

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY, 21 JANUARY 2014

Councillors Present: David Allen (In place of Alan Macro), Peter Argyle (Substitute) (In place of Sheila Ellison), Jeff Beck, Brian Bedwell (Chairman), Jeff Brooks (Vice-Chairman), Dave Goff, Mike Johnston, Tim Metcalfe, Garth Simpson, Tony Vickers, Virginia von Celsing, Quentin Webb, Emma Webster, Keith Woodhams (Substitute) (In place of Gwen Mason) and Laszlo Zverko

Also Present: Councillor Pamela Bale (Highways, Transport (Operations), Emergency Planning, Newbury Vision & Deputy Conservative Group Leader), Nick Carter (Chief Executive), Mark Cole (Traffic Services Manager), Caroline Corcoran (Education Service Manager), Jason Teal (Performance, Research & Consultation Manager), Rachael Wardell (Corporate Director - Communities), David Lowe (Scrutiny & Partnerships Manager) and Elaine Walker (Principal Policy Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Sheila Ellison, Councillor Alan Macro and Councillor Gwen Mason

Councillor(s) Absent: Councillor Andrew Rowles

PART I

62. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 10 December 2013 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following amendments:

- Councillor Paul Bryant was present at the meeting and should be noted as such.

63. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Emma Webster declared an interest in Agenda Item 5, but reported that, as her interest was personal and not prejudicial or a disclosable pecuniary interest, she determined to remain to take part in the debate and vote on the matter.

64. Actions from previous Minutes

The Commission received an update on actions from the previous meeting and made the following comments:

- Paragraph 2.2 – A response to this action was circulated to the Commission during the meeting.
- Paragraph 2.3 – The Chairman requested that Members who wished to volunteer to be on the Task Group, make themselves known to their Group Officer.

65. West Berkshire Forward Plan 15 January 2014 to 31 May 2014

(Councillor Emma Webster declared a personal interest in Agenda item 5 by virtue of the fact that her work colleagues were working on item EX2757. As her interest was personal and not prejudicial, or a disclosable pecuniary interest, she determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter)

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The Commission considered the West Berkshire Forward Plan (Agenda Item 5) for the period covering January to May 2014.

Resolved that the Forward Plan be noted.

66. **Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission Work Programme**

The Commission considered its work programme for 2011/12.

The Chairman advised the Commission that recent information had been received in relation to the item on Continuing Health Care. This would be circulated to Members and added to the agenda for the next meeting of the Commission.

Councillor Tony Vickers questioned the focus of item OSMC/12/149, commenting that an holistic view of parking in Newbury town centre had been requested to include resident parking, street parking and car parks. This would not be adequately addressed by Agenda Item 7 on the current agenda. Councillor Webster agreed that a general view of parking arrangements had been agreed, but that it had also been agreed that this would not take place until after existing reviews being undertaken by the Highways department and the Newbury BID.

Councillor Jeff Beck advised the Commission that the Shaw House Task Group was next scheduled to meet in mid-February, and that that this was expected to be the Task Group's final meeting.

Rachael Wardell advised the Commission that a scrutiny proposal was being developed to consider children's social work.

A suggestion for a scrutiny review of the Disability Related Expenditure Policy was circulated. Councillor Quentin Webb requested that Councillor Gwen Mason be invited to provide further detail as to why this suggested had been put forward.

Resolved that:

- Continuing Health Care be added to the next agenda of the Commission;
- Councillor Mason would provide further information relating to the suggested topic for scrutiny – Disability Related Expenditure Policy.

67. **Item Called-in following an Individual Decision on 28 November 2013 and Executive on 19 December 2013**

The Commission considered a report concerning the Call in item ID2715 – Parking Review Amendment 15: On-Street Charging (Newbury), which was approved by the Executive Member for Highways on 28 November 2013.

Councillor Keith Woodhams presented the reasons for calling in this item. Councillor Woodhams commented that the reasons for the item being called in had been set out in the report and he was content for the Executive Member and Officer present to address each point.

[18:45: Councillor Jeff Brooks arrived]

Mark Cole (Traffic Services Manger) provided a response to each of the issues raised as follows:

2.1 (1)

The views of local residents, shoppers and traders have been ignored (see the 1,719 signature petition, and responses from the Newbury BID, Newbury Town Council and those of dozens of local residents, shoppers, and business people).

Response:

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The informal consultation undertaken between 21 January and 1 March 2013 was the period during which the organised petition opposing the on-street charging was submitted. This petition, along with 170 other responses from individuals and representative bodies (FSB, Newbury Town Council, Newbury BID and a petition from post office workers and residents of Goldwell Drive area) were all investigated and given serious consideration following this informal consultation. It was not the case that the views had been ignored and paragraph 3.2 of the July 2013 report (Appendix A to ID 2715) detailed the changes which were made in response to the comments and objections received.

These included retaining the areas in Catherine Road and Link Road for the benefit of parents dropping off children to St Nicholas C of E Junior School and also continuing to provide parking areas for visitors to the various dental and medical surgeries in that area. The 4 hour limited waiting bays on Kings Road West (8 of them) were also retained and these were generally able to provide long-term parking for Post Office shift workers who arrived early, as the restriction commenced from 8am so would enable early morning shift workers to park until midday. Also in Carnegie Road the 1 hour limited waiting was extended to 4 hours thus providing a further 6 spaces for local workers, including postal workers.

The formal consultation which took place between 25 July and 15 August included these amended proposals and as detailed in ID 2715 received considerably fewer objections (only 25). Some of the objections were perhaps prompted by the raised public awareness of parking issues as a result of 'The Barnet Case' which was in the national press in the period immediately prior to the formal consultation taking place.

The proposals were however advertised in the normal manner and significant numbers of formal Notices were erected on the affected streets, along with articles in the Newbury Weekly News and so there was no reason to believe that the public were unaware of the proposals. The relatively small number of objections received during the formal consultation therefore perhaps indicated that the general public held no strong views on the matter, given the amendments that were made and the fact that many towns already include on-street charging as part of their management of parking and it was not an entirely new concept for road users.

2.1 (2)

This does nothing to support the economy of Newbury, and would dissuade shoppers from coming into the town.

Response:

The Officer's view was that the current parking behaviour by road users was sterilising parts of the town and this was not providing adequate turnover of spaces for local traders. Providing a regular turnover of parking space would provide more opportunities for passing trade in particular to stop and this would greatly benefit many of the smaller traders in the town centre.

The argument that shoppers would simply travel to other local towns or out of town retail areas to shop was believed to be spurious and once the general public realise that many of the proposed on-street charging areas included a 30 minute period of free parking there would be a better appreciation that the impact of the changes would be marginal.

Shoppers requiring longer term parking already used the town centre off-street car parks and there was no reason to consider that this would diminish after the proposals were implemented and so would not affect local trade significantly.

Long term parking by commuters and shop workers in some of the outer roads of the proposed scheme where 'Pay by Phone' parking was proposed would have little impact

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on local trade as they were not generally used by shoppers. However the turnover provided in these areas would alleviate the pressure on the town centre car parks in times of high demand.

2.1 (3)

This would cause a displacement of car parking into residential areas.

Response:

The majority of the residential roads adjacent to the roads being considered as part of this proposal were already subject to parking restrictions which should ensure that displacement would be limited. That was not to say that it would not happen, as evidence showed that some commuters or car owners wishing to park long term in Newbury were prepared to park a considerable distance from their destination and walk. It was also within the Council's remit to make 'best use' of the public highway and in many locations the residents themselves commuted away from an area and this provided space for other users. Where this 'non-resident' parking caused a problem however the authority could and would propose additional measures to address the problems raised if required. As with all the Council's parking schemes Officers would monitor the effects of the on-street parking scheme if it went ahead.

2.1 (4)

The reasons for introducing the charge have been changed during the course of the consultation; - during and after the informal consultation the Council stated that it intended to generate revenue income as part of the overall cost savings review. The Council has now backtracked from this and said all the money generated by on street parking charges would be used for road safety and car parking. This seems disingenuous when the council simultaneously plans to cut the road safety budget by £96,000 and plans to increase car parking charges on Sundays. If the income from on-street parking was intended to enhance the funding in these areas, then why were the services being cut?

Response:

The ruling of 'The Barnet Case' had a significant impact for all local authorities and required them to show how income raised from parking would be spent and to clarify that the income would only be spent on transportation measures, which included road safety schemes and car parking. The wording of the informal consultation advertisement was unfortunate, but Officers were confident that going forward the Council's procedures for allocating any income from the scheme would comply with legislation and all of the issues that were raised during the Barnet Case. The paper produced on the Barnet case and accompanying spreadsheets demonstrated this very clearly. The main message that was demonstrated was that the income from parking was very much lower than the expenditure on permitted transportation measures. Further detail on the Barnet paper could be provided if required by Members.

Although the informal consultation indicated that income raised would form a contribution to general budget savings it was important to note that all additional income was a saving.

The £96,000 savings identified in road safety budgets over the next two financial years had been put forward independently of the identified saving from extra income from on-street charging of £30,000 that had not yet been achieved. There would be further pressure on the road safety budgets or other budgets if the on-street income was not achieved.

2.1 (5)

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Despite the overwhelming majority of respondents to both consultations being against the proposals, the Council has actually increased the number of 'paid for' on street parking bays – in some streets by over 50%. Twenty three bays were removed from the charging structure, but fifty seven new ones were added after the first consultation process. What was the reason for this?

Response:

It was made clear that the parking bay figures given on both the informal and formal consultations were approximate only and might still be subject to a level of adjustment if the scheme was implemented and the physical constraints of the carriageway or adjacent street furniture did not allow the parking bays to be introduced.

Unfortunately however the figure given for Old Bath Road during the informal consultation was incorrect as a lengthy continuous bay at the western end (containing approximately 27 potential parking bays) had, inadvertently, not been included in the informal consultation count. There was however no change to the area being proposed for Old Bath Road as the plans for this road, during the informal and formal consultation both showed the same areas subject to the proposals.

Similarly there was no change to the plans used for the Faraday Road area proposals in either consultation; however a detailed re-measurement prior to the formal consultation resulted in an adjustment upwards of the figure provided during the informal consultation.

Newtown Road south of St John's Road roundabout was primarily used by rail commuters and it was considered that they would just move further along Newtown Road if the restrictions were only introduced at the area between the roundabout and Porchester Road. Consequently the length of on-street charging at this location was extended for the formal consultation. This additional section provided some compensation for the areas in Catherine Road and Link Road where on-street charging was removed for the formal consultation.

The alternative proposed by those calling in the decision was for the maintenance of the status quo or the extension of the limited waiting time to further areas if necessary to deter commuters and free up short term parking for shoppers. (This would require re-advertisement of an entirely new parking scheme.

Further delay or a decision not to proceed with the scheme would impact on the Council's savings plans because the savings would need to be identified elsewhere in highways and transport budgets. It would also impact on the Council's ability to support existing town centre initiatives such as providing free parking for the late night shopping on the four Thursdays leading up to Christmas and free parking after 3.00 pm during the Newbury food festival week.).

The calling Members were also of the view that the decision was contrary to the policy framework for the following reasons

2.2 (1)

The introduction of charging for on-street parking in Newbury contradicts the Council Strategy 2013-2017 on the following points:

(a)

The charging would not assist with 'Promoting and acting in the interests of the communities, people and businesses of the district' which was one of the core purposes of the council.

Response:

The work undertaken in response to the Barnet case looked at expenditure incurred in

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securing expeditious, convenient and safe movement of traffic and provision of suitable and adequate parking facilities on and off the public highway. The test to be satisfied was that parking income was spent on the broad range of functions in the RTRA 1984. The work undertaken had demonstrated that expenditure on such measures substantially exceeded income. Consequently this scheme, which would generate some income that could be used on permitted transportation measures was, on the contrary, promoting and acting in the interests of the communities, people and businesses of the district. It was considered that the charges were reasonable and that the 30 minutes free in the town centre locations maintained turnover of some spaces and encouraged turnover in others. Unfortunately it was not always possible to satisfy the needs of all opposing groups all of the time.

(b)

The charging would also not assist with 'Promoting a vibrant district' one of the Council's priorities, in which we should be 'promoting the district to businesses and becoming more business friendly'.

Response:

It was not considered that this scheme would have a significant negative impact on the vibrancy of the district. On the contrary, generation of income to enable the Council to secure expeditious, convenient and safe movement of traffic and provision of suitable and adequate parking facilities would assist in making Newbury a more vibrant place to visit.

(c)

The on street parking charges also contravene the Council's main principle, that of 'Putting people first....means looking at how our services were designed and operated from the perspective of those who use them'.

Response:

Due consideration had been given to all the different user groups who would be impacted upon by the proposals in this scheme. The views of consultees had been taken into consideration in arriving at the final proposals so people's views had been listened to. The charges were considered reasonable and should not overly impact negatively on service users.

(d)

Finally, the decision to go ahead with the charges following overwhelming public opposition does not chime with this excerpt from the strategy: 'We need to ensure that we continue to listen to local people in deciding how our services should be delivered in the future and that they feel able to contribute to the decisions that affect them'.

Response:

The Council had undertaken two consultations on this scheme. The first informal consultation did generate opposition to some of the proposals; significantly a petition containing 1,719 signatures. However this resulted in some changes to address the concerns raised. The second formal consultation on the Amendment 15 parking order only resulted in 25 objections on a matter which was raised to a relatively high level of public awareness through the local press and various other interested parties. It was not considered that this demonstrated overwhelming public opposition to the scheme. It perhaps indicated that the public accepted that this proposal was necessary, that the Council had listened to them and that they had been able to contribute. It was accepted that few road users wanted to pay for parking but it was considered that many might appreciate that in certain locations on-street charging was necessary and appropriate.

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Councillor Brooks suggested that those people who had objected to the proposal during the first, informal consultation would not have felt it necessary to comment on the second consultation, believing that their comments should remain under consideration. Councillor Vickers added that if people had not seen evidence that their initial responses had been taken into account, they might not have felt it worthwhile to respond a second time. Councillor Allen believed the initial petition should stand throughout both consultations rather than be discounted for the second one.

Mark Cole clarified that the initial, informal consultation sought views on how budget savings could be achieved, and the second consultation was a statutory process relating to the requirements of a Traffic Order. Officers had not been complacent about the responses received in either consultation, and had set out how they would be addressed in the report. Mark Cole further confirmed that it was normal to receive fewer responses to the second consultation as had been demonstrated when a similar process had been followed for the Parkway development.

Councillor Tony Vickers commented that the Newbury Business Improvement District (BID) had indicated that they believed that the proposal would harm town centre businesses. In addition employees working in the town centre would be affected perhaps disproportionately as many were low paid. The Chairman requested that Councillor Vickers clarify this statement and asked whether he believed that people working in the town centre should be able to park for free. Councillor Vickers responded that he had sympathy with workers who were low paid and commented that his statement reflected a need to protect town centre retail business.

Councillor Pamela Bale advised the Commission that several meetings had taken place with businesses in Newbury as well as the Newbury BID (the latest meeting having taken place that morning), and the proposal had raised no issues, nor had any fresh suggestions been made. There was no evidence that the Newbury BID believed the proposal to be untoward.

Councillor Woodhams referred to a newsletter from the Newbury BID from March 2013 where they stated that they were in opposition to the proposal, that the consultation period had been insufficient and that not enough time had been allowed for issues to be explored prior to the agreement of budgets.

Mark Cole responded that he had been present when BID had made these comments, and as a result the budget had been approved subject to this consultation taking place. The proposal had therefore not been implemented until a year later to allow full consideration of all feedback.

Councillor Webster asked what process had been undertaken to understand the different needs of shoppers in different areas of the town. Mark Cole responded that there was a desire to maintain turnover of parking spaces in the more central areas in order to attract passing trade for small businesses. Further out of Newbury, the attention was on preventing commuters from parking all day thereby sterilising the area.

Councillor Woodhams advised the Commission that he had been made aware that there was vacant space in the Northcroft multi-storey car park where the top two floors were underused.

Councillor Simpson commented that the length of the consultation had been over five weeks, almost the same as that allowed for major policies.

Councillor Brooks calculated that with £25,000 to £30,000 estimated income from the pay machines that would cost £50,000 to install, it would be three years before the Council received any extra funding from this proposal. He therefore suggested that the difficulties

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caused by implementing the proposal would not be offset by the income gained by going ahead.

Mark Cole replied that the pay machines had a lifetime of ten to twelve years, and that the revenue income generated would help take forward other permitted schemes in relation to road safety, etc. Over the previous four years, spending on transport related measures far exceeded income received from parking. In 2012/13 there had been a deficit of £750,000. The modest income from on street parking would assist in closing this gap. Councillor Woodhams challenged this statement; referring to the RAC Foundation's information which stated that West Berkshire Council's income from parking had risen by £429,000 last year. Mark Cole advised the Commission that the information was not correct and the Council had been in communication with the RAC Foundation to understand from where the figures had been sourced.

Councillor David Goff asked what the predicted return on investment for the pay machines would be over their lifetime. Mark Cole commented that it was not possible to be accurate but he was confident of an income of £25,000 to £30,000 per annum and there was an expectation of an increase in usage over time. The estimate of income had been safeguarded by using an assumption of achieving 60 pence per day, per parking bay, as the basis for the calculation.

Councillor Webster asked about the method for deciding where the pay machines would be located in relation to the identified bays, and whether this was related to the expected income generation of the location. Mark Cole replied that consideration had been given to how far someone would need to walk to reach the pay machine, and therefore a single pay machine could cater for only a few, or many parking bays. Consideration had not been given to income generation as this would be extremely difficult to predict with any accuracy.

Councillor Allen related anecdotal evidence from local traders that they believed shoppers would prefer to travel to the retail park than pay for on street parking in Newbury.

Councillor Webster asked, if the proposal were approved, how it would be rolled out and whether this would be phased. Mark Cole replied that the intention would be to introduce all of the machines over a short timescale in order to avoid confusion. There would, however be an implementation plan, and it was expected that, subject to approval by the Commission, implementation would begin from 1 April 2014.

Councillor Webster continued by asking what provision there was for amendments to the scheme, if it was found to be unsuccessful in some areas, and what would happen to the pay machines. Mark Cole explained that the scheme would remain under review and the effects of the scheme would be addressed, for example by making changes to resident parking schemes if town centre parking was displaced to these areas. It was not expected that any machines would be removed, however if it did become necessary, the machines would be used to replace machines in other locations as required.

Councillor Vickers recognised that the town centre shops were residents' local shops and that the loss of free on street parking would be a loss of amenity. He believed that the result would be a displacement of vehicles to residential and out of town areas. Councillor Vickers would have preferred the proposal to have come through the Newbury BID as experts in town centre requirements, and requested that no action be taken until the Newbury BID had had the opportunity to comment. Councillor Bale reiterated that the Newbury BID had been fully consulted and no negative comments and no alternatives had been put forward by them. Mark Cole added that there was nothing wrong with town centre users making use of resident areas as long as this did not cause a nuisance.

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There needed to be a balance between what residents would like, and making good use of the highways.

Councillor Woodhams shared with the Commission, the views of one local business owner who believed that the proposal would jeopardise trade and that the current arrangements were sufficient.

Councillor Tim Metcalfe related his experience that in his Ward there was no need for pay machines as the naturally high turnover of passing trade to the local shop was healthy for business. However, if the situation became such that cars were parking for long periods resulting in restricted access to the shop, he would consider asking for a pay machine to prevent this.

Councillor Brooks proposed that without overriding evidence that the proposal would benefit local people, the Executive decision in relation to on-street parking charges be rejected and instead an investigation be undertaken to consider how to deter commuter parking. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Woodhams. At the vote, the proposal was rejected.

Councillor Webster placed a counter proposal that the Executive decision be upheld, but that consideration be given to phasing the installation of pay machines such that the usage of areas in the centre of Newbury be assessed whilst those in the surrounding areas were being installed. Councillor Webster proposed that the list of roads in Appendix B of the original report be referred to so that Northbrook Street, Broadway, Cheap Street, Kings Road West and Bartholomew Street be deferred, whilst all other locations be implemented as planned. Councillor Webster believed that more people used the currently allowed free parking for stays of between 35 minutes and an hour. To implement a free 30 minute period would therefore affect the habits of these people and this should be assessed prior to implementation in these areas.

Councillor Bale indicated that it might be possible to phase the installation to allow for this analysis, however consideration would need to be given to how the requested information could be collected, and all pay machines would be purchased together. Councillor Bale also commented that should any changes be made, then further consultation would need to be undertaken. Mark Cole advised that there were legal considerations in respect of the advertised Traffic Regulation Order, however a careful roll out of the proposal could be considered.

At the vote, the proposal was carried.

The Chairman thanked Mark Cole and Councillor Bale for the information provided.

RESOLVED that:

- The Individual Executive Member decision in relation to On-Street Parking Charges be upheld;
- The Executive Member for Highways give consideration to a phased introduction to allow further information about the current usage of free parking to be gathered in very central areas.

68. Petitions

There were no petitions to be received at the meeting.

69. Home to School Transport

Councillor Allen introduced the item which he had proposed following recent changes to the Home to School Transport policy. Councillor Allen had also requested information relating to the Fare Payer scheme and Safer Walking routes.

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Caroline Corcoran (Service Manger, Education) presented information about Home to School Transport and Safer Walking routes and made the following points:

- The Home to School Transport Policy and Fare Payers scheme were separate policies with the Fare Payers scheme aimed at children who did not qualify for home to school transport;
- Legally it was the parent's responsibility to ensure their child got to school and statutory guidance existed from which the Council's policy had been drawn;
- It was not a statutory requirement to provide home to school transport for children under 5 years or those in higher education;
- The new document was intended to simplify the policy and set out clearly when funded transport could be accessed;
- Safer Walking routes were considered to be safe in the company of a responsible adult and were not intended for children to navigate alone;
- The Fare Payers scheme had been used to make best use of the space available on buses, however more spaces were being made available for fare payers resulting in the transport costs not being value for money. The review into this scheme therefore sought to redress the balance;
- Although approximately 70 pupils from Trinity Academy were affected by the changes to the Fare Payer scheme, all lived within the three mile radius set in statute, within which it was considered acceptable for them to walk;
- Safer Walking routes were assessed if it became apparent that people believed them to be unsafe. The assessment included walking the route with a variety of stakeholders, and consideration being given to practical uses such as pushing a buggy. The views of the Highways Team were also taken into consideration;
- All routes were currently being assessed to consider any changes to infrastructure, new housing developments, etc;

Councillor Woodhams asked about the suitability of the route from Tull Way as he understood that it was not considered safe but no action had been taken. Caroline Corcoran explained that the route had been assessed in Summer 2013, and that the Road Safety Team considered the route to be safe. Councillor Woodhams asked for a report on this matter.

The Chairman voiced his concern that an assessment appeared to have been delayed, and suggested that Councillor Woodhams ask to join the assessment team on their walk when they next went.

Councillor Webster thanked Caroline Corcoran for the work undertaken, advising that ten years ago she had received numerous letters about home to school transport, but that she had not received one in recent years.

Councillor Jeff Beck said that he had been advised recently by the Highways Team that the term 'safer walking routes' was no longer in use. The Chairman requested that Caroline Corcoran provide assurance that the term was fully understood across service areas.

Councillor Allen thanked Caroline Corcoran for the information provided but asked whether there could have been any confusion between the Home to School Transport Policy and Fare Payers scheme when they were consulted on. Caroline Corcoran replied that it was unlikely to have caused any confusion, however the consultation might be approached differently if repeated.

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Councillor Metcalfe asked whether the Council was obliged to provide home to school transport for Academy pupils. Caroline Corcoran replied that the authority would be required to provide this if the pupil was eligible under the law.

The Chairman thanked Caroline Corcoran for the information provided.

RESOLVED that:

- Caroline Corcoran would provide a report on the assessment of the Tull Way safer walking route to Councillor Woodhams.
- Caroline Corcoran would provide assurance that the term 'safer walking routes' was fully understood across service areas.

70. Performance report for level one indicators

The Commission considered the Council's performance report for quarter two. Jason Teal (Performance, Research and Consultation Manager) introduced the report explaining that the information related to July to September 2013 and included some amendments that had been requested following the quarter one report. Jason Teal commented that of 48 measures, 30 were reported as green – i.e. on track, 7 were amber – i.e. at risk of not being achieved by year end, and 11 were not yet reported as they were annual measures.

The Chairman commented that the new presentation format helped to make the information clearer.

Councillor Simpson asked how the average house price was calculated. Jason Teal replied that this information came from Land Registry records and was therefore an average of house prices at completion.

The Chairman, noting that there had been a significant increase in the number of freedom of information requests, asked whether this was causing difficulties. David Lowe responded that there had been year on year increases since 2005 when the process was introduced. This trend was not expected to reverse and it had been necessary to employ a second member of staff to assist. The Chairman asked where the requests mainly came from. David Lowe replied that many were from the press or from students undertaking research. There were also a number of requests from dissatisfied residents. Councillor Webb asked whether records were maintained of requests that were not completed due to the time or cost involved, and if so, could this information be circulated. David Lowe confirmed that it was recorded and could be provided.

Councillor Simpson asked why access to the internet had reduced by 25% despite a rising internet using population. Jason Teal agreed to provide this information.

RESOLVED that:

- David Lowe would provide information about the number of freedom of information requests not completed due to time or cost constraints;
- Jason Teal would provide the reason for the reduction in visits to the Council's website.

71. Councillor Call for Action

There were no Councillor Calls for Action.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.05 pm)

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CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature