

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the **Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee**  
held in Committee Room 1, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney,  
at 6.30pm on **Thursday 21 November 2019**

### PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chairman), Joy Aitman, Luci Ashbourne, Jill Bull, Julian Cooper, Jane Doughty Harry Eaglestone, Hilary Fenton, Ted Fenton, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Neil Owen and Carl Rylett

### Officers in Attendance

Giles Hughes, Jenny Poole and Paul Cracknell

### 39. MINUTES

**RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

### 40. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Carter and the following resignations and temporary appointments were received:-

Councillor Julian Cooper attended for Councillor Jake Acock

Councillor Ted Fenton attended for Councillor Suzi Coul Councillor

Liz Leffman attended for Councillor Andy Graham

There were no other apologies for absence or temporary appointments.

### 41. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

### 42. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no submissions from members of the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

### 43. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS – ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman advised that he intended to take Agenda Item No. 10 (Budget 2020/2021) as the first substantive item of business.

### 44. BUDGET 2020/2021

The Committee received and considered the report of the Chief Finance Officer, which sought consideration of the initial draft base budgets for 2020/2021, draft fees and charges for 2020/2021, and the latest Capital Programme for 2019/2020 revised and future years. The views of each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees of the Council would be submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report and stressed that the complete budget position was yet to be finalised. Details of the Local Government Settlement would not become clear until early in the New Year and work was ongoing to finalise a forecast of Business Rates income for 2020/2021.

In terms of the National funding position, the Chief Finance Officer advised that the Business Rates Retention Scheme and New Homes Bonus Funding would continue for one year as the proposed changes to local government funding had been delayed until April 2021.

In the longer term it was anticipated that a hard re-set of Business Rates would result in the Council losing the benefit of Business rates growth and that there would be a significant reduction in New Homes Bonus funding.

The Chief Finance Officer went on to discuss the key cost pressures facing the authority, the foremost of which was the need to increase its contributions to the Local Government Pension Scheme. Councillor Doughty asked whether the additional contributions were a reflection of the fact that there were a considerable number of long serving employees within the Authority. The Chief Finance Officer explained that this was not a direct influence as contributions were defined by actuarial assumptions based upon the value of the payroll. The real issue was that sufficient contributions had not been made in the past. Historically, contributions made by the Gloucestershire authorities had exceeded those made by those in Oxfordshire and the new actuary engaged by the Oxfordshire fund had identified a shortfall. It was proposed that the Council make a one-off contribution of £4 Million in 2020/2021 with ongoing additional contributions of £120,000 for each of the next five years.

In response to a question from Councillor Leverton, the Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the Council's liability related solely to its own current and former staff and that there was no cross subsidy to other partner authorities. Councillor Owen asked whether staff would be expected to pay additional contributions and the Chief Finance Officer explained that this was a national scheme with employee contributions agreed nationally.

The Chief Finance Officer then outlined the budget pressures and aspirations for growth set out at paragraph 2.10 of the report. With regard to capital financing she advised that, whilst the Council had achieved debt free status in the past it would now have to borrow to fund its capital programme and make provision for repayment in future years. She drew attention to the provision of funding to the Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board, the Publica Transformation Programme and recycling campaign and explained that, whilst there had been an increase in the Ubico contract sum, operational savings were now beginning to be realised.

Growth and budget pressures were explained in more detail in paragraphs 2.12 to 2.19 and the Chief Finance Officer advised that some fees and charges were still subject to review.

Councillor Leverton asked whether savings on the GLL leisure management contract were predicated on an increase in fees and the Chief Finance Officer undertook to investigate further. In response to a question from Councillor Owen regarding climate change, the Chief Finance Officer made reference to the funding provided for the new climate change manager post and in support of an ongoing action plan.

With regard to proposals to upgrade CCTV equipment, Councillor Leverton noted that there was an under-provision in Carterton in comparison to Witney. The Chief Finance Officer advised that a report was in the course of preparation.

Whilst accepting the need for additional provision in Carterton, Councillor Ashbourne indicated that there was scope for further improvement in Witney.

The Chief Finance Officer advised that it was proposed to increase Council Tax by the anticipated referendum limit of £5.00. She pointed out that this was a balanced budget, making a small contribution of £4,000 to the General Fund in contrast to the previous year's expectation which envisaged a £700,000 contribution from the General Fund balance.

In response to a question from Councillor Cooper, the Chief Finance Officer advised that the £261,000 accounting adjustment in relation to the leisure management contract would be applied as a contribution back to earmarked reserves. .

Councillor Ashbourne noted that, at 1.25%, the projected return on cash investments was below the rate of inflation and questioned whether this presented a problem for the Authority. In response, the Chief Finance Officer advised that Officers would look again at how to make the best use of available cash but explained that these were short term investments utilising cash held for operational purposes. Long term investments secured higher interest rates but the Council had to retain an element of liquidity; it was a question of balancing investment and capital and liquidity against risk.

Councillor Cooper reminded Members that the initial cost of installing CCTV had been shared with Thames Valley Police. He sought and received clarification of the provision for development referred to at paragraph 2.28 of the report and questioned whether there were opportunities to invest further with social housing providers. The Chief Finance Officer advised that a review of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy was to be presented to the next meeting of the Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This would take account of the scale of the challenges facing the Council and the development of a commercialisation strategy including the possibility of investing further with social housing providers.

Councillor Ted Fenton noted that investment in the Ubico refuse collection fleet was constantly more than expected, particularly as a whole new fleet had been purchased at the start of the Contract. Since then it had been necessary to purchase a number of smaller vehicles and now further investment was required to reduce hire costs. In response, the Chief Finance Officer advised that she had met with Officers from Ubico earlier in the week to discuss how the vehicle fleet could be employed more efficiently. This included ways in which to make best use of the vehicle fleet across other councils to take account of wear and tear in different operating environments. Ubico's schedule of vehicles and replacement plan was being checked by the Commissioning Team.

Councillor Fenton suggested that advertising to encourage recycling could be displayed on the vehicle fleet and the Chief Finance Officer undertook to discuss this further with colleagues.

Councillor Leverton asked whether consideration had been given to procuring electric vehicles and the Chief Finance Officer confirmed that this had formed part of the discussions. Councillor Leverton also suggested that a more rapid cycle of vehicle replacement could prove more cost effective as younger vehicles would retain a greater residual value. The Chief Finance Officer advised that Ubico was looking at ways in which to extend the life of the vehicle fleet and also to carry out vehicle maintenance in-house.

(Councillor Leffman joined the meeting at this juncture)

Councillor Leverton sought clarification of the variation in expenditure in Environmental and Regulatory Services from 2018/2019 to 2019/2020. The Chief Finance Officer advised that this was a result of re-basing of cost centres to give a more accurate reflection of expenditure that did not represent employment of additional resources.

In response to a question from Councillor Beaney, the Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the increase in employee costs shown on page 2 of Appendix A to the report related to the one-off pension contribution. In response to a further question, she advised that the income from New Homes Bonus funding shown at page 3 was a forecast that would be confirmed once the Local Government Finance Settlement was finalised.

Councillor Doughty sought clarification of the discrepancy in relation to income from markets and was advised that this reflected a re-alignment of Ubico costs. The Chief Finance Officer undertook to check whether the 2020/2021 estimate was accurate and to make any corrections necessary when the budget came before the Cabinet. In response to a further question, she also agreed to check the figures relating to homelessness at page 5.1.

Councillor Leverton suggested that more explanation was required with regard to entries under homelessness at page 5.1 and Chief Executive at page 6.1. Councillor Doughty suggested that similar clarification was necessary in relation to the heading of 2020 Vision and Transformation. Councillor Leffman identified a similar requirement in relation to third party payments at page 6.2 and Councillor Ted Fenton was impressed by the accuracy of the elections budget at page 7.1.

In response to a question from Councillor Ashbourne, the Chief Finance Officer advised that the entry on page 8.1 under Housing Loans related to treasury management loans to housing associations and indicated that she would check if these were still live. In response to a further question from Councillor Leffman, the Chief Finance officer undertook to check the accuracy of the projected increase in income.

In response to a question from Councillor Owen, the Chief Finance Officer advised that she would confirm that the change in costs for Animal Control at page 9.1 reflected a re-alignment of Ubico costs and, at the request of Councillor Leverton, she undertook to check the extent of savings in relation to the Leisure Management Contract as shown at page 10.1.

Councillor Ashbourne noted that costs relating to the refugee programme were not shown separately and the Chief Finance Officer undertook to investigate further.

Turning to Fees and Charges, Councillor Doughty questioned why the hourly rate for pre-application advice for developments of 15 – 100 units differed from all others, including larger developments, and the Chief Finance Officer undertook to clarify the position.

In relation to the Capital Programme at Appendix C, Councillor Doughty questioned the cost of £21,000 for a printer and it was explained that this was a specialist piece of equipment required by the Planning Service capable of producing and copying large plans and drawings.

Councillor Beaney welcomed the inclusion of £250,000 to provide additional short term accommodation for the homeless.

**RESOLVED:** That the initial draft base budget for 2020/21 totalling £15,724,621 as summarised in Annex A to the report, draft fees and charges for 2020/21 at Annex B; and the latest Capital Programme for 2019/20 revised and future years at Annex C be endorsed.

45. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2019/2020

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services which gave an update on progress in relation to its Work Programme for 2019/2020.

44.1 RAF Brize Norton

The Chief Executive advised that a further conversation with representatives of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation was to take place the following week. Councillor Beaney requested that an update be provided at the next meeting.

44.2 Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme

Councillor Ashbourne noted that, in September, the Working Party had agreed to hold a further meeting within three months prior to reporting back to the Committee. She emphasised that the meeting should be held shortly.

44.3 Homes for All

Councillor Doughty indicated that, whilst the meeting held with representatives of 'Homes for All' back in August had been productive, she considered that the group should be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee. She considered that the Committee should look at the work of this group in more depth and stressed that they were not seeking financial support from the Council but simply wished to work more closely with the Authority.

Councillor Bull agreed that it would be useful to hear more from the organisation which had offered to provide information and training for Members at no cost. It was **AGREED** that Homes for All be invited to attend the next (*scheduled*) meeting of the Committee. Councillor Ashbourne suggested that this would be useful for both parties.

44.4 Oxford to Cambridge Expressway

In response to a question from Councillor Cooper, the Chief executive advised that the proposed consultation had been postponed as a result of the forthcoming General Election. Whilst there had been some media speculation as to the future of the project following comments made by a number of Parliamentary candidates, no formal decision had yet been made.

44.5 Domestic Violence

Councillor Doughty advised that Homes for All had offered to provide Members with training on domestic violence. Councillor Leffman suggested that this was an area that the Council needed to look at and advised that advisors at Citizens Advice were trained in identifying signs of domestic abuse in their clients. Councillor Ashbourne agreed, indicating that domestic violence was a significant factor in homelessness.

Councillor Beaney suggested that the question of the provision of training should be left and addressed when the group attended the next meeting. He questioned whether the points raised during the meeting with Officers had been implemented.

Councillor Leverton agreed that Members needed this critical skill set and information as to where any concerns should be directed.

#### 44.6 Strategic Review of the Council's Markets

Councillor Beaney noted that this item referred by the Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be considered at the next (*scheduled*) meeting.

**RESOLVED:** That progress on the Committee's Work Programme for 2019/2020 be noted and that the additional items referred to above be included within the Committee's Work Programme.

#### 46. 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 15 November 2019.

##### 46.1 Community Infrastructure Levy

In response to a question from Councillor Beaney, the Chief Executive advised that the Cabinet was to consider a report at its January meeting regarding the Community Infrastructure Levy Charging Schedule. Technical work was currently underway to establish whether a revised schedule would be necessary or if the previously approved schedule could be put forward for examination.

##### 46.2 Approval of Proposals for a Council Tax Exemption Scheme for Care Leavers

It was noted that the Cabinet was to consider a report setting out proposals for a Council Tax exemption scheme for care leavers at its meeting in January. In response to concerns expressed by Councillor Ashbourne, the Chief Executive advised that discussions had taken place with other Oxfordshire authorities with the objective of adopting a common approach. The financial impact upon the Council was not as great as had originally been anticipated

#### 47. OXFORDSHIRE GROWTH BOARD REVIEW

The Committee received and considered the report of the Chief Executive which invited Members to consider a response to the Oxfordshire Growth Board's review.

Councillor Leverton enquired what the Growth Board had delivered for West Oxfordshire. In response, the Chief Executive advised that the Growth Board had been fundamental in negotiating the Growth Deal with Central Government which had secured some £215 Million of investment in Oxfordshire. It was doubtful that the Government would have had the confidence in the County's ability to deliver the deal had the Growth Board not been in place.

Councillor Leverton then sought clarification of the national position and the cost to the Council. The Chief Executive advised that Oxfordshire was in the forefront with this initiative and other authorities were looking to replicate the model elsewhere, particularly within the Oxford/Cambridge Arc where local authorities were exploring ways of working more closely together. In terms of costs, the Board was primarily funded through the Growth Deal Capacity Funding, although the member authorities each made a small contribution for the provision of administrative support.

Councillor Cooper considered that Oxfordshire had rather under played its hand in its bid for infrastructure funding as the necessary costs of up to £2 Billion far exceeded the funding allocated. He emphasised that any future funding bids ought not to under-estimate the cost of infrastructure provision.

Councillor Cooper acknowledged that the availability of a three year housing land supply was of significant benefit as, previously, the Council had been losing planning appeals, resulting in development on inappropriate sites such as those on Burford Road, Witney and in Long Hanborough.

Councillor Rylett questioned whether, given the increasing focus on climate change, the name and function of the Growth Board remained an accurate reflection of real priorities. There was a need to focus on economic viability, employment and the development of infrastructure and Councillor Rylett suggested that, in terms of development in Eynsham, the process had been the wrong way round. Improvements to the A40 were to be funded through further development which, in itself, would render those improvements inadequate. Decisions should be taken at local level, not from the top down. A re-orientation of thinking was required.

Councillor Leffman agreed with Councillor Cooper that Oxfordshire's plans were unambitious as the cost of infrastructure provision was far in excess of the funding that had been made available. She went on to express her frustration at the failure of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local and the Department for Transport to work together. The entire administrative landscape needed to be reviewed and Councillor Leffman suggested that, given the political differences, it would be extremely difficult to reach a consensus on these complex questions in the current forum. Therefore, she suggested that it would be more appropriate if Members were to respond to the consultation independently.

Councillor Leffman also suggested that there was a limited understanding amongst the wider membership of the role and functions of the Growth Board. The Chief Executive advised that arrangements were being made to hold a Member workshop to brief Members on the role of the Growth Board and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership early in the New Year.

Whilst not seeing it as particularly politically divisive, Councillor Ted Fenton agreed that it would be difficult to come to a collective conclusion and encouraged all Members to complete the consultation individually.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted and Members encouraged to respond to the Oxfordshire Growth Board's review individually.

#### 48. NOTICE OF MOTION – EUROPEAN NATIONALS

The Committee received and considered the report of the Executive Director – Commissioning which sought consideration of the Notice of Motion regarding European Union Nationals referred to the Committee by the Council.

Councillor Rylett expressed concern with regard to the position of European Union Nationals, indicating that it was important for the Council to address the needs of all its residents and to do all that it could to ensure that EU citizens were aware of how to apply for settled status. He felt disappointed by the Officers' response and considered that the Council should take a more imaginative approach such as that adopted by South Oxfordshire, the Vale of the White Horse and Portsmouth. He urged Members to express their support the Motion asking the Council to publicise and communicate with European Union citizens regarding their immigration status and rights.

With regard to the suggestion that the Council write to all EU Nationals, Councillor Rylett suggested that, if the electoral register was not complete, the Council should also encourage those eligible to register.

He suggested that writing to EU citizens would also help to reach any individuals who were non EU citizens but who could obtain residency through their partners. Councillor Rylett indicated that his aim was to do everything possible to avoid a future situation similar to the 'Windrush Scandal' where second generation children born in the United Kingdom were unable to provide documentary evidence of citizenship.

Turning to the third element of the Motion, Councillor Rylett considered that the provision of a physical document confirming settled status was the obvious thing to do. The request for confirmation that there would be no changes to the rights of settled EU citizens that they currently have by ratifying the Immigration Bill as primary legislation before the exit day had been overtaken by events but the threat of a no deal Brexit remained. It was important for the Government to clarify rights.

There was a lack of understanding as to why many applications were given less secure pre-settled status where individuals could not provide a comprehensive employment record or evidence of previous residence and the Home Office needed to make the criteria clearer and more transparent.

Finally, Councillor Rylett considered that the Council should lobby for a review of charges and waivers for applications for British Citizenship for European citizens and their children was required as current application fees were far higher than those levied by other countries.

Councillor Beaney suggested that each element of the Motion should be considered in turn.

Councillor Ashbourne indicated that she supported the thrust of the Motion but found it somewhat vague. Failure to apply for settled status could be disastrous for individuals and was more likely to become an issue for vulnerable people. She noted that the Home Office had produced advice and guidance for local authorities including a toolkit and recommendations and suggested that the Council be recommended to adopt the recommendations contained therein. The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership estimated that some 6% of the population of Oxfordshire were EU nationals and Councillor Ashbourne suggested that the Council should write to employers to encourage them to assist their employees to make application.

Councillor Owen expressed his support for the Motion which he considered to be a decent, humanitarian initiative.

Councillor Leverton questioned what more the Council could do as the Government had already provided a considerable amount of information and publicity and organisations such as Citizens Advice could assist those who needed help in completing applications. He suggested that advertisements in the Local Press would be the most cost effective way of reaching large numbers of people.

Councillor Ted Fenton agreed that the Council should do more to engage with hard to reach groups but questioned whether the measures suggested were the most effective way of doing so. Writing to those on the electoral register was likely to be reaching out to those already aware of the requirements.

Councillor Doughty indicated that the Council had a responsibility to all its residents and should do all that it could to meet that duty of care. The Chief Executive advised that the Council already provided information and advice to both individuals and businesses through its website.



Councillor Leffman asked whether the Council's Housing Department could help in providing information and advice and suggested that the authority should consider cascading information through town and parish councils. Councillor Leffman also asked what training the Council's staff had received and recommended that the Council should adopt the Home Office advice.

Councillor Leffman questioned whether the electoral register was the best source for contacting those in greatest need of assistance. She suggested that other organisations such as faith groups might be a more appropriate and effective channel of communication.

Councillor Ashbourne questioned whether flyers could be sent to all households in the District but it was considered that this would not be particularly effective means of communication.

Councillor Cooper noted that other authorities had made use of the electoral register and Councillor Rylett advised that they had done so in the manner suggested.

Councillor Doughty suggested that staff should undertake the training provided by the Home Office and the Chief Executive undertook to consider this.

Councillor Doughty proposed that a Working Party be established to undertake an audit of what action the Council was taking and what was being done elsewhere. Councillor Leffman asked that information be provided as to the cost of writing to EU citizens as suggested and it was agreed that a Working Party be established.

Councillor Bull suggested that the Working Party should carry out its review prior to a decision on whether to write to EU citizens.

Members expressed their support for the suggestion that the Leader of the Council writes to the Home Secretary seeking clarification and suggesting improvements to the European Settlement scheme.

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That the Council be recommended to adopt the Home Office advice and guidance for local authorities including a toolkit and recommendations contained therein.
- (b) That a Working Party comprised of Councillors Ashbourne, Beaney, Leverton and Rylett be established to undertake an audit of what action the Council was taking and what was being done elsewhere.
- (c) That the Council be recommended to request that the Leader of the Council writes to the Home Secretary seeking clarification and suggesting improvements to the European Settlement scheme.

49. SERVICE PERFORMANCE 2019/2020 – QUARTER TWO

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager, Strategic Support which provided information on the Council's service performance at the end of 2019/2020 Quarter Two.

Councillor Doughty expressed her concern at the continued use of the Travelodge as temporary accommodation for the homeless as she considered the facilities available to be unsuitable. The Chief Executive reminded Members that provision had been made within the budget to purchase a further property for use as accommodation for the homeless.

Councillor Leverton noted that a Families First Project Officer had been appointed and requested that Members be provided with a copy of their job description in order that they could better understand the nature of their duties.

Councillor Ted Fenton expressed concern over the delay in checking building regulations plans and asked whether this was a result of staff shortages. The Chief Executive undertook to follow up the staffing situation and Councillor Beaney noted that, whilst a new member of staff had been appointed, another was to leave at the same time.

Councillor Leverton questioned whether the Council had cut back staffing levels too hard and whether additional staffing resources were needed. Councillor Leffman expressed her concern over staffing levels in the Planning Enforcement Team.

Councillor Rylett expressed concern that a planning application for the Eynsham Garden Village would be submitted by the prospective developers before the Area Action Plan had been approved. He also asked if the design review report on the Grosvenor draft masterplan could be made available to Members. The Chief Executive advised that pre application discussions and documentation were generally treated as confidential until a planning application had been submitted. He explained that a developer could submit an application for planning permission at any time. Consultation on the Area Action Plan would take place in January and February and comments received incorporated in the Plan.

Regardless of when it was submitted, the Chief Executive stressed that it was inevitable that an application of this magnitude would take some time to determine.

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

## 50. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Councillor Doughty stated that she found it extremely difficult to contact Officers in the Housing Department. She considered that it was paramount that continuous cover was maintained in this vital service area and felt that poor communication with Councillors made it difficult for them to carry out their duties.

Councillor Cooper indicated that he had not experienced any such difficulties. Councillor Rylett advised that he found communication with Officers to be generally good but felt that an up to date, detailed organogram would be helpful to Members.

Councillor Ashbourne asked whether any additional staff resources were required and Councillor Doughty questioned whether the current pay and grading review had resulted in a loss of staff. The Chief Executive advised that the results of the pay and grading review were largely neutral or positive hence he did not see it as being a particular risk.

In view of the concerns raised, Councillor Beaney suggested that the Committee carry out a SWOT analysis of the Housing and Planning Enforcement services.

Councillor Leffman made reference to the disbandment of the Human Resources Committee and Councillor Cooper indicated that its functions had been passed to the Audit and General Purposes Committee. It was explained that this role only extended to those staff directly employed by the Council.

Councillor Owen expressed his support for the proposition and echoed the concerns expressed with regard to the planning service.

**RESOLVED:** That a special meeting be held to undertake a review of staffing levels in the Housing and Planning Enforcement services.

There were no other questions from Members relating to the work of the Committee.

The meeting closed at 8:45pm

Chairman