

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee



held on Wednesday, 2 October 2024 at 7.00 pm
at Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon OX14 3JE

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Committee members

Councillors: Katherine Foxhall (Chair), Judy Roberts (Vice-Chair), Ron Batstone, Oliver Forder, Hayleigh Gascoigne, Robert Maddison and Eric de la Harpe

Officers: Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer)

Cabinet members: Councillor Andy Foulsham (Policy and Programmes)

Also present:

Committee members

Councillors: Debby Hallett

Officers: Simon Hewings (Head of Finance), Anna Winship (Strategic Finance Manager), Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive – Transformation and Operations), Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes)

Cabinet members: Councillor Andy Crawford (Finance and Property Assets)

1. Chair's announcements

None.

2. Apologies for absence

Councillor James Cox gave his apologies. Councillor Debby Hallett was present online.

3. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2024 were agreed as a correct record, and the chair would sign them as such.

4. Declaration of interests

None

5. Urgent business

None

6. Public participation

None

7. Work schedule and dates for all Vale scrutiny meetings

Committee noted the work programme. Chair highlighted that a scope had been prepared for 'Council Housing Approach' and would be added to the work programme.

8. Corporate Plan Annual Performance report 2023-2024

Cabinet member for Policy and Programmes introduced the report. Head of Policy and Programmes was online to support the item.

Committee considered and noted the annual report. The main points from their discussions for the Cabinet member to consider in future were:

- It was considered that the summaries were a good feature
- Members asked for further work on reducing jargon. A member asked for a glossary or clickable links to definitions
- It was asked - how do we make links from the plan overview and detailed policies?
- How do we use narrative information to quantify objectives?
- Introduce more SMART targets
- Infographics
- How we use RAG ratings – how do we monitor green ratings, was green really a measure of success? How did the RAG rating vary from last year (trends)? Head of Service added that officers were working on this. A member suggested that items could be marked completed or add links to show final outcomes and successes.
- We have two more quarterly reports to wrap up the 2020-24 Corporate Plan, how can this tie in with the budget cycle. A member asked about the finalisation of the plan period and what the RAG ratings meant when the plan was in its final period. Cabinet Member explained that officers were using software such as Power BI to assist. Head of Service added that the Corporate Plan was now working in parallel to the budget.
- Make clear who the plan's audience included / was aimed at, to inform experts and non-experts alike and ensuring accessibility.

Resolved: Committee noted the report and officers were thanked for their work.

9. Budget scene setting

Cabinet member for Finance and Property Assets and the Head of Finance were present online to introduce. Also present online was the Strategic Finance Manager.

The purpose of the report was to set the scene for this year's budget setting process to be carried out by officers, with appropriate member input, including the proposed timetable for activities and future cabinet reports to meet the requirement for officers to propose a revised base budget, reflecting the previous decision of council. Head of Finance described the key themes.

In response to a query, Head of Finance explained what was meant by member challenge. He explained that it was a line-by-line exercise with portfolio holders.

On page 56 a member questioned that proposals for corporate plan were slimmer and asked if the new corporate plan was planned to be a cost saving. The Cabinet member explained it would be a more focussed plan rather than a cost saving.

The Cabinet member explained to committee that the Corporate Plan was delayed in order to staff the Joint Local Plan (JLP) work and confirmed that the Corporate Plan would align with the budget - there was a delay from the JLP being given temporary priority.

On the transformation programme, it was explained by the Cabinet member that the programme was to make efficiencies, not to generate income. This programme was brought to Joint Scrutiny in the form of an update report on 15 July 2024.

On page nine, bullet point two, a member asked about the deletion of vacant posts, and it was suggested the wording was not clear.

On base budgets, finance officers explained they were a couple of weeks behind, but the base budget challenge had already started. Progress was ahead compared to the previous year.

On paragraph 20, a member asked about the approach to borrowing. Why would we need to borrow and when? The Cabinet member explained that treasury income reduced after release of many Section 106 funds for schools to Oxfordshire County Council (OCC). The review was to understand the extent to which we might need to borrow in future. It might not be needed soon, but it was important to review.

Resolved:

Committee decided to note the contents of the report.

10. Financial outturn report 2023-24

Cabinet member for Finance and Property Assets and the Head of Finance were present online to introduce. Also present online was the Strategic Finance Manager. Head of Finance gave a brief run through of the main report aspects.

The Cabinet member added that in table one, the net expenditure was less than expected, due to investment income overachieving beyond what was budgeted for. This was not expected to continue for long. There was an increase in expenditure that members could question by service area. The Cabinet member explained that he was keeping track of changes and he welcomed questions from committee.

The main points of the committee discussion were:

A member asked for an explanation of the contingency line in Table 1: The Strategic Finance Manager explained that this was mainly for the incremental and inflationary pay award, considering the vacancy factor, and in-year expenditure unbudgeted for.

Regarding service charges paid at Abbey House (paragraph 20), the Strategic Finance Manager explained that the billing was overestimated. A reconciliation was carried out for the overbilling that was now fully reconciled. The Cabinet member explained it had been resolved. The finance team were supporting the strategic property team regarding billing to help ensure this is not repeated.

Members were informed that in-year budget monitoring was assisting in checking that we were accurate on budget.

Regarding page 69-70, appendix three: on explanation of variances, a member asked whether we can have wording added to this item. An officer explained that areas of slippage had been explained but could be elaborated on.

Officers and the Cabinet member explained slippage on the decarbonisation work. There needed to be reprofiling of projects to fit and commit to keeping the funding as per government specifications.

On the Garden Town projects funding, officers would reply to an email from the councillor querying the spend.

Regarding paragraph 20, members suggested that there should be further scrutiny of tenant service charges and overbilling. Members asked about overbilling and what steps were taken to resolve this and the lessons that were learnt. Head of Finance explained that the finance team was working to support the property team regarding the overbilling. Head of Finance queried whether it was a Joint Audit and Governance Committee (JAGC) role, and it was agreed that the best process to look at this should be ascertained and brought back to committee chair.

Resolved:

Committee resolved to note the overall outturn position of the council as well as the individual service areas.

Committee raised concern regarding overbilled service charges to tenants and noted that this was being resolved. Committee agreed to request the Head of Finance to look closer at service charges in order to understand the issue, and report back to the Chair. A decision would then be taken on whether a further report was necessary and whether that should be presented to Scrutiny Committee or to Joint Audit and Governance Committee.

The meeting closed at 8.58 pm

Chair:

Date: