

COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1ST MARCH 2016

Present:

Councillor Jim Parsons - Chairman

Councillors -

SI Andrews
Julian Beale
JA Harris

RG Keeling
SDE Parsons (until 12.02 p.m.)
NP Robbins

OS.51 SUBSTITUTION ARRANGEMENTS

No substitution arrangements had been put in place for the Meeting.

OS.52 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(1) Member Declarations

Councillor SDE Parsons declared an interest in respect of Agenda Item (9) - Review of Cotswold Water Park Master Plan - because he was a Member of the Cotswold Water Park Trust.

(2) Officer Declarations

There were no Declarations of Interest from Officers.

OS.53 MINUTES

RESOLVED that

(a) the Minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of the Committee held on 1st December 2015 be approved as a correct record;

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 1, absent 0.

(b) the Special Meeting of the Committee held on 9th February 2016 be approved as a correct record.

Record of Voting - for 7, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

OS.54 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman explained that this would be his last Meeting as Chairman of the Committee, having served in such capacity for the maximum three-year period. He wished to place on record his thanks and appreciation to other Committee Members and Officers for the support that they had given him during his term.

OS.55 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

OS.56 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

No questions had been received from Members.

OS.57 CALLED-IN DECISIONS

No executive decisions had been the subject of Call-In since the Committee's previous Meeting.

OS.58 THE COTSWOLD WATER PARK AND REVIEW OF COTSWOLD WATER PARK MASTER PLAN

At the request of the Committee, Mr. Matthew Millett, Managing Director of the Cotswold Water Park Trust, was in attendance and made a presentation to the Committee on the Water Park, the Trust and the review of the Cotswold Water Park Master Plan.

By way of introduction, Mr. Millett drew attention to the extent of the Water Park area, which covered some 40 square miles within Gloucestershire and Wiltshire and comprised over 150 lakes; together with past, on-going and future gravel extraction operations, whereby current extraction rates were in the region of one million tonnes per year and which gave rise to future supplies of between 30 and 50 years. Mr. Millett also reminded the Committee of the national and international significance of the area in terms of wildlife, with the shallow and clear lakes providing a rich and varied habitat.

Mr. Millett provided information in respect of the Cotswold Water Park Trust, a charitable organisation, in terms of governance by trustees, support from staff and volunteers, and a membership scheme open to all; and explained that its key objectives related to education, conservation, recreation, and leisure but set against the need to seek a balance between the competing interests. Given that the Trust only owned a very small percentage of the land within the Water Park (although it had some leasehold interests), its role was very much to seek to persuade, seek to influence and work with other land-owners, all of which would benefit from a clear Water Park Strategy. Mr. Millett also highlighted roles undertaken relating to biodiversity, promotion and education.

Mr. Millett explained that the organisation's current challenges related to funding; Keynes Country Park; Cleveland Lakes; the Gateway Centre; and the future strategy, and he amplified various opportunities and initiatives. Mr. Millett also drew attention to the Cotswold Water Park Vision and Implementation Plan (the Master Plan), which had been commissioned by the former Society in 2007, completed in 2008, and subsequently endorsed by the partner local authorities in 2011. It was noted that many of the issues remained valid, and Mr. Millett highlighted a number of aspects including the aspirations and vision that had been created. It was acknowledged that integration and balance were key to any success.

Mr. Millett provided a brief overview of the developments that had occurred since the approval of the Master Plan, and went on to explain the subsequent review work jointly commissioned with the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England

(CPRE) Gloucestershire, and undertaken by a firm of consultants (Green Balance), to establish whether the Master Plan remained fit for purpose and, if so, what could be done in the next five years. Interviews had been undertaken with a wide range of stakeholders, the findings of which had identified that there was general support for the concept of the Cotswold Water Park (CWP); there was an awareness of the CWP Master Plan but a poor understanding of its actual content and what was trying to be achieved; and there was a variety of perceptions as to what the CWP was for. It had also been established that almost all of the Master Plan objectives remained fit for purpose, although there had been little support for the area to be used as a major sporting venue.

In terms of moving forward, the research had identified three key strands, namely a landscape strategy/action plan; a landscape biodiversity strategy; and an access and rights of way strategy. It was also recommended that some CWP-specific guidance be produced, based on data and research already available, in respect of mineral site restoration; branding and marketing were key; more engagement was required on CWP-wide issues generally, and with local councils on neighbourhood plans; and a new, up-to-date CWP boundary would be beneficial. Mr. Millett explained that the Trust was now evaluating the outcomes of the consultation work, and next steps would include engagement with key stakeholders, input into the CDC Local Plan, and investigation of funding/partnership opportunities/mechanisms.

In response to questions, Mr. Millett explained that detailed costings were not available for the suggested schemes, although 'ball-park' figures had been devised; not all schemes would require significant financial support, particularly if some degree of 'ownership' could be agreed with partners and/or businesses; the Trust did not have a member of staff dedicated to fund-raising; the Trust also needed to address its own operational budget arrangements; National Park status potential was both lengthy and resource-intensive; gravel extraction was subject to normal supply and demand issues; there was largely no regular funding from mineral or accommodation developers; and it was hoped that Keynes Country Park would become a thriving and popular local destination, with proper long-term management. Moving forward, and in an attempt to define a future strategy, Mr Millett hoped that dialogue would continue with the Council.

Members were supportive of the CWP and the desire to enable a strategy that would benefit what was an exceptionally significant and special area. There was considered to be a deficit at strategic and political levels, particularly in relation to co-ordination and future planning. Funding difficulties were also acknowledged.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked Mr. Millett for his attendance, and interesting and informative presentation.

Note:

The Chairman agreed to a brief adjournment of the Meeting at this stage.

OS.59 SUMMARY FINANCE/SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORT - 2015/16
QUARTER 3

The Committee received a report which summarised the overall performance of the Council during Quarter 3 of the financial year 2015/16, with particular focus

on progress towards achieving the Council's top tasks, and efficiency measures; and which also provided information on the Council's capital expenditure, capital receipts and use of reserves.

A Member acknowledged that financial performance was impressive, but questioned whether conservative budgeting and spend meant that additional projects were not pursued.

Continuing concerns were expressed over performance in some areas, particularly in relation to Building Control, the processing of Council Tax and Housing Benefit claims, and the number of long-term empty domestic properties. It was agreed that, if performance remained below target at year end, relevant Officers would attend to provide more detailed information and respond to any questions from Members.

In reviewing performance, a number of Members questioned the way in which measurements were made, suggesting that percentages might be more meaningful than figures, and that trends should be considered instead of, or in addition to, targets. Officers agreed to look into these suggestions.

In response to questions, the Chief Finance Officer explained that the figures within the 'Variance' column of the table within paragraph 2.9 of the circulated report were actual figures as at the end of Quarter 3, whilst the figures within the 'Comments' column were year-end projections; and drew attention to the manner in which sickness absence records were collated.

RESOLVED that the report be noted, and relevant comments be forwarded to the Cabinet.

Record of Voting - for 7, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

OS.60 ELECTIONS REVIEW - UPDATE

The Head of Democratic Services provided a brief update on the comments received as a result of a consultation undertaken with key stake-holders in respect of the elections held in May 2015.

It was noted that the majority of issues raised had resulted from the combination of polls, and were therefore unlikely to apply again until 2019. However, improvements would be introduced where relevant; the experiences from the upcoming Police and Crime Commissioner election and EU Referendum would be evaluated; and best practice would continue to be reviewed. The further work would be undertaken in conjunction with those Members who had been appointed by the Committee to assist with the review.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Record of Voting - for 7, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

OS.61 COUNTY MATTERS

The Committee received updates in respect of Gloucestershire County Council's Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee; and the Gloucestershire Police and Crime Panel.

It was explained that a reply was being pursued in relation to ambulance response times, together with an action plan to address the Council's concerns.

It was also pointed out that the Chief Constable had sought a 2% increase in Council Tax, but that the Police and Crime Commissioner had determined that an increase of 1.24% increase would apply.

OS.62 QUARTERLY DIGEST

The Committee was requested to identify any issues arising out of the Quarterly Digest for future debate and/or action; but no specific issues were highlighted.

OS.63 WORK PLAN 2016/17

The Committee was requested to consider and approve its forward work programme, including the identification of any other matters for possible consideration.

It was agreed that it would be timely to receive a presentation from SLM, the contractor appointed to operate the Council's leisure facilities. In this connection, a Member suggested that the Committee could not only seek information on the success or otherwise of the outsourced operation, but also carry out a review of the management of the gym upgrade project, to ascertain whether there were specific lessons that should be applied in a few years' time when the next upgrade was due, and also whether there were more general lessons on how projects should be run by the Council. Members were invited to submit suggestions for Terms of Reference for such review to Officers, for subsequent presentation to the June Meeting; and it was suggested that a presentation by SLM representatives be scheduled for the Committee's September Meeting.

It was also agreed that a provisional date should be earmarked for any Special Meeting required to review the 2017/18 Budget and associated Medium Term Financial Strategy post-consultation.

RESOLVED that the draft Work Programme, as amended, be approved.

Record of Voting - for 7, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

OS.64 OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business that was urgent.

The Meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m., adjourned between 11.20 a.m. and 11.30 a.m., and closed at 12.10 p.m.

Chairman