

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Cabinet



held on Friday 11 August 2023 at 10.30 am
in Meeting Room 1, Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon, OX14 3JE

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Cabinet members: Councillors Bethia Thomas (Chair), Sue Caul, Andy Foulsham and Helen Pighills

Officer: Steve Culliford (Democratic Services Team Leader)

Remote attendance:

Cabinet members: Councillors Debra Dewhurst and Debby Hallett

Officers: Patrick Arran (Head of Legal and Democratic), Nigel Bower (Housing Delivery Manager), Andrew Busby (Head of Development and Corporate Landlord), Suzanne Malcolm (Deputy Chief Executive – Place), Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services), Tom Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Richard Spraggett (Strategic Financial Manager), and Mark Stone (Chief Executive)

21. Apologies for absence

Councillors Mark Coleman, Andy Crawford and Neil Fawcett had sent their apologies for absence.

22. Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the public and exempt minutes of the Cabinet meetings held on 23 June and 3 July 2023 as correct records and agree that the Chair signs them as such.

23. Declarations of interests

None

24. Urgent business and chair's announcements

Cabinet noted the evacuation arrangements in the event of an emergency.

25. Public participation

None

26. Recommendations and updates from other committees

Cabinet received updates from the Joint Audit and Governance Committee and the Joint Scrutiny Committee, together with recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee on the grant funding affordable housing item (minute 27 refers).

27. Grant Funding Affordable Housing

Cabinet considered the head of housing and environment's report on grant funding affordable housing projects.

Members recalled that the Housing Delivery Strategy, adopted in November 2022, had recommended a refresh of the policy and criteria used to assess grant applications for affordable housing projects. The scheme was funded by using commuted sums received from Section 106 agreements, generated by housing developments in the district.

The report set out proposed changes to the policy, which aimed to increase the delivery of affordable housing and to make the grant application process easier and more transparent. The Cabinet member for affordable housing, infrastructure, development and governance believed that the criteria within the policy should not be too prescriptive. The main aim was to ensure the Section 106 funds were spent, and the corporate objective of delivering affordable housing was met.

The revised policy had been considered by Scrutiny Committee on 31 July 2023. The committee had made the following suggested changes:

- Strengthen wording in the report to emphasise that the money for bids is ring-fenced
- Paragraphs 20-21 in the report – clarity requested on the spend limits for full Council approval
- Paragraph 3 of the policy – clarify wording to explain this applies to housing sums only
- Paragraph 4 of the policy – amend wording to explain the delivery of affordable housing and that affordable housing in perpetuity was a requirement
- Paragraph 4 of the policy – distinguish between essential and desirable. It was confirmed that this was in line with the Housing Strategy
- Wording requested in the policy to explain that a report on the assessment of the bid would be shared with the applicant
- The criteria from page 2 of the policy could have more explanation, without being overly prescriptive as this may deter some bidders
- Please remove undefined acronyms or provide explanation, as it is a public facing document
- Please clarify what “low cost” housing means. Officer to add wording on asking bidders to explain what the resident's experience would be for utilities/low cost housing
- Make “low running costs” a markable criteria. This would include non-carbon utilities such as water
- Clarity needed on what “adding social value” is
- On page 3 of the policy, the committee believes that the wording suggested for South Oxfordshire on gas boilers being given a rating of zero should be replicated for Vale, but with reconsideration of the wording. The committee is keen to balance encouraging bids with the commitment the council has to tackle the climate emergency, noting that officers are intending to not exclude potential properties that already have gas boilers installed, but will work with bidders to move towards efficient

zero carbon options that have low running costs. If gas boilers scored low, this is one of many criteria and should not deter bidders if the wording is considered carefully

- Check whether bidders need to provide architect's drawings at this stage

Cabinet considered it was important to update the policy to encourage applications for grant funding to provide more affordable housing in the Vale. Cabinet thanked Scrutiny Committee for its suggestions, which were accepted with one exception. Members did not support the suggestion that gas boilers should receive a zero-rating in the criteria. Instead, the council should encourage applicants to provide affordable homes with green energy solutions. The wording in the policy should be strengthened to reflect this. Each application would be assessed against the various criteria and officers would make a recommendation to Cabinet. If members approved the application, Cabinet would make a recommendation to Council to approve the necessary funding.

To allow officers to incorporate the changes suggested by Scrutiny Committee, the Cabinet member proposed a second recommendation to authorise the deputy chief executive – place, in consultation with the Cabinet member for affordable housing, infrastructure, development and governance, to make any minor amendments and corrections to the policy.

The policy needed to reflect the council's corporate priorities but should not exclude anyone. Members suggested that the website should promote good case studies to further encourage applications.

The Cabinet member reported that the policy would be reviewed within one year to ensure that it was operating effectively.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) adopt the revised Affordable Housing Section 106 Commuted Sums Grant Policy for the awarding of S.106 grant funding to affordable housing projects in the district; and
- (b) authorise the deputy chief executive – place, in consultation with the Cabinet member for affordable housing, infrastructure, development and governance, to make any minor amendments and corrections to the policy.

The meeting closed at 11.08 am

Chair:

Date: