

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Joint Scrutiny Committee

held on Monday, 25 March 2024 at 6.30 pm

at Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon OX14 3JE

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Members:

South Oxfordshire District (SODC) Councillors: Leigh Rawlins, Jo Robb, and Ed Sadler

Vale of White Horse District (VOWHDC) Councillors: Katherine Foxhall (co-chair in the chair), Andy Cooke, Ron Batstone, Andrew Skinner and Judy Roberts.

Officers: Mark Stone (Chief Executive, South and Vale), Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer), Nicola Wyer (Didcot Garden Town Team Leader) and Jayne Bolton (Infrastructure and Development Manager)

Cabinet members: Councillor Robin Bennett (Development and Regeneration, SODC), Councillor Sue Caul (Affordable Housing, Infrastructure, Development and Governance, VOWHDC), Councillor Sue Cooper (Environment - SODC) and Councillor Mark Coleman (Environmental Services and Waste - VOWHDC)

Online attendance:

Officers: Paul Fielding (Head of Housing and Environment), Scott Williams (Environmental Services Manager), William Maxwell (Waste and Recycling Project Manager).

Council Leaders Councillor David Rouane (SODC) and Councillor Bethia Thomas (VOWHDC)

Sc.32 Chair's announcements

Chair explained that scrutiny recommendations were now being sent as a separate report to Cabinet. Therefore, scrutiny committees would be including this report in their future agendas. This would be a standing item where committee would receive any updates available on the recommendations that were made by the committee. It will be a method for scrutiny committees to monitor the impact of their recommendations and comments and it was welcomed by chair and the committee.

Sc.33 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Stefan Gawrysiak (SODC) and Alexandrine Kantor (SODC).

Sc.34 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting on 29 January 2024 were agreed as a correct record, and the chair will sign them as such.

Sc.35 Declaration of interests

None.

Sc.36 Urgent business

None.

Sc.37 Public participation

None.

Sc.38 Work schedule and dates for Joint scrutiny meetings

Chair updated committee that progress was being made with officers on planning a meeting with Environment Agency and Thames Water. Members were asked to contact co-chair Councillor Stefan Gawrysiak, to provide scoping ideas.

On the Integrated Care Board (ICB) item, it was previously confirmed by Scrutiny Lead officer that this item was best placed initially with the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC). Our representatives at HOSC were Councillor Paul Barrow (VOWHDC) and Councillor Katharine Keats-Rohan (SODC). Both members had been contacted and had confirmed that the ICB will be discussed at HOSC on 18 April at 10am. Chair encouraged members to register to attend or speak if they wanted. Chair also welcomed comments to the co-chairs (Katherine Foxhall and Stefan Gawrysiak), who would feed the comments to the HOSC.

Resolved:

Members agreed that the transformation update would move from the May Joint Scrutiny meeting to the July meeting, to allow time for the governance structure to be embedded in practice.

Sc.39 Waste Vehicle Purchasing Strategy

The report was introduced by Cabinet member for Environmental Services and Waste (VOWHDC). Cabinet member for Environment (SODC) was present to answer questions.

Officers present online to assist with questions were Head of Housing and Environment, the Environmental Services Manager and the Waste and Recycling Project Manager.

The report was produced to inform joint scrutiny members of the current issues facing the councils in modernising and sustaining the waste and street cleansing operational fleet, and to outline the process that officers will use for the future procurement of new vehicles. The report was intended to explain the mechanism by which officers would assess the market and select the best vehicles to complete the work required. Committee were welcomed to provide comments.

Cabinet member referenced an update circulated to committee, which was as follows: “Officers have submitted a proposal for Ministry of Transport funding, through Innovate UK’s Transport Decarbonisation Demonstrators fund, to carry out an initial trial of around 12 weeks of an Electric Refuse Collection Vehicle (eRCV), in partnership with an external logistics optimisation software company and an eRCV manufacturer. There is no comparable software currently available on the market and given the national challenge of how to decarbonise rural waste collection fleets, we believe the proposal has a strong chance of success. Given there would be a backup truck available, that would ordinarily be in use on the trial route, the risk to the councils in ensuring continuity of service is low. The project is likely to commence in June, with the operational trial beginning in the autumn. It aims to develop a software tool to optimise waste collection routes for electric vehicles by considering:

- journey lengths
- cumulative load weights
- geographical factors such as hills, main roads, urban environments
- optimum battery size, accounting for weight of batteries vs. permissible total load (26 tonnes)
- Numbers of bins able to be emptied each day.

Regardless of the trial’s outcome, the councils will be able to utilise this data, and that which we already share with other Councils, to make informed decisions regarding the potential to decarbonise future waste collection operations. A successful trial would enable the councils to lead the way for rural Local Authorities facing the challenge of decarbonising their waste collection fleets.”

The chair welcomed the report and opened the meeting up to committee questions.

- Clarification was given from Cabinet member on electric vehicle capacity for charging. It was explained that officers were planning ahead and futureproofing – the whole fleet could not be swapped out for electric vehicles at this time and changes would be a gradual process.
- A member asked about the consideration being given to maintenance of vehicles and what was possible.
- It was suggested that depot location was key and it needed flexible fuel storage.
- A member asked about the timeline over two years – how would major changes (such as technology, or depot location) mid-timeline be factored in? Cabinet member explained that each year it would be assessed as to which vehicles would need replacing. It would be a rolling programme reflective of the budget. Environmental Services Manager explained that gateway points were built into the process, as with all Council processes – a business case would be built after securing funding through the capital programme and would represent the final gateway.
- A member raised a point about the added weight of electric vehicles on the roads, and it was clarified that the total weight would be the same but the vehicles would carry less refuse if electric. Some vehicles were used for accessing narrow roads etc and any replacements would consider the parameters required for a particular route.
- Discussed geographical distances in Oxfordshire and the issues faced for electric vehicles on rural routes. Cabinet member added that the current technology doesn’t yet meet our needs and there were storage issues, however the strategy enables us to plan ahead to review in a year’s time.
- Paragraph 15 – a member asked about prioritisation of steps. It was confirmed with officer advice that the wording needed adjustment to make it clearer. Value for money was a statutory requirement.
- A member asked for clarification on why the leasing option was not considered currently? Cabinet members explained that it was currently more expensive, and leasing companies where we had less leverage would give us the vehicles they wanted to give rather than the best vehicles for our purposes. Leasing would still be considered at annual review.
- Hydrogen fuel was discussed and the fact that there were very few charging stations in the country.

Committee members noted the report and put forward the following comments summary for officers and Cabinet members:

- Confirmation was sought that the Councils standard approach to business cases, with review points along the way, would be used, noting that there were legal requirements to assess all expenditure on the latest information available at the final decision point.
- Paragraphs 15 and 16 to 20 needed to be relooked at to avoid contradiction of procurement factors.
- Think about maintenance of vehicles during procurement (issues such as depot location and frequency, vehicle routing, size of bins).

Officers and Cabinet members were thanked for their contributions.

Sc.40 Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan update and next steps

Joint Scrutiny was asked to review and provide comments for Cabinets on the Didcot Garden Town delivery plan, the draft Didcot Wayfinding Strategy, the draft Didcot Green Infrastructure Strategy and their proposed delivery approaches. Present in the room to introduce the report was Cabinet member for Development and Regeneration (SODC), and Cabinet member for Affordable Housing, Development, Infrastructure and Governance (VOWHDC). Officers present were the Infrastructure and Development Manager and the Didcot Garden Town Team Leader.

This was the first on-the-ground delivery of projects for Didcot Garden Town. In 2022 the project programme was reviewed and condensed to make sure the programme was deliverable and identified all responsible bodies to ensure accountability. The delivery plan goes through regular review by the Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board (DGTAB). Financially, the money appears mainly with SODC because Homes England funding was initially funded in this way, however the district boundary between SODC and VOWHDC was through Didcot, so it was a shared project. The draft Didcot Wayfinding Strategy would improve signage in the area and encourage active travel, giving distances to landmarks. The draft Didcot Green Infrastructure Strategy would help implement green infrastructure needed for a fast-growing community.

Main comments from committee were as follows:

- A member suggested reflectors on signs where lighting was not possible. This could encourage active travel and give reassurance to people using these areas at night.
- A member felt the signage was very well thought out. Praise was given to using metric measurements for distances, as it was felt that most people used this.
- Regarding design motifs – it was confirmed that the motifs would be unique to neighbourhoods, but the signage would be the same apart from the motifs.
- A discussion around graffiti - Cabinet member stated that the aim was to encourage long-term community stewardship as a Garden Town principle and ensure upkeep of assets.
- It was confirmed that the signage would be a single-phase replacement, and the removed signage would be recycled.
- A member suggested defibrillators – an officer felt that they could look at mapping this as an additional piece of work.
- Braille was suggested, and officers confirmed they would consider this in the design process.
- A discussion was had around liaising with other stakeholders in the area regarding clutter. Officers suggested that they can build on existing contacts.
- Page 71 of the Arkwood report (Green Infrastructure, page 146 of the agenda pack) – a member asked about the potential for North-West Didcot to have a country park allocation. Could biodiversity net gain receipts for this fast-developing area be allocated locally? Cabinet member added that this could be in Phase 2 to establish the area of influence. Officer added that the funding for the current phase was to get smaller projects off the ground.
- A member asked about signage for the skatepark.

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- Rain gardens – considering recent flooding, can this be accelerated as a project? It was responded that it might be something to raise at DGTAB.
- How were decisions made on headline and non-headline projects and how was momentum kept? Was there money for officers to bid for funding? Cabinet member considered that there was existing resource for bidding, and there was a bid writing team. Priorities were reviewed by DGTAB where all the partners were involved.
- The report explained what funding was committed in the delivery plan, and officers confirmed that further reports would come forward as other projects emerge.

In summary, Joint Scrutiny Committee put forward these comments for consideration:

- Members endorse the use of metric measurements throughout signage.
- Signage: members suggested reflectors, lighting and braille to be factored into design
- Country parks: At the next phase, can DGTAB members look into large scale nature parks, referencing the area of influence.
- Rain gardens: Can this project work be accelerated considering the local flood issues this year. Liaise with DGTAB and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) as the lead flood authority.
- Timetable for active travel projects can be further informed by Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), noting that OCC are the lead transport authority.

Officers and Cabinet members were thanked for the contributions, co-chair also thanked committee and closed the meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.25 pm