

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 27 November 2019**

PRESENT

Councillors: Alex Postan (Vice Chairman); Alaa Al-Yousuf, Rosa Bolger, Julian Cooper, Jane Doughty, Duncan Enright, Gill Hill, Richard Langridge, Martin McBride, Harry St John and Elizabeth Poskitt.

In the absence of the Chairman, Councillor Cotterill, the Vice Chairman, Councillor Postan chaired the meeting.

43. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 2 October 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman subject to the additional wording detailed being added to Page 2:

Councillor Al-Yousuf stated that as an Oxfordshire Pension Fund Committee Member, the issue of ethical investments was often discussed at great length at their meetings. *He advised that the Committee had a Statement of Investment Principles which included a section on Social, Environmental and Ethically Responsible Investment. This Statement was available online and he encouraged the Treasury Management team to draft an appropriate statement.*

Councillor Al-Yousuf also pointed out that Oxfordshire Pension Fund benefited from being a member of the Brunel Pension Partnership and that perhaps a treasury management pool could be created with the Council's partners in Publica or other councils to take advantage of economies of scale in the selection of advisers, fund managers, negotiation of fees, and the adoption and monitoring of ethically responsible investment policies.

44. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

There were no apologies for absence, however, the following resignations and temporary appointments were reported:-

Councillor Duncan Enright for Councillor Saul
Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt for Councillor Dan Levy
Councillor Martin McBride for Councillor Maxine Crossland

45. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

46. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no requests received.

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

Councillor Cooper queried if there was an update on his previously submitted questions relating to the failed Building Control targets. He was advised that this issue had been discussed with senior officers at Publica and was part of the ongoing service reviews.

In response, Councillor Cooper advised that he was struggling to understand why the target was being consistently missed and it was suggested that to understand the issue fully, Members should add an item to their Work Programme. It was agreed that if members could appreciate what the target was, they would be able to find some clarity as to where the failures existed.

Councillor Al-Yousuf queried whether a Statement of Investment Principles had been drafted yet. In response, Mrs Poole advised that the introduction of a new Investment Strategy was a good opportunity to incorporate a Statement of Principles.

The report was noted.

48. 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.

Following the comments made by Councillor Cooper under Minute 47 above, it was agreed that an update from officers regarding Building Control targets, what they entailed and why they were consistently being missed, be added to the work programme.

In relation to Publica / Implementation of the transformation programme, Mrs Gore advised that the previously arranged Publica Liaison Group meeting had been postponed due to the forthcoming election and would likely be rearranged for the new year. Members would be kept informed.

Members raised concerns about Item 2 on the work programme, Electric Vehicle Charging Points and the lengthy delay in bringing this forward. Officers explained that the original working group had not provided clear objectives for delivery and this had resulted in an 'all encompassing' programme instead. The lessons learned from this were that clear objectives were paramount, along with the inclusion of realistic timescales. With regard to timeframes, a report was due to come forward in either January or February 2020 and officers were alert to the urgency and committed to moving this forward as soon as possible.

Members discussed the availability of 'apps' to locate charging points throughout the area and were pleased this had been included in discussions, along with the awareness that technology was changing all the time and the District wanted to be able to boast about its facilities.

An update was provided on the Local Authority Partnership Purchase Scheme and Members were advised that there had been no successful applications in two years. Councillor Postan reminded the Committee that the original intention of the scheme had been to assist key workers whose ability to pay did not meet the mortgage lenders requirements and the Council had wanted to be able to act as guarantor for the shortfall in funds.

Councillor Al-Yousuf queried whether the introduction of Help to Buy schemes and the Shared Ownership programmes in other localities had rendered this idea outdated. In response, the Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the take up of the scheme had been disappointing and it was felt that the market had moved on. Members proposed that the scheme could be reviewed and other avenues considered.

The report was noted with the addition of an item relating to Building Control Targets.

49. 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.

Councillor Cooper queried Item 12, Approval of CCTV Policy and if there was any contribution being made by Thames Valley Police. Officers agreed to feedback how the scheme operated.

In response to a query from Councillor Enright regarding the Community Infrastructure Levy, officers advised that a decision was to come forward in January with an agreement to consult, give further consideration or to proceed to inspection. Once this had taken place, implementation of the policy should not take long and officers were mindful of the degree of urgency.

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

50. NOTICE OF MOTION – LIVE STREAMING

At the meeting of the Council held on 23 October 2019, the following Motion had been proposed by Councillor Jake Acock and seconded by Councillor Andy Graham:

“One of the ethos of this council is to be inclusive; not exclusive. We want to welcome people in and get more and more active with local government. This council recognises we are living in an age of technology that can be used to keep in touch, improve communications and change peoples lives for the better. Therefore, in order to improve our communications, we charge that every council and committee meeting is filmed and recorded, then placed on the West Oxfordshire District Council website for West Oxfordshire residents to view and listen to our meetings. Across the country from Manchester, Wandsworth and Bath, council meetings are recorded. Therefore, this council charges that we will now record and stream live all of our council meetings and committee meetings”

In accordance with paragraph 11(e) of the Council Procedure Rules, Council had resolved that the motion should stand referred without discussion to this Committee. The Committee accordingly received and considered the report of the Executive Director Commission, which outlined the motion, and was asked to consider the matter and respond to Council.

The report advised that this Committee had previously considered a report on the Webcasting of Council meetings, in March 2016, and a copy of that report and the associated minute extract had been included at Annex A to the report.

Officers outlined the motion and requested that the Committee considered providing some clarity as to what could be included in any proposal, such as requesting further costings, and to provide some indication as to which meetings they might wish to be included.

Councillor Langridge expressed disappointment that neither the proposer nor seconder had been able to attend the meeting to elaborate on the motion or listen to the debate.

Councillor McBride agreed with the motion in principle but was conscious that the costs could be high and was mindful that Members had a responsibility to the residents of the District regarding the spending of Council finances. However, openness and clarity were paramount and voice recordings could be considered.

Councillor Langridge reminded Members that the Committee had considered this issue over three years previously, and was concerned that it could change the nature of debates, leading to 'grandstanding' from some individuals as he had seen evidenced at the County Council.

Councillor Enright reminded Members that the microphone system was in a poor state in the Council Chamber resulting in him having to move seats.

Councillor Leffman advised that Planning meetings were often well attended by members of the public, and stated that openness and transparency was important. She was aware that other authorities had investigated installing systems and felt it was worthwhile sharing in their findings and lessons learned. She was also mindful that the Council had made a commitment to combat climate change and enabling the public to view meetings remotely was another measure that could assist in reducing carbon emissions. She felt that further investigations into the costings for installing systems in the Council Chamber and Committee Rooms were necessary.

Councillor Cooper concurred with the desire to promote openness in decision making but thought that Members needed clearer costings before making a decision.

In summary, Councillor Postan felt that the financial costings needed further investigation and that further study was needed.

The suggestion of approaching local, small scale webcasters who may be prepared to attend and trial recording meetings was discussed, as was how digital recordings could assist in bolstering decisions and improving minutes.

Councillor Leffman proposed that the motion be agreed in principle but referred back to Council to allow further investigation into the methods of recording available and subsequent cost implications to be investigated for the Council Chamber and Committee Rooms 1 and 2. This was seconded by Councillor McBride.

The Committee agreed that it was in favour of open democracy and that the investigations needed to include audio, visual and live streaming methods; and encouraged officers to share the experiences of other Councils.

RESOLVED: That the Council be advised:

- (a) That the Committee was interested in the motion in principle but in view of the scale of the cost of implementation, and the risk of encouraging "grandstanding", felt that

further study was required on the various methods of recording available, location options and cost of installation; and

- (b) That the meetings rooms to be included in the evidence gathering should be Committee Rooms 1 & 2 and the Council Chamber, and that feedback should be sought from other Councils who had installed systems, or were due to do so.

51. BUDGET

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 explained that the complete budget position was yet to be finalised. She advised that the New Homes Bonus Funding would continue for one year as the proposed changes to local government funding had been delayed until April 2021, however, there was likely be a significant reduction in New Homes Bonus funding.

A breakdown of the cost pressures faced by the authority was set out in section 2.10 of the report together with the savings which would help to mitigate these.

In response to a question from Councillor St John, Mrs Poole clarified the figures detailed in the table on page 5 of the report as reverse one off costs for 2019/20.

Councillor Langridge requested further clarification on the voluntary pension contribution and was advised that there was a significant unavoidable increase in spending arising from the valuation of the Local Government Pension Scheme. This was mainly due to the fact that contributions made by the Gloucestershire authorities had exceeded those made by those in Oxfordshire and this had identified a shortfall. The report 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. Mrs Poole explained that the earmarked reserves were not solely used to cover pension costs.

Councillor Poskitt remarked that the Earmarked Reserves were often difficult to understand as it appeared that the money in this area was clearly not needed elsewhere but it was noted that these were generic descriptions.

Councillor Bolger was keen that the Council continued to strive towards making ethical investments and was comforted that Councillor Al-Yousuf was on the Oxfordshire Pension Fund Committee to represent the Council.

Councillor Postan noted that if there was an interest rate rise, the shortfall from the pension fund lump sum contribution could disappear or go into reserves.

Councillor Cooper noted the figures relating to the savings from the leisure contract but commented that the capital spend on affordable housing schemes appeared erratic. Mrs Poole expanded on the revenue expenditure for Revenues and Housing Support on page 5.1 of the Annex and the actual spend compared to the estimated. Councillor Cooper also highlighted the differing figures detailed against Environmental Services. Mrs Poole advised that this had been noted and officers were working with the accountants to provide a narrative to explain.

Councillor Leffman queried whether the significant savings figure relating to the Ubico contract was accurate. Mrs Poole advised that Ubico had worked hard to define the figures down to a granular level and there had been detailed discussions to generate savings. In addition, monthly reporting was progressing and officers continued to work with the service provider at a detailed level.

Councillor Postan reflected that the report contained a mixture of both good and bad news which officers confirmed reflected a balanced budget. In summary, the Committee noted the report and looked forward to receiving the revised report.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

52. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

In February 2019 Council approved the Medium Term Financial Strategy. The key aspects of the strategy were outlined at section 1.1 of the report.

The approved strategy sought to rebalance the budget over the short term by using a number of measures which included recognising the full business case savings in respect of the 2020 efficiency programme of £1.27m by 2021/22; including savings from the contract for leisure service provision; including a dividend from the Oxfordshire Business Rates pool of £157,485 in 2019/20 to fund costs associated with the Ubico contract; and including savings targets of £1.6 million to address the forecast loss of income from central government post April 2020.

The Strategy also forecast a small contribution to General Fund balances of £3,789 in 2019/20. In subsequent years the Council was forecast to need to use General Fund balances due to the impact of the changes to central government funding and time lag for delivering savings of this magnitude.

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report and made reference to the potential changes being considered to the New Homes Bonus in 2020/21 by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. The fund was expected to be reduced from four years to one-year only and legacy payments from previous years were expected to fall away.

Members were advised that the implementation of the Spending Review 2020, the Fairer Funding Review and 75% Business Rates Retention would now take place in 2020/21 and it was hoped that good things would emerge from these.

Councillor Postan thanked officers for the report and noted that this was a broad brush summary and that this would be updated as further information was received.

Councillor St John queried the format of the detail contained in Annex B and requested that plain English be used where possible.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and the Committee's comments be passed to Cabinet.

53. SERVICE PERFORMANCE 2019/2020 QUARTER ONE

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 Quarter 2 of 2019/2020.

The report advised that the performance and progress in the service areas relating to the work of the Committee were submitted quarterly, for Members to review and challenge if necessary. Annex A to the report provided an overview of service performance in Customer Services, Business Support Services, Democratic Services and Revenues and Housing Support. A summary of progress for the key tasks relating to the work of the Committee was provided at Annex B to the report.

The report highlighted specific areas of interest including those performance indicators that had received a 'red' rating and provided an explanation of the circumstances and mitigating factors relating to it. Similarly, some indicators were awarded an 'amber' rating, and these were explained further in the report.

There were eight quarterly performance indicators relating to the work of the Committee and out of these six indicators had achieved their targets, one indicator had achieved its target 'within tolerance' and one indicator did not achieve its target.

With regard to ICC4 - Percentage of telephone calls answered within 20 seconds, Councillor Langridge observed that this was likely to improve with the gradual implementation of the Salesforce system along with the introduction of the Councillor Contact Number. He felt this had been a great asset and improvement.

Councillor Poskitt noted that there was no indication as to timescale in relation to how long individuals had waited for a response.

Councillor St John queried ICC3 – Percentage of complaints responded to within 10 working days and felt that four out of ten complaints missing their target date was disappointing. It was agreed that this could be raised at the next Member Liaison Group meeting.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

54. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Councillor Cooper raised a query relating to a letter that had been sent to Parish and Town Councils advising them that the provision of hard copies of planning applications and supporting documents would no longer be provided by the Council. He was concerned that many town and parish councils depended on a hard copy of these details to enable them to reach their decisions, as most were not IT literate, did not have the necessary computer equipment and would struggle with online versions.

In response, the Committee Services Officer advised that the Head of Paid Service had asked that the matter be put on hold for the time being in order that further consideration be given to the way forward.

Members agreed that further consultation should be offered before a decision was reached but there were differing views as to the use of digital applications to view the papers.

It was also noted that the quality of the digital offering depended on the quality of applications and relevant drawings submitted. It was felt that both methods were appropriate in certain circumstances but further consultation was required.

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

The meeting closed at 3.55pm

CHAIRMAN