

GROWTH & INFRASTRUCTURE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 20 October 2011 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 1.30 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor David Nimmo-Smith – in the Chair

Councillor Anne Purse
Councillor Michael Gibbard
Councillor Pete Handley
Councillor Charles Mathew
Councillor Keith Strangwood
Councillor John Tanner
Councillor David Turner
Councillor Patrick Greene (In place of Councillor Nicholas P. Turner)

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Peter Jones (for Agenda Item 8)

By Invitation: Philip Newbould - OCTAP (Oxfordshire Community Transport and Accessibility Partnership)

Emily Lewis - Community Transport Adviser at ORCC,

Phil Clark – manager of FISH

Pat Chirgwin – manager of West Oxfordshire Volunteer Link-up

Victoria Freeman – Community Transport Association

Andy Stokes – Public Transport Manager at Warwickshire County Council,

Liam Tatton-Bennett, Community First, the rural communities council for Wiltshire,

Nick Small, Northamptonshire County Council,

Officers:

Whole of meeting Liz Johnston, Scrutiny Officer

Part of meeting Martin Tugwell, Deputy Director Growth & Infrastructure (Item 6)

Huw Jones, Director, Environment & Economy (Item 7)
Agenda Item Officer Attending

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting [, together with a schedule of addenda tabled at the meeting/the following additional documents:] and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports [agenda, reports and schedule/additional documents] are attached to the signed Minutes.

35/11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Nicholas Turner, with Cllr Patrick Greene substituting. Apologies were also received from Cllr Roger Belson.

36/11 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE

(Agenda No. 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

37/11 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

Cllr Handley could not support the signing of the minutes of 22 September 2011 as they did not reflect comments in relation to energy saving benefits of changing school terms. The Committee agreed that this should be reflected in the minutes of the last meeting, and that they should only be signed when this had been incorporated. The Chairman agreed and asked for the minutes to be brought back to the meeting in February 2012.

38/11 SPEAKING TO OR PETITIONING THE COMMITTEE

(Agenda No. 4)

There were no requests to speak to or petition the Committee.

39/11 BRIEFING ON THE COUNTRYSIDE SERVICE AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING

(Agenda No. 5)

Due to Officer availability this item was postponed to the meeting in February 2012.

40/11 INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING AND FINANCING

(Agenda No. 6)

Martin Tugwell (Deputy Director, Growth & Infrastructure) updated the Committee on work ongoing to develop the Strategic Infrastructure Framework across Oxfordshire. The Committee reinforced the need to work closely with District and Parish Councils to ensure the best outcomes for residents. Cllr Handley wanted to remind Officers that there needs to be a lot of work with other partners, including the chambers of commerce and businesses to ensure the best use of infrastructure funding. Cllr Purse

wanted clear evidence of biodiversity and the natural environment being considered in future plans.

Cllr Mathew proposed designing a questionnaire for all Councillors so the right partners are contacted in each local area during the development of the Framework. This was supported by the Committee, and Cllrs Purse and Handley in particular wanted to feed into the process. Martin Tugwell agreed to work with the Members named above to ensure Member involvement.

The committee RESOLVED that this should come back to Scrutiny in February.

41/11 COMMUNITY TRANSPORT - Q&A SESSION

(Agenda No. 8)

The Chairman invited the panel to come to the table. The members of the panel were introduced as:

Philip Newbould – officer responsible for OCTAP (Oxfordshire Community Transport and Accessibility Partnership, based at ORCC (Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council)

Emily Lewis – Community Transport Adviser at ORCC, supporting and advising 64 CT schemes in Oxfordshire,

Phil Clark – manager of FISH volunteer scheme at Sonning Common – a car scheme with a minibus for social and shopping trips. Pure charity manned 100% by volunteers.

Pat Chirgwin – manager of West Oxfordshire Volunteer Link-up, a community car scheme with 60 volunteer drivers serving West Oxfordshire.

Victoria Freeman – Community Transport Association, a membership organisation providing legal and technical advice to help develop community transport services.

Andy Stokes – Public Transport Manager at Warwickshire County Council, managing a wide range of community transport projects.

Liam Tatton-Bennett, Community First, the rural communities council for Wiltshire, managing a range of schemes and delivery of the overall CT strategy for Wiltshire and Swindon.

Nick Small, Northamptonshire County Council, responsible for a wide range of transport provision including their new demand responsive service that meets needs formerly met by subsidized rural bus services.

Cllr Peter Jones also joined the committee at this stage as a representative of the Adult Services Scrutiny Committee.

Cllr Nimmo-Smith opened the discussion by asking the Oxfordshire scheme representatives about **problems faced by schemes that relied on volunteers**.

Phil Clark said that FISH in Sonning Common benefited from the fact that the majority of trustees and volunteer drivers have lived in the village for most of their lives, and therefore there is a strong commitment to the local community. They have also been fortunate with funding, including bequests and donations from well-to-do residents. The donations from users of the car scheme enable them to subsidize the minibus. He compared this fortunate situation with other areas with a transient population and a different age profile.

With regard to specific problems, he highlighted the difficulties of operating a bus service, in particular with the complexity of claiming for concessionary fares.

Andy Stokes agreed that it was easier to run volunteer schemes in some types of area than others. In rural south Warwickshire it seems easier, with schemes such as Shipston Link having little trouble in recruiting volunteer drivers. In other areas the county council has felt it needed to put in more funding to provide necessary services, particularly where public bus services were being withdrawn. There was a concern about depending completely on volunteers to provide a basic level of service for everyone's needs.

Nick Small from Northamptonshire echoed this, saying that in affluent areas like South Northants schemes had little difficulty in recruiting volunteers, although some schemes do not want to get involved in the complexity and risk of bidding for a service providing a minimum service level. He added that in Northamptonshire, the lack of sustained support and commitment to community transport has made it difficult for officers to commit to long term funding arrangements.

Progress relative to other local authority areas

Cllr David Turner said he admired the innovation of Wiltshire and the progress they had already made with their strategy. He asked Victoria Freeman how it was that other local authorities were ahead of the game compared with Oxfordshire.

Victoria answered that Oxfordshire is not behind. Initially CTA had been in contact with 76 local authorities, but uptake of consultancy services has been slow. Some local authorities have already spent their DfT grant money, she believes, on things not necessarily relevant to the development of community transport. Others, like Oxfordshire, are thinking more strategically. She pointed out that the grant funding is not time limited.

Recruiting unemployed people as volunteers

Cllr Jones asked whether the volunteer sector used job-seekers, who are entitled to do some voluntary work without losing their benefits. Phil Clark said FISH advertise regularly in the local paper, but in 5 years only one unemployed person has come forward. Patricia Chirgwin said West Oxfordshire Volunteer Link-up was one of only 15 projects that had recently received lottery funding to recruit jobseekers into volunteering. From September, they will be employing someone in JobCentre Plus to do this. She has given talks to JobCentre Plus staff about the value of volunteering experience and how people could be made more aware of opportunities.

However, Nick Small said that it was not always easy to find suitable volunteers from among unemployed people, particularly with the need for CRB checks, and the fact that they may not have the long term commitment necessary to deliver frontline services (they would be looking for paid work).

Setting up a 'Hub' to deal with all transport needs, and consolidate provision

Cllr Jones asked for more information about this type of approach. Nick Small said that in Northamptonshire some parish based minibus schemes have been set up to include delivery of SEN home to school and Social and Community Services, but it has been difficult aligning procurement processes. They are looking at joint commissioning with PCTs, but there are big challenges to align the different regulatory frameworks of different packages of commissioned work. He mentioned Norfolk, which has progressed furthest along this route, although they have been working on it for three years.

Problems for CT schemes in dealing with 'red tape'

Cllr Strangwood asked whether schemes felt this held them back. Phil Clark said that FISH used CTA for advice, but the scheme does not always comply with the absolute letter of the law, and a certain amount of trust is involved (although he did confirm that all drivers were CRB checked). In particular, volunteers should legally be treated as employees, but this is not always feasible in practice. Patricia Chirgwin said that dealing with 'red tape' did take up staff time but they have not lost volunteers because of it. Emily Lewis said that a number of schemes in Oxfordshire have remained informal to avoid having to get involved in red tape.

Nick Small said that proportionately, regulation is a greater burden to voluntary organisations and added that in his view, the Government has failed to address this as part of the Big Society agenda. It is a barrier to entry which makes it difficult to 'seed' new CT schemes.

Vicky Freeman agreed that there were difficulties, but new schemes were appearing. Some local authorities are investing more in helping CT schemes than others, including helping existing schemes by making sure they can compete to win contracts. CT forums can help achieve this. Philip Newbould said that ORCC has provided that service, and added that voluntary groups need help to understand Government and council language.

Philip also added that if any staff are paid, they must receive minimum wage, and this has been a problem for some organisations.

Winter weather

Cllr Strangwood also asked whether CT schemes had vehicles that could continue to operate in snow conditions. Phil Clark pointed out that 4-wheel drive vehicles were not necessarily safe to operate in snow unless they were fitted with snow tyres. He added that FISH do not go out in snowy conditions, due to the safety risk of getting elderly and disabled people from their door into the vehicle. Patricia Chirgwin said her scheme erred on the side of caution and would cancel trips if necessary – very often the appointment the person wanted to get to would be cancelled in any case. Andy Stokes said getting around in snow conditions was an issue for scheduled

buses too, and the ability to travel depended largely on the county's gritting policy. Nick Small said it was sometimes difficult to decide which Northamptonshire village would get a service and which would not.

How to start up new schemes

Cllr Purse asked what was being done to take advantage of any aspirations to start up schemes, and help them become a reality.

Andy Stokes said that in Warwickshire not much was being done to start up new schemes due to budget problems. Pat Chirgwin said that Emily and ORCC had been a great support to all schemes in Oxfordshire. Emily said schemes have tended to start at parish or community group level, or from church groups or Good Neighbour schemes. The West Oxfordshire scheme started off as a FISH scheme.

Nick Small said that in Northamptonshire, many schemes have started as general volunteering schemes, e.g. Thrapston Volunteer Bureau. They succeed more easily where the people involved happen to have a lot of relevant experience (e.g. former experience with a bus operator) and are commercially astute. Organisations like ORCC and Community First can engage strategically with all schemes, large and small, to expand the capacity and provide strategic focus. He added that looking to replace public provision with CT may not always work out well. Liam Tatton-Bennett added that it must be borne in mind that a volunteer cannot be compelled to do anything.

Liam said that when Community First started to build community transport in Wiltshire, there were 15 schemes, and that now there are 67. There is complete coverage of the county, and he feels there is no more potential for new schemes – the focus is now on developing capacity in existing schemes. Community First has a good practice guide, describing how they have worked at community level, involving community led planning, and setting up charities.

Potential for centralization, centralized control and consolidation

Cllr Handley queried whether there should be a national CT scheme. Emily Lewis said that local knowledge is really important, and there is a lot of goodwill at local level, including lots of informal lift giving. Vicky Freeman said she had been working with some local authorities who wanted to centralize CT provision. They have encountered resistance, and it can result in loss of local knowledge and the comfort of users. Phil Clark warned against trying to centralize, but said that small villages could and should work together, because schemes are only really viable for a population of around two to three thousand. In Sonning Common, the scheme covers the local health centre catchment.

Cllr Mathew said he would like to know what the total cost of all 64 schemes was, and what could be set up across the county with an equivalent cost. Nick Small said it was very hard to put an output value on community transport. Emily said the large number of schemes had grown up because they are locally led. Also, the majority of the car schemes receive no council funds at all. Vicky said that in some areas schemes were working collaboratively. Liam Tatton-Bennett said groups sometimes share resources but often do not want to merge..

Insurance

Cllr Handley asked whether getting insurance was a problem for volunteer drivers. Emily said that Volunteering England have secured a pledge from insurers that they won't increase premiums if drivers say they are providing a volunteer driving service. Vicky said that CTA's website lists all the insurers who don't charge an additional premium.

Linking public transport and community transport

Nick Small advised against rushing into new arrangements and said that it can be difficult to resolve the boundary between public transport and community transport. The two must complement one another – public transport meeting the basic needs of all settlements, with community transport offering a more personalised service. Both need to be supported.

Supporting community transport

Cllr Mathew asked what Vicky Freeman felt was the best way for a county council to support the wide variety of community transport schemes. Vicky said she would reply later in writing as there were a number of different options.* Liam Tatton-Bennett and Emily Lewis both said that there were some models which could potentially be rolled out, but they would not suit all schemes and all areas.

Fuel costs

Cllr Green asked to what extent increasing fuel prices were having on services, and whether the Government could be helping. Philip Newbould said that fuel rebate was available to all bus operators including community transport, but not car schemes. However, the tax free amount that volunteer drivers can claim to cover their expenses has recently been increased to 45p per mile (although users would not necessarily want to pay this).

Liam Tatton-Bennett said that Government was proposing to reduce bus operators' fuel duty rebate by 20%. The CTA would welcome support from the county council for their campaign against the reduction.

* Answer subsequently provided by Victoria Freeman:

A very broad question, which a lot of the answers will revolve around funding, a few are listed below;

- *Make funding available to support office costs and co-ordination costs*
- *Provide funding towards fares to reduce the costs to passengers*
- *Help with providing a small accessible vehicle to some organisations who have the capacity*
- *Help with marketing of services*
- *Help and guidance on putting volunteer drivers through the MiDAS MPV scheme*
- *Provide support with back office functions*
- *Set up a car scheme forum with council representation to discuss best practice*
- *Provide clear information on website*
- *Mapping of service areas to identify the current service provision*

Cllr Tanner left the meeting at 12:20pm.

42/11 DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

(Agenda No. 7)

Huw Jones (Director, Environment & Economy) gave the Committee an update on delivering the Business Strategy in 2011/12. This year the Directorate is likely to deliver more efficiencies than planned. This is despite the increased costs in the Highways Contract due to high levels of inflation.

Cllr Tanner left the meeting at 12:20pm.

The Committee received an update on the Capital programme from Arzu Ulusoy-Shipstone (Capital Strategy and Transformation Manager). Although actual spend is lagging slightly behind predicted spend, we are likely to be on track by the end of the year.

Cllr Mathew left the meeting at 1:25pm.

Cllr Greene requested that the presentation be circulated electronically to allow Members to consider issues for future Scrutiny.

43/11 FORWARD PLAN

(Agenda No. 9)

No further items from the Forward Plan were identified.

Cllr Purse reinforced that there were a number of items that should be coming up to meetings shortly, so meetings could last a fully day or start earlier if necessary. Cllr Handley supported the idea, as rushed items don't produce meaningful outcomes.

44/11 CLOSE OF MEETING

(Agenda No. 10)

1:30pm.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing