

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee



held on Thursday, 2 November 2023 at 7.00 pm
at Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon OX14 3JE

This meeting was streamed live. Access the recording here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMUTm0UTLcM>

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Katherine Foxhall (Chair), Judy Roberts (Vice-Chair), Hayleigh Gascoigne, Ron Batstone, Oliver Forder, Robert Maddison, James Cox, Kiera Bentley and Debby Hallett

Officers: Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance), Emma Turner (Enforcement Team Leader), Adrian Duffield (Head of Planning) and Andy Roberts (Communications and Engagement Manager)

Guests:

Cabinet Members: Councillor Andy Crawford (Finance and Property) and Councillor Diana Lugova (Planning and Development Management)

Present online:

Officers: Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services), Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive for Transformation and Operations), Richard Spraggett (Strategic Finance Officer)

Guests: Cabinet Member – Councillor Lucy Edwards (Communications)

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Amos Duveen. Councillor Debby Hallett was present as substitute. Apologies were also received from Councillor Sally Povolotsky. Councillor Kiera Bentley was present as substitute.

2. Urgent business and chair's announcements

There was no urgent business, but the chair ran through some housekeeping matters.

3. Declaration of interests

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Minutes of the last meeting

Resolved:

Committee agreed that the minutes of the Vale scrutiny committee meeting held on 31 July 2023 were a correct record, and the chair will sign them as such.

It was suggested that consideration should be given to the link between scrutiny and Cabinet, and a suggestion was made on forming a recommendation tracker. Chair explained that she attended Cabinet meetings to update them on scrutiny feedback, it was also added that Cabinet minutes were available. Cabinet receive a summary of recommendations and comments under an agenda item called "recommendations from other committees". Democratic Services would take this discussion into consideration.

5. Work schedule and dates for all Vale and Joint scrutiny meetings

The committee considered the work programme.

6. Public participation

None.

7. Financial outturn report 2022-23

The financial outturn report 2022/23 was presented by Cabinet member for Finance and Corporate Assets. Head of Finance and Strategic Finance Officer were also present to answer questions.

The papers for consideration contained summarised schedules of revenue and capital expenditure for 2022/23; they also presented an explanation of the significant variances against budget. This was presented by service. All the figures in the report were preaudit and may be subject to change following the conclusion of the audit of the statement of accounts.

Below is a summary of the discussion.

- A member asked about the slippage on capital expenditure? – can we budget in year? It was explained that over the last two years effort had been on revenue. We are now challenging capital.
- A member questioned whether there was mitigation in higher interest times.
- Cabinet member was asked how he saw the council's immediate financial health? Were there immediate concerns? Can scrutiny help? Cabinet member explained that reserves ran out in five years' time. It was meant to be this year, so this is an improved position. We cannot increase council tax even though we are a low-cost council. We were in much better shape that 4 years ago.
- Planning corporate transformation on page 11 – overspend on planning service – why was this? It was explained that this was actually an underachievement of income, the market cooled down for building so the department did not achieve the expected. The next budget will reflect this expectation.
- Corporate transformation underspend – why was this underspend? Deputy Chief Executive for Transformation and Operations explained that there was a one-off budget about 750k carried forward for Planning, Customer Services, and grounds maintenance projects. There had been profiling of 16 projects, they had not been static and in 22/23 we chose to bring forward planning and changed the profile. IT systems will show in the budget in 23/24. A dedicated team was set up in 22/23 and naturally this takes time to settle in.
- It was explained that refugee homes budget will show in 23/24 – this will be a housing department budget.
- Development and Corporate Landlord – carparking fees were adjusted to make up shortfall? What is this? Cabinet member explained that this was looking forward to expected fee changes next year. Some discussion was had regarding the rationale for raising fees and what attracts people to use the carparks.
- Grounds team overspent – it was expected that the transformation project would resolve this overspend.

Resolved:

Committee noted the report and the better financial position. They commented that they hoped to see more detail on the Beacon's financial position in the options report that was due in December.

8. Planning enforcement update report

Cabinet Member for Planning and Development Management introduced the Planning Enforcement update report. The Enforcement Team Leader and Head of Planning were present to answer questions.

The report sought Scrutiny Committee's comments on the progress made in the last year in reducing the on-hand enforcement case work to enable improvement in the performance of timely responses to investigations.

It was explained that there was continued improvement in the service. The addition of two members of staff, now permanent, had created consistency in the on-hand reduction.

The report was for the period of September 2022 – September 2023. The team reduced open cases from 229 to 161. There were external factor complications (such as Covid backlog where staff couldn't site visit). In April, two new staff were employed, creating a consistent 6-week reduction figure as a result.

The team had not achieved the target of having decisions made on 80% of new cases within a 6-week period from the initial application, but they were heading in the right direction.

Comments were as follows:

- Page 22 graph 1 – members asked about the difference between on-hand and open. Officers confirmed open is a new case.
- A member said they would have liked a last year's comparison and costs. Officer added that triage deals with varying case difficulty. Lots of people complaining doesn't mean a case was dealt with quicker – planning harm was the measure for triage.
- Officers confirmed that there is currently no national target for enforcement, but the planning reforms has proposed some; waiting for Govt confirmation. Other councils had contacted the enforcement team on what they were achieving and how, this was a testament to the improvements made.
- Members commended the team for producing a clear report.
- Stuck old cases – members asked officers to maintain pressure on those.
- Biodiversity net gain – chair asked officers if they could put the onus onto developers and landowners. Officers responded that they needed steer from government and that this would be a major piece of work in future, liaising with the climate team. Officers added that they had proactive working themes where they focus on a particular area of work for a period of time.
- In response to a question, officers confirmed that some planning officers from the wider team were viewing the enforcement cases and joint working / discussing.
- Parish questions on enforcement – officers confirmed that they've done a round of parish training on planning. Officers have not received any complaints about the process over the last 6 months. People are understanding that the enforcement team cannot provide updates during the investigation, but the team will update when the investigation has concluded.
- Members asked whether drainage was part of enforcement. Officers explained that drainage was not always a breach of planning control – but the team did work with the drainage team, Thames Water etc if the enforcement team were made aware of a drainage case. Usually, County Council were alerted first because it tended to be a highways issue.
- Members were keen to see the success communicated – could a comms message be released?
- Discussed proactive work (noting lack of resource for now). Officers responded that not every reported breach required action – residents should talk to one another and consider whether it was worth taxpayer's money to report, or can it be resolved by neighbourly discussion.

Resolved:

Committee noted the report and congratulated the enforcement team on the report and on the ongoing improvements.

Comments to Cabinet:

1. Committee were conscious of the on-hand caseload, and they wanted to see a downward curve in cases still open.
2. Committee would like the enforcement team to challenge on KPIs, to reach beyond their current success.
3. Committee discussed biodiversity net gain and would like to see this highlighted in enforcement work.
4. Committee would like to see a communication on improvements to the service - to inform residents and improve public image of enforcement.

9. Consultation and engagement annual report

Cabinet member for Communications presented the report, supported by the Communications and Engagement Manager. The Head of Corporate Services was also present online.

In the last financial year, the Consultation and Engagement team conducted 22 consultations, launched 21 feedback forms, supported four neighbourhood plan consultations and five conservation area appraisals. The new annual report highlighted the key findings from each project and the actions the councils have taken from the outcomes of these engagement activities.

The report showed the variety of engagement the councils carried out and demonstrated how consultation and engagement findings have led to changes in council services.

Below summarises the main discussion of the committee.

- Members found that the inclusion of district demographics data in the report was very useful.
- Members asked how were people asked? And what were the different platforms for consultation? Officers responded that the team used software called SmartSurvey and had obtained lots of email addresses particularly during Covid, when online surveys became the default method. The officer present suggested that the team needed to get out and about which was resource intensive but effective.
- The Joint Local Plan (JLP) consultation was approaching, and the team had plans to consult residents in cafes and schools . The officer felt that the JLP is likely to have an impact on college age residents as future homeowners – therefore we needed to try and reach these groups. Facebook and direct mail were successful methods.
- A member asked whether we can benchmark against other authorities to assess the effectiveness of resources used and their impact? The officers responded that we needed to define what was a successful consultation. The South and Vale team was comprised of three members of staff in addition to the manager. We do need to see how much each consultation costs in terms of staffing costs, yet it was thought to be more efficient than outsourcing. Response rate was a crude measure and not necessarily a sign of quality consultation exercises.
- It was noted that for The Beacon consultation project, the team reached out in person to users of the facility and not just via social media.
- The impending JLP and Corporate Plan consultations will use the teams new, more interactive software called Citizen Space.

- A member queried a governance review where only 5 people replied – in response the officers responded that some topics only affect a few people hence a smaller response rate.
- A member asked were we ready to respond to varied answers of those we only start reaching now? (underserved residents).
- A members suggested a Youth Council as an engagement method – officer added that they were not keen on consulting the identical group of people each time. The team continued to look at best practices for example, West Oxfordshire District Council created a good charter for young people.
- Other suggested methods from members were consulting businesses on the high street, a Citizens Assembly, telephone polls and residents' panels.
- The officer added that we had a large consultation mailing list, and that a large proportion of work was for statutory consultation.
- Taxi tariffs consultation – a member asked whether all consultations were in this report? Officer confirmed that yes, all of the last financial year except ongoing neighbourhood plan activities (there were two currently). Officer added that there were plans for some light-touch activities such as polls.
- It was explained that using Tiktok was too intensive with little to no traction.

Resolved:

Committee noted the report and commended officers for a well written and clear report.

Committee's main comments to Cabinet were:

1. Officers need to include their award nomination in the report.
2. Advertise/promote this report and include it in the data hub.
3. What were the consultation team's learning points? Committee would like to see a formal look back at lessons learned in future annual reports.
4. Platforms – committee would like to see all the platforms available for the team to use for consultations. Committee discussed potential development of a framework of criteria and benchmarking against other authorities, although mindful of the team's capacity. Could a criteria for 'what a successful consultation looks like' be developed between Cabinet and the Consultations team?

Chair thanked all officers for their work.

The meeting closed at 21:00

Chair:

Date: