

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the  
**Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee**  
held in Committee Room 1, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon  
at 2pm on **Wednesday 29 January 2020**

PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chairman); Alex Postan (Vice Chairman); Alaa Al-Yousuf, Julian Cooper, Maxine Crossland, Harry Eaglestone, Andy Graham, Gill Hill, Dan Levy, Harry St John and Geoff Saul

55. MINUTES

**RESOLVED:** That subject to the removal of Councillor Derek Cotterill from the list of those in attendance, the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 27 November 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

56. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Rosa Bolger and Toby Morris

The following temporary appointment was reported –

Councillor Andy Graham for Councillor Liz Leffman.

57. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

58. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no requests received.

59. MAIN POINTS FROM THE LAST MEETING AND FOLLOW UP ACTION

Councillor Cotterill highlighted the following actions:

- (a) the motion relating to live streaming needed a more in depth report including costings and would be added to the work programme.
- (b) Medium Term Finance Strategy and budget were awaiting figures from Central Government. Figures were due to be released on 12 February 2020.
- (c) A report relating to electronic documents, reports etc would be added to the work programme.

Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf requested a verbal update on the Statement of Principles relating to the Climate Emergency which had been passed by Council and enquired whether the Council was generating economies of scale by pooling treasury managers.

The Chief Finance Officer responded in relation to the climate change query, the treasury management and investment principles would be incorporated in the treasury management strategy to address this issue. The Council's treasury management advisors, Arlingclose, were investing in this area of work. A report was requested to be prepared for the next meeting, and comments from the meeting could be fed to the climate change group.

Councillor Cooper queried why there was no report on the budget included on the agenda for this meeting and whether it would be possible to have another meeting of the Committee

before the Cabinet considered the budget. He also queried the situation with Building Control and how this would be reported in the budget.

Finalised papers on the budget would be reported to Cabinet on 12 February 2020 and detail of this would be in the report, although there would be no significant changes. The Chair reiterated that as the budget report would be presented to that meeting he did not consider it necessary to hold another Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Postan highlighted that care needed to be taken not to include pension funds and investment funds in the principles for investment, as trustees of the pension funds were responsible to their members. Investment funds were managed by the Council for residents of the district. The risk and profile were different and consideration in relation to these fund principles should not follow them on value and return and social and carbon neutral policies should be taken into account in light of investments.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

60. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2019/2020

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services, which provided an update on its Work Programme for 2019/2020.

The following updates were made to the work programme:

- (a) Local Authority Partnership Purchase Scheme to be removed from the work programme until further information was received; and
- (b) Items relating to livestreaming and electronic documents to be added to the programme.

61. 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 14 January 2020.

Councillor Cooper queried item 15 on the work programme – Approval of CCTV Compliance Policy and asked which Scrutiny Committee would be receiving this item. The Chief Finance Officer explained that this item would ensure that the Council was complying with regulations and Scrutiny Committee could call this in following the Cabinet meeting. It was also stated that the item on employment land could be removed from the programme.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

62. CAPITAL, INVESTMENT AND TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES 2020/2021 – 2022/2023

The Committee received the Council's Capital Strategy, Investment Strategy and Treasury Management Strategy for the period 2020/21 to 2022/23.

Councillor St John queried paragraph 2.2. of the report in relation to the definition of fair value. The Chief Finance Officer explained that this was the market value of the assets.

The Chief Finance Officer explained that these were strategic documents which had to be brought to Council at the start of each financial year. There was no substantial change; figures were taken from the MTFs, although some were subject to change when final figures were available. The documents were presented for Members to see the Council's position in relation to investments, with feedback from the Committee to Cabinet and Council, as necessary.

Councillor Cotterill highlighted that there were dramatic changes for local government funding ahead. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the spending review for Local

Government had been postponed and changes were due to come into effect from April 2021. Illustrative figures should be available in the spring and there would be a significant timeframe for consultation.

Councillor Postan reiterated that any consideration of the changes should take account of re-balanced trends, successes in terms of principles which were important and when it came to value, the Council should be strict when selling, and take principles into account.

Councillor St John queried figures within the Capital Strategy, with outstanding borrowing at the end of March 2020 being £27m and where was the money to be found. It was explained that some cash holdings were used in order not to borrow, with money from income and investments, money may be borrowed temporarily although this was being managed on a day to day basis.

Councillor Cooper queried a further loan with Cottsway which he considered was wrong under Council procedure rules and should return to Council. A business case for this had still not been published.

**RESOLVED:** That the Council's draft Capital Strategy, Investment Strategy and Treasury Management Strategy for the period 2020/21 to 2022/23 be recommended to Cabinet.

### 63. PUBLICA BUSINESS PLAN

The Managing Director highlighted that this was part of a new process, and in discussion with the Leader it had been decided that Scrutiny should receive the report first. He apologised for handing out paper copies at the meeting, as this document had only been received by the Publica Board meeting the previous week.

The Executive Director explained that there had been a change of emphasis and approach since the new Managing Director had been in place, his first three months had been spent exploring the organisation in detail and included an assessment of future work.

The document set out a change in direction, focusing on what was important to the partner Councils. This was taken from Council plans and built on work currently taking place, recognising that this was a two year plan with an expectation that an update would be brought forward in 2021. The priorities followed in part from the previous business plan and it was important to deliver these whilst also reflecting on how best to deliver on behalf of the partner Councils.

Areas of work within the plan included:

- (i) Climate Change Strategy – it was recognised that this was a high priority. A Climate Change Manager had recently been appointed.
- (ii) Delivering more affordable homes – the aspects of this would be included in the Local Plan, such as economy, infrastructure and the garden village.
- (iii) Modernisation agenda – customer expectations continued to rise and the Salesforce system was a platform on which to build a new customer experience. The Council's website was being refreshed.
- (iv) Becoming an employer of choice – Publica delivered services on the Council's behalf. The pay and grading framework work was ongoing, having involved a lot of work to bring different schemes together in one. Actionable targets were in the document to build upon.

Councillor Cotterill commented that previous business plans had been heavily weighted to saving financial amounts to meet austerity targets, this was totally different and he wondered whether this had been written in a way to advertise Publica and to have a wider circulation than Councillors.

It was explained that the document was aimed at Councillors and substantial financial savings had been made, which had benefited the partner Councils, and now was the time to start changing the business, putting investment into Publica being an employer of choice with new ways of working, not only with systems such as Salesforce, but presenting a more rounded process.

Councillor Crossland queried page 12 of the business plan and highlighted the problems that planning services faced constantly with planners being sought by private enterprise and asked how Publica was planning to support and retain these staff. The Managing Director explained that there was only a certain amount of budget and resources and if Publica were to try to compete with the salary race over the private sector it would not succeed. A different employment package had to be offered, and acknowledge that people would stay with good organisations, with officers having an opportunity to make a significant contribution to the work of the Councils and Publica. A graduate scheme had recently been put in place in addition to paid interns, which gave Publica the opportunity to develop people throughout the organisation.

Councillor Graham considered that Publica was a good idea, with partnership building across the authorities, and reiterated that these circumstances gave something different to the partnership. Technology was welcome, although he recognised that some residents and Councillors were perhaps a bit reluctant to change. He would have liked to see much more on a five year period moving forward but congratulated the Directors for bringing this to Committee.

Councillor Postan explained that he would like to see a 'dashboard' on Salesforce for Councillors and the public to provide a better service for residents, enabling Publica employees to better engage with Members. He considered the business plan needed some cultural issues embraced, such as hopes, pride and employees working more with Members. The Managing Director reiterated that it was difficult to put emotion into a business plan document although energy and commitment of employees would be channelled into delivering priorities, for the Council.

Councillor Levy questioned whether there could be more staff physically located in the Council's buildings, rather than on the phone. Residents wanted people located locally, and he asked whether Publica could commit to having more staff in the Council's buildings. The Managing Director explained that this was a three way balance and economies and efficiency of scale were factors, although he understood the point which was being made.

Councillor Eaglestone stated that staff had been cut back in the Council and asked whether this was likely to continue, on the basis of the information in the Local Authority budget. The Executive Director explained that the headcount had increased over the last two years and although staff were sharing responsibilities across the partnership Councils, they responded to queries as quickly as possible.

Councillor Cooper reiterated that if there was a suggestion that there were less staff in the planning service and Publica was not working, a fully costed alternative strategy should be ready for the budget meeting. Councillor Cotterill would have to ask for more detail on this from Cabinet.

Councillor St John queried whether a dashboard for accessing the Salesforce system, for Councillors and the public would be available when the upgrade of the Council's website was implemented. He queried a diagram on page 9 of the plan, with more customer enquiries being self-service or through the customer service centre. It was explained that over time more specialist staff could be working in front of house, leaving fewer specialist officers back office. It was noted that there was a desire and need for Councillors to have a dashboard for their use. Salesforce was currently up and running for the public, although the operating

model had not yet been extended into the back office, and it could take up to two years for this to take place. The focus would be the upgrade of the website and elements of automation via the website were already in place, such as online 'chats' with advisors.

Councillor Postan considered that this was most important and the nature of Salesforce could and should completely change the way the public interacted with the Council. Officers should be working to find out what the public expect and how Members can react to queries. The Managing Director explained that Publica was talking to over 7,000 customers asking about services, evidence was being gathered for a better understanding of what customers needed and whether 9-5 Monday to Friday was appropriate, or whether there should be communication outside these hours.

Councillor Saul queried the type of questions being asked by the public and what expertise may be needed of the contact centre staff. It was explained that the profile of most services meant that scripted responses could be given although the different partner Council's had different responses.

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That the report and presentation be noted; and
- (b) That feedback on the Draft Publica Business Plan 2020-22 be provided to the Publica Board before the plan was presented to the Cabinet for consideration.

64. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

**RESOLVED** That, in view of the likely disclosure of exempt information, as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, (information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person) the public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining item of business.

65. INVESTMENT PROPERTY REVIEW AND OUTTURN 2018/19

The report was presented by the Estates Manager, it was a comprehensive report which included a detail property level review by the Council's property consultant. Councillor Cotterill questioned whether there had been any requests for rent reduction which would cause types of risk, such as financial risk and effect on income. The officer explained that there could be a tendency to ask for rent reduction where companies were in voluntary arrangements.

Councillor Levy queried the newer properties outside the district and whether it would be a good idea to have more of this type of property. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the regulations on owning property outside the district had changed, these buildings were bought from cash the Council was holding, and no borrowing was made to purchase the buildings.

Councillor Postan commented that there was a risk and guarded most strongly of borrowing money to invest in property as it could become speculative.

Councillor Saul commented that Greystones in Chipping Norton was looking fairly tired and was earmarked for further investigation, and asked whether it could be prioritised through an options report to Cabinet, setting out the options for the future. The Executive Director reiterated that this was in a difficult location which included an operational depot. It was also in a leisure based location, with difficult access roads making it a difficult property to be dealt with although it was recognised that there were few sites around Chipping Norton for business premises.

Councillor Cooper commented that significant work had been carried out on this item and queried why the item was in private session, enquiring whether future reports could be in the

public domain. Officers explained that there was financial information in the report of a confidential nature.

Councillor St John commented that the Talisman business centre investment had increased as a consequence of Bicester being a major growth area.

Councillor Crossland congratulated officers on the amount of detail and clarity in the report and found it extremely helpful. One of the properties in Carterton was in the heart of the town and currently in a run-down state. She queried whether it was the tenant's responsibility to carry out work on the building and, if it was the Council's responsibility, whether officers could investigate. The Estates Manager confirmed that Officers would look into this particular case.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

#### 66. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

A question had been received from a Member relating to Building Control Fees being in deficit, and asking whether targets had been missed, and whether full costs were being recovered. The Chief Finance Officer explained that within the budget the net position for the building control service, service provision and other income was plus £160,000, i.e. income was higher than direct costs. In addition to the direct costs there were allocations for use of the building, support from finance, legal, HR etc. A more detailed report would be presented to the next meeting of the Committee, in April.

The meeting closed at 3.43pm

CHAIRMAN