

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee
held via video conferencing at 12:30 pm on **Wednesday 9 December 2020**

PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chairman); Alex Postan (Vice-Chairman); Alaa Al-Yousuf, Rosa Bolger, Louise Chapman, Maxine Crossland, Harry Eaglestone, Steve Good, Gill Hill, Liz Leffman, Dan Levy, James Mills, Elizabeth Poskitt, Geoff Saul and Harry St John.

Also in Attendance: Councillors Duncan Enright and Toby Morris.

Officers: Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer and Deputy Chief Executive); Clare Williams (Interim Finance Business Manager); Ciaran O’Kane (Senior Procurement Business Partner); Keith Butler (Head of Democratic Services); and Amy Bridgewater-Carnall (Senior Strategic Support Officer).

22. MINUTES

Councillor Al-Yousuf requested that paragraph 19 of the minutes be amended to record his request to the Chief Finance Officer to report on compliance with the Statement of Investment Principles approved last year.

Subject to this amendment it was

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 7 October 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

23. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

The following temporary appointment was reported –

Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt for Councillor Julian Cooper

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

25. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no requests received.

26. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2020-2021

The Committee considered the previously circulated report from Democratic Services, which invited it to consider its Work Programme for the remainder of 2020/2021.

The report asked Members to take into account the impact of the cancellation of the previous scheduled meetings of the Committee, and a revised format had been prepared following consultation with an overarching aim of making the programme more focused and relevant.

The Chairman highlighted the changes that had been made with a view to helping the Committee carry out their role more effectively by looking at work that was relevant to their remit and would add value to the decision making process.

Councillor St John raised a query relating to the Investment Property Review and asked the dividing line between officers and the managing agents was clear and if access to the property schedule was available. The Chief Finance Officer assured the Committee that officers were

very involved in the process and asked Councillor St John to email his detailed question to her.

Councillor St John also queried when the Council had last looked at its scrutiny processes and Councillor Morris advised that a review was undertaken in 2017 at the request of Councillor Cooper.

RESOLVED: That the new style work programme be adopted.

27. 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 17 November 2020.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

28. UPDATE ON 2021/2022 BUDGET

The Committee received and considered the report of the Chief Executive, which provided details of the budget for the following year. Funding would not be determined until the new year and therefore Members were reminded that this draft was an early indication and would be subject to change.

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report and highlighted the key points. The estimated budget gap in 2021/22 was approximately £3m pre Covid and it was noted that the pandemic had resulted in a large impact on the Council's income and investments.

The Chief Finance Officer explained that the Budget could be considered as expected and that there would be a funding shortfall of £2 million over 2021/22 and a total of £9 million over the next five years. The Chief Finance Officer also drew attention to the difficulties the Council's Leisure Operator GLL had faced over recent months and the difficulties also faced by the Council's commercial tenants. She continued that the Budget for 2021/22 was based on a £5 uplift in Council Tax for a Band D property, but highlighted that savings in office supplies and working arrangements, owing to the move to working from home, had saved an approximate £300,000.

The Chief Finance Officer advised that there had been approximately £75,000 in terms of savings from Democratic Services due to the lack of elections, no expenses being submitted and more virtual working.

Mrs Griffiths answered queries from Members and clarified the Council's position in relation to Tax Base calculations, the current situation involving GLL and Business Rates revenue.

Councillor Morris echoed the statements made by the Chief Finance Officer and reminded Members that the future was unknown. He referred to the savings already made by Publica and suggested that the increase in Council Tax would be the £5 referred to previously.

In response to a question from Councillor Postan regarding unused surplus funds, Mrs Griffiths assured Members that the budgets had been scrutinised very closely and officers had been robust in deciding if projects were still current and relevant. Councillor Postan requested that any future re-examinations of projects be considered by the Committee.

Councillor Morris concluded by reminding Members that officers were busy managing the finances following the recent pandemic and supporting businesses for the future.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

29. PROPOSED CHANGES TO CONTRACT PROCEDURE RULES

The Committee received and considered the report of Senior Procurement Business Partner, Mr Ciaran O’Kane, which advised that Procurement wished to simplify the procurement process for low value procurements. To support this change, officers were looking to change the thresholds outlined in the current Contract Procedure Rules (CPD’s) and align them with all other Publica Councils. The proposed changes would enable officers to self-serve under £25,000.

The Procurement team currently approved all Purchase Orders over £10,000. This would not change under the new process and therefore the team would retain an element of control over the self-serve process.

It was also noted that allowing officers to self-serve would result in an increase in spend levels with local contractors (where appropriate) resulting in benefits to the local economy.

Mr O’Kane introduced the report and highlighted the key points which it was hoped would free up the procurement team to work on more complex procurements.

In response to a query from Councillor Levy, Mr O’Kane advised that the splitting of orders was not an appropriate practice and would not be allowed moving forwards.

Councillor Bolger supported the proposal that the procedures be aligned with the other Publica partners and asked if specific examples relating to West Oxfordshire could be provided. She also enquired if it was possible to have a breakdown of the procurements made below £10,000 and below £25,000 and queried the reference to the local economy. In response, Mr O’Kane advised that he could provide examples and a breakdown as requested after the meeting. He explained that at present, any procurement above £10,000 was put out to tender nationwide and these measures would enable officers to approach three local contractors instead.

Having considered the report, the Committee

RESOLVED: That Council be recommended, via Cabinet, to adopt the proposed revised Contract Procedure Rules appended to this report.

30. COUNCIL PRIORITIES AND SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2020-21 QUARTER TWO

The Committee received and considered the report of the Chief Executive which provided details of the Council’s progress towards achieving its aim and priorities set out in the Council Plan 2020-2024, and service performance during Q2.

The Chief Finance Officer highlighted the key aspects of the report and answered questions from Members.

Councillor St John referred to the introduction of a new IT system for Revenue and Benefits and hoped that this would be hard tested before going live.

The Chief Finance Officer assured Members that those involved in the implementation of the system were very aware that the system was critical and this would ultimately help those officers in their everyday work. Councillor St John requested that his thanks be passed to the team for their hard work.

Members raised the issue of the colour printing in the papers which was not easy to read against a white background. Officers agreed to feed this back.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Finance Officer for her attendance.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

31. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Councillor Postan had submitted two questions before the meeting relating to Brokers and Projects respectively.

The first question was:

“Current procedure with Council holdings of collective investments relies on one retained broker. We have no established principles or guidelines or formal objectives. To improve our administration of the considerable assets under management could we obtain a detailed analysis from our broker of the various fund managers' rules and objectives and to establish a portfolio overview of individual fund holdings and where there may be over emphasis through duplication and conflicting fund manager actions with regard to rebalancing, value, momentum and asset allocation.”

In response to the question, the Chairman reminded Members that the Investment Strategy contained a lot of the information referred to but it may not be in a desirable format. The Chief Finance Officer advised that officers would be holding a strategy session with the Council's advisors, Arlingclose next week and she had forwarded the question to them to address.

The second question was:

“Two significant initiatives that I have introduced (EV charging and Key worker mortgage assistance) have both failed to achieve their original intentions.

The cause of the failures might lie with a failure from members to clearly specify the objectives and the worthy but scattered implementation by the officers attending to the initiative. From now on, new motions or calls for action would be better served by starting to work through by the use of "start and finish" groups with a clear description of the intended outcome and a defined reporting date.

Could this become the default position from now on.”

The Chief Finance Officer agreed with the sentiment of this statement as project management was an area of work that she was keen to strengthen. She advised that Publica had been addressing this issue over the past year and had recognised that it was unfair to expect officers to absorb projects on top of their day jobs.

Councillor Enright queried if there was a procurement strategy attached to the Council Plan. Mr O'Kane advised that there was a strategy but it had been recognised that it was out of date and needed further work. He did advise that a User Guide was due to be published shortly.

Members also discussed the merits of forming Task and Finish Groups but recognised that it was important that the toolkits were used and followed appropriately.

The meeting closed at 2.00pm

CHAIRMAN