

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held at 7pm on Thursday 27 October 2011

at the Abbey House, Abingdon



Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Jim Halliday (Chair), Melinda Tilley (Vice-Chairman), Eric Batts, Andrew Crawford, Jane Crossley, Tony de Vere, Charlotte Dickson, Jason Fiddaman, Bill Jones, Julie Mayhew-Archer, Fiona Roper

Substitute member: Councillor Holly Holman (in place of Councillor Sandy Lovatt)

Non-participating members: Councillors Debby Hallett, Dudley Hoddinott, and Reg Waite

Officers: Steve Culliford, William Jacobs, Steve Bishop, Paul Howden, Clare Kingston, Ian Matten, and Anna Robinson

Capita representative: Darren Keen

Number of members of the public: Nil

Sc.43 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

Councillor Sandy Lovatt had sent his apologies for absence and appointed Councillor Holly Holman as his substitute.

Sc.44 Minutes

The committee received the minutes of its meeting held on 4 August 2011. However, the committee amended the minutes and asked that an updated copy was brought to the next meeting for signing and adoption.

Sc.45 Declarations of interest

None

Sc.46 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The chair reported that as an efficiency measure, paper copies of the committee's agenda would no longer be posted to committee members unless they specifically requested a

copy. Instead, the agenda would be emailed to all councillors and paper copies would be available at the meeting. Councillors indicated on a form which option they preferred.

The chair also reported that, further to the last meeting, details for the costs and savings of the fit for the future round one were tabled for councillors' information. Any questions on this should be directed to the strategic director.

Sc.47 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee

Councillors noted that Councillor Dudley Hoddinott wished to address the committee and ask questions on the financial services contract and the recycling and waste collection contingency plan items. The chair agreed to take these questions during these items.

Sc.48 Financial services contract monitoring

The committee considered report 35/11 of the head of finance, which reviewed the 2010/11 performance of the council's financial services contractor, Capita.

The chair invited Councillor Dudley Hoddinott to address the meeting. Councillor Hoddinott believed that the report highlighted a number of instances where communications could be improved. Although some customers reported excellent service, others believed the service was not so good. In particular, customers had difficulty in speaking to the right person and did not always have confidence in the responses to their questions or found correspondence difficult to understand. Councillor Hoddinott asked what actions had been taken to ensure customers spoke to the most appropriate person and what was being done to improve both verbal and non-verbal communication?

Capita's representative, Darren Keen, could not identify the reasons for these customer responses to Capita's survey. He reported that Capita trained its call centre staff and monitored calls. No issues had been discovered. As for written communication, Capita was bound by the law on what had to be included in its letters and forms; it had no choice on the wording.

The committee then considered the officer's recommendations to rate Capita's performance for each service. The following points were made:

Revenues

- The number of complaints about the revenues service were believed to be approximately the same as the previous year. However, the chair asked for the officers to confirm this to the committee members outside of the meeting
- The Citizen's Advice Bureau no longer had concerns over the bailiff service
- The committee was pleased to note an improvement in rating the revenues service from 'good' in 2009/10 to 'excellent' in 2010/11.

Benefits

- During 2010/11 the Audit Commission qualified the council's 2009/10 benefit subsidy grant claim, criticising the council's benefits arrangements. Initially, this meant the council would be penalised £52,998 on its subsidy grant claim for breaching the local authority financial error threshold. However, the council challenged this penalty and following further audit work, the Department of Work

and Pensions had agreed to waive the penalty but the final decision rested with the Secretary of State. The outcome was awaited.

- In terms of old debts owed to the council, these were paid off over time by a court order arrangement. There was a cost to the council but it had reduced its bad debt provision. The officer undertook to provide the committee with the level of bad debt written off last year.
- Most of the overpaid benefits were due to fraud or benefit recipients not advising the council of their changed circumstances. However, the accuracy of administering benefits claims had improved.
- The committee was pleased to note an improvement in rating the benefits service from 'weak' in 2009/10 to 'good' in 2010/11.

Exchequer services

- Councillors noted that exchequer services covered accounts payable and accounts receivable.
- The committee was pleased to note an improvement in rating the exchequer service from 'fair' in 2009/10 to 'excellent' in 2010/11.

Financial management system

- Since writing the report, Capita and the council had agreed to improved training in the report writing capabilities of the financial management system.
- The committee was pleased to note an improvement in rating the financial management system from 'weak' in 2009/10 to 'good' in 2010/11.

Concessionary fares (assisted travel)

- The committee was pleased to note an improvement in rating the administration of the concessionary fares service from 'good' in 2009/10 to 'excellent' in 2010/11. The officers reported that they had recommended a 'good' rating as the council had received no complaints about this service but could not justify awarding a higher rating as they had no data to support this.

The committee congratulated Capita and the council's contract monitoring officer on the significant improvements made during 2010/11. The committee agreed with the officer's assessment of Capita's performance and agreed with the ratings set out in the report.

The committee noted that the financial services contract was closely monitored by the Ridgeway Shared Services Partnership Board. The board consisted of two Cabinet members from the Vale and two from South Oxfordshire District Council. It met at least every quarter and sometimes monthly to monitor Capita's performance. The committee thanked the board for its work.

RESOLVED: To recommend the Cabinet member for finance to agree the financial services contractor's performance ratings for 2010/11 as follows:

- Revenues – excellent
- Benefits – good
- Exchequer services – excellent
- Financial management system – good
- Concessionary fares – excellent

Sc.49 Recycling and waste collection contingency plan

The committee considered the draft recycling and waste collection adverse weather plan. The committee recalled that at its meeting in June 2011, the Cabinet member responsible for waste and recycling had offered to bring the draft adverse weather plan to the Scrutiny Committee in October. He invited the committee to comment on the draft plan.

Before opening the debate, the chair invited Councillor Dudley Hoddinott to address the committee and ask his questions. Councillor Hoddinott welcomed the adverse weather plan but believed it did not take into account the varying number of days of disruption to different parts of the Vale. In particular, there was a greater disruption to the service where hills were covered in snow. He asked how the plan would differentiate between those areas where the disruption might be for one or two days, and areas and specific roads where the disruption was likely to be much longer? He also asked how would the council communicate information on plans to collect waste from people living in these specific areas?

The Cabinet member for waste, Councillor Reg Waite, accepted that the council's communication systems had been poor during the worst weather before and after last Christmas and New Year. The council must learn from this. He hoped the plan would overcome the problems experienced last winter and that communications would be significantly better. The plan was to improve communication to district councillors and parish councils. There was also the text messaging service open to the public to register to receive text updates to their mobile telephones. He urged all councillors to promote this scheme. This should cut down on the emails and calls to the council during this time. There were also plans to park refuse vehicles overnight in areas closer to the operator's home during the worst weather, rather than requiring drivers and operators to travel to the vehicle depot each morning. The County Council had offered each parish one tonne of road salt to clear local roads. Parish Councils were co-ordinating this. He was pleased that the contractor, Biffa, had shown a positive attitude to plan for any adverse weather this coming winter.

The committee thanked the Cabinet member for inviting the committee to comment on the draft adverse weather plan. The committee made the following suggestions:

- There should be an owner for the adverse weather plan, and a date and version number.
- To further improve communication, information could be sent via local village or town newsletters, neighbourhood watch co-ordinators, local radio, local television news programmes, and advertisements in local newspapers.
- Paragraph 1.1 should include district councillors in the list of people to alert to impending adverse weather.
- Paragraph 3.2 should specify that the forms of communication set out in that paragraph would be used to communicate to those parts of the Vale where there were specific problems, such as where there were roads on hillsides.
- Paragraph 4.2 should include emptying dog waste bins.
- Paragraph 4.3 in the second row of the table in the last column, clarify that the Biffa disposal site at Sutton Courtenay is not open to the public but if opened on Saturdays, it would allow Biffa to dispose of waste from collection vehicles.
- Appendix 1 regarding the text alert system, ensure that text messages specify the day and date of the next collection.

- Appendix 1, remind residents that the garden waste scheme will be suspended over the Christmas/New Year period.
- During the worst weather, the council should promote the use of 'bring sites', the local recycling points near shops and community centres for recycling.
- There should be communication to the public after the winter weather was over, detailing what happened and why.

The committee noted that the communication and waste teams and their managers were now located in the same office space, which should improve communication while the adverse weather plan was in operation. The committee welcomed this. The Cabinet member reminded the committee that the plan was a living document, and he would welcome any further suggestions outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED: To request that the officers and Cabinet member for waste take the committee's suggestions into account before finalising the recycling and waste collection adverse weather plan.

Sc.50 Scrutiny work programme

The committee reviewed its work programme for the remainder of 2011/12. Following the councillors' briefing sessions in September, at which councillors identified some areas for possible scrutiny, the chair suggested that these fitted into two categories:

- Items that required a councillor briefing
- Other items that required more detailed work

The committee highlighted some suggestions from the list that could form part of the committee's work programme. These included an update on the work of Science Vale UK, a review of brown bin billing, and a look at the monitoring and policing of section 106 agreements. The committee asked the strategic director to consider the best time to schedule these in the work programme. The committee also suggested adding in a review of the new grounds maintenance contract for September 2012.

With regard to the draft budget 2012/13 item that was due to be considered by the committee in December, the strategic director offered to report back to the next meeting of the committee on the plan for budget consultation this year.

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

None

The meeting closed at 8.50pm