

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

At the Meeting of the  
**WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen,  
Witney, on Wednesday 21 January 2015 at 2.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillors: N A MacRae MBE (Chairman), Mrs J C Baker, M A Barrett, A C Beaney, R J M Bishop, M R Booty, M Brennan, Mrs L J Chapman, A S Coles, Mrs E M Coles, N G Colston, J C Cooper, D A Cotterill, C Cottrell-Dormer, R A Courts, H G Davies, C G Dingwall, P J G Dorward, Mrs J M Doughty, H B Eaglestone, P Emery, D S T Enright, Mrs E H N Fenton, S J Good, J Haine, A D Harvey, S J Hoare, E H James, P D Kelland, R A Langridge, Mrs L E C Little, Mr R D J McFarlane, J F Mills, T J Morris, B J Norton, T N Owen, Dr E M E Poskitt, A H K Postan, W D Robinson, G Saul, T B Simcox, D A Snow and B J Woodruff.

38. MINUTES

**RESOLVED:** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 22 October 2014, copies of which had been circulated, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

39. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Mr A J Adams, Mrs L C Carter, Mrs M J Crossland (Vice Chairman), Mr P J Handley, Mr H J Howard and Ms E P R Leffman.

40. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mr J F Mills advised that, whilst he undertook work for a Registered Social Landlord within the District, there was nothing on the current agenda giving rise to a disclosable interest.

41. RECEIPT OF ANNOUNCEMENTS

41.1 Mrs Laetisia Carter

The Chairman, Members and Officers offered their congratulations to Mrs Laetisia Carter on the birth of her daughter earlier in the week.

41.2 Mr Paul Cracknell

The Chairman and Members welcomed Mr Paul Cracknell, the Council's Principal Democratic Services Officer, on his return to work following injuries sustained in an accident the previous year.

41.3 Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

The Chairman advised that the Council had received a donation of £500 from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association, a non-political community organisation, which was making similar contributions to 100 local authorities in celebration of the centenary of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in the United Kingdom. The organisation raised considerable sums for charitable purposes and the donation received by the Council would be added to the Chairman's Charity Fund.

#### 41.4 Local Plan Workshop

The Chairman reminded Members that a Local Plan Workshop was to be held on the morning of Thursday 5 February, commencing at 10:00am, and encouraged all Members to attend.

#### 41.5 Fire at South Oxfordshire District Council's Offices

The Leader of the Council informed Members that West Oxfordshire had offered support to South Oxfordshire District Council following the catastrophic fire at its Crowmarsh offices the previous week. Mr Norton went on to advise that a review of the Council's own Business Continuity Plans had been put in hand, the results of which would be incorporated into existing plans as part of the annual service planning process.

Initial findings had been encouraging and it was noted that all IT systems and data were replicated at other locations. It was considered that all ICT systems would be back up and running within 24 hours of a similar event. A review of those IT systems hosted off site by third parties, such as the website, was underway to ensure that appropriate contingency arrangements were in place.

In the event of the loss of the Witney offices, telephone contact with the public could be restored quickly by re-routing calls to the customer services teams in Cirencester.

A review of building security and the risk of loss of paper files was also underway and some areas where improvements might be necessary had already been identified.

In response to a question from Mr McFarlane, the Chief Executive advised that West Oxfordshire had provided some ICT back-up following the fire and had placed technical support on standby over the weekend as South Oxfordshire was attempting to bring some systems back on line (although in the event this assistance had not been required).

The Head of Democratic Services had also been in contact with South to offer assistance over certain democratic issues but the Chief Executive suggested that support would be required in the long term as the impact of the loss would deflect South Oxfordshire from its long term priorities for years to come.

#### 41.6 Oxfordshire County Council's Unitary Authority Proposals

The Leader of the Council made a statement on the Oxfordshire County Council Unitary Options report which was to be considered by the County's Cabinet on 27 January.

A copy of the statement is attached to the original copy of these minutes as an Appendix.

Mr Owen indicated that he had been offended by the description of West Oxfordshire's low level of Council Tax in the Council's report as a discrepancy, indicating that it was a credit to the District's prudent financial management. He indicated that, as a Member of both the District and County Councils, he would stand down from one or other if he found himself having to vote to support or oppose the proposals.

Mr Enright enquired what other Members sitting on both authorities would do in such circumstances. In response, Mrs Chapman indicated that the Government's policy remained that applications for unitary status would only be accepted with the support of all relevant authorities. Given that the Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government had encouraged unitary submissions, Mrs Chapman asked Mr Enright his view.

In response, Mr Enright indicated that he was opposed to the proposal as he believed that the District Council performed well. Being close to the local community it was better able to respond to and reflect the wishes of local residents.

Whilst acknowledging the emotional response, Mr Hoare emphasised the importance of responding to the proposals with a logical argument. He indicated that he favoured the retention of the status quo, having found the County Council's case 'not proven'. The benefits of a move to a unitary authority had not been evidenced. He feared such a move would be a mistake leading to a centralised approach with the harmonisation of charges throughout the County and a democratic deficit at local level. Mr Langridge concurred, indicating that he believed that the interests of local residents would be best served by the retention of the status quo with decision making taking place at local level.

Mr Enright welcomed the views expressed, indicating that he too was opposed to a unitary county. He expressed a desire to see closer working relationships between county and district councils and expressed concern that re-opening discussion on unitary authorities would be divisive and detrimental to the development of such links.

Mr Cooper stated that the District Council worked well and that the County Council's proposals held more negative than positive points. He asked whether the matter would be considered by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee where the claims made could be assessed in comparison with those areas which already had unitary councils. In response, Mr Norton indicated that this would depend upon the County Council's decision whether or not to proceed further. He believed that it would be irresponsible of the County not to reconsider its position and withdraw the report given that there was no support at local or national level and suggested that it would be more appropriate for it to consider how its resources could best be spent for the benefit of residents.

Mr Dingwall welcomed Mr Cooper's suggestion that the matter be considered at an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and, whilst applauding the philosophy that examined all possible options for efficient service provision, considered that greater savings could be secured were the County Council to consider outsourcing service provision to more efficient district councils such as West Oxfordshire.

Mr Norton suggested that the County had failed to explore all other possible options to address its budget deficit and had only recently considered pursuing efficiency savings and shared services; a route taken by West Oxfordshire some years ago. He considered that the County would be better advised to follow such a course of action.

#### 41.7 2020 Vision Programme Board

Mr Booty advised that the 2020 Vision Programme Board had confirmed David Neudegg to the new role of Managing Director with Andrew North, Chief Executive of Cheltenham Borough Council, as the Lead Commissioner. The position of Programme Director had been advertised internally.

Mr Booty indicated that this appointment would have an impact upon David's current role as Chief Executive and a report on proposals to address this would be brought forward. Mr Booty had also asked the Chief Executive to circulate details of new roles, responsibilities and contact details to all Members.

#### 41.8 'No Food Waste' Campaign

Mr Harvey advised Members that the 'No Food Waste' sticker campaign encouraging residents to utilise their food caddies had been successful in significantly increasing the volume of food waste recycled. An additional four tonnes of food waste had been collected over the Christmas period when compared with the same period the previous year.

42. ROYAL GARDEN PARTY

At the suggestion of the Chairman it was **AGREED** that Mr Derek Cotterill be invited to attend the Royal Garden Party in recognition of his service as Chairman of the Council from 2010 to 2014. Mr Cotterill was pleased to accept this invitation.

The Chairman proceeded to conduct the draw to select the remaining member to attend the Royal Garden Party.

The outcome was that Mr Peter Emery would attend.

It was proposed by Mr Norton that, in future years, the Chairman of the Council be invited to attend the Royal Garden Party during his or her term of office. The proposition, having been duly seconded, was put to the vote and

**was carried**

43. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

No submissions were received from the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

44. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EXECUTIVE AND COUNCIL COMMITTEES

The Council considered the report of the Chief Executive setting out recommendations made by the Cabinet and the Council's Committees from 12 November 2014 to 14 January 2015.

The recommendations were proposed by Mr Norton and seconded by Mr Booty and on being put to the vote were carried.

**RESOLVED:** that the recommendations made by the Cabinet and the Council's Committees from 12 November 2014 to 14 January 2015 be approved in relation to:

- (a) West Oxfordshire Statement of Community Involvement (Minute No. CT/64/2014/2015);
- (b) Budget Performance and Monitoring Quarter 2 2014/2015 (Minute No. CT/67/2014/2015);
- (c) Procurement of housing Software (Minute No. CT/86/2014/2015);
- (d) Revised Medium Term Financial Strategy 2014-2024 (Minute No. CT/88/2014/2015);  
and
- (e) 2015/2016 Budget and Council Tax Base (Minute No. CT/89/2014/2015)

45. REPORTS OF THE CABINET AND THE COUNCIL'S COMMITTEES

The reports of the meetings of the Cabinet and the Council's Committees held between 12 November 2014 and 14 January 2015 were received:

45.1 Rural Superfast Broadband Project  
(Minute No. CT/63/2014/2015)

Mr McFarlane noted that the Rural Superfast Broadband Project supported the Council's ambition to achieve as close to 100% high speed broadband coverage as possible within the District and enquired when it would be known if this target would be achieved. In response, Mr Langridge advised that the tender period had now closed and that four organisations had submitted bids. These were being evaluated at present and the outcome would be reported as soon as possible. Officers had also met with the private investors supporting the scheme, however, at this stage, it was not possible to give a firm date by which full details of coverage would be known.

45.2 Development Control – Notification and Engagement Arrangements  
(Minute No. CT/64/2014/2015)

Mr Enright expressed some concern over the display of public notice of planning applications and enquired as to the current arrangements for physically advertising applications on-site. In response, Mr Robinson undertook to provide Mr Enright with a written response on arrangements following the introduction of the new back-office development management system.

45.3 Oxfordshire County Council Domestic Violence Service  
(Minute No. E&S/36/2014/2015)

Mr Hoare advised that the concerns expressed and suggestions made by Mrs Carter over the reduction in funding to the County Council's Domestic Violence Service had been considered but the proposed cut in funding was not scheduled to come into force until next year

45.4 Community Infrastructure Levy and the Local Development Framework  
(Minute No. E&S/36/2014/2015)

Mr Mills made reference to his comments regarding building communities through the provision of funding through the Local Development Framework, his point being the importance of soft infrastructure in engendering community cohesion. He enquired whether there would be the opportunity to consider this further through the Local Development Framework. In response, Mr Robinson suggested that Mr Mills attend the forthcoming workshop as such proposals formed part of the emerging Local Plan and Local Development Framework. Mr Robinson advised that funding would be available through the Community Infrastructure Levy and noted that funding was already made available to local councils for community purposes through developer funding secured by way of legal agreement, drawing particular attention to the contributions provided through the North Curbridge development.

45.5 Affordable Housing Target 2015-2018  
(Minute No. E&S/37/2014/2015)

Mr Dingwall welcomed the adoption of the affordable housing target of at least 400 affordable homes in the period 2015-2018.

45.6 Marriotts Walk Development – Business Rates  
(Minute No. E&S/40/2014/2015)

Making reference to the comments he had made regarding the impact of the Marriotts Walk development, Mr Mills enquired whether its impact upon retail premises elsewhere in the town represented a material change in terms of the calculation of Business Rates. In response, Mr Langridge undertook to make enquiries and respond in writing. Mr Norton noted that the geographical relationship between the Marriotts Walk development and the Woolgate had strengthened the retail offer in the town. More people shopped in Witney than ever before and the new development had a positive effect on all businesses in the town.

46. SCHEME OF MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES 2015/2016

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Democratic Services outlining the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel and seeking agreement for a scheme of allowances for Members to be effective for the financial year 2015/2016.

Mr Hoare thanked the Members of the Panel for their work on the Council's behalf but proposed that the existing scheme of Members' Allowances remain unchanged with no

increase in allowances being made for a further year. The proposition was seconded by Mrs Chapman.

Mr Enright expressed his thanks to the Panel, indicating that he believed that it was important to ensure that allowances were such that people were not dissuaded from becoming councillors but also set at a level that was no more than necessary. He considered that it was difficult for all Councillors to have to consider their own level of remuneration on a year by year basis and suggested that Members' Allowances could be explicitly linked as a percentage of a specific staff grade, providing a direct link to public spending and staff costs.

Mr Norton advised that the Panel had been invited to consider indexation and intended to undertake a more fundamental review next year. He acknowledged Mr Enright's argument but considered that it would be difficult to tie the value of Members' Allowances to a specific staff grade given the very different nature of their roles.

Mr Norton reminded Members that the remuneration scheme had originally been devised by Dr Declan Hall of the Institute of Local Government Studies of the University of Birmingham and was based upon the amount of time members could reasonably be expected to put into their roles with a proportion of that time being given voluntarily to reflect the public service ethos.

In expressing his support for the proposition, Mr Cooper suggested that the role of the Chairman of the Human Resources Committee and the consequent level of remuneration ought to be kept under review so as to take account of any increase in workload arising from the 2020 Vision Programme.

Mr Hoare reminded Members that, under the current scheme, only one Special Responsibility Allowance was payable to any Cabinet Member.

Mr Coles agreed with Mr Hoare as he considered that it would be inappropriate for Members to agree any increase whilst some 12 million people in the UK were earning less than the Living Wage. Mr Hoare reminded Members that no West Oxfordshire employees were paid below the Living Wage.

Mr Chapman thanked the Panel Members for their efforts and agreed with Mr Norton that it would be difficult to base Members' Allowances on staff salaries. She expressed support for the introduction of indexation and considered that it would be preferable for all Members if the question of allowances was removed from the political arena to be set independently.

**RESOLVED:** that the existing scheme of Members' Allowances should remain unchanged with no increase in allowances being made for a further year.

#### 47. PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS 2015/2016

The report of the Head of Democratic Services seeking agreement of a programme of meetings for the 2015/2016 civic year was received and considered.

In proposing the recommendation, Mr Hoare suggested that the scheduled meetings of the Human Resources Committee should be on Wednesdays 10 June, 9 September and 2 December 2015, and 3 February and 6 April 2016, each to begin at 1 pm;

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That the Calendar of Meetings for 2015/2016 set out in the Appendix to the report be approved, subject to the scheduled meetings of the Human Resources Committee being Wednesdays 10 June, 9 September and 2 December 2015, and 3 February and 6 April 2016, each to begin at 1 pm; and

- (b) That the times for the first meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees after the annual meeting of the Council be as set out in the Appendix, but that each Committee be invited to consider the timing of its subsequent meetings during the year.

48. SEALING OF DOCUMENTS

The Council received and noted the report of the Chief Executive which gave details of documents numbered 11041 to 11056A sealed since the last meeting.

The meeting closed at 3:00pm

CHAIRMAN

### Statement by Leader of the Council, Councillor Barry Norton, on Oxfordshire County Council Unitary Options Report

On Friday morning of last week (16<sup>th</sup> January) I was contacted by Ian Hudspeth, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, advising me that he was sending me a copy of a report they had commissioned in respect of unitary council options for Oxfordshire. His intention was to put this report to County Cabinet on 27<sup>th</sup> January and then on up to full County Council in March for debate.

The reasoning behind the County Council's decision to pursue this line of enquiry is purely seen as financial as the County seeks to deliver additional savings to meet its funding shortfall estimated at £71m. The report indicates substantial savings from senior management; corporate services and service optimisation are possible from the creation of one, two or three unitary Councils in Oxfordshire.

The report does not consider other potential options such as shared services with other Councils – something we would have expected to have seen given the County's recent tri-County partnership announcement with Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire. Given our significant success in working with partners that deliver similar services one would have expected the County Council to have looked at County partnerships as a potential solution to their funding issues.

We were unaware, until mid-afternoon on Friday, that the County had actually conducted a media briefing in respect of the release of this report including a press release which was embargoed from publication until Monday 19<sup>th</sup> January, the day County Council Cabinet papers would be published for their 27<sup>th</sup> January meeting.

Given the unfortunate events of last week impacting upon South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, I took the lead, on behalf of the four district leaders, in preparing an initial response to the report and our joint media statement was agreed by all four rural districts.

Our work in responding was, given the time constraints, a high level response based upon some work carried out during Friday by our senior management team analysing the report written by Ernst and Young. Ernst and Young, who are also the external auditors of the County Council, have also conducted similar pieces of work for Leicestershire and Buckinghamshire with remarkably similar outcomes (indeed remarkably similar reports).

Our initial work has identified that the savings are overstated, taking little account of the innovative level of joint working done by all four rural districts, and the costs of achieving these savings are understated.

There are also basic errors of understanding in respect of business rates funding which in their own right would lose Oxfordshire taxpayers between £2m and £3m per year.

Our concern in West Oxfordshire is that a unitary solution will lead to a one size fits all level of service set from the centre which will disadvantage our local market towns jeopardising our key local priorities such as free Car Parking.

The government have already responded to the County Council report with Local Government Minister, Kris Hopkins, stating:-

**“One of the first acts of the coalition Government was to legislate to scrap the last administration's plans for top-down unitary local government restructuring, through the Local Government Act 2010. Such top-down upheavals would have been expensive and disruptive, distracting from the need to promote growth and to tackle the deficit”**

**"This stance is, and remains, Government policy. There is great potential for more locally-led joint working and sharing of services in local government.”**

This Council has adopted this approach with its partnership working that doesn't allow artificial administrative boundaries get in the way of efficiencies and ensures that the **local** democratic structures dictates the service provision as supported by the electorate.

Given the response of the four rural districts who are united in opposition to a unitary County Council in Oxfordshire, and the Local Government Minister's reiteration yesterday that it will not support the restructuring of council's, it is to be hoped that the County Council will now withdraw its report from consideration. Instead it should seek to work collaboratively with other authorities to share staff and procure more cost effective services as we have done successfully in recent times thereby protecting front line services without the need for large rises in Council Tax.