

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee
held in Committee Room 1, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon
at 2pm on **Wednesday 5 June 2019**

PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chairman); Alex Postan (Vice Chairman); Rosa Bolger, Julian Cooper, David Harvey, Gill Hill, Liz Leffman, Dan Levy, Martin McBride, Harry St John and Geoff Saul.

Also present: Councillors Duncan Enright and Toby Morris.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 3 April and 15 May 2019 be approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

5. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Alaa Al-Yousuf and Richard Langridge, and the following resignation and temporary appointment was reported:-

Councillor Martin McBride for Councillor Maxine Crossland.

6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

7. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

8. 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 3 April 2019. It was noted that most of the points detailed were due to be covered in the main agenda.

9. SUPERFAST BROADBAND PROJECT

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager, Business Support Services which updated them on how the broadband contract with 'Gigaclear' was progressing.

The report was presented by the Business Development Officer, Will Barton. He advised that the last report considered by the Committee had been in October 2018 at which point 30% of properties had pots located outside the front of their properties, although some remained unconnected. At present, up to 60% of properties had pots with 37% of them 'live'.

Mr Barton explained that Phase I of the project should have been delivered by the end of 2018 however this target had been missed. This was due to a number of reasons including the negotiation of wayleaves and poor performance from one of Gigaclear's two contractors. The contractor in question was no longer being supplied with new work and was solely responsible for completing outstanding works. The new milestone date for the completion of Phase I was the end of June 2019.

Mr Barton advised that Gigaclear had been a relatively 'young' company initially and their communication with Parishes had not been robust. In addition, they had experienced issues with passing cables and ducts across bridges and culverts but now had a catch up plan in place with the County Council. Gigaclear had been bought out by 'Infra Capital', part of M&G Asset Management who were a wing of Prudential and they were aware of the poor public relations issue they had created. It was therefore recognised that a robust communications plan needed to be in place going forwards.

Councillor Leffman expressed her frustration with the project and stated that the residents in her Ward had been badly affected, with Aston under Wychwood enduring their road dug up for the third time. Issues of poor workmanship and damage had been reported in Fowler and Finstock amongst other places. She felt it was unfair to allow a company who was not in control of their sub-contractors to continue at the expense of residents.

Mr Barton agreed that it had been very frustrating and he shared the concerns raised regarding the management and the contractor. He assured Councillors that the procurement process had been robust and the area would receive better infrastructure in the long term by using Gigaclear. However, lessons had been learned from the difficulties and delays experienced.

In response to a question from Councillor Enright, Mr Barton provided a rough geographical description of the areas where the project was experiencing delays and he confirmed that the south of the District had fared better.

The Group Manager, Business Support Services, Phil Martin, addressed Members and assured them that the sub-contractor in question was subject to a daily check to monitor their work and progress. Mr Martin also stressed that the project was in many ways future proofed due to the technology it was using (Fibre to the Premises) and the potential speeds available (up to 1GB that was fully symmetrical and not shared) so whilst clearly there was disruption being experienced in some areas now, once the infrastructure was in and established, no further work would be required to upgrade it. Whereas in the future, other providers who had adopted a different approach and were relying on existing infrastructure to connect homes to the internet, may need to undertake similar projects but this may be mitigated by new solutions in the future.

Councillor Cooper queried whether the Council would receive a reduction on the contract price due to the issues caused to residents during the build. It was explained that this was unlikely because Gigaclear were contributing substantially more money than WODC and BDUK, and the Council's costs were capped and would not increase as a result of the issues. In addition, Gigaclear had offered to provide some community groups such as village halls and schools free broadband at superfast speeds as a gesture of good will.

Councillor Leffman recognised that the Community Engagement Manager was doing a good job but noted that there had been a lack of communication with communities from Gigaclear.

In relation to queries raised about the contract and the potential to clawback costs, Mr Barton reminded Members that the contract had been written by BDUK and adapted for WODC use. The main objective had been for the delivery of a number of pots at a certain speed and this was being met.

Councillor Postan queried why a caveat could not be added to larger contracts regarding arbitration which could help to find a remedy.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

10. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – YEAR END 2018/19

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager, Strategic Support which provided information on the Council's performance at the end of 2018/19.

Councillors noted that there were a number of 'red' indicator areas detailed in Appendix A which included response times to complaints, telephone calls answered within 20 seconds and response times to notifications of change in circumstances.

With regards to the response times to complaints and telephone calls, the Group Manager, Business Support Services, Phil Martin, detailed the recent implementation of the 'Salesforce' system which had gone live at the three partner councils. This was described as a Customer Relationship Management System and he explained that this should go some way to improving response times to various different service requests as they were being actively recorded but improvements in actual call handling times would take time to filter through and would be reliant on customers switching from reporting issues over the phone to using the website / online options.

Mr Martin provided a practical example of potential of the system in the future, explaining that it would be able to link all the relative activities involved in a replacement bin request together, i.e. a request for a replacement bin would be received online and this would automatically raise a case in the system, which would then generate an acknowledgement to the customer. An order would then be generated and sent through to the supplier electronically, who would action this and update the system, which would in turn close the case and update the customer accordingly.

Members were assured that the system was not designed to replace one to one interactions or use of the telephone and it was recognised that some residents would struggle with technology. Mr Martin described it as not looking to close down communication channels but enhance existing ones.

Members noted that it was important to manage customer expectations and a response with an automated message could alleviate calls to the Council, chasing up a request.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

11. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services, which provided it with an update on the Work Programme for 2018/2019.

11.1 Electric Vehicle Charging Points (EVCP's)

The Chief Finance Officer, Jenny Poole, advised that a report was due to be submitted to Cabinet in July and officers would bring an update to FMOS at that stage.

Councillor Harvey was frustrated that this issue had been raised three years ago, at which point WODC was supposed to be leading the field. However, little progress seemed to have been made.

In response, Mrs Poole advised that the report would include an update and the reasons why the project had encountered delays.

Councillors raised a number of issues including why developers of new housing estates were not being asked to install EVCPs as standard and whether the Council was liaising with the number of private companies who appeared to be investing in EVCPs around the country.

Councillor Postan reiterated his request from the previous meeting for a schedule of events regarding the delay to this project and was frustrated that this had not been received. He queried what projects had taken priority over this one or whether it was as a result of a lack of resources to progress with work.

11.2 Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy

The Chief Finance Officer, Jenny Poole, reminded the Committee that a Local Government Finance briefing session was scheduled for 24 July 2019 and she encouraged all elected members to attend if possible.

11.3 Local Authority Partnership Purchase scheme

The Chief Finance Officer, Jenny Poole, advised that she had been in contact with LAS and LAMS to request if officers could use the legal documents supplied. However, officers had been advised that this was not possible because the scheme had closed. Mrs Poole felt it was necessary to investigate what the Council wanted from a scheme and then look at who could deliver what was needed. Discussions with Bloor Homes continued and Members would be updated in due course.

11.4 Ubico Business Plan & Gigaclear Contract

Members agreed that the Ubico Business Plan and the Gigaclear contract could be scrutinised to ensure that due diligence was taking place. The scrutiny would look at contract management and how contracts were negotiated. These were two important service areas for residents.

RESOLVED: That progress with regard to the Committee's Work Programme for 2018/2019 be noted and that additional items would be added regarding Contract Management and the Ubico Business Plan as detailed at 11.4 above.

12. 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 January 2019.

12.1 Community Infrastructure Levy / Homeseeker Plus Policy / Low Carbon and Environmental Plan

Councillor Toby Morris advised that these items would not be submitted to Cabinet in June but would appear later in the programme.

Councillor Cooper expressed mild frustration at the further delay to the CIL decision and suggested that Cabinet consider their programme carefully.

The Chairman referred Members to the Performance Indicators Report (Minute Number 10) which advised that the CIL policy would be adopted and implemented jointly with Cotswold District Council. Councillor Cotterill queried whether the joint working approach had resulted in the delay. In response, Mrs Poole advised that Cotswold District Council had already approved their policy through Council and the joint working related solely to the implementation of back office systems. She assured members that the Policy would very much be West Oxfordshire District Council's own Policy. The work being carried out on back office systems would enable an efficient implementation of CIL at the Council.

RESOLVED: That the content of the Cabinet Work Programme published on 15 January 2019 be noted.

13. FLEXIBLE HOMELESSNESS SUPPORT GRANT

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager for Customer Services which outlined the planned expenditure of the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant.

The report was introduced by the Business Manager Operational Services, Mandy Fathers who explained that Councillors had previously considered the 2017/18 funding report but this detailed new funding and how it would be utilised. She was joined by the Housing Manager, Caroline Clissold.

From 1 April 2017 the Government removed the Temporary Accommodation Managements Fee from the Housing Benefit system. This was in line with the Government announcement in the 2015 Spending Review and Autumn Statement, that the subsidy for the temporary management fee paid from the Department for Work and Pensions to Local Authorities on a household basis would end from 2017/18.

The Council had very minimal expenditure in this area of Housing Benefit and therefore had benefited from the additional funding; which was ring-fenced to activities that would prevent or relieve homelessness.

The report proposed that the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant be utilised to further assist us in managing the property side of Housing, to maximise the options available in terms of emergency, temporary and long-term accommodation.

Details of the WODC Projects proposed were outlined and Mrs Fathers advised that any surplus would be ring fenced to support activities that would prevent or relieve homelessness.

Councillor Bolger supported the proposals in the report and felt that this was tackling a very important issue. Whilst she would have liked to have seen a little more detail in the report about how the housing department operated, she noted that officers were due to hold a briefing after the meeting. The briefing was designed to provide further facts and figures with regards to the prevention of homelessness as well as giving an introduction to the issues facing WODC in this District.

Councillor Enright noted the reasons for homelessness detailed in section 3.12 of the report and queried whether this data could be broken down further to enable further understanding of the increase in numbers. Officers advised that whilst it was not possible to expand on each individual case there was potential in the system to provide a breakdown between urban and rural cases. However, officers did not feel that there would be a difference in the cost of rehousing an individual.

Councillor Morris felt that this was a great piece of work, close to many Councillors hearts that officers had worked well on and should be praised for. He reminded the Committee that this funding had always been ring fenced and highlighted the recent purchase of property at Horsefair – a scheme that was working well.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and the scheme commended to Cabinet as an excellent piece of work.

14. TREASURY MANAGEMENT ACTIVITY AND PERFORMANCE – 2018/19

The Committee received and considered the report of the Chief Finance Officer which advised Members of treasury management activity and the performance of internal and external fund managers for 2018/19.

Mrs Poole introduced the report, assisted by Accounting Technician, Andrew Sherbourne, and advised that performance had exceeded forecasts. Whilst there was a lot of data to note, the Council had complied with all relevant indicators and strategies.

Councillor Leffman asked whether the Council had a policy relating to ethical investments and was advised that whilst there was no specific strategy, this was difficult to manage due to the diversity of the funds.

Mr Sherbourne explained that investments were decided using officer experience at the present time.

Councillor Bolger queried whether the Modern Slavery Charter was considered and in response Councillor Postan advised that, in his experience, one had to be extremely careful with collective investments. He felt that the Council's duty was to provide a return for the electorate and the common sense and judgement of the officers should be respected.

Councillor Bolger stated that she did not doubt the work of the officers but equally felt that the Council should be setting ethical standards.

Councillor Cooper expressed his disquiet about Councillor Postan's comments and Mrs Poole advised that 'Arlingclose', the Council's Treasury Advisors, would be attending the next FMOS meeting to update Members and provide them with further information about the investments being utilised.

Councillor Morris reminded Members that the Treasury Management Strategy laid out the areas of investment that the Council would not want to invest in and assured them that the obligation was to invest as wisely and as ethically as possible. In addition, he stated that the strategy was revisited annually and this was a subject that could be built in.

It was agreed that it would be useful to receive some advice and assurance from Arlingclose at the next meeting.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Poole and her team for their work.

RESOLVED that the treasury management and the performance of in-house and external fund manager's activity for 2018/19 are noted.

15. START TIME OF MEETINGS 2019/20

The Committee received the report of the Head of Democratic Services which asked them to consider the start time for meetings of the Committee for the remainder of the 2019/2020 municipal year.

The Chairman noted that a start time of 2.00pm had worked well in the previous year and he had received no requests to alter it.

RESOLVED that the start time of the meeting should remain at 2.00pm for the remainder of the year.

16. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

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

Prior to closing the meeting, the Chairman reminded all Members present that there was Overview and Scrutiny training being delivered on Tuesday 18 June 2019 and encouraged everyone to attend if possible.

The meeting closed at 3:37pm

CHAIRMAN