

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Joint Scrutiny Committee

held on Monday, 15 July 2024 at 6.30 pm

At Abbey House, Abingdon

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Members:

South Oxfordshire District Councillors (SODC): Stefan Gawrysiak (co-chair in the chair), Sue Cooper (sub), Leigh Rawlins, Jo Robb, Ed Sadler

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

Cabinet Members: Councillor Mark Coleman (Deputy Leader and Member for Environmental Services and Waste)

Officers: Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services), Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer), Corrine Ede (Interim Transformation Lead), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance), Paul Fielding (Head of Housing and Environment), Lucy Kennery (Waste Projects Officer), Louise Brown (Environmental Services Technical Team Leader), William Maxwell (Waste Projects Manager)

Also present online to participate:

Cabinet members: Councillor Sam Casey-Rerhaye (SODC, Corporate Services)

Officers: Scott Williams (Environmental Services Manager)

Sc.1 Chair's announcements

Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting but had no further announcements to make.

Sc.2 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Alexandrine Kantor, and Councillor Sue Cooper was in attendance as a committee substitute.

Sc.3 Minutes of the last meeting

Members of the committee agreed that the minutes of the meeting on 4 June 2024 were a correct record, and the chair would sign them as such. This included a set of confidential minutes, of which no one raised any matters to discuss in confidential session.

Sc.4 Update on previous recommendations from Joint Scrutiny Committee

Members noted the update.

Sc.5 Declaration of interests

None.

Sc.6 Urgent business

None.

Sc.7 Public participation

None.

Sc.8 Work schedule and dates for Joint scrutiny meetings

Committee noted the work programme and the added meetings for managing the committee's workload.

Sc.9 Biffa annual performance report 2023

The report was introduced by the Cabinet member for Environmental Services and Waste for Vale of White Horse District Council, Councillor Mark Coleman. Councillor Sam James Lawrie, Cabinet member for Environment for South Oxfordshire District Council was unable to attend. Officers supporting were Environmental Services Technical Team Leader, Head of Housing and Environment, Waste Projects Officer and Environmental Services Technical Team Leader.

Members asked questions on the performance report:

- Fly tipping: why was there an increase? It was responded that some people drive through the area to fly tip. It was hard to understand unless we get to prosecute / have evidence. An officer confirmed that the cost was part of the contract but passed back to us. Sometimes it was people fly tipping black sacks near to public bins, not just large bulky items, which is the usual impression of fly tipping.
- A member highlighted an issue raised by a resident of electricals being thrown into the main compartment of the waste vehicle. It was an issue of a hired vehicle having no separate cage. Biffa representative confirmed that they will investigate these occurrences if given the detail of the incidents.
- Officer confirmed that more detailed questions were being asked when members of the public raised street cleansing as an issue, to make sure we get better detail of what the real issues were. The ownership of certain street cleaning assets were more complex and the public would not necessarily know if it was a council responsibility or not.
- Recycling plastic film – currently only in supermarkets. The Cabinet member responded to this. It could be part of household recycling in the future depending on government decision, but currently residents need to take soft plastics to supermarkets. They currently count as contamination in council recycling and it would cost money to start taking those. Head of Environment added that the timings and planning required would take longer – communications to residents, checking if Edmonton sorting facility can handle the film, and the expense.
- Call centre wait times – a member queried the lower rating. Biffa representative answered that the situation was better now, with added members of staff in the call centre.

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- A member would like to see the background of the survey respondents, to see who was replying. For example, a parish council single response versus a single resident. An officer responded that it goes to single residents, not to councils. GDPR issues means that they could only get data for the first part of a post code.
- Paragraph four – agreed review framework. As a scrutiny committee, how do we review the framework? Can we review this? Was the same format suitable for different contracts? Head of Service did explain that the current contract extension was measured in a different way, but the member questioning the framework questioned whether a one-size-fits-all framework was used, as there would be different needs. This could be a future item for Scrutiny.
- Paragraph 69 – KPIs including climate objectives. A member questioned the impact of changes in climate targets on Biffa KPI's. Cabinet member responded that this would be a question for Climate committees, as this report was to assess the 2023 performance of Biffa and its current KPIs.
- It was confirmed that surveys were open to all residents, and the communication push from the officer team was discussed.
- Table one page 16 on recycling rate. Do we remove more garden waste than other councils, and should we measure against others. Cabinet member explained that authorities can choose what they offer at present. He discussed the need to see waste levels reduce, and discussed high recycling rates, and how lower recycling could indicate reusing and less waste generation, which was the ideal.
- Discussed packaging (card) and click and collect services to reduce waste.
- Emptying public litter bins was included in the survey, for the bins the council collected. The results of the survey (includes street cleansing) would be reviewed with Biffa to see where to monitor.
- A member questioned the council satisfaction being fair. Was this being improved? It was responded by Head of Service that this was for 2023. Now in 2024 we had a contract extension, and closer working to monitor that. It was confirmed that closer working between the council and Biffa meant improvements in the working relationship.

Members voted in favour to accept the officer's recommendation on Biffa contract performance for 2023.

RECOMMENDATION

Joint Scrutiny committee considered Biffa Municipal Ltd (Biffa) performance in delivering the household waste collection, street cleansing and ancillary services contract for the period 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023 (2023 calendar year) and made comments before a final assessment on performance is agreed.

Sc.10 Waste resources and street cleansing strategy

Cabinet member for Environmental Services and Waste (Vale) introduced the report. Officers supporting were the Waste Projects Manager, Environmental Services Manager and the Head of Housing and Environment.

The strategy was not final, and scrutiny views will be built in before formally going to Cabinet in September. Members can send comments to officers up until 22 July. Committee asked questions in the meeting as follows.

- Page 58: summary of national government changes. A member discouraged pale type on documents and requested bigger labels and boxes. A member suggested an acronym glossary.
- A member asked whether smaller shops could be included as an exception to commercial.
- Member discussed the split of bins for recycling
- Praise was given for deposit reduce scheme, bring and take events, glass removal

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- 321 collection strategy (this would be a potential consideration if central government allowed it). It was felt by a member that this might cause some reaction from residents. Head of Service felt that people get used to it over time with preparation. He also explained how the strategy was to encourage involvement from everyone, we all need to play our part in waste reduction. Another member showed support for the 321 strategy and felt that case studies would be available to show that it does work
- Consideration should be given to size of households who can't help creating more waste – so may have overflowing bins by comparison to smaller households.
- A member asked about bulky waste straight to landfill (reference page 69 of the pack). An officer confirmed that electricals were recycled. Sofas (POTS) needed incineration. The rest was landfill (less than 1%). We do encourage reuse and reduce
- Can we lobby government to label all material, to show what can be done with it. Officers added that when the set recyclable materials were named by government, all councils across the country will be obliged to recycle, and this will include labelling. Members asked can we influence government policy as part of the strategy?
- Page 73 - success targets, how did we arrive at the figures. An officer explained that the government target was 65 percent recycling rate by 2030. We were 5 percent above this. A member asked whether we should be ambitious, and move to 70 percent? Officer explained that extra 5 percent was harder to hit. Another member expressed a differing view that we should increase recycling rate but remove numbers. The cabinet member added that meeting the 70 percent target was not desirable – he hoped we would be reducing and reusing, hopefully with the waste deposit scheme. We want waste per household coming down – not increase in recycling (as this implies more consumption and not reusing).
- Can we liaise with other council departments, can we liaise on events and use licensing powers to stop waste created at events etc.
- Page 75, regarding roadside litter. A member asked if we could trial CCTV / ANPR to catch those littering/ fly tipping
- Waste sacks for those unable to use wheelie bins – have other options been considered for blocks of flats etc? Members discussed options such as large communal bins and examples seen elsewhere.
- Officers welcomed suggestions to improve the capture of food waste.
- Can we have (post-2026) some pilots on bin configuration.
- A member raised the issue of edible food in food bins, we need to help educate on using food and not just throwing it. Can we be a zero-waste council(s)?
- What markets locally were there for recycling (sorting)? It was suggested that this would be looked at for the post-2026 contract.
- A member asked can we ask county council to put a bid in, (with reference to Fix My Street), to help direct residents when reporting issues. For example, was the issue for water or sewage? Or fly tipping? To help direct people to the correct organisation.

Committee listed their main points and formed their recommendation, with members voting in favour.

Joint Scrutiny Committee considered the draft joint Waste Resources and Street Cleansing strategy and made comments before a final strategy is presented to Cabinet for decision. The committee welcomed the report and recommended the following for consideration by Cabinet:

1. Make sure the font is clear on a readable background colour
2. Prepare people for change – education, preparation and communication
3. Suggestion of making an acronym glossary (from page 15 of the report)
4. Should we keep recycling figures or focus on reusing figures? Overall waste reduction targets were deemed more important than recycling rate.
5. Working across council teams – can we include our targets within licensing for events, planning, procurement etc?

6. To tackle fly tipping and roadside litter, members suggested ANPR, and asked can viable options be investigated for this issue?
7. Committee would like to show the aspiration to be a zero-waste council.
8. Requested investigation into recycling (sortation) locally before sourcing elsewhere.

Sc.11 Transformation programme update

The report was introduced by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Environmental Services and Waste for Vale of White Horse District Council, as Cabinet member for Policy and Programmes (Vale) was unable to attend. For South Oxfordshire District Council, Cabinet member for Corporate Services was present online to answer questions. The Head of Finance and Interim Transformation Lead were present to support, as well as the Head of Policy and Programmes and Head of Corporate Services.

The programme was initially IT developments to prepare for exiting an outsourced service contract. This had developed into other areas, to look for ways to make services more efficient and save money where possible. This report presented a summary of the programme refresh.

Cabinet member for SODC explained we were looking at objectives we were trying to achieve:

- Greater speed, less slippage
- Achieving greater impact
- Quicker progress on projects rather than stalling for perfection
- Budget saving aims
- Culture change – keep moving in the direction of moving things quickly but with the right governance in place to minimise risk

Head of Finance explained that he was satisfied that the budgets were prudent and robust. To maintain that we make allowance for inflation, but not non-inflationary pressures. However, we can deal with the unexpected in a timely manner with a prudent budget. We were unsure on government funding as the government had just changed. We had planned for £100k savings per council (annually, cumulative) and the transformation team was made permanent. The aim being to make efficiencies and not reduce services. Our obligation to best value duty (making continuous improvements) was key.

Interim Transformation Lead provided a short presentation on the refreshed programme.

The committee considered the content of the refreshed Corporate Transformation Programme and the plans for its further development over the coming months. Committee made comments and asked questions.

1. Budget – a member felt that the scale of what was required for transformation to deliver was huge. The member considered that housing strategy and potential for council housing should be considered. The member wanted to see timelines for these projects listed, the example given was Ocella milestones and costings. It was discussed with cabinet member and officers that milestones were being developed next, and the Head of Finance agreed that transformation was key as we would likely need more than £100k savings. A lack of transformation was a key missing aspect in failed councils. This initial stage was about culture change and new ways of approaching transformation.
2. A member asked how this would be communicated to departments regarding the culture change. Head of Corporate Services explained that there were people within teams to support this. Corrine added that it would likely be project by project basis. An example was given of the customer services merge 12 months ago – recently the teams had been changing how they operate and think, being more creative with a crossover of skills.
3. How can scrutiny help with lessons learned (waive scrutiny call-in examples). Committee discussed failing early, in order to intervene rather than a project failing or stalling too late

for the governance process. Officers should come to a realisation quickly if a project was not working. A member suggested that fail fast, with cultural values would work.

4. Can we say “no surprises” as a culture change, over “fail fast”.
5. Would like headline target dates as soon as possible, and costings.
6. More thought around terminology of failing fast considering our work as a council.
7. Ensure corporate memory of success and failure as well.

Recommendation:

Joint scrutiny committee noted the content of the refreshed Corporate Transformation Programme and the plans for its further development over the coming months.

Committee commented that they wanted to see headline target dates asap and costings for projects. It was asked that recognition be given to potential larger financial burden.

Members considered the private sector terminology “failing faster” and recommended that thought be given to this terminology, to consider appropriateness for a council.

Sc.12 Exclusion of the public

Not required

Sc.13 Confidential minutes of the last meeting

Not required

Sc.14 Updates on previous recommendations to Cabinet - Confidential item 04-06-24

Not required

The meeting closed at 8.58 pm