

# Minutes

of a meeting of the

## Scrutiny Committee

held at 7.00pm on Thursday 22 March 2012

at the Abbey House, Abingdon



### Open to the public, including the press

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

Non-participating members: Councillors Reg Waite and Richard Webber

Officers: Marcia Beviere, David Buckle, Steven Corrigan, Ian Matten, Anna Robinson, Margaret Reed, Jennifer Thompson

Others in attendance: Simon Chown, contract manager, Biffa Municipal Limited

Number of members of the public: Nil

### **Sc.85 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from Councillor Jason Fiddaman. There were no substitutes.

### **Sc.86 Minutes**

**RESOLVED:** to adopt the minutes of the committee's meeting on 16 February 2012 as a correct record and agree that the chairman signs them.

### **Sc.87 Declarations of interest**

None

### **Sc.88 Urgent business and chair's announcements**

Councillor Halliday reported that the debt from uncollected payments for the garden waste service had reduced to £33,000. Officers proposed writing off about £35,000 of debts accrued before April 2011 as it was neither cost effective to pursue these nor clear whether these were real debts or errors in recording. The audit committee were monitoring the debt collection and current systems for managing the garden waste service.

The committee asked for a briefing note about the garden waste service setting out the outstanding debt, the proposed write-offs, and the breakdown of these by category before the next meeting of the committee.

## **Sc.89 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee**

None.

## **Sc.90 Election review**

The committee considered report 89/11 of the head of legal and democratic services setting out progress on the implementation of the scrutiny committee's recommendations on the review of the 2011 local elections.

The committee noted that:

1. Compensation payments received from Paragon in respect of failings in the 2011 elections had to be allocated against the correct expenditure and had taken some time to apportion.
2. The elections team were currently running a parish council by-election for Vale and a district council and a county council by-election for South. A different printer had been appointed for these by-elections. Agents and relevant district councillors would be alerted when the postal votes were issued and a sample of recipients would be asked to notify the council when they received their postal vote.
3. A number of recommendations from the independent review had been implemented. The returning officer was content to involve councillors in the process up to the point where their role as the elected representatives on the council stopped. The public viewed the council as responsible for delivering the elections, and councillors could legitimately oversee the use of council resources and procedures.
4. Count supervisors would be instructed in a consistent and clear method of counting split votes.
5. Letters had been written to the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Electoral Commission, and local Members of Parliament as requested. No responses had been received but any response would be reported to the committee and the task group.
6. A project plan and frequent team meetings would be in place in good time before the police and crime commissioner elections. The risk registers would be updated for this election. However detailed planning was not possible at this stage due to a lack of national guidance about the conduct of these elections. The procurement for the printing for this election would be carried out later in the year and would specify information to be reported to the returning officer at each stage.

The committee commented that:

- Communication with agents and candidates was crucial. Agents should be encouraged to pass information on to candidates. Candidates and agents could make matters worse by being uninformed but could assist the elections team in notifying the team of problems and explaining solutions and steps taken to the public.
- The task group would oversee the process and resources allocated to elections and recommend the level of staffing, IT, resources required. It would also recommend a plan for an adequate communications strategy.

The committee noted the report and progress in implementing the recommendations, and asked for an update on the work of the task group at a future meeting.

## **Sc.91 Recycling and waste contract monitoring - performance review of Biffa Municipal Limited in 2011**

The committee considered report 90/11 of the head of corporate strategy setting out the performance of Biffa Municipal Limited (Biffa) in providing the household waste collection, street cleansing, and ancillary services in the Vale of White Horse for the period 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011.

The committee noted the points below:

### **Street and environmental cleanliness - litter and detritus**

1. About 800 inspections of street cleanliness were made throughout the district over the year. Officers and the contractor's representatives inspected some sites together. Sites were selected at random from each type of street and were not reinspected. If a site fell below the expected level it would be visited a few weeks later, after cleaning, to check if the standard was now acceptable. Some roads had been inspected before being cleaned.
2. Residents were surveyed via the council's citizens' panel and it was not possible to work out if the unsatisfied residents came from a few areas or more widely across the district.
3. Standards of cleanliness had improved on taking over the contract but were now static.
4. The failure to meet the targets did not reflect the standard of cleanliness. In the town centres this was generally good and had improved, and an increased number of roads were cleaned.
5. Roads scheduled to be cleaned were cleaned roughly every eight weeks, allowing for variations to deal with high visibility or litter-prone areas.
6. Un-cleared and overgrown drains were creating problems for street cleaning as the build up of debris in the drains increased the accumulation of litter and detritus. This would be mentioned to the Oxfordshire Waste Partnership for action.
7. There was a balance needed between targets which were realistic and achievable and those which were unrealistic; and the scoring system needed to be fair and reasonable given that the district had a reasonable standard of cleanliness. Biffa suggested an independent inspection to set a benchmark level of cleanliness.
8. Currently Biffa co-ordinated community litter picks but had no records of regular litter picking carried out by parish councils.
9. Extra street sweeping was carried out in spring and autumn when blossom and leaves fell.

Councillors commented that it was better to keep the targets stretching rather than easily achievable to give the contractor something to strive for.

### **Waste collection and garden waste collection services**

10. Refuse crews have clear instructions as to how to collect and replace wheelie bins. Crews worked to demanding targets and could be penalised for missed bins, misplaced bins, obstructing the footpath or driveways, and for leaving lids open.
11. The chips in each bin allow crews to know which bin belongs to which property, problems arise when missed collections are reported because a bin is being used at the wrong address.

12. Biffa was supplied with a list of garden waste bins which should not be collected and this should have been supplied to crews. Garden waste bins were not chipped or necessarily labelled and it could be difficult to tell which should be collected. When, as in spring, few bins were presented, crews were less able to differentiate. It was not cost-effective to supply a coloured sticker each year for a paid-for bin, and there were practical problems in collecting unpaid for bins.
13. The recycling rate for this review period was 69.3 percent and the council was aiming for 75 percent this year. However this was very high and while more recycling of more items could be encouraged there was a limit to any increase. An analysis of residual waste had shown that not much more could be recycled under the current scheme although further analysis is to be carried out.
14. Increasing information about recycling, additional bring banks, and increased garden waste collections could increase the overall recycling rate. Reducing food waste would reduce the amount of waste overall but may also reduce the recycling rate.
15. The rejection rate of material presented for recycling was about four per cent, which is extremely low.

### **Call centre**

16. Information had been collected about customer satisfaction with the call centre but was not part of this review.
17. Call centre staff were responsible for logging and passing on job requests and had expected timescales for completion of requests; however they were not responsible for ensuring these were carried out.

The cabinet member reported that some areas were improving and action plans for improvements in other areas were in place. Parish councils would be informed after roads in their parish were cleaned. Better technology on Biffa's vehicles would reduce problems.

Councillors commented that managers could test the call centre staff to make sure they had the correct information in response to more irregular or unusual queries.

The committee:

- welcomed proposals to raise the need to clean gullies and drains with the members of the Oxfordshire Waste Partnership;
- recommended that Biffa's contract manager find out which parish councils regularly litter pick and clean areas within their parishes and co-ordinate Biffa's and the parishes' cleaning schedules as far as possible;
- recommended that the cabinet member press for improvements to litter and detritus removal, and dog mess collection standards; and
- congratulated Biffa on their excellent waste and recycling collection services.

**RESOLVED:** To recommend that the Cabinet Member for Finance assess the overall performance of Biffa Municipal Limited in providing the household waste collection, street cleansing, and ancillary services in the Vale of White Horse for the period 1 January to 31 December 2011 as 'good'.

## **Sc.92 Scrutiny work programme**

The committee noted the proposed work programme attached to the agenda.

The committee asked for detailed information about the current and proposed schemes for community grants when the report was presented and noted that this may be delayed; and  
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for information about the numbers and categories of people on the housing list and the housing stock and turnover when the report on housing allocations policy was presented.

### **Sc.93      Dates of next meetings**

The committee agreed that the next meeting would be held on Wednesday 18 April 2012.

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

None

The meeting closed at 9.30pm