

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Finance and Management Overview & Scrutiny Committee
held in Committee Room 1, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon
at 2.00 pm on Wednesday 11 April 2018

PRESENT

Councillors: P Emery (Chairman), A D Harvey (Vice-Chairman), A J Adams, D A Cotterill, C Cottrell-Dormer, P J G Dorward, E H James and G H L Wall

Also in attendance: Mrs M L Mead

68. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2018 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

69. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mr S J Good and from Mr D A Cotterill for his late arrival at the meeting and the following resignation and temporary appointment was received and noted:-

Mr J C Cooper for Mr K J Mullins

70. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

71. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

72. MAIN POINTS FROM THE LAST MEETING AND FOLLOW UP ACTION

The Committee received and noted the report of the Chairman, which gave details of the main points arising from its meeting held on 7 February 2017.

The Chairman advised that, whilst the Leader of the Council had been invited to attend the meeting to provide an update on current position in relation to local government re-organisation, neither he nor the Deputy Leader were able to be present. The Executive Director would provide an update later in the meeting.

73. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2017/2018

The Committee received the report of the Head of Democratic Services providing an update on the work programme for the Committee for 2017/2018.

73.1 Rural Broadband Project

The Group Manager – Business Support advised that the project had proceeded well during the last quarter. Work was currently being undertaken in six locations; Aston, Church Hanborough, Ducklington, Kencot, South Leigh and Tackley and completion of phase one of the project remained on schedule.

Whilst a number of customers had already signed up and were receiving a service on a commercial basis, the first funded customer was due to go live shortly and a joint press release would be issued when this took place. Overall interest in the project was growing month on month and the number of households that had registered an interest or signed up for a service reflected the demand anticipated at this stage by Gigaclear.

Mr Adams advised that the trench dug across the Ducklington bypass required some additional reinstatement work and the Group Manager undertook to raise this issue with the contractors. He advised that they had been working closely with Officers from the County Council's Highways Department to resolve any such issues. Mr Adams acknowledged that, in general, the standard of work had been satisfactory and the Group Manager invited Members to advise him of any similar issues of concern.

73.2 Re-organisation of Local Government

The Executive Director advised that, whilst he had previously suggested that the question of local government re-organisation in Oxfordshire had fallen into abeyance, there had been a number of recent developments elsewhere in the Country. In Dorset, the Minister had proposed a two unitary solution; although one District, Christchurch, maintained an objection and was considering a judicial review. In Buckinghamshire, where two competing bids had been put forward, the Minister had indicated that he was minded to approve a single unitary authority (excluding the existing unitary serving Milton Keynes).

(Mr James joined the meeting at this juncture)

The recent financial difficulties faced by Northamptonshire County Council, where the Responsible Financial Officer had issued a Section 114 Notice placing a moratorium on non-statutory spending, had given rise to Government intervention and a call for bids for a unitary solution. It was anticipated that a two unitary solution would be put forward and, whilst this would not have a direct impact upon Oxfordshire, the position was further complicated by Cherwell District Council's partnership arrangement with South Northamptonshire. Whilst Cherwell wished to continue with this arrangement, this would require primary legislation which the Government had rejected in the past.

Whilst there was no change to the position in Oxfordshire, the unitary proposal put forward by the County Council and South and Vale Districts remained unresolved. A recent article in the Municipal Journal provided further commentary on the likely outcome of this bid.

In addition, a district based merger in Somerset had recently received Government approval and a similar proposition had been put forward in Suffolk.

Notwithstanding recent developments, there was no apparent appetite for countrywide unitary authorities within Central Government.

73.3 Introduction of Electric Vehicle Charging Points

The Chairman noted that the sum of £250,000 had been included within the budget for the potential provision of electric vehicle charging points within the Council's car parks. No expenditure would be incurred until a detailed business case had been considered and the Chairman suggested that the Working Party be requested to provide an update at the next meeting.

73.4 Receipt of Petition – Affordable Housing

It was noted that an initial report on the petition referred to the Committee by Council would be submitted to the next meeting and Members were invited to highlight any specific information that they would wish to see incorporated into that report.

Mr Cooper questioned whether it would be necessary to re-establish a Housing Revenue Account and suggested that it would be useful to know how other authorities had responded to such requests and to discover the difficulties that they had encountered and the benefits they had achieved.

Mr Dorward suggested that the report should provide information on the extent of the difficulties outlined in the report experienced in West Oxfordshire and Mr Harvey indicated that it should also incorporate details of the likely impact of the emerging Local Plan.

RESOLVED: That, subject to the amendment detailed above, progress with regard to the Committee's Work Programme for 2017/2018 be noted.

74. 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 16 March 2018.

74.1 Designation of Data Protection Officer

Mr Harvey noted that the designation of a Data Protection Officer was a requirement of the General Data Protection Regulation and advised that this legislation had placed a significant burden upon small and medium sized businesses. He asked whether there was anything the Council could do to assist such enterprises in addressing the impact of this legislation. In response, the Executive Director advised that it was not for the Council to assist businesses in this way and explained that it did not have the resources to do so. He questioned whether the requirements of the Regulation would place as great a burden on small businesses in the long term as was feared.

(Mr Cotterill joined the meeting at this juncture)

Mr James noted that failure to comply with the Regulation was a criminal offence and the Group Manager – Business Support advised that it was sufficient to have a robust action plan in place by the time the Regulation came into force.

In response to a question from Mr Adams, the Group Manager confirmed that all Members had now been registered with the Information Commissioner's office as Data Controllers and that further training was to be provided following the impending elections.

Arrangements were being finalised and details would be available shortly. Mr Emery advised that the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils was providing training for town and parish councillors and that other on-line training was available.

RESOLVED: That the content of the Cabinet Work Programme published on 16 March 2018 be noted.

75. TREASURY MANAGEMENT ACTIVITY AND PERFORMANCE 2017/2018

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager Go Shared Services, copies of which had been circulated, regarding treasury management and the performance of internal and external Pooled Funds' activity for the period 1 April to 28 February 2018.

The Finance Manager drew Members' attention to the estimated performance of investments at end of year. Members noted that the estimated outturn of £725,470 would exceed the original budget of £607,300. Members offered their congratulations on this performance and expressed their thanks to Officers for this achievement.

RESOLVED: That the information provided be noted

76. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – QUARTER 3 2017/2018

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Leisure and Communities providing information on the Council's performance at the end of the third quarter of year 2017/2018.

The Executive Director acknowledged that there had been some difficulty in responding to telephone calls within target as a result of the increased volume of calls received during the introduction of the new refuse and recycling collection contract. Whilst additional resources had been deployed, the volume of calls received had exceeded the capacity available.

The Group Manager – Business Support advised that calls had reached a peak of 18,000 a month in October against a monthly average of 10,000 to 10,500. However, call volumes had decreased as the new collection service had bedded in and the volume of calls had now returned to a manageable level. In consequence, performance during November and December had improved significantly.

The Executive Director advised Members that Cotswold and West Oxfordshire had been able to provide support to the Forest of Dean when their own staff had been unable to get to work during the recent inclement weather. The Leader of that Authority had expressed his appreciation for this mutual assistance.

RESOLVED: That the contents of the report be noted.

77. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

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

Mr Cotterill noted that Mr Emery was standing down from the Council and that this would be his last meeting as Chairman of the Committee. Members joined in expressing their thanks to Mr Emery for his work on the Council's behalf.

Mr Emery thanked Members for their support and good wishes. It had been a pleasure to Chair the Committee and a role that he would miss.

The meeting closed at 2:35pm

CHAIRMAN