

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the
West Oxfordshire District Council
held via video conferencing at **2.00pm** on **Wednesday 13 May 2020**

PRESENT

Councillors: Harry Eaglestone (Chairman), Jane Doughty (Vice-Chairman), Jake Acock, Joy Aitman, Alaa Al-Yousuf, Luci Ashbourne, Andrew Beaney, Richard Bishop, Rosa Bolger, Jill Bull, Mike Cahill, Laetisia Carter, Nathalie Chapple, Andrew Coles, Owen Collins, Nigel Colston, Julian Cooper, Derek Cotterill, Suzi Coul, Maxine Crossland, Merilyn Davies, Duncan Enright, Hilary Fenton, Ted Fenton, Steve Good, Andy Graham, Jeff Haine, David Harvey, Gill Hill, David Jackson, Ed James, Richard Langridge, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Norman MacRae MBE, Martin McBride, Michele Mead, James Mills, Toby Morris, Kieran Mullins, Neil Owen, Elizabeth Poskitt, Alex Postan, Carl Rylett, Geoff Saul, Harry St John and Ben Woodruff.

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive); Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director); Keith Butler (Head of Democratic Services); and Amy Barnes (Senior Strategic Support Officer).

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 26 February 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Louise Chapman.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Harvey declared an interest in Agenda Item 10, Sealing of Documents because he was a tenant of Newman Court, Witney.

4. RECEIPT OF ANNOUNCEMENTS

4.1 Death of two employees

The Chairman reported the sad news of the deaths of two members of staff.

Janice Cooper, from the Planning department, passed away on 30 April 2020. Janice had worked for West Oxfordshire District Council and then Publica for 24 years, having joined in 1996 as a tea person and from 2002 was employed as an administrative assistant within planning services.

Sheela Cousins, from Revenues and Benefits, passed away on 20 March 2020. Sheela was employed in October 2017 as a Client Support Officer and helped hundreds of residents with a variety of issues including debt management, money management and the threat of homelessness. She was a very compassionate person and the Council received regular communications of praise from clients that she had helped.

The Chairman stated that both Janice and Sheela were valued members of staff, and popular amongst their colleagues. They would be sorely missed and the Council's thoughts were with their families and friends.

Councillors held a moments' silence in memory of both ladies.

4.2 Climate Action Group

Councillor Harvey addressed Members and advised that the scheduled meeting of the Climate Action Group would not take place on 19 May because the lead officer Ms Scott, was having to self-isolate. He advised that the consultation would progress in line with the schedule and the next meeting would take place on 16 June 2020. He wished Ms Scott well.

4.3 Maintenance of Service Delivery

Councillor MacRae paid tribute to all within the Council, staff, Members and the wider community for the tremendous effort that had been in place looking after the welfare of so many. He particularly expressed his gratitude to Ubico colleagues, led by Mr Lightfoot, who had worked hard to maintain kerbside collection, recycling, food and garden waste. Commercial waste had also been collected on a reduced basis and officers would be contacting commercial waste clients from June to establish their requirements.

Due to the hard work of specific officers and Ubico, a reduced bulk waste collection service had been reintroduced a few weeks ago and the full service would commence the following day. The Street Scene team had continued with usual duties and Councillor MacRae referred to many emails and Facebook entries where members of the public had expressed their gratitude to Ubico colleagues.

Thames Valley Police (TVP) had announced an increase in the number of Domestic Violence and Domestic Abuse reports but stressed that their staff had been able to focus on this area in recent weeks due to less demand elsewhere. In contrast, the helpline and support services were not reporting an increase in the level of demand and our officers were working with TVP to understand this. Officers and Members had also been working hard to communicate the message regarding support for any potential victims and leaflets and information sheets were available.

In addition, the Council had Domestic Abuse champions in Housing and in Community Wellbeing who were trained to signpost people to services and listen to concerns. Councillor MacRae also detailed the support that the County Council was preparing for children returning to school and the Safeguarding challenges that this could present. He also highlighted the Safeguarding training offered by OSCB and OSAB should Councillors wish to increase their knowledge.

Councillor Enright reiterated his thanks to all staff on a number of fronts, including delivering an uninterrupted waste collection service. He highlighted the support that officers had been providing to shielded and vulnerable residents, along with the numerous community organisations and micro groups delivering assistance at street level. He recognised the assistance being provided by officers running the Community Support telephone line and asked whether the helpline could be publicised more widely.

As a vulnerable resident himself, Councillor McBride echoed the thanks to all councillors and volunteer groups for assisting him and his wife who were both shielding.

In response to Councillor MacRae's comments regarding Domestic Violence, Councillor Carter asked if the text service could be published along with a communications push on the assistance available to anyone suffering abuse at the present time. Councillor MacRae agreed to speak to officers.

Councillor Ashbourne thanked Councillor MacRae for the update and was pleased to see the District Council at the centre of the support network. She had observed how well the support had been received by residents and hoped the council could continue to work like this in the long term.

4.4 Repairs to banks along the River Windrush

Councillor MacRae's second announcement was not just for Members of the Council but also members of the public residing at Woodford Mill in Witney. Two gentlemen had contacted Councillor MacRae asking for an update on the riverbank repairs but he felt it was necessary to update Council first, before responding in full to them.

Councillor MacRae reminded Members that whilst the breach occurred in the spring of 2018, it was only accepted in May 2019 that the Council had the responsibility to repair it. Repairs had been due to commence on two occasions in summer 2019 when heavy rainfall rendered the repair impossible for safety reasons. It had been agreed that it was too dangerous for engineers to enter the river, especially when large bags of gravel were being moved by the water flow.

The current situation was that the water level was dropping but still flowing at a fast rate. The Council had asked the contractor to carry out a site inspection this week to confirm if temporary barriers could be deployed to deflect the river over the existing crest weirs. The barriers would be monitored for one week prior to further work being undertaken. The Environment Agency had confirmed that the permit obtained the previous year was still valid and they had no objection to the work being carried out.

This urgent piece of work would be carried out as soon as practicable and was likely to continue into June, weather permitting. However, the work may have to cease or be stopped temporarily if the river depth increased or velocity changed due to the weather.

Councillor MacRae concluded by advising that despite the delay, the expenditure was not expected to exceed the previous forecast and officers were ready to start work with one week's notice, when the weather allowed.

Councillor Coles thanked Councillor MacRae for the update but expressed his frustration at the length of time this had taken so far. However, he noted that progress was being made and reiterated that communications needed to be kept up.

In response, Councillor MacRae advised that officers were working as fast as possible bearing in mind the weather conditions which often hampered progress and made it unsafe to undertake the work. He assured Members that the Council was not dragging its heels and had worked hard to resolve the problems since having to assume responsibility for the works.

4.4 Community Revenue Grants

Councillor Mead addressed Members and advised that a number of organisations had received around £186,000 in grant funding. The organisations ranged in size from small, pre-school groups to the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Chipping Norton Theatre and Age UK.

Councillor Doughty expressed her thanks for the assistance provided to the community groups and was grateful to all members and staff for supporting the residents at this time.

Councillor Acock stated his thanks to the staff and volunteers involved in supporting residents, especially those assisting the elderly in village locations. He asked Councillor Mead if she could comment on the impact that Covid 19 had had on the leisure industry.

In response, Councillor Mead advised that the leisure centres were poised to re-open when advised it was safe to do so and in the interim, many had been used as locations for testing centres and foodbanks.

4.5 Update on Covid 19 and WODC's position

Councillor Mills addressed Members and added his thanks to all of the key workers who had kept working throughout the crisis. He had witnessed communities working together

across the District and was grateful to the staff and officers for their effort and time they had dedicated to ensure that services were delivered and vulnerable people were supported. He had been approached by one resident in particular who had been shielding in Bampton and who expressly requested that their thanks be passed on. He reiterated that the Council was here to assist wherever possible.

Councillor Mills advised that there was an upcoming Oxfordshire Growth Board meeting in June where they would begin to look at the recovery stage of the Covid 19 epidemic and what part WODC would play in that response.

Councillor Graham thanked the Leader for his update and hoped that the cross party approach that had been adopted so far, would continue. Councillor Mills advised that more information would be provided at Cabinet with regards to the Business Recovery Stage and input from all colleagues was welcomed.

Councillor Leffman queried whether the Growth Board would be looking at the future differently, following the pandemic and whether it would be an opportune time for them to review their remit.

In response, Councillor Mills advised that a review had been ongoing and there would be a lot more work on sustainable and active travel, in conjunction with the County Council.

5. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There was no participation from members of the public.

6. CABINET MEMBERSHIP AND PORTFOLIOS

Councillor Mills addressed Members and thanked them all for their support during the recent lockdown restrictions. He especially wanted to thank Councillor Morris for deputising when he had had to self-isolate, as his help had been greatly appreciated. He recognised that everybody had been working hard and he thanked Members for their willingness to adapt to a rapidly evolving situation. He stated that one positive that had emerged was the good working relationships, trust and confidence that had developed across the board and the excellent skills and knowledge that had been built up.

He therefore had decided not to make any changes to the Cabinet or Portfolios at this time.

Councillor Postan added his thanks to staff and volunteers for their hard work and highlighted how the crisis had shown how vital growth and transport was in rural areas. He hoped that Cabinet Members would consider collating and sharing their ideas and initiatives moving forwards.

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

The reports of the meetings of the Cabinet and the Council's Committees held between 27 February and 18 March 2020 were received.

7.1 Ryegrass, Woodstock Minute No. E&S/66/2019/2020

Councillor Cooper asked for clarity on the alternative options which had been considered by Cottsway Housing prior to taking the decision to close Ryegrass, as he was not aware that residents had been offered any alternative to having to move.

In response, Councillor Beaney undertook to put the question to Cottsway Housing on Councillor Cooper's behalf.

8. VIRTUAL MEETINGS AND DELEGATION ARRANGEMENTS

The Council considered the report of Head of Democratic Services, which addressed a number of issues where decisions were required in order to organise and facilitate the conduct of Council meetings and business during the coronavirus pandemic. This included the current requirements for people to stay at home where possible, the social distancing requirements, and the redeployment of Council and Publica resources to maintain essential services and to provide support to residents and communities.

The report also proposed amendments to officer delegations to enable the Council to act in situations of emergency or urgency and changes to the meetings programme for 2020/21 as a consequence of District Council elections now being scheduled to take place on 6 May 2021.

The report outlined the requirements for meetings to be held remotely and detailed the relevant protocol and procedure rules which would be used by officers and councillors.

A copy of the virtual Meetings Procedure Rules was attached at Annex 1 and Councillor Protocol for Virtual Meetings was attached at Annex 2 to the report.

Councillor Mills outlined the report and reminded the meeting that nobody was operating in normal times at the moment. He directed Members to paragraph 1.1 of the report which was key in understanding the pressures everyone was under at the current time. He hoped that the procedures and delegations proposed would be supported and would assist those staff who had been redeployed to continue to help residents and provide a continuity of service.

The proposal was seconded by Councillor Morris, who reserved his right to speak at this stage.

Councillor Graham stated that he broadly supported the report but proposed an amendment that paragraph 8 of Annex 1 be deleted, which stated that where full Council meetings were held virtually, the provision for members to submit a Motion would be disappplied. He made reference to Article 13.4 of the Council's Constitution which encouraged that all realistic alternatives should be considered. He stated that motions put forward by Members often originated with residents and were an essential part of democracy.

The amendment was seconded by Councillor Leffman who felt that many of the procedures applied at the County Council could be echoed at District level and the right to bring forward motions should be retained. She drew attention to the requirement at the County Council for amendments to motions to be notified in advance of the meeting, which she considered could facilitate the processes.

Councillor Enright reminded the meeting that these arrangements would be reviewed no later than October.

Councillor Davies felt that disapplying this provision was borderline anti-democratic and that a requirement to notify amendments 24 hours in advance would stifle debate. A number of Members agreed that it would not be acceptable to remove this function and, in relation to the possibility of advance notification of amendments, felt that this would remove the ability to respond to debate and modify a proposal in that context.

Councillor Acock supported the amendment and did not accept that it would be difficult for officers to manage the process virtually.

Councillor MacRae reiterated the reasons for the temporary change in process and reminded the meeting that this would be reviewed by October.

Councillor Mills expressed his disappointment at the points being raised, especially as officers and Councillors had been working incredibly hard on behalf of residents. He felt that communication remained key and it was important to remember that officers needed support to continue to deliver services.

The amendment was voted on and subsequently lost on the chairman's casting vote.

In response, Councillor Acock proposed a further amendment which was to include an additional paragraph at 8.2 of Annex I. He requested that the proposed additional paragraph should outline the Council's desire to see the reintroduction of all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings with immediate effect. This was seconded by Councillor Leffman who felt it was unclear what was happening with scrutiny although she accepted that officers were busy dealing with the current crisis.

Councillor Cotterill reminded Members that there was a lot of work involved outside of the scrutiny meetings, including chairman's briefings which could prove problematic if held virtually.

The majority of Members were not comfortable taking officers away from the frontline to administer scrutiny meetings, and felt it was unrealistic to consider reintroducing the meetings at this time. Councillor MacRae advised that it was important to take the pressure off officers where possible and reminded the meeting that this would also be reviewed.

Councillors Coles and Haine both agreed that it was not the right time to reintroduce scrutiny meetings.

Councillor Levy raised a query regarding the Oxfordshire Garden Village Area Action Plan and when or how this would be scrutinised and looked at by Members. In response, Councillor Haine agreed to contact Councillor Levy outside of the meeting to discuss.

Councillor Leverton suggested that Councillor Acock withdraw his amendment based on the discussion, as taking a named vote would be lengthy. Councillor Acock agreed subject to assurances that scrutiny would be reintroduced at the earliest opportunity.

Councillor Mills repeated that these changes were not permanent but were in response to the current crisis and would be reviewed.

Councillor Graham raised a point of order regarding paragraph 12.1 of Annex I which advised that the rules would be kept under regular review by the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer. Mr Butler advised that this would be used for any urgent changes if procedures were seen to not operate effectively.

Councillor Cooper asked how the administration intended to deal with Call-in Items. Following a request for clarification on the question, the Monitoring Officer advised that this would be managed in consultation with the relevant Scrutiny Chair and each case would need to take into account its own particular circumstances.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That the next annual meeting of the council shall take place in May 2021;
- (c) That the proposed Virtual Meetings Procedure Rules in Annex 1 to the report, and the proposed Councillor Protocol for Virtual Meetings in Annex 2 be approved and incorporated into the Constitution until such time as the Regulations made by the government pursuant to the Coronavirus Act 2020 cease to have effect;

- (d) That in the event of a Licensing Panel being required to meet, the Chief Executive be authorised, in consultation with the Chairman of the Licensing Committee, to establish arrangements for the participation of interested parties which meet the statutory requirements;
- (e) That the delegations set out below be approved, and the Constitution amended accordingly;
 - (i) the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer and/or the Monitoring Officer as appropriate, can take any necessary decision in cases of emergency; and
 - (ii) the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer and/or the Monitoring Officer as appropriate, can take a decision in relation to any function of the Cabinet or of a Committee or Sub-Committee where the matter is urgent and cannot reasonably await the next meeting of that body, and subject also to consultation with the Leader or in their absence the Deputy Leader of the Council; or with the Chairman or in their absence the Vice Chairman of the Committee or Sub-Committee, as the case may be; and
- (f) That the proposed changes to the previously approved meetings programme for 2020/21 set out below be approved;

| Original Meeting and Date | Revised Meeting Date |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Lowlands Monday 8 March 2021 | Monday 15 March 2021 |
| Lowlands Monday 12 April 2021 | Monday 19 April 2021 |
| Annual Council Wednesday 12 May 2021 | Wednesday 19 May 2021 |
| Lowlands Monday 17 May 2021 | Monday 24 May 2021 |
| Cabinet Wednesday 19 May 2021 | Wednesday 26 May 2021 |

9. APPOINTMENT OF CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER/DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

The Council considered the report of the Chief Executive, which requested consideration of the proposed permanent full time Chief Finance Officer and Deputy Chief Executive role. The postholder would also be the Council's Section 151 Officer and the budget for the role had been approved by Council in February 2020.

In 2019, Cotswold District Council had informed the Council that it no longer wished to share the Chief Finance Officer (Section 151) role. This retained role was a key one for both of the Councils, and there was a concern that a shared role was no longer appropriate given the importance of its responsibilities and the scale of future financial challenges.

As the Council was required to employ a Section 151 Officer it needed to make alternative arrangements and a full time Chief Finance Officer/Deputy Chief Executive role was proposed to strengthen the Council's retained officer structure and to act as well as fulfilling the Section 151 Officer requirements. A copy of the job description and employee specification had been circulated with the report.

Councillor Mills presented the report and explained that the decision had been taken to review the role and combine it with a Deputy Chief Executive position, in order to support the workload of the current Chief Executive. Councillor Mills advised that interviews had taken place and he thanked Councillors Enright and Graham for their

assistance in the interview process. He advised that a conclusion had been reached to offer the role to one of the candidates, Elizabeth Griffiths, subject to the successful completion of post interview checks and processes. He also advised that it was proposed that Philip Alway would undertake the s151 Officer role on an interim basis, until the new postholder had taken up their position.

The proposal was seconded by Councillor Morris, who reserved his right to speak until the end of the discussion.

Councillors Graham and St John expressed their thanks to the current Chief Finance Officer, Ms Poole, who had left the Council in a good position to help it move forward into the recovery phase of the existing pandemic.

Following a question from Councillor Langridge, Councillor Mills confirmed that there would be a three to four week period before Ms Griffiths started her new role, which would then be exclusively for this Council. Ms Poole would remain an employee of Cotswold District Council.

In response to a question from Councillor Acock, Councillor Mills advised that the post had been advertised online and in the technical press. The recruitment process had, as always, been undertaken in line with established equality and diversity policies and procedures.

Councillor Bolger stated that she was pleased to see that the role had been vacated by and offered to a female.

Councillor Postan included his appreciation to Ms Poole and commended her work for the Council, as he had often worked alongside her and Philip Alway at the Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Morris concluded the discussion by adding his thanks to Ms Poole for her work over the years, as he had worked closely with her in his role as the Cabinet Member for Resources. He added that he had no concerns with Mr Alway undertaking the S151 appointment on a temporary basis and was assured that this would assist with the S151 transition and handover. He advised that Ms Griffiths was coming from a predominantly commercial background and he was looking forward to working with her in the future.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the report be noted;
- b) That having considered the outcome of the interview process for the Chief Finance Officer/Deputy Chief Executive, the position be offered to Elizabeth Griffiths, subject to the successful completion of post-interview checks and processes; and
- c) That Philip Alway be appointed as the interim Section 151 officer, with immediate effect.

10. SEALING OF DOCUMENTS

The Council received and noted the report of the Head of Paid Service which gave details of documents numbered 11784 to 11798A sealed since its last meeting.

The meeting closed at 4.45 pm

CHAIRMAN