

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee
held in Committee Room 1, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon
at 2.00pm on Thursday 10 October 2019

PRESENT

Councillors: Alaa Al-Yousuf (Chairman, on election); Martin McBride (Vice Chairman, on appointment); Richard Bishop, Jill Bull, Mike Cahill, Andrew Coles, Owen Collins, Harry Eaglestone, Gill Hill, Dan Levy, Kieran Mullins, Elizabeth Poskitt, Alex Postan and Harry St John

18. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

Consequent on the appointment of Councillor David Harvey as a member of the Cabinet, and therefore no longer being a member of this Committee, nominations were invited for the election of a chairman for the remainder of the civic year. On being proposed and seconded, it was –

RESOLVED: That Councillor Al-Yousuf be elected as Chairman of the Committee for the remainder of the civic year.

19. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 13 June 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

20. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

Consequent on the election of Councillor Al-Yousuf as Chairman of the Committee, nominations were invited for the appointment of a vice-chairman for the remainder of the civic year. On being proposed and seconded, it was –

RESOLVED: That Councillor McBride be appointed as Vice-Chairman of the Committee for the remainder of the civic year

21. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

There were no apologies for absence. Councillor Levy attended for Councillor Leffman and Councillor St John attended for Councillor Ted Fenton.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members or Officers in matters to be considered at the meeting.

23. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

No submissions were received from the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

Prior to the consideration of the next agenda item, the Chairman asked the Group Manager, Commissioning, Claire Locke, to provide an update on the recently established Climate Change Working Group. She delivered a summary of the potential actions which the group had discussed and advised that one of the first areas it had been agreed to look at was Planning. It was recognised that this was a key area that Members could influence from reinforcing existing policy to amending policy to embed Climate Change.

In addition, recruitment to the post of Climate Change Manager was in process, and officers hoped to have someone in post soon.

The Chairman highlighted the recent social housing scheme which had won the Stirling National Prize for architecture, in Norwich and suggested that this may be a suitable site to visit.

24. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2019/2020

The Committee received the report of the Head of Democratic Services seeking consideration of a work programme for the committee for 2019/2020.

24.1 West Oxfordshire Water Day – Tuesday 22 October 2019

The Business Manager for Environment Services, Matt Kirby, updated Members on the forthcoming Water Day. This was the second year the event had been held and a number of organisations were attending, including Thames Water, the Environment Agency, WASP and relevant County and District Officers. Parish Councils had also been invited and all Members were encouraged to attend.

24.2 Open Space Grass Cutting

The Group Manager, Commissioning advised that there had been very little progress on this matter due to a number of factors including a lack of officer resource and difficulties in reaching suitable agreements with Parish or Town councils. It was suggested that this item be removed from the work programme and incorporated into the work of the Climate Change Working Group, which might be able to approach the issue from a biodiversity perspective.

Councillor Coles felt strongly that this was not the best approach and was keen that work continued to progress the scheme, in order to achieve better efficiency for the tax payer. It was also agreed that the wording in the work programme should be amended to reflect the fact that the County Council had reduced funding rather than withdrawn it.

Ms Locke advised that liaison with Parishes and Towns on this matter was very resource intensive and suggested that this time could be better spent focusing on the priorities identified by the Climate Change Working Group.

Some Members felt that one of the difficulties around this subject was identifying land ownership. It was agreed that a link to the Council's mapping system be included in the minutes of the meeting, although Members were advised that the capacity of the system was limited.

24.3 Implementation of Car Parking Strategy

The Chairman queried the dates detailed in the work programme, specifically because they reference a meeting in July which had not taken place. It was noted that this section should be amended. The Group Manager, Commissioning advised that at present the Council provided the enforcement of on street parking on behalf of the County.

24.4 Environmental Regulations

The Group Manager, Commissioning suggested that this item could be removed from the work programme due to the fact that the risks associated with Brexit were being closely monitored by the Management Team and Cabinet via the Corporate Risk Register. It was felt that, should there be any potential impact on Environmental Regulations, these would be reported to the Committee as soon as practicable.

Councillor Coles was concerned by this suggestion as he felt that, as the deadline for leaving the EU drew closer, it was even more important to monitor any changes. Councillor Mullins agreed that as the deadline approached, the risk became more pertinent than ever. It was therefore agreed that the item should remain on the work programme.

24.5 Waste Collection Data

The Committee were advised that there was no routine data to consider due to a resourcing issue within the team. However, the Group Manager, Commissioning would circulate the information to Members in due course.

25. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services, which gave members the opportunity to comment on the Cabinet Work Programme published on 17 September 2019.

25.1 Action Plan to reduce the Council's use of Single Use Plastics

The Group Manager, Commissioning highlighted that the submission of the action plan to Cabinet had been deferred until December 2019. This was partly due to resources, the recruitment of a Climate Change Officer and the recent creation of the Climate Change Working Group.

26. MARKETS UPDATE

The Committee received and considered the report of the Business Manager – Environment Services, Matt Kirby, which updated Members on the current situation relating to markets within the District.

The report had been submitted at the request of Councillor Harvey who had felt that the Witney Market appeared to be somewhat less vibrant as of late. Following a review of the Council's Markets, a report had been considered by the Cabinet in September 2013 and various initiatives put in place. Councillor Coles had also suggested that this work should be extended to give consideration to the operation of the Witney Farmers Market, which also appeared to be in decline.

The report advised that the Council had a responsibility for managing the Charter Markets at Witney and Chipping Norton. There was also an independently operated Farmers Market in Witney which operated on the last Friday of each month, but the Council exercised no control over this.

The Committee noted that Council officers currently collected the fees and ensured the markets were managed effectively, and that significant income was generated by the fees collected from the Charter Markets.

Mr Kirby explained that the administration of the markets was managed by Environmental and Regulatory Services (ERS) but the issue of economic regeneration was not within his team's remit, and that if this was something that Members required, it would need additional funding. He also advised that regular communication with the traders was good and they also wanted the Council to continue providing this service.

Some Members felt that although the farmers markets were managed independently, they could benefit from input by the Council. It was not known if the traders working at the Farmers Market were satisfied with the arrangements.

Officers advised that waste collections at the charter markets were labour intensive, with two collections a day. Ubico had stated that this was an expensive service to provide,

totalling £50,000 per year. Members noted that a report was due to be submitted to Cabinet in due course which would consider removing this service from the market and would provide a saving to the Council.

It was noted that the economic benefits of the markets were great but the potential need to regenerate this could fall to the Economic Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Members thanked Mr Kirby for attending, and it was -

RESOLVED: That the Economic Overview and Scrutiny Committee be requested to consider whether it would wish to recommend the allocation of resource to strategically review and assess the future strategic direction of the markets.

27. DRAFT COUNCIL PLAN

The Committee received and considered the report of the Chief Executive which invited it to consider and make comments on the draft Council Plan for 2019-2023.

The report reminded Members that the Council's extant corporate plan covered the period 2016-19. As such a new Council Plan had been drafted, using evidence and learning derived from a number of sources including the Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken in October 2018. A range of evidence had been reviewed and summarised and was provided in an Evidence Paper, included at Annex 2 to the report. Early preparatory work had included a liaison meeting in March 2019 between the Council's Leader and Cabinet Members and Town and Parish Councils. A further consultative session with Towns and Parishes was planned for 10 October 2019.

The current plan was presented as flat text and was attached as Annex A to the report.

The report also set out the Council's vision across a set of priority themes, as detailed at section 2.5 of the report, and members were asked to comment so that their views and insights could be taken into account in developing the final version of the plan.

The Chairman advised that the report had already been considered by the Economic and Social and Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committees and proposed a similar approach to that taken at the Finance and Management meeting, i.e. that if Members had any comments to make on the draft plan, they forward them to the Committee Services Officer to circulate to the relevant officers.

Councillor Al-Yousuf did note however, that in response to the section advising that the plan was currently presented as 'flat text' that this may be an opportunity to make the document less verbose. He felt that this may assist in reducing its length and would make it easier to digest.

Members agreed that the plan needed to be more action orientated and aspirational, with clearer numbers and dates for the implementation of actions.

Councillor Postan reiterated his comment that the Salesforce system could be developed to create a 'dashboard' for Councillors to assist in their work and help officers work more efficiently alongside them.

It was agreed that any additional comments should be forwarded to the Committee Officer by 12 noon on Tuesday 15 October, for consideration with the Cabinet agenda.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and any comments be sent to the Committee Services Officer to enable them to be communicated to officers, prior to its consideration by Cabinet on Wednesday 16 October.

28. OXFORDSHIRE ENERGY STRATEGY

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager, Commissioning which outlined the Oxfordshire Energy Strategy recently published by the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP).

The strategy had been published on the OxLEP website and was due to be launched during the Autumn.

The report set out the background to the strategy, highlighted its importance and explained how it would support the ambitions of the Oxfordshire Growth Board. In addition, the strategy's delivery plan themes and work streams were highlighted for the Council to consider in the development of the future Climate Change Action Plan.

The Committee was asked to note the strategy prior to its consideration by Cabinet the following week.

Members noted that due to the high level nature of the strategy, the target to achieve zero carbon growth by 2050 was not as ambitious as that set by WODC earlier in the year. In addition, the resourcing aspect had not been confirmed as yet and costings were unknown at this stage.

Councillor Coles was disappointed that there was no reference to divestment in fossil fuels within the strategy.

Members also discussed a variety of options that could have been incorporated into the strategy including the planting of trees and providing housing by using pre-prepared panel housing.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

29. SINGLE USE PLASTICS ACTION PLAN

The Committee received an update from the Group Manager-Commissioning, who advised that the group had not met for a while due to the recent creation of the Climate Change Working Group and the uncertainty as to how these two groups would work alongside each other. However, she assured Members that the work of the group had not stopped.

Officers were due to meet with the Communications Team to develop a strategy to deliver information to staff and the wider community. It was hoped that work could also be embedded in the work of the Climate Change Group.

A number of suggestions were made by Members including re-introducing public water fountains, the 'Refill' scheme, re-using and recycling of print cartridges and the potential to roll out a competition to design a plastic bottle crusher.

The issue of the milk delivery to the WODC offices was discussed and the Group Manager, Commissioning advised that she would provide a briefing note to Members updating them on the current situation.

The Chairman reminded the Committee that, once the new Climate Change Officer was in post, some of the 'easy fixes' could be implemented and robust communication could be rolled out.

Councillor Postan suggested that when working groups made suggestions or asked for work to be completed, achievable completion dates should be provided.

RESOLVED: That the information provided be noted.

30. BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY

The Group Manager, Commissioning advised that she had asked for this item to be included on the agenda as she was mindful that Members had not received an update for a while. She stated that officers were taking positive steps to embed Biodiversity in all work streams and was a common theme within the context of Climate Change.

It was noted that this was an area that crossed over with Planning Policy and should be considered at all stage of development. Officers were aware that Biodiversity was not truly embedded throughout the organisation and it was hoped that the Garden Village project was an excellent opportunity to bring forward a change in culture.

However, it was noted that this may require funding for additional resources.

Councillor St John reiterated his desire to see the inclusion of pollinators throughout the design process and suggested an appraisal of how the Council's own land was managed.

Councillor Coles was pleased that the message was finally catching on and reminded Members that the Council was still not meeting its obligations as set by DEFRA. In addition, he suggested that the Cabinet nominate a 'Biodiversity Champion' in a similar vein to the other champions in existence.

RESOLVED: That the information be noted.

31. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

The Chairman encouraged the Committee to make use of the Members Questions section of the agenda as he felt it could be a useful tool for discussion.

Members noted that the Budget Review was due to be considered at the December meeting.

Councillor Postan suggested that a list of actions agreed and dates be circulated after the meeting to ensure that none of the actions got missed. Officers advised that this could be discussed as an option for each of the scrutiny committees.

The meeting closed at 4.00 pm

Chairman