

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 17 July 2019**

PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chairman); Alex Postan (Vice Chairman); Alaa Al-Yousuf, Rosa Bolger, Maxine Crossland, David Harvey, Gill Hill, Richard Langridge, Dan Levy, Harry St John, Elizabeth Poskitt and Geoff Saul.

Also present: Councillors Duncan Enright and Toby Morris.

17. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 5 June 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Julian Cooper and the following resignation and temporary appointment was reported:-

Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt for Councillor Liz Leffman,

19. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

20. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

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

21. 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 5 June 2019.

22. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2019/2020

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services, which provided it with an update on the Work Programme for 2019/2020.

22.1 Local Authority Partnership Purchase Scheme

The Chief Finance Officer advised that discussions with Bloor Homes were ongoing and that the Council's Officers were working on further initiatives in relation to other development sites. A further update would be provided in due course.

RESOLVED: That progress with regard to the Committee's Work Programme for 2019/2020 be noted.

23. 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 25 June 2019.

RESOLVED: That progress with regard to the Committee's Work Programme for 2019/2020 be noted

24. SUPERFAST BROADBAND PROJECT

At the last meeting the Committee received an update report regarding the progress of the contract with Gigaclear PLC to design, build and operate the superfast broadband network.

During the course of that meeting Members requested a further report regarding the award of the contract and the contract management arrangements in place to manage its delivery.

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager, Business Support which outlined the procurement process and the contract management arrangements in place.

Phil Martin, the Group Manager, Business Support Services, advised that, following the difficulties experienced with one of Gigaclear's sub-contractors, a daily update was provided in relation to their activities. It had been made clear to that contractor that they would not be offered any further work on the project and they were now only involved in conducting remedial work. A significant element of their contract sum had been withheld to ensure that any defects identified over a two year period were rectified.

As to the question of compensation, the contract between the Council and Gigaclear required completion of the specified network by the end of March 2020 and, at present, work was on track to meet that deadline. The question of redress for disruption caused by their sub-contractor was one between residents and Gigaclear.

(Councillor Morris joined the meeting at this juncture)

In response to a question from Councillor Enright, Mr Martin advised that the number of complaints had fallen as Gigaclear had been more pro-active in their communication with local residents and clearer as to the nature and extent of disruption likely to occur during the installation work.

In response to a question from Mr Langridge, Mr Martin advised that the take-up rate had been lower than anticipated but that this was a seven year project which anticipated a 50% take-up rate over that period. Whilst they had initially concentrated on design and installation, Gigaclear had now recognised the importance of sales and marketing and had invested accordingly. Mr Martin advised that the project was intended to offer inclusion and, whilst no minimum take up was specified, the contract incorporated a claw-back provision for take-up in excess of 50% as this would give rise to a 'super-profit' that would bring the need for state subsidy into question.

Councillor Langridge asked if there was a role for the Council in publicising the service. Mr Martin indicated that the Council had sponsored the infrastructure and that Members should certainly act as advocates for the project.

Will Barton, the Council's Business Development Officer, advised that Gigaclear recognised the issues surrounding take-up and Officers were pushing them on the question now.

Whilst the Council could promote the service where it was already live, it had to be borne in mind that other service providers were also using the network and a list was available on the Company's website at <https://www.gigaclear.net/get-connected> . He also suggested that it was likely that the larger service providers would wish to use the network in future.

Councillor St John suggested that local Members should be advised when the service went live in their area so that they could promote take-up through local newsletters etc.

Councillor Poskitt made reference to difficulties experienced in Bladon but Mr Barton advised that these related to services offered by a national provider. The County Council was looking at ways in which to address the problems encountered.

Councillor Enright made reference to the level of take-up at Northmoor and it was explained that this was a different scenario as that particular project required a 30% take up to be viable. This had been achieved early in the project.

As a user of the new service, Councillor Postan indicated that it provided an outstanding service at good value.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

25. ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGING POINTS

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager – Commissioning which outlined the work currently underway at both the District and County Councils to provide Electric Vehicle Charging Points within West Oxfordshire.

Councillor Levy sought reassurance that the work carried out by the District Council would not overlap with that of the County Council and other providers.

The Chief Finance Officer advised that the Council's Officers were working closely with those from the County and other Oxfordshire authorities to avoid any duplication of effort and to maximise the level of funding coming into the County. Expressions of interest were being sought through a flexible framework document that would enable West Oxfordshire to determine how it would wish to proceed whilst fitting in with plans put forward by other partners.

Councillor Crossland advised that the Carterton Town Council was keen to see charging points provided in the town and would be happy to work with the District Council and others to achieve this objective.

Councillor Langridge questioned whether the Council could learn from the experience of other authorities.

Councillor Postan indicated that the objective of the Working Party established to consider this issue had been the rapid initiation of a pilot scheme to demonstrate that West Oxfordshire was a District ready to embrace and champion the delivery of new technology.

He expressed his disappointment that this aim had not been more clearly expressed and that, in consequence, the project had grown into a comprehensive research programme. The absence of unambiguous recommendations from the Working Party had resulted in sight of this original objective being lost.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

26. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

In response to a question from Councillor St John, the Chief Finance Officer advised that the production of a register of Section 106 agreements had been included within the Audit and General Purposes Committee's Work Programme and a report would be submitted in due course.

Councillor Poskitt indicated that it was important for Members to be able to access this information to ensure that developer contributions were fully utilised.

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

27. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED: that the Committee being of the opinion that it was likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted, that if members of the public were present during the following items of business there would be a disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting.

28. PROPOSED CAPITAL INVESTMENT TO ENABLE THE DELIVERY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The Chief Finance Officer advised that, at its meeting to be held on 24 July, the Cabinet was to give consideration to a potential capital investment that would enable the delivery of an additional 164 affordable homes within the District. A copy of the Cabinet report containing exempt information had been circulated to all Members of the Committee by email and copies were also made available at the meeting.

The Chief Finance Officer emphasised that the information contained in the report was commercially sensitive and was not to be shared outside the Authority.

The Committee gave consideration to the information provided and the recommendations set out in the report. Members sought clarification of certain matters of detail regarding the proposals and the Chief Finance Officer undertook to clarify these issues prior to the Cabinet meeting to be held the following week. In addition, Members sought to establish whether there was any possibility of securing an element of special needs housing as part of the scheme.

Members expressed their support for the project and it was proposed by Councillor Langridge and Seconded by Councillor Postan that the Cabinet be requested to approve the recommendations as set out in the report.

On being put to the vote the proposition was approved unanimously.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet be requested to approve the recommendations as set out in the report.

29. ACQUISITION OF LAND AND PROPERTY TO SUPPORT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Chief Finance Officer advised that it had been intended to provide Members with an update regarding the acquisition of a strategic site for economic development to enable Members to make comment on the proposals prior to their consideration by the Cabinet the following week. However, negotiations were ongoing and the matter would not now be considered until a later date.

The meeting closed at 3:00pm

CHAIRMAN