

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the **Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee**
held via video conferencing at **6.30 p.m.** on **Thursday 17 September 2020**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chairman), Laetisia Carter (Vice-Chairman), Joy Aitman, Luci Ashbourne, Jill Bull, Julian Cooper, Harry Eaglestone, Hilary Fenton, Andy Graham, Nick Leverton, Neil Owen, Alex Postan and Carl Rylett.

Also in attendance: Councillor Geoff Saul.

Officers in Attendance: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive); Claire Hughes (Business Manager Corporate Responsibility); Mandy Fathers (Business Manager Operational Services); Keith Butler (Head of Democratic Services); and Kathryn Skill (Senior Strategic Support Officer).

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 27 February 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Suzi Coul, and it was reported that Councillor Alex Postan was attending for Councillor Jane Doughty.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

4. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no submissions from members of the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

5. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman advised that Agenda Item 7 would be heard before Item 6. He also reported that a representative of the Thames Valley Police would be attending Committee in November and requested that any questions Members may have be sent in prior to the meeting.

6. EQUALITY POLICY

The Committee considered the previously circulated report of the Business Manager Corporate Responsibility, to which were attached a draft Equality Policy and Action Plan; and was invited to make comments which Cabinet could take into account when considering the matter at its meeting the following week.

The Officer explained that the policy would ensure that the Council was meeting the legal requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and linked with the policy for employees, which included a statement regarding dignity in the workplace.

During discussion Members questioned whether training would be provided and how recruitment was fairly carried out. Online training had been provided for all staff and training would be available for Members, although the details were not finalised. In relation to a question on recruitment, no one was discriminated against, and anyone with a recognised disability who made an application for a post would be entitled to an interview for the role. There was concern that recruitment advertisements were reaching all groups, such as BAME and Neuro-divergent groups, as the policy did not mention this, although it was considered that the policy should be all inclusive, without too much detail, to include all groups, reaching diverse people.

RESOLVED: That the Equality Policy 2020-2024 be recommended to Cabinet.

7. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services, which updated it on progress on the 2019/20 work programme, and incorporated a proposed work programme for 2020/21. The Committee was advised that the proposal for 2020/21 had sought to take into account the impact of the cancellation of the previous three scheduled meetings of the Committee, had been prepared following consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Committee, and had an overarching aim of making the programme more focused and relevant.

Questions and comments from Members on the work programme included:

- Housing at RAF Brize Norton. Homes England were working with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation to bring forward the houses and funding options were being explored, although this was linked to the Government spending review which would be forthcoming in the autumn of 2020
- Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire won the bid contract awarded at the beginning of the year, and the cost to the CAWO would have been minimal as they had also submitted a successful bid the previous year
- It was confirmed that there had been no further information from the Home Office on the question of hard to reach groups in the context of the EU Settled Status scheme. The Executive Director (Commissioning) would be asked to respond in more detail.

Annex 2 to the report included the proposed new style work programme, and during discussion the following comments were made:

- A short briefing on the enforcement powers in the Housing and Planning Act would be prepared, and it could be removed from the programme
- A presentation by representatives of GLL Better (Greenwich Leisure Limited), the Council's Leisure Services Provider, was to be provided to Committee in November 2020
- The Strategic Review of the Council's Markets would be removed
- Policing in West Oxfordshire – the Police would be attending Committee in November 2020
- Staffing Levels in Housing and Planning – it was noted that this had been considered in February, but a query was raised as to whether the levels were correct and staff suitably trained.
- The Equality Policy had been dealt with earlier in this meeting so could now be removed

- The Annual Local Plan Monitoring report would be presented to Committee in November 2020
- An annual update on the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme was requested

RESOLVED: That (i) progress on the 2019/20 work programme be noted; and (ii) the proposed 2020/21 work programme be approved, subject to the comments and amendments referred to above.

8. START TIME OF MEETINGS

The Committee gave consideration to the start time of meetings for the remainder of the 2020/2021 municipal year.

It was proposed by Councillor Beaney and seconded by Councillor Leverton that meetings continue to be scheduled to begin at 6.30 p.m.

Concern was expressed that meetings which started at 2.30 p.m. might limit the range of people putting themselves forward to become Councillors.

RESOLVED: That the start time for the remaining scheduled meetings of the Committee in the 2020/21 municipal year shall be 6:30 p.m.

9. MOTION: TENANTS FORUM

The Committee gave consideration to the following motion, which had been proposed by Councillor Geoff Saul and seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright at the meeting of the Council held 26 February 2020, and referred to this Committee for consideration and comment:-

“The Council welcomes the private landlords forum. To better understand and support this sector, the Council resolves to establish a private tenants forum to hear the voice of residents and understand their concerns and perspective.”

Councillor Saul attended Committee to speak to the Motion. Since it had been proposed in February 2020, due to the pandemic, private sector tenants were in a vulnerable position with rent arrears and evictions. District Councillors and staff had done a good job in reaching out to the community, although the District Council should be a hub at the centre of the Community, and a voice for under-represented tenants. A forum could share experiences and the Council could have a dedicated web-page with advice and awareness, and an individual local private renter’s charter. The District Council should be at the heart of the community.

The Business Manager Operational Services would report back to Committee on the resource and any legal implications.

During discussion the following points were made:

- It was considered that this would be setting up a separate body and the CAWO could achieve the results that the motion was proposing.
- Councillor Carter commented that she was often contacted by residents who were renting, whose landlords/landladies were intrusive, it was not easy to afford rent in the district. This was distinct work which would be something that the CAWO could be involved in.

- Councillor Ashbourne commented that private renting created huge issues for many residents and it would be a benefit to hear from these residents to effect change and promote better ways of working.
- Councillor Graham commented that the concept being proposed was laudable and would be effective for many tenants.
- The District Council had responsibility for standards, to ensure that landlords/landladies complied with private renting charters and should not give advice to tenants, this was a role for the CAWO.

RESOLVED: That a report on the implications of establishing a Tenants Forum be submitted for consideration by the Committee at its meeting on 19 November 2020, following which the Committee would submit comments for the Council to take into account.

10. COUNCIL PRIORITIES AND SERVICE PERFORMANCE FOR QUARTER ONE OF 2020/2021

The Committee considered the previously circulated report of the Chief Executive, which provided details of the Council's progress towards achieving its aims and priorities set out in the Council Plan 2020-2024, and service performance during Quarter One.

Comments and queries on Annexes A and B were as follows:

- Attention was drawn to the fact that the indicators relevant to this Committee started on page 29 of the report
- Climate Action – Councillor Graham commented on whether an issue had been missed out of the plan, namely the impact of farming and farming methods on the district. This was acknowledged as being a significant issue, and the Chief Executive agreed to feed the comment back, and explained that work was being carried out on a broader Climate Change policy looking at the district as a whole, and the farming sector would be included
- A Vibrant District Economy – Carterton Town Council was a potential lead partner in regard to the Carterton Technology Hub.
- Oxfordshire electric vehicle strategy and ihub. Work was being carried out on this strategy, with a new initiative of overnight charging points in lampposts. This was an issue being looked at by the Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Strong Local Communities: Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive communities. Councillor Ashbourne asked for some of the language to be revisited, to make it more accessible to the public. She also queried the housing allocation, which had been re-allocated from Oxford City, and concern was expressed about residents losing friends and family if they had to move from Oxford City into the district. Officers explained that careful detailed planning was needed in order to create successful and balanced communities in major new developments, and this would involve a range of different housing types and tenures
- Tourism should be supported when emerging from Covid-19 with new ideas and initiatives being desirable

- A request was made for more information on the number of households living in emergency accommodation for over 28 days to be presented to the meeting of the Committee in November 2020
- The meaning of “other” planning applications determined was queried. The Chief Executive explained that the definition included applications such as those for Listed Building and Advertisement consent.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

11. 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 25 August 2020.

The Chairman referred to Supplementary Planning Documents and other planning policy related matters, and asked the Committee whether it wished to continue the practice where such documents were considered by the Committee during the applicable consultation period. The consensus was that this was desirable.

Other comments and queries were as follows:

- Councillor Cooper queried the reason for the proposed report on the Woodstock Infrastructure Delivery Strategy, and Officers explained that it arose from discussions with Blenheim, and that the report would put forward options for Cabinet to consider
- There had been a particular complaint which had been dealt with, using language which had been defensive and had escalated the complaint. It was stated that when dealing with complaints, a calm and understanding manner would be preferable to being defensive, even if the information being given was not what the recipient would want to hear
- Councillor Leverton commented that the Planning Inspector had turned down housing near Woodstock, as they were too far away from Oxford City. Officers explained that the housing was on a site on the edge of Woodstock which was in Cherwell District and was proposed development through their Local Plan. The Inspector had ruled that the allocation should be taken out of the Cherwell Local Plan.

RESOLVED: That the contents of the Cabinet Work Programme published on 25 August 2020 be noted.

12. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Councillor Postan questioned the use of the term ‘affordable housing’. A house costing £400,000 was not affordable. He requested that a different term should be used. Officers explained that this term reflected the government definition of affordable housing and included different forms and types of housing. The district was a high cost housing area and it was recognised that there was a need to be imaginative in the housing provided.

There were no further questions and the Chairman thanked Members and Officers for their attendance.

The meeting closed at 7:40 p.m.

Chairman