

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the  
**Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee**  
held via video conferencing at 2 pm on **Wednesday 8 July 2020**

PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chairman); Alex Postan (Vice-Chairman); Alaa Al-Yousuf, Rosa Bolger, Julian Cooper, Maxine Crossland, Harry Eaglestone, Gill Hill, Richard Langridge, Liz Leffman, Dan Levy, Harry St John and Geoff Saul.

Also in Attendance: Councillors Duncan Enright and Toby Morris.

Officers: Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer and Deputy Chief Executive); Frank Wilson (Group Director – Finance), Jasmine McWilliams (Estates Manager); and Amy Barnes (Senior Strategic Support Officer)

1. MINUTES

**RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 29 January 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

There were no apologies for absence or temporary appointments.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

4. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no requests received.

5. COUNCIL FINANCES

Members were directed to the follow on papers which had been circulated prior to the meeting. These included an update note on Council Finances following the Covid-19 situation, which was having a significant impact.

The papers contained a diagram detailing the percentage breakdown of pressure areas in the Council's current budget and advised that the most recent MHCLG return submitted forecast an expenditure increase of £1.1m alongside an income reduction of £2m. This was offset by £1.1m grant funding.

The Council's Chief Finance Officer (CFO) outlined the report and reminded Members that this was a worst case scenario. With regard to the financial support being provided to GLL, Mrs Griffiths advised that if the contractor required further assistance in the future, officers would return to Cabinet with a report. In the meantime, the Council was seeking further advice from legal advisors, experienced in working with Leisure Companies. However, it was noted that this was an ever changing situation and the main aim was for the leisure centres and facilities to be open to the public again as soon as possible.

The CFO advised that the first Budget Review meeting had been held recently with some very productive and useful suggestions regarding generating income and cutting expenditure.

Members were assured that Ubico were managing their services well under the current additional pressures and their situation was being monitored closely.

A Treasury Management meeting was due to be held soon and the CFO intended to raise Members' concerns to the Council's advisors, Arlingclose. However, she highlighted that investments that had previously been considered "safe" may not be at present and that she planned to ask Arlingclose to review the current portfolio and advise. With regard to S106 monies, the records were being looked at by the Business Manager – Development Management with a view to trying to pull together the information into a useful and easy to access format. It was hoped that once all the data had been compiled, it would show the amount of monies being held, sums expected in and where it could be used.

Councillor Postan queried whether Arlingclose could be approached about potential opportunities in a similar vein to the advice they provided on the Treasury Management Strategy. With regards to income generation he suggested that a seminar could be held to examine ideas from Members and staff. The CFO advised that officers were working with Business Managers in the first instance regarding income generation.

In response to a question from Councillor Leffman, the CFO advised that the 8% budget pressure relating to Ubico had been based on initial projections as it had been thought that staff numbers would be affected at the company, if individuals had to shield. In reality, only a small number had had to isolate so the impact on their finance had been much lower. She advised that updated figures would be available soon.

Councillor St John queried the length of time it was taking to compile the S106 data. He also asked if the Council was a discretionary client of Arlingclose and whether investment advice could also be sought from other advisors the Council had used previously. The CFO explained that there was a lot of manual work required with the S106 data and officers were about two months away from completion. She advised that different services areas held different parts of information and all of this needed to be drawn together into a usable document. With regard to Arlingclose, she advised that she was due to attend a meeting with internal staff the following week, prior to liaising with Arlingclose but to her knowledge they had always been responsive to any requests for assistance or advice.

Councillor Levy asked if there were any subjects that were 'off the table' and whether West Oxfordshire was out of line with other Councils. He referenced the use of CIL money, the zero rated Garden Village and whether parking charges could be introduced in the District.

Councillor Morris stated that there would always be areas of difference between Councils and he reminded Members that many authorities had been hard hit due to their loss of income from parking since Covid-19. He also recognised that a balance had to be found to encourage cycling, whilst offering attractive parking options in order to get the economy going again. With regard to CIL monies, he advised that this would be discussed at Cabinet for further information.

Councillor Langridge raised a concern that the Council was still providing revenue grants to organisations, asked whether officers were using LGA guidance and noted that it was important to add support to the economy. He was assured that Members were working with their counterparts across Oxfordshire and ensuring that discussions aligned.

Councillor Al-Yousuf addressed Members and was concerned that it was not the right time to be introducing new levies or taxes as businesses and families were struggling. He also asked for clarification on the figures in the diagram. The CFO assured him that the income generation discussions were focused on whether Business Managers felt there

was anything more they could do to deliver their service whilst spending less from their budgets. It was not about introducing new charges or levies but encouraging Business Managers to catch up on lost income or extend current income generating services.

In order to alleviate concerns about a lack of Member involvement, the Group Finance Director, Mr Wilson, explained that the Commercial Strategy was now focused on investment to support recovery. This would follow due process through scrutiny and Cabinet so there would be plenty of opportunity for Councillors to participate.

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

#### 6. START TIME OF MEETINGS

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services, which asked it to consider the start time for its meetings for the remainder of the 2020/2021 municipal year.

**RESOLVED:** That the start time for the remaining scheduled meetings of the Committee in the 2020/21 municipal year shall be 2.00pm.

#### 7. 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 23 June 2020.

Councillor Cooper asked how long the consultation would be on the Woodstock Infrastructure Delivery Strategy. Officers advised they would get back to him via email in due course.

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

#### 8. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

There were no questions from Members.

#### 9. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

**RESOLVED:** That, in view of the likely disclosure of exempt information, as defined in paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, (information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person) the public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining item of business.

#### 10. INVESTMENT PROPERTY UPDATE

The Committee received a report from the Estates Manager, Ms Jasmine McWilliams, updating Members on the property portfolio which the Council held, and which helped to support the revenue budget via investment income.

Since the portfolio had been developed, the investments were monitored annually, with the Committee being due to receive an updated report at this meeting. However, due to the workload pressures in responding to the current pandemic it had not been possible to complete the review. Accordingly, this report sought to provide a high level update for the Committee on the anticipated performance of the portfolio in the current year based upon currently known information.

It was noted that the pandemic had had an impact on businesses and tenants and consequently on anticipated income from rents, and Annex A to the report detailed the rental yield but did not take account of any measures taken as part of the emergency response.

The Estates Manager answered a number of questions from Members who raised concerns about falling rents, closure of small and large businesses and the difficulties the high street had been facing before the pandemic.

The wider issue of the impact on Town Centres was also debated and officers advised that it was still unclear what the future would look like. However, the recovery work streams would look at all options to support and revitalise all of the town centres.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance advised that it did not matter which calendar period the request for support fell under, it was offered when the businesses needed it. He also highlighted that the high street had been changing anyway and a lot of issues had been accelerated by the pandemic. It was still the goal of the Council to make town centres a destination and officers and Members would be working with partners to seek to make that happen.

Councillor Cooper requested specific details about the lease of certain properties and was advised that this information would be emailed to him after the meeting.

Officers assured the Committee that they were liaising with tenants regularly and would continue to update Members as necessary.

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

The meeting closed at 3.20pm

CHAIRMAN