

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held at 7pm on Thursday 22 September 2011

at the Abbey House, Abingdon



Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Jim Halliday (Chair), Melinda Tilley (Vice-Chairman), Andrew Crawford, Jane Crossley, Tony de Vere, Charlotte Dickson, Jason Fiddaman, Bill Jones, Sandy Lovatt, and Fiona Roper

Substitute members: Councillor John Morgan (in place of Councillor Eric Batts) and Councillor Richard Webber (in place of Councillor Julie Mayhew-Archer)

Non-participating members: Councillors Matthew Barber and Elaine Ware

Officers: Kate Arnold, John Backley, Steve Bishop, Steve Culliford, Sarah Longman, Suzanne Malcolm, John Backley, Steve Culliford, Steve Bishop, Matt Prosser, Chris Webb, Kate Arnold and Sarah Longman

Contractor: Mark Jaggars (SOLL Leisure)

Number of members of the public: Nil

Sc.35 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

Councillors Eric Batts and Julie Mayhew-Archer had sent their apologies for absence and had appointed Councillors John Morgan and Richard Webber respectively as their substitutes.

Sc.36 Declarations of interest

None

Sc.37 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The chair thanked councillors for attending the training session on 15 or 20 September and for suggesting items that could be considered by the Scrutiny Committee. This had proved to be a useful exercise.

Sc.38 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee

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Sc.24

None

Sc.39 Leisure contract monitoring

The committee considered report 24/11 of the head of economy, leisure, and property. This set out the performance of the council's leisure contractor, SOLL, during 2010/11. The contractor managed Faringdon Leisure Centre, Wantage Leisure Centre, and Tilsley Park. The committee noted the exempt appendix setting out exempt information but did not debate it.

The committee reviewed the contractor's performance. Councillors noted that despite there being doubts over the reliability of user data in the past, the contractor's new system now provided much more confidence. Although the council's customer satisfaction survey showed a drop in performance over the previous year, the contractor was not aware of any specific issues. The contractor's own surveys had indicated positive results. The committee investigated the possible reasons for the drop in survey score. Councillors noted that staffing levels had not changed, prices had increased with inflation, and the contractor took cleanliness just as seriously as before. There had been no drop in cleaning standards.

The strategic director suggested that the council needed to look at how it carried out the survey, and produce a better perception-based study. The council needed to understand why its customers had considered they were not receiving good service. Some committee members suggested that the Cabinet should look at whether the council was getting good value for money from particular leisure centres.

The committee was pleased to note the improvements in energy efficiency at the leisure centres at a time when energy costs were rising. Councillors commended the contractor's collaboration with the council for its work on this.

Councillors suggested that the committee should consider contract monitoring reports earlier in the year.

The committee looked at the officer's assessment of 'fair' for the contractor in 2010/11 and concurred with this.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) recommend the Cabinet member for leisure to award the council's leisure contractor, SOLL, a 'fair' overall assessment for 2010/11, and
- (b) congratulate the contractor for its part in improving energy efficiency at Faringdon and Wantage Leisure Centres and Tilsley Park.

Sc.40 Proposals to monitor the impact of the free two hours car parking scheme

The committee considered report 25/11 of the head of economy, leisure, and property. This set out proposals to monitor the impact of introducing two-hours free car parking. The report sought the committee's comments before the Cabinet member finalised the monitoring arrangements.

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The officers proposed using a short online survey of all town centre businesses, the chamber of commerce groups, and town partnerships. The survey would also be available through the council's website, the council's economic development newsletter, 'Vision', and in town and parish council newsletters. There would also be a press release to publicise it. The report set out the draft survey questions.

The survey was aimed at businesses. Respondents would have to provide details of their business contact details. This way, the council could discount multiple responses from business. The officers could give more weight to responses from large businesses. In addition, the council would conduct annual footfall surveys in each market town.

Some councillors suggested additional data that the council could collate. The council could ask if free parking was the reason people came into the town centre. The officers could compare data from other market towns also, including footfall, car park usage and air quality. The strategic director thanked the committee for its suggestions but expressed caution at the additional work this would entail. He preferred to await the outcome of the survey before committing to additional work, which might be unnecessary.

Some councillors believed that it could take a few years to determine the effectiveness of free short stay parking. There were other influencing factors on town centre footfall, such as the decline of market towns and the economic downturn. The council should be measuring the effectiveness of the council's economic development policy, of which free short stay car parking was a part.

In answer to a question from the chairman, the Cabinet member responsible for economy reported that she had every confidence that the officers would conduct the survey thoroughly.

RESOLVED: To request the officers and Cabinet member for economy to consider the committee's suggestions before finalising the arrangements to monitor the impact of free short-stay car parking.

Sc.41 Fit for the future update

The committee received a presentation from the leader of the council on the council's Fit for the Future programme. This looked at all aspects of service delivery, including cost effectiveness, improving efficiency, improving processes, and ongoing team development. The programme generated typically savings of 10 to 15 per cent per service. This work ran in parallel to other budget planning work. The first round of reviews was almost complete. This included reviews in Planning, Housing, Legal, and Accountancy. The tender process was underway for the second round. This included reviews for Human Resources, IT, Democratic Services, Environmental Health, Finance (non-Accountancy), and the Local Services Point. This second round should complete in 2013 but was dependent on resources.

The cost of the programme for the initial function review across all service areas had been £117,274. This included staffing and consultancy costs. The savings from the function review had been £1,236,266.

In answer to questions from councillors, the committee noted that the Fit for the Future figures that appeared in the recent financial outturn report to Cabinet, related to 2010/11

only. The programme ran across financial years. The chief finance officer undertook to investigate the costs and savings of the programme and to advise the committee outside the meeting. He assured the committee that there had been no double counting of costs or savings. He was confident that for each review, the savings had been greater than the costs.

The committee recognised that demand for council services did not reduce, so it was important for the council to look at performance and productivity. However, councillors questioned the rationale behind choosing the services for review and questioned why some were left out; the leader undertook to find an answer. The committee expressed an interest in seeing minutes from programme monitoring board meetings and projected savings for the next year. The committee wanted assurance that the programme could achieve the projected savings, as these formed a significant part of the council's budget.

Councillors questioned which committee was keeping track of the programme's progress. The leader offered an annual review of the programme at the Scrutiny Committee; the committee welcomed this and thanked the leader for his presentation.

RESOLVED: to add the Fit for the Future programme to the Scrutiny Committee's work programme for an annual review.

Sc.42 Scrutiny work programme

The committee reviewed its work programme for the remainder of the municipal year. The committee added a debate on the budget for its December meeting, and an annual review of the Fit for the Future programme.

The committee also received a summary of the suggestions received from councillors that attended one of the training sessions on 15 and 20 September. At the sessions, councillors nominated their three preferred topics for scrutiny. The chair asked committee members to review the summary list and advise the chair and vice-chairman of their preferences to feed these into the work programme at the next committee meeting.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) update the scrutiny work programme to consider the budget in December 2011, and add an annual review of the Fit for the Future programme; and
- (b) request committee members to advise the chair and vice-chairman of their preferred issues to add to the scrutiny work programme.

Exempt information under section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972

None

The meeting closed at 8.52 pm