

Sc.15

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT THE GUILDHALL,
ABINGDON ON WEDNESDAY,
17TH DECEMBER, 2008 AT 7.00
PM

Open to the Public, including the Press

PRESENT:

MEMBERS: Councillors Melinda Tilley (Chairman), Jim Halliday (Vice Chair), Matthew Barber, Andrew Crawford, Yvonne Constance, Jenny Shepherd, Tim Smith, Laurel Symons, Reg Waite and Chris Wise.

SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS: Councillor Julie Mayhew-Archer

NON MEMBERS: Councillors Jenny Hannaby, Jerry Patterson and Tony de Vere.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

OFFICERS: Steve Bishop, Alice Brander, William Jacobs, Claire Litchfield, Mike Mackay and Tim Treuherz

NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC: 0

sc.27 NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Committee noted that Councillors Joyce Hutchinson and Julia Reynolds had sent apologies for absence and that Councillor Julie Mayhew Archer was in attendance as a substitute.

sc.28 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2008 were adopted and signed as a correct record.

sc.29 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

sc.30 URGENT BUSINESS AND CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed the Members of the Executive who were in attendance at the meeting. She stated that she was concerned whether the Committee would have enough time to consider the budget proposals in full, given the other items which were on the agenda. She suggested that an additional meeting of the Committee could be arranged in January if necessary to consider the budget fully.

The Committee agreed that if the budget proposals were not given enough time at this meeting, that a further meeting could be called in January.

SC.31 STATEMENTS AND PETITIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None.

SC.32 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None.

SC.33 REFERRALS UNDER THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PROCEDURE RULES OR THE BUDGET AND POLICY FRAMEWORK PROCEDURE RULES

None.

SC.34 SERVICE AREA HALF YEAR REPORTS

Members had each been allocated service area for consideration.

Contracts and Procurement

Councillor Constance commented that she had read the report and had spoken with the Deputy Director and had no concerns to report.

Environmental Health

Councillor Symons reported the tables on page 27 of the report showed an overspend of more than 50%.

Commercial Services

Councillor Hutchinson was not in attendance at the meeting.

Planning and Community Strategy

Councillor Crawford commented that there was not much to concern him, however he could not see any reference to planning enforcement. He had noted that the planning department had been affected by the economic downturn.

Councillor Halliday commented again that the interface areas between legal and planning, such as section 106 agreements and planning enforcement were not addressed.

Organisational Development – Contact Services and Communications

Councillor Smith commented that he had considered the report and had been pleased to note that staff sickness levels had reduced.

Organisational Development – Organisational Change

Councillor Waite commented that the report had been well written and that he was satisfied with the content.

Organisational Development – Human Resources

Councillor Wise was satisfied with the report.

Democratic Services

Councillor Shepherd had nothing of concern to note.

Legal Services

Councillor Halliday commented that he was pleased to note that the team had enjoyed a number of recent successes. He was disappointed however that there were items which were outstanding from the Service Plan, in particular the establishment of regular meetings with client departments so as to be able to provide a more responsive service. He advised that this was important, particularly in respect of planning enforcement.

Housing and Community Strategy

Councillor Tilley was satisfied with the content of the report.

Finance

Councillor Barber commented that overall he was satisfied with the report and that Officers should be congratulated on a number of notable successes. He questioned what the current position was in respect of the Vale's interest in Landisbanki.

The Strategic Director confirmed that the Local Government Association (LGA) was handling negotiations on behalf of a number of local authorities who had investments with Landisbanki. He advised that the feedback from them was positive and it was hoped that most, if not all of the investment could be recovered, although there were no guarantees at this point. He advised that as a result of current economic problems the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the LGA had issued advice and clarification on accounting rules. He reported that at present there were no operational difficulties and the Vale was not experiencing problems in using a tighter group of borrowers.

SC.35 CORPORATE GOVERNANCE REPORT - SECOND QUARTER

Members received and considered the Corporate Governance Report for the second quarter.

One Member commented that in Appendix D, relating to sickness and turnover he had noticed that Contracts and Procurement stood out from the other service areas for quarters 1 and 2 with a figure of 1.92 average days lost. It was reported that this could

be explained by the fact that there had been three cases in the department of long term sickness, two of which had now been resolved.

SC.36 INITIAL BUDGET PROPOSALS

Councillor Patterson was in attendance at the meeting as the portfolio holder for Finance. He stated that the budget proposals had been published earlier this year, so as to give more time for responses. He advised that the budget assumed an increase in Council tax of 4.99%. He stated that William Jacobs, the Head of Finance and Alice Brander, the Chief Accountant were in attendance to answer any detailed questions.

It was noted that one of the proposals was to charge staff and Members £100 per year for parking permits. One Member commented that she was against this proposal, as it would penalise those who lived in areas with no suitable public transport provision.

It was noted that the proposals contained £319,500 per annum until 2014 allocated for concessionary fares. One Member questioned whether the age of the population should be factored in. Councillor Patterson advised that Officer's estimates had been accepted. The Head of Finance stated that it was difficult to predict the cost of this scheme, he commented that it may be the case that the number of people applying for passes falls off following an initial surge of interest. He stated that the scheme would be carefully monitored and charges had been requested on a monthly basis. It was added that it was possible that the scheme would be moved to the remit of the County Council and there was concern that the amount of the Vale's funding which would transfer to the County was uncertain at this stage.

One Member commented that he had been surprised to see the inclusion of a loan to cover the cost of Parliamentary elections within the unavoidable growth bids for Democratic Services. It was explained that this had been included as a possibility to ensure that funds were available to cover it should it be called. There was also surprise expressed at the timing of the loan given the likely election date.

One Member questioned what the assumed rate of inflation was in preparing the budget, given that it was likely that inflation would be reducing. The Head of Finance advised that the figures had been based in respect of salaries at 2-2.5%. He advised that it was likely that these figures would be revisited, given the current economic climate. The Member agreed that this was a sensible approach.

One Member questioned what Strategy (SB) was. The Strategic Director advised that SB, were his initials. He explained that under this heading sat budgets for corporate core, which included all of the senior management team salaries. One Member commented that it would be helpful if that had been made clear. She then went on to question what the LABGI grant was. It was explained that this was the Local Authorities Business Growth Incentive Scheme which recognised good past performance. Another Member suggested that footnotes would have been helpful, so that this would be clear to members of the public considering the budget.

One Member wished to clarify the proposal in respect of an increase in car parking fees. Councillor Patterson explained that there had been an officer proposal to increase car parking charges by 5%, however this had been rejected.

One Member questioned whether the Government's free swimming scheme had been considered. Councillor Patterson replied that the Vale would not be introducing the scheme as it had not been sufficiently funded and would be very costly.

SC.37 REVIEW THE ACTIVITY OF THE EXECUTIVE

None.

SC.38 RESPONSES OF AND REFERENCES FROM THE EXECUTIVE

None.

SC.39 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC, INCLUDING THE PRESS

RESOLVED

that in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the remainder of the meeting to prevent the disclosure to them of exempt information, as defined in Section 100(1) and Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, to the Act when the following item is considered:

Item Joint Waste Contract

(Category 3 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information.)

SC.40 JOINT WASTE CONTRACT

The Committee received and considered a presentation from the Deputy Director (Contracts and Procurement) relating to the procurement of the Joint Waste Contract with South Oxfordshire District Council.