

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the **Cabinet**

Held in the Council Chamber at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 10 November 2021**

PRESENT

Councillors: Michele Mead (Leader), David Harvey (Deputy Leader), Suzi Coul, Marilyn Davies, Jane Doughty, Jeff Haine and Norman MacRae MBE.

Also present: Councillors Rosa Bolger, Julian Cooper, Colin Dingwall, Duncan Enright, Andy Graham, Alex Postan.

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Amy Bridgewater-Carnall (Democratic Services Manager), Angela Claridge (Interim Monitoring Officer), Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer) and Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Mandy Fathers (Business Manager Operational Services), Emma Cathcart (Counter Fraud Manager, Caroline Clissold (Housing Manager), Thomas See (Homeseeker Plus Lead), Barry Clack (Communications Officer) and Bill Oddy (Group Manager – Commercial Development).

48 Notice of Decisions

The decisions from the meeting held on 13 October 2021 were noted.

49 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Martin McBride.

50 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

51 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

52 Receipt of Announcements

Cabinet Update

Councillor Mead addressed the meeting and advised that the Cabinet met every Wednesday, as a group initially, and were then joined by officers to go through and discuss the upcoming Cabinet reports, meetings and Cabinet Work Programme. Councillor Mead suggested that if any Councillors had questions or queries that they would like putting to officers, they could ask the Cabinet to pose these directly at their Wednesday meetings.

Refuse Collections

Councillor MacRae announced that, despite the steady success of refuse collections being at 99%, there had been a number of problems experienced recently due to staff absences at Ubico. This had been exacerbated by the continued unavailability and scarcity of qualified HGV drivers. Councillor MacRae also advised that the fleet's 'narrow lanes' vehicle had broken down and was currently awaiting spare parts to be delivered. In the meantime, Ubico had hired a duplicate vehicle which had unfortunately also failed, resulting in a number of missed collections for those properties located down narrow access routes. Whilst the team were working hard to rectify the issue, there was little that could be done to speed up the delivery of the spare parts required as they were stuck in the supply system.

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Following a question from Councillor Graham, Councillor MacRae explained that he did not know where the spare parts were coming from so could not comment on how long term the issue would be. However, it was hoped that the hired vehicle would be back on the road soon.

WODC and Blenheim Housing Award

Councillor Davies was delighted to announce that the Council and Blenheim Estate Homes had won the inaugural Public/Private Partnership of the Year Award at the Estates Gazette Awards. She explained that the new category celebrated partnerships between the public and private sector, for delivering solutions through real estate. Councillor Davies highlighted that the partnership had meant the Council could provide houses at 80% market rent and she thanked all of the officers involved, including Caroline Clissold and Tom See who were both present at the meeting.

Councillor Enright thanked the team behind the award and applauded Blenheim Estates for the turnaround in culture they had achieved in recent years. Councillor Graham also welcomed the news and referred to a document entitled 'A sketchbook for an emerging vision for Blenheim Estate'. He explained that this was a document produced and commissioned by Blenheim that looked at potential emerging sustainable communities in West Oxfordshire, which Councillors may find insightful.

Councillor Davies concluded by reiterating her gratitude to all officers involved and stated that the award was a testament to the Housing team and the Planning officers at the Council.

Oxfordshire wide Electric Vehicle Charging Point project

Councillor Harvey announced that the contract for the above EVCP project had now been signed and installation would commence in the next few weeks.

Following a question from Councillor Graham, it was confirmed that the first site to have charging points installed would be the Woodford Way Car Park.

Planting Session – Mary Ellis Country Park

Councillor Postan advised that Bloor Homes had organised a tree planting session at the northern end of the Brize Norton Mary Ellis Country Park on Friday 12 November 2021, at 10.30am. He encouraged those elected Members who lived nearby to attend and show their support.

53 Homeseeker Plus Policy Update

Members received a report from the Housing Manager which updated them on the legislative changes needed to ensure that the HomeseekerPlus Policy met the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) Allocation of Accommodation standards and reflected the outcome of the stakeholder consultation.

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HomeseekerPlus was a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme run by seven Local Authorities, in partnership with social housing landlords, operating within Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire. Demand for affordable housing within the HomeseekerPlus area was very high and could not be met in its entirety from the available social housing resources.

The Policy explained who was eligible and who qualified to apply on HomeseekerPlus and set out how applications would be assessed and awarded a subsequent Emergency, Gold, Silver or Bronze banding based on housing need. A copy of the 2019 Banding Table was attached at Annex E to the report.

In late 2019, West Oxfordshire District Council's Cabinet approved the suggested changes set out in the 2019 draft Policy, attached at Annex B, and they had agreed that these should be made available for wider consultation. This report outlined the proposed Policy changes that had been consulted upon and set out the legislative reasons for recommending the approval of the final draft of the HomeseekerPlus Policy.

There were a number of further annexes attached to the report, including those noted above and these were as follows:

Annex A – Draft HomeseekerPlus Policy (Pending Formatting)

Annex C – Summary of Proposed Changes HomeseekerPlus Policy 2019

Annex D – Consultation outcome

Annex F – New Banding Table 2021

Annex G – Equalities Impact Assessment

The report asked Cabinet to approve the policy for adoption and requested that the HomeseekerPlus Management Board be given approval to confirm the date for adoption, once all partners had received approval from their authorities, and professionally format the policy prior to publication.

An alternative option was outlined in full at section 10 of the report and detailed the implication of withdrawing from the current HomeseekerPlus Partnership, sourcing the Council's own Choice Based Letting system and designing its own Policy. It was noted that this would also impact on staffing arrangements, would require a significant financial contribution and extend timescales considerably.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, Councillor Davies, introduced the report and explained the reasons for updating the policy. She proposed the recommendations as laid out and these were seconded by Councillor Doughty.

Following a question from Councillor Dingwall, officers confirmed that an applicant was asked to specify a preferred area on the application form, however, this did not restrict them if they wished to register their interest on properties in any area.

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Councillor Graham queried if was thought the amendments to the policy would impact on the number of people being accommodated. Officers advised that this report addressed how the Council allocated housing in a fair and transparent manner.

Councillor Davies added that Councillor Graham's question related to the Strategic Planning area of work and meetings were being held to try to marry the two areas together.

Having considered the report, and having heard from the Members present, the Cabinet

Resolved that

- a) The policy be approved for adoption; and
- b) Approval be given for the HomeseekerPlus Management Board to:
 - confirm the date for adoption once all partners have approval through their individual authorities governance structure (likely to be early 2022); and
 - professionally format the policy prior to publication.

54 Our House and Housing First Project Updates and Funding Extension Options

Members received a report from the Group Manager for Resident Services and the Housing Manager which updated members on the 'Our House' and Housing First projects since their inception, and recommended the continuation of the projects and outline future opportunities over the next two years.

The report explained that the Council had worked with Countywide partners for many years to provide a collaborative approach to ending rough sleeping in the County and, as a result, Oxfordshire had both an established Young Peoples Supported Accommodation Pathway and an Adult Homelessness Pathway, achieving much success in reducing the numbers of those that were sleeping out.

The report explained that the Adult Homelessness Pathway would be refreshed for 2022-2025 by adopting a more Housing First focused approach, whilst still continuing to deliver effective supported accommodation. However, due to the high concentration of rough sleeping in Oxford City, and the graduation of people from rural areas to the services located in the City, much of the funding and supported accommodation projects were located in Oxford.

The report detailed how the Housing First project operated and how it worked alongside the Adult Homeless Pathway and gave an update on the numbers of individuals helped over the past twelve months. The complex funding streams supporting this work were outlined at paragraph 3.1 and a list of them was provided at Annex A, showing how they related to West Oxfordshire.

There were a number of proposals set out at section 2.26 of the report and these were aimed at reducing the use and time spent in expensive short term, emergency accommodation by

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utilising the funds in the Housing Reserve account, if further grant funding cannot be sourced, benefiting both the Council and the client in the longer term.

There were no alternative options outlined in the report.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, Councillor Davies, introduced the report and highlighted that this was a very targeted and specific project, designed to help vulnerable people. So far eighteen young people had been helped to find housing and were being supported on the path to independence. She hoped that the continuation of the projects would be supported and proposed the recommendations as laid out.

This was seconded by Councillor Haine, who was very supportive of both causes detailed in the report and he referred to paragraph 2.16 of the report which outlined the projects successes.

Following a question from Councillor Postan regarding a definition for the term 'disability', Councillor Davies proposed that officers respond directly after the meeting.

Clarification was also given on the support given to anyone suffering or fleeing from Domestic Violence and officers gave an outline of the external organisations worked with.

Councillor Enright supported the projects and highlighted a minor grammatical error in recommendation d) which should read 'as set out in 2.33'. Councillor Graham also expressed his support for the initiatives and asked what the strategy was beyond the two year timescale, if and how it would be reviewed and relevant timescales.

In response, Councillor Davies explained that this report was funding specific for two years. Officers advised that the project was constantly under review and would enable the existing bed spaces to remain accessible.

Having been proposed and duly seconded, the Cabinet

Resolved that

- a) the recommendation to continue the projects for a further 18 months from April 2022, is agreed;
- b) the outsourcing of the Support element of both projects via waiver, is agreed;
- c) the exploration of external funding sources including bidding for Government and/or community grant funds in order to continue the projects, is agreed;
- d) the use of the Housing Reserve / Housing Grant Underspend, as set out in paragraph 2.33 of the report, to guarantee the continuation of the projects whilst alternative funding options are explored, is agreed; and
- e) delegation of any amendments to these allocations is given to the Housing Manager in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness subject to compliance with funding allocation conditions.

55 Use of the Internet and Social Media in Investigations and Enforcement Policy

Members received a report from the Counter Fraud Unit Manager which presented Cabinet with a new 'Use of the Internet and Social Media in Investigations and Enforcement Policy' for adoption.

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The report advised that the Council's Policies were based on the legislative requirements of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (IPA) and the Codes of Practice relating to directed surveillance and the acquisition of communications data. Councils had come under increased scrutiny in this area by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO) during inspections and there were a number of recommendations in their annual reports, procedures and guidance. This included that evidence should demonstrate that consideration had been given to whether the activity could be considered surveillance and the appropriate authorisation sought.

Existing arrangements had been reviewed and the policy for ensuring compliance had been developed.

There were no alternative options listed in the report.

The report had been considered by the Audit & General Purposes Committee on 23 September 2021 and following confirmation from officers on a number of points, the policy was endorsed.

The Leader, Councillor Mead, introduced the report and proposed the recommendations as laid out. This was seconded by Councillor MacRae.

Following a question from Councillor Graham, the Counter Fraud Unit Manager explained the scenarios in which this policy would be used ie any occasion where officers were asked to investigate a criminal offence against the Council. She highlighted that staff should not be using any personal social media accounts and the policy would help protect staff and the public.

Having been proposed and duly seconded, the Cabinet

Resolved that

- (a) the Policy attached to this report is approved and adopted; and
- (b) the Chief Executive is authorised to approve future minor amendments to the Policy in consultation with the Counter Fraud Unit Manager, Legal Services and the Leader of the Council.

56 Community Facility Grant Awards - 2nd Round - 2021/22

Members received a report from the Business Manager – Contracts, which asked them to consider applications for grant aid from the Community Facilities Grant Scheme.

The report explained that these recommendations represented the second of two rounds of funding for the Community Facilities Grant scheme, with Round 1 awarding £11,563. This had left £188,437 in the scheme and, if agreed by Cabinet, Round 2 would total £134,472.

All applications had been scored against a matrix and funding allocations were proposed in line with this. A list of the applicants and a breakdown of each financial commitment was provided at Annex A to the report.

An alternative option was that Cabinet could choose to offer differing levels of grant aid than those proposed in Annex A, but within the budgets established for these purposes, however, this could result in the projects not being viable due to insufficient funding.

The Cabinet Member for Customer Delivery, Councillor Doughty, introduced the report and provided a breakdown of each application, details of the individual schemes and the different areas of the District that this would help and support. The applicants were as follows:

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- Stonesfield Playing Field Association, who required funding to develop their outdoor sports facilities;
- 1st Stonesfield Scouts, who had to rebuild their scout hut following demolition of their previously, unsafe premises;
- Witney Rugby Club had applied for funding towards an extension to their existing clubhouse, work to outside patio areas and to allow winter fitness training to take place inside;
- Ducklington Parish Council required assistance to make improvements to the playground and installation of a multi-games area;
- Witney Mills Cricket Club had applied for funding to purchase a new outfield mower; and
- Filkins Village Centre required funding for playground refurbishment.

Councillor Doughty expressed her delight at being able to recommend these grants for approval and proposed the recommendation as laid out. This was seconded by Councillor Coul. The Leader highlighted how impressive it was that all of the organisations had been successful in raising their own share of funding towards the projects, especially during Covid times.

Councillor Cooper queried why not all of the applicants had secured Parish or Town funding. Councillor Doughty agreed to speak to officers and respond outside of the meeting.

Councillor Dingwall addressed the meeting and passed on his thanks to the Cabinet for continuing to support these community projects. He went on to highlight the inspirational and diverse services that organisations such as Witney Rugby Club provided to residents of West Oxfordshire and Councillor Dingwall reminded the meeting that Community Facility Grants were not a statutory responsibility of the Council. Therefore, he felt that officers and the administration should be thanked for helping communities to continue to bring in additional funding for projects.

Councillors Bolger and Graham added their support to the proposals. Councillor Graham thanked all involved to continuing to assist these schemes which reflected the needs of the community.

Having been proposed and duly seconded, the Cabinet

Resolved that the grants as recommended in Annex A to the report are agreed.

The Meeting closed at 2.40 pm

CHAIRMAN