

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

At the Meeting of the
WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen,
Witney, on Wednesday 27 April 2016 at 2.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillors: N A MacRae MBE (Chairman), Mrs M J Crossland (Vice Chairman), A J Adams, Mrs J C Baker, M A Barrett, A C Beaney, R J M Bishop, M Brennan, Mrs L C Carter, Mrs L J Chapman, A S Coles, N G Colston. J C Cooper, D A Cotterill, C Cottrell-Dormer, R A Courts, C G Dingwall, P J G Dorward, Mrs J M Doughty, H B Eaglestone, D S T Enright, P Emery, Mrs E H N Fenton, E J Fenton, S J Good, J Haine, P J Handley, A D Harvey, Miss G R Hill, H J Howard, E H James, P D Kelland, R A Langridge, Ms E P R Leffman, Mrs L E C Little, R D J McFarlane, J F Mills, Sir Barry Norton, T N Owen, A H K Postan, Mrs C E Reynolds, W D Robinson, G Saul, T B Simcox and G H L Wall

71. MINUTES

RESOLVED: that the Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 24 February 2016, copies of which had been circulated, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

72. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A M Graham, T J Morris, Dr E M E Poskitt and B J Woodruff

73. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from members or officers at this juncture.

74. RECEIPT OF ANNOUNCEMENTS

74.1 Microphones

The Chairman advised that there was a problem with some of the microphones in the chamber so members would need to speak up or a roving microphone was also available.

74.2 Member Dispensation

Mr MacRae reported that both Sir Barry and Mr Postan were not in the best of health and accordingly if they wished to speak at the meeting he was happy for them to remain in their seats if they so wished.

74.3 Oxfordshire Blue Plaque Scheme

Mr MacRae reported that by virtue of his office as Chairman he was a member of the Oxfordshire Blue Plaque Board. An email was to be sent to all councillors giving details of the scheme and seeking nominations in the district.

74.4 Forthcoming Elections

The Chairman advised that there would be elections held on Thursday 5 May for 17 seats on the council. Mr MacRae wished those councillors seeking re-election good luck and in the event that any member was not re-elected thanked them for their efforts for the Council.

74.5 Sir Barry Norton

Mr MacRae reported that it was the end of an era as the Leader of the Council, Sir Barry Norton, had decided not to stand for re-election.

The Chairman quoted from a statement made by Sir Barry when he announced he would not be standing as follows:

'It is with great sadness that I have had to take this decision to stand down from both North Leigh Parish Council where I have served since 1973 and West Oxfordshire District Council to which I was first elected to represent my village in 1983 and have been council leader for the past sixteen years. I have greatly enjoyed serving the residents of North Leigh and wider West Oxfordshire over these years locally, regionally and in negotiations with national government. I believe we can all be proud of our achievements in making our district recognised as one of the very best places in the country to live, work and visit'

On behalf of all members and staff the Chairman expressed his thanks to Sir Barry for all that he had done for politics in West Oxfordshire and beyond. Mr MacRae indicated that Sir Barry was held in the highest esteem by all political groups on the council and recognised the hard work of Sir Barry at both local and national level for the good of the residents of West Oxfordshire.

Mr MacRae highlighted that this service had been recently recognised with the award of a much deserved Knighthood in the Honours List. Mr MacRae advised that personally he had learnt a lot from Sir Barry in the arena of public service and his friendship and guidance had been invaluable.

The Chairman wished Sir Barry and Lady Molly an enjoyable and restful retirement.

Finally Mr MacRae advised that it had been the earnest hope of the Prime Minister to attend the Council meeting. However the timing clashed with Prime Ministers Questions in the House of Commons.

The Chairman then read out a letter from the Prime Minister offering his best wishes to Sir Barry.

Mr Robinson then spoke on behalf of the Conservative Group and paid tribute to Sir Barry's leadership of the council, his integrity and the support that Sir Barry had given to Mr Robinson and other councillors.

Mr Cooper, on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Group, echoed the previous speakers and suggested that Sir Barry's service to the council had been exemplary. Mr Cooper highlighted Sir Barry's generosity of spirit and hard work during challenging times at the council.

Mr Cooper advised that his group had purchased some signed books as a present for Sir Barry. In addition Mr Cooper gave notification of his intention to bring a notice of motion to a future meeting to make Sir Barry the first Alderman of the district.

Mr Enright, on behalf of the Labour Group, highlighted the incredible service of Sir Barry to the district. Mr Enright paid tribute to Sir Barry's political skill in dealing with councillors of all parties with respect and courtesy and his commitment to serving the residents of West Oxfordshire.

Mr McFarlane highlighted that tributes were coming from across the political spectrum and this demonstrated the high esteem that Sir Barry was held in. Mr McFarlane praised Sir Barry's vision, dedication and leadership and indicated that he would be missed by all at the council.

Sir Barry indicated that he was overwhelmed by the best wishes he had received and he had greatly enjoyed his time on the council. Sir Barry advised that he appreciated working with councillors from all political groups and thanked them and officers for their hard work on behalf of West Oxfordshire.

Sir Barry advised that West Oxfordshire was in his blood and the district was very special to him and the ambition to improve the district had always been paramount. Sir Barry suggested that this would continue with the new Council.

Sir Barry reiterated that he would be sad to leave the council and would be doing so with a heavy heart and would be thinking of everybody at the authority. Sir Barry highlighted the challenging times ahead and the importance of the district council taking decisions for the benefit of residents.

Sir Barry again thanked everybody for the tributes he had received.

Mr MacRae reminded members that there would be a reception for Sir Barry in the committee rooms following the meeting.

75. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

76. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EXECUTIVE AND COUNCIL COMMITTEES

The Council considered the report of the Head of Paid Service setting out recommendations made by the Cabinet and the Council's Committees from 9 March to 25 April 2016.

The recommendations were proposed by Sir Barry Norton, Leader of the Council, and seconded by Mr Robinson.

Mr Enright proposed an amendment in respect of the Devolution Update, Minute No. CT/130/2015/2016, in that the allocation of £50,000 should not be approved and the matter referred to Finance and Management Overview & Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

Sir Barry advised that other authorities had agreed to make a financial contribution and the study was likely to cost less than 50% of the amount committed. The outcome of the study and any business case would then be put before members for consideration.

Ms Leffman seconded the amendment and suggested, as was the case with grants, that further detail was needed before money could be allocated. Ms Leffman opined that it was important this issue was scrutinised as taxpayer's money was involved and it would be beneficial to know how it would be spent.

Mr Cooper concurred and questioned why some authorities were only committing £4,000 to the study. Mr Cooper suggested there was a need to look at better integration with towns and parishes in the district. Mr Cooper, whilst acknowledging it was in the scrutiny committee work programme, suggested more detailed consideration was required and full details of the study presented.

Sir Barry indicated there was a danger of pre-empting discussion on a motion later in the agenda and highlighted the in depth debate at Cabinet on this matter. Sir Barry reminded members that any submission would seek devolved powers from central government and there were conflicting opinions on how this could be best achieved.

Sir Barry advised that decisions had to be made quickly and advice had been received that options that built on current shared working were acceptable. The consultants would look at various options and Sir Barry undertook to investigate if the Terms of Reference could be made available to members.

In respect of reduced contributions from Cotswold and South Northants District Councils this was because advice was needed as to the legal position regarding cross border amalgamations. Sir Barry advised that if this option was considered feasible then they would contribute more finance. Sir Barry asked members to reject the amendment.

Mr Langridge suggested there was still uncertainty on this matter and it was important to get the information and make it available for consultation. Mr Langridge expressed disappointment that no Labour members had attended Cabinet when the matter was discussed.

On being put to the vote the amendment **WAS LOST**

On being put to the vote the substantive proposition **WAS CARRIED**

RESOLVED: that the recommendations made by the Cabinet and the Council's Committees from 9 March to 25 April 2016 be approved in relation to:

- (a) 2020 Partnership Joint Committee - Appointment of Substitute Members (Minute No. CT/121/2015/2016)
- (b) Devolution Update (Minute No. CT/130/2015/2016)
- (c) Housing Investment Property Purchase (Minute No. CT/135/2015/2016)
- (d) Scheme of Delegation (Minute No. DC/19/2015/2016)

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

The reports of the meetings of the Cabinet and the Council's Committees held between 9 March and 13 April 2016 were received:

77.1 Quality of Care in Hospitals (Minute No. E&S/64/2015/2016)

Mr Enright asked if the re-opened Wenrisc Ward at Witney Hospital was now fully staffed and operating at capacity.

Mr Mills, Cabinet Member for Leisure and Health, confirmed that the ward had re-opened and assurances had been received that Witney Hospital had a future role. In addition changes had been made to the arrangements at the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee that would ensure full consultation on any proposed changes to hospital provision.

In respect of staffing Mr Mills indicated that it was not possible to go straight to full capacity so the process would be undertaken in stages.

Mr Saul asked if there was any update regarding Chipping Norton Hospital not accepting patients. Mr Mills undertook to establish the current position and respond to Mr Saul accordingly.

77.2 Local Development Framework (Minute No. E&S/64/2015/2016)

Mr Cooper asked if the Chairman of Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee had raised any of the points discussed at the meeting with the Policy Planning team. Mr Handley undertook to provide a response to Mr Cooper.

77.3 Meeting the Needs of an Ageing Population
(Minute No. E&S/64/2015/2016)

Mrs Little advised that the Oxpip initiative was still operating in Carterton. Mrs Carter indicated that she understood funding had been withdrawn for some services. Mrs Little and Mrs Carter agreed to discuss and clarify the matter outside of the meeting.

Mrs Carter sought further information regarding the current position with Children's Centres. Mr Handley advised that no decisions had been made and the timescale had been extended to allow further discussion. Mrs Carter emphasised the importance of the scrutiny committee continuing to look at this issue.

77.4 Leisure Contract
(Minute No. E&S/64/2015/2016)

Mrs Carter asked about progress with the new leisure contract. Mr Mills advised that a timetable was being drafted and options considered.

77.5 Devolution Update
(Minute No. CT/130/2015/2016)

Ms Leffman expressed disappointment that this had not been discussed at the last Council meeting as the information had been available. Sir Barry clarified that this had not been possible as the agreement had been secured at a late stage and needed to be confirmed by all involved. Sir Barry advised that he had briefed the opposition group leaders after the meeting.

77.6 Response to Government Technical Consultation on Implementation of Planning Changes
(Minute No. CT/132/2015/2016)

Mr Saul asked for an update regarding developers seeking to renegotiate the terms of a legal agreement as a result of changes to the definition of affordable housing and whether there were other sites where this was the case.

Mr Robinson, Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Economy, confirmed this was the only case and the developer had now agreed to the agreement as originally negotiated.

78. NOTICE OF MOTION – UNITARY PROPOSALS

The following motion had been received in the names of Mr D S T Enright and Mr J C Cooper namely:

'West Oxfordshire District is an historic part of the county of Oxfordshire and has links over generations to neighbouring towns and the city of Oxford. We have gained from sharing services outside the county and should continue to look for such savings. However full merger of our district with Cotswold, with associated democratic, strategic, political and service merging of interests, is against the best interests and instincts of the people of West Oxfordshire. This Council therefore resolves not to pursue the proposed development of a unitary authority with Cotswold district, and instead commits to exploring urgently options for a unitary authority operating within Oxfordshire.'

Mr Enright moved the motion and acknowledged the positive impact of the 2020 Vision project. Mr Enright also confirmed that Sir Barry had taken time to explain the proposals for unitary authorities and this was appreciated. Mr Enright indicated that he was in favour of unitary authorities particularly for strategic services as it was clearer for all to understand. It was also likely that some form of unitary system would be in place in the future.

Mr Enright advised that he could not however support a merger with Cotswold District Council. Mr Enright highlighted the problems of working in different counties and regions and the need to deal with a range of partners which often had different arrangements in their respective areas. It was acknowledged that there were organisational benefits but the strategic, political and democratic issues could not be demonstrated.

Mr Enright expressed concern about the geography of a new authority, the possibility of services being moved away from the district and the lack of a historical link between the two. Mr Enright acknowledged the need to look at options but questioned whether the creation of small unitary councils was practical. Mr Enright asked members to support the motion and rule out this option from the deliberations.

Mr Cooper seconded the motion and advised that he concurred with the views of Mr Enright. Mr Cooper pointed out that they had both been County Councillors and so understood the issues involved.

Mr Cooper suggested that this option did not have any coherence and it was important not to repeat previous aborted attempts to find a unitary solution. Mr Cooper thanked Sir Barry for briefing him on the proposals and acknowledged it was important to look at options. However it was considered more beneficial to look at opportunities in Oxfordshire where there was a greater synergy.

Sir Barry indicated that all options needed to be looked at before any detailed debate could be undertaken so the notice of motion was premature. It was important not to rule anything out and government advice was that current shared working should be considered to see if a unitary arrangement was feasible.

Sir Barry suggested that it may be the case that some of the issues raised by Mr Enright may come forward but the preparatory work needed to be undertaken first. Members would then have an opportunity to consider the merits of different options.

Sir Barry asked members to reject the motion as the issues would be discussed at a later juncture with more detailed information.

Mr Handley concurred that all options should be considered with council making the final decision. Mr Handley suggested the consultant's report may identify issues with other options so it was important to establish all the facts.

Mr Cotterill challenged the assertion regarding historic links between West Oxfordshire and Cotswold and highlighted a lot of boundary changes whereby communities had changed area. Mr Fenton pointed out that boundary changes were administrative rather than historical.

Mrs Chapman concurred with other speakers that it was wrong to rule out any option at this stage and achieving the best result for residents was key. It was suggested that current cross border working should not be ignored in the process.

Ms Leffman suggested that the motion had generated a healthy debate but reiterated it would have been good if there had been an opportunity to discuss the issues at an earlier stage. Ms Leffman advised that she would abstain from voting.

Ms Leffman agreed with other members that as wide a range of options as possible should be considered to see which would deliver the best for residents.

Mr Mills acknowledged the need to keep an open mind but suggested the assertions in the motion were wrong and there were significant links such as tourism between the two areas. Mr Mills emphasised that authorities could have different priorities but it was too early to rule anything out.

Mr Courts suggested the discussion should not be about territory but service delivery and a full debate could be had when all information was available. Mr Dingwall suggested access to funding was key and it was important to retain local identity if possible and nobody was pre-empting the outcome of the consultants work.

Mr Coles suggested that a decision should not be rushed and efficient use of resources was a major consideration. It was acknowledged that a number of options were possible but members should not be steered down a particular course.

A number of members then reiterated that it was important to see the report before decisions were made.

Mr Robinson questioned previous statements that a combined West Oxfordshire and Cotswold authority would be too small. Mr Robinson advised that there were already smaller unitary authorities in existence and raised concern that a unitary for the whole of Oxfordshire could have problems too.

Mr Enright closed the debate by reiterating that in his opinion a combined unitary would not work and the politics of place was key. It was suggested that there was greater commonality with the rest of Oxfordshire than Cotswold.

Mr Enright indicated that devolution would be a huge change and whilst not espousing a unitary Oxfordshire it was preferable to seek solutions within the county.

On being put to the vote the motion

WAS LOST

(Mr McFarlane left the meeting at this juncture)

79. NOTICE OF MOTION – OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL SERVICES

The following motion had been received in the names of Mr D S T Enright and Mr G Saul namely:

‘County Council services in West Oxfordshire are being slashed with damage to our communities. Of particular concern are the state of our roads including potholes, the threatened closure of our waste recycling sites, the impending closure of our children's centres, stresses on adult social care, and the imminent termination of bus subsidies with the attendant cancellation of some bus routes. As part of its work on unitary status, this Council therefore resolves to draw up plans and establish a budget to contribute to the maintenance of services abandoned as a result of County Council cuts, starting before the end of the current budget year in April 2017.’

Mr Enright proposed the motion and suggested that it was opportune to consider whether the council could bridge the funding gap created by reductions in Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) funding until the devolution issue was resolved.

Mr Enright cited examples where Witney Town Council was looking to support bus services and Wallingford Town Council was looking to run a Children's Centre. Mr Enright expressed the hope that the spirit of the motion could be incorporated in to future budget discussions.

Mr Saul seconded the motion and reserved the right to speak later in the debate.

Mr Langridge, Cabinet Member for Resources, expressed his disappointment that this matter had not been raised during recent budget deliberations. It was acknowledged that OCC were making cuts but it would be reckless for the district council to take over services.

Mr Langridge outlined that the district had its own financial pressures and could not jeopardise the approved Medium Term Financial Strategy. There was also the potential that it could be seen as double taxation for the same services. Mr Langridge asked members not to support the motion.

Mr Cotterill suggested the motion was directed at the wrong authority and highlighted the cuts in OCC grants to local town and parish councils.

Mr Handley, in acknowledging the concerns raised in the motion, suggested it was premature as decisions could not be made until all options had been explored and the outcome of OCC reviews were known.

Mr Howard highlighted the uncertain financial position and the potential funding deficit facing the district council. Mr Howard indicated that these needed to be addressed first.

Mr Cooper emphasised that the OCC budget had been agreed between all the parties and concurred with Mr Langridge that the issues should have been raised as part of the budget consultation. Mr Cooper reminded members that the Liberal Democrat group had supported the budget and agreed with Mr Howard regarding financial priorities. Mr Cooper highlighted the positive impact of initiatives such as property investment that had been suggested by the opposition. Mr Cooper indicated he would vote against the motion.

Mr Coles referred to discussions around bus services and clarified that he did not have an interest although he was employed by Stagecoach as the discussion was general. Mr Coles confirmed that advice had been sought from officers on this point.

Mr Coles suggested the motion sought to bridge funding gaps and not take on responsibility for services. Mr Coles refuted that this would involve double taxation and the priority for residents was to retain services. Mr Coles suggested it was right for the Labour Group to challenge and put forward alternative ideas.

Mr Mills suggested the motion would just commit the council to expenditure it could not afford and would be contrary to the agreed financial strategy. Mr Mills advised that transitional budgets had been agreed by OCC to help ease financial pressures and whilst it was vital to protect the most vulnerable in society it was not right that the district council should pick up any funding commitments.

Mrs Chapman concurred that tough financial decisions needed to be made by both authorities but the motion was not the way forward in that respect.

Sir Barry suggested that it would have been useful if the proposer of the motion had discussed it with the other groups at an earlier stage. Sir Barry highlighted the positive impact of collaborative working in achieving budget savings.

Mr Saul, in agreeing there were budget pressures, clarified that the motion was not looking for pound for pound funding but offered the scope for flexibility and make funds available to plug financial gaps. Mr Saul suggested there was an opportunity for local solutions.

Mr Enright thanked members for the debate and advised that the motion had been put forward to contribute towards addressing funding issues. It was suggested that OCC had been slow to share services and some services may be better operated on a smaller scale.

Mr Enright acknowledged that OCC and the district councils were doing all they could but an ambitious approach was needed to see if anything further could be done. Mr Enright expressed the hope that ideas would be forthcoming through the committee process in the coming year.

On being put to the vote the motion

WAS LOST

80. SEALING OF DOCUMENTS

(Mr Harvey declared an interest at this juncture by virtue of being a tenant at Newman Court)

Mr Cooper sought further information regarding the Clawback Deed of Release relating to properties in Woodstock. It was agreed that a response would be forwarded to Mr Cooper.

The Council then received and noted the report of the Chief Executive which gave details of documents numbered 11175 to 11206A sealed since the last meeting.

The meeting closed at 4.07pm

CHAIRMAN