NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC: None

SC.41 NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Julia Reynolds and it was noted that Councillor Dudley Hoddinott was in attendance as a substitute.

Apologies were also received from Executive Member Councillor Jenny Hannaby.

SC.42 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17 December 2008 were adopted and signed as a correct record.

Councillor Hutchinson reported that she had sent a comment to the Committee in respect of minute SC.34 Service Area Half Year Reports, Commercial Services, to the effect that she had been impressed with the department and had no concerns.

SC.43 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

SC.44 URGENT BUSINESS AND CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

None.

SC.45 STATEMENTS AND PETITIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None.

SC.46 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None.

SC.47 COUNCIL SUNDRY DEBT AND WRITE OFF

The Committee received and considered report 158/07 of the Strategic Director which provided an overview of debts owed to the Council as well as an aged debt analysis. The Committee was invited to identify any areas which required further investigation.

One Member commented that the format of the report made for difficult reading and requested that in future the figures be presented in a larger font.

The Strategic Director reported that the Business Units listed in the aged debt Analysis Report did not reflect the structure of the Council as the categories had been created fairly haphazardly by the various teams who raised invoices on the Agresso System. The Committee considered that it would be useful to have a breakdown of the aged debt by service area. The Strategic Director agreed that he would provide this to the next meeting.

The Committee heard that the only housing debts that appeared in the aged debt analysis were those that were old. It was reported that the housing department had a different system which contained the current housing debts. Members commented that this meant that the figures presented did not reflect the total level of Council debt.

One Member noted that in considering the histogram (page 15 of the agenda) there was a general downwards trend from May 2008 however in December 2008 there appeared to be an increase. He further commented that it would be helpful to have delineators within the histogram to give an idea of the scale.

One Member questioned whether it was known who the debtors were and whether this information could be available to Members. The Strategic Director agreed that this information could be provided in the case of high value debts. He suggested that it may be helpful to provide an analysis of debt by amount to show, for example how many debts were under £10.

One Member questioned whether the Strategic Director was satisfied with the procedures in place for the recovery of debt. He responded that the procedures were robust and in terms of generating invoices, reminders and final demands the Vale was in good shape. In addition he advised that things in Legal were improving in terms of escalating unpaid debts. However he stated that Legal required evidence in order to commence any formal debt recovery action and was experiencing delays from service areas.

In terms of procedures in place for recovering debts from businesses it was reported that there were various legal remedies being used such as the use of bailiffs ultimately culminating in the Council being able to issue bankruptcy proceedings. However the Strategic Director advised that some of these were difficult options whether such action was a good use of public money. He commented that it was usually more desirable for the Council to make repayment arrangements with the debtors.

One Member commented that it would be helpful to have details of what proportion of debts were in dispute or had debtors that were unable to pay. The Strategic Director agreed that that this information could be provided.

The Portfolio Holder for finance, Councillor Patterson commented that the Ridgeway Shared Service Partnership Strategic Board looked at the aged debt and sundry debtor reports regularly. He considered that it would be an excellent idea to break the debt down by Service Area. He added that considering and acting on debt to the department should be part of the Head of Service job. One Member commented that in his experience debts were dealt with better when they were owned by a department and suggested that finance and legal work more closely with the service areas.

One Member advised that she would be interested to see how the figures compared with the same time in 2008. The Strategic Director confirmed that this would be possible and would provide this information for Members.

SC.48 REVIEW OF THE BROWN BINS SCHEME ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS

The Committee received and considered report 156/08 of the Strategic Director.

The Strategic Director reported that the main problem with the implementation of the Brown Bin scheme had been that the customer record database (called the Customer Relationship Management System (CRM)) did not match the financial records database (Agresso). He commented that this had been due to Officer error and that the system had not been set up to address this problem. It was reported that last year there was around £40,000 outstanding debt and that the figure for this year was lower, but was still above £10,000, although the precise debt could not be calculated until a full reconciliation between CRM and Agresso was completed.

In response to a question the Strategic Director confirmed that whether residents had received invoices for the service was a question to be answered as part of the reconciliation. He advised that if a resident deliberately chose not to pay for the service ultimately the service could be withdrawn with the bin being removed. One Member questioned whether this was possible, given that the Vale was supposed to provide waste collection service. The Strategic Director explained that there was no duty on the Council to collect garden waste and that this was a discretionary service

With regards to the Action Plan, Members commented that it was disappointing that the deadline for a number of the actions had passed, yet no progress appeared to have been made.

One Member commented that the recovery of the outstanding debt was going to be a large administrative operation and questioned whether residents could be given an incentive to set up direct debits. The Strategic Director commented that around 3% of users paid by direct debit. Members discussed the possibility of introducing a reduction for residents who paid by direct debit, to include those who chose to pay council tax by direct debit. One Member suggested that those already paying council tax by direct debit and are known to have brown bins should be encouraged to pay for

their brown bin by direct debit also. The Strategic Director commented that any arrangements on council tax would have to be agreed with the other agencies, County Council, Thames Valley Police for whom the Vale acts as collecting agent. In respect of the brown bins however he agreed to look into the possibility of a reduction for direct debit payments.

One Member suggested that instead of offering a reduction for direct debit payers those who chose not to pay by direct debit could be charged more.

One Member questioned whether the Committee could be reassured that the remedial action numbered (1) in the Action Plan was being done. Secondly, he suggested that the bins should not have been delivered until the payments had been received. Finally he advised that he hoped that in the future Officers would ensure that the financial procedures that were in place before rolling out schemes to residents.

The Strategic Director commented that the financial regulations were going to be reviewed and enforced. Officers would be expected to comply with them or face disciplinary action.

One Member questioned what had prompted this action plan to come about, given that a question had been put to Council some time ago. The Strategic Director advised that Officers had been given an opportunity to take remedial action, however it had been felt that little progress had been made in twelve months. The Member commented that he had raised this issue with the portfolio holder a year ago and felt that action should have been taken earlier.

SC.49 GOVERNMENT FUNDED MANDATORY SERVICES

The Committee received and considered report 155/08 of the Strategic Director. It was noted that this was two reports in one, half of the report dealing with Concessionary Fares, the other with Disabled Facilities Grants and other Housing Renewal Assistance. It was advised that the link between the two was that they these were mandatory services for which the Vale appeared to be under funded.

Concessionary Fares

The Strategic Director explained that the total cost of the scheme was either met from Government grant or council tax.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Councillor Patterson advised that it had been agreed by Vale, Cherwell, South Oxfordshire and West Oxfordshire that fares now paid for outbound fares into Oxford. He stated that Oxford City Council were responsible for the cost of the return journey. He commented that it was very unsatisfactory that the Government refused to advise the precise amount it was funding for this service.

One Member questioned what the shortfall was for the other districts. The Strategic Director advised that he would request this information. Councillor Patterson advised

that he understood that the other three districts shortfall would be lower as they did not have a centre so close to Oxford city with excellent bus services.

One Member questioned whether the local MP's were being lobbied about this issue. He advised that one of the local MP's could put a question to parliament asking for evidence that the Vale was in receipt of funding for this scheme. Councillor Patterson commented that he did not think that the government was interested in this issue. He advised that the LGA had presented the sentiment of member councils to the government and that everyone who could complain about the scheme had done so and it had made little difference.

One Member questioned how much it cost to issue the passes. The Strategic Director reported that he would get this information from Capita.

Housing Renewal Assistance

One Member commented that the figures referred to on page 23 of the agenda, showing the utilisation of the budget for discretionary Home Renewal Assistance Grants of £108,000 did not add up to £108,000. Ian Forster, the Housing Operations Team Leader advised that these figures showed the amount committed out of a possible £108,000.

SC.50 CORPORATE GOVERNANCE THIRD QUARTER 2008/09 - TO MONITOR PERFORMANCE AND TAKE ANY NECESSARY ACTION

The Committee considered report number 150/08 which was presented to the Executive Committee on 6 February 2009.

One Member referred the Committee to page 159, regarding NI 157 and questioned why the figure referred to in Q3 (56%) and the figure referred to in the comments box stating that the Q3 figure was (75%). The Strategic Director advised that he would provide an answer to Members outside of the meeting.

SC.51 REVIEW THE ACTIVITY OF THE EXECUTIVE

One Member noted that the Corporate Plan presented to the Executive did not contain any target figures (page 35 of the Executive agenda). He questioned why this was the case. The Strategic Director commented that the figures were yet to be included in the plan as consideration the soon to be appointed Heads of Service would need to have some input into the targets.

SC.52 REFERRALS UNDER THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PROCEDURE RULES OR THE BUDGET AND POLICY FRAMEWORK PROCEDURE RULES

None

SC.53 RESPONSES OF AND REFERENCES FROM THE EXECUTIVE

None.

SC.54 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC, INCLUDING THE PRESS

The Chairman moved that in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the remainder of the meeting to prevent the disclosure to them of exempt information, as defined in Section 100(l) and Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, to the Act when the following items are considered:-

Item 15 - Exempt Minutes 17 December 2008

(Category 3 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information.)

SC.55 EXEMPT MINUTES

The Exempt Minutes of the meeting held on 17 December 2009 were adopted and signed as a correct record.