

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet

Held in the Council Chamber at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 19 January 2022**

PRESENT

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

Also present: Councillors Joy Aitman, Julian Cooper, Colin Dingwall, Andy Graham, Mark Johnson and Alex Postan.

Officers: Amy Bridgewater-Carnall (Senior Strategic Support Officer), Jan Britton (Managing Director), Georgina Dyer (Business Partner Accountant), Mandy Fathers (Business Manager - Operations Support and Enabling), Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer), Giles Hughes (Chief Executive) and Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica) and Michelle Ouzman (Strategic Support Officer).

69 Notice of Decisions

The notice of the decisions taken at the meeting on 15 December 2021 were received.

70 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

71 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

72 Participation of the Public

There was none.

73 Receipt of Announcements

The Leader, Councillor Mead, advised of the sad passing of two former Councillors of West Oxfordshire District Council, Tony Walker and Roy Cooper. She stated that more detailed eulogies would be delivered at Council next week but asked Members to acknowledge their passing with a moments quiet reflection.

74 2022/23 Budget

Members received a report from the Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer which asked them to consider the initial draft base budgets for 2022/23, fees and charges for 2022/23, the adoption of the Council Tax Base and the submission of the business rates return. Along with the budget growth and approval of the uprating of allowances and deductions on the LCTS.

A summary of the draft base revenue budget was attached at Annex A along with detailed revenue budget breakdowns at Annex B and the Medium Term Financial Strategy at Annex C to the report. In addition, the proposed Fees and Charges were detailed at Annex D with the Council Tax Base shown at Annex E to the report.

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The report advised that the initial draft budget was considered by the Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 December 2021 with no issues raised. In addition, the annual budget had been out for public consultation, giving residents an opportunity to input directly into the budget planning process. Responses to the consultation had been positive and the results of this would be included in the next budget report.

Since the budget was presented to Scrutiny, officers had received the Provisional Local Finance Settlement and had updated the budget and forecast accordingly. This report also looked forward over the Medium Term Financial Strategy and outlined the Council's approach to addressing the challenges ahead.

There were no alternative options outlined because the Council was obliged to produce an annual budget for scrutiny and approval.

The Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the report and highlighted the following amendments to the report: the dates quoted in the 'Summary/Purpose' section of the table should read 2022/23; and the reference to a Civic Pride Officer on page 17 of the report, should read Environmental Officer.

Councillor Coul went on to signpost Members to key areas of the report including the initial budget deficit of £830,000 which had been reversed resulting in a surplus and the initial government proposal of a reduction in New Homes Bonus of £1.8 million. The government had since reversed this decision but there was no assurance that this funding would continue past 2022/23. She warned Members of the potential for large changes ahead and reminded them of the rises in National Insurance contributions, fuel, food and energy prices.

Councillor Coul also reiterated the Council's commitment to keeping costs low whilst maintaining the delivery of services and highlighted the increased costs in relation to the waste contract. New investment opportunities were being discussed with managers and officers had aimed to tighten existing budgets as much as possible. She reminded Members of the ongoing issues with the Council's Leisure Centres and the running of two waste depot sites.

Councillor Coul concluded by stating that she was confident with the budget position, in the short and medium term, but warned that this was unlikely to continue. She therefore, proposed the recommendations as laid out and this was seconded by Councillor Mead.

Councillor Graham raised a number of questions including the financial arrangement with GLL Better Ltd and how confident officers were that the management fees would be paid. In response, Mrs Griffiths advised that the contract with GLL stated they had an obligation to pay these fees and GLL were expecting to pay them, however, it was noted that the leisure industry nationwide was not stable and operators were struggling.

Councillor Graham asked if negotiations with Ubico had been robust regarding a recent pay award, which he believed to be 15%, due to a shortage of drivers. In response, Mrs Griffiths

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explained that it had been agreed with Ubico that there was a need to increase drivers wages and this had been included in the budget and she confirmed that discussions had been extensive. The Cabinet Member for Environment, Councillor MacRae advised that the Ubico staff would be eligible for the local government pay increase.

The third question raised by Councillor Graham related to section 3.5 of the report which dealt with play park repairs. Officers confirmed that there was a project running to establish costs and the Council were in discussions with the Town Council's to take some of the play parks on. In addition, some Section 106 funding had been received and other areas of funding had been identified.

With regard to the Growth Board queries raised, and whether all authorities were paying the same amount, it was noted that the charging mechanism was complicated. Mrs Griffiths advised that central costs were split equally and confirmation had been received from the other authorities to this effect. However, each authority also paid additional amounts, as detailed in the report. Councillor Graham requested that updates on these areas be communicated to Members. Mr Hughes addressed the meeting and advised that, in addition to the work that the Section 151 Officer and her team undertook with the Growth Board, he would be advised of any authority that was not contributing, as part of the Chief Executive's meeting.

Councillor Graham queried the increased costs relating to Street Fairs and Street Traders. He felt it was important to encourage street fairs to continue and was concerned that the increased costs to street traders was beyond the rate of inflation. Officers advised that the costs allocated to these items paid for cleaning up after the events, road closure fees and were a 5% increase overall.

Councillor Cooper addressed the meeting and thanked officers for responding to his previous questions. He reiterated his desire to know what aspects of income Publica and Ubico were looking at and stated that he did not feel that communications between them and Councillors was what it should be. He advised that the precept for Woodstock Town Council was being amended, asked for a response on his query relating to the marking of Winston Churchill's life and repeated his previous question relating to solar panels on Council buildings.

Mrs Griffiths explained that with regard to the installation of solar panels, these were being considered as a potential capital investment opportunity. Councillor Coul confirmed that Publica and Ubico were exploring opportunities for income generation and reiterated that Councillor Cooper should pose his question regarding Winston Churchill to the Tourism Team, who had a budget for marking events such as this.

Councillor Mark Johnson raised queries relating to the Publica salary figure on page 18 of the report, the budget for play park repairs and the large difference in figures in Annex B which detailed the proposed Revenue Budget comparison to last year. Mrs Griffiths explained that the Publica salary figure originally quoted had been an estimate for the first draft. Numbers had now been agreed and updated in this version. With regard to the play parks, the £50k

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budget was an estimate and was not the S106 figure. Finally, the figure quoted in Annex B for, on page 27, was as a result of a one off payment to the pension fund in 2020/2021.

Having read the report and having heard from those present, Cabinet

Resolved that

a) Cabinet approves:

- i. The draft base budgets for 2022/23 as detailed in Annex A;
- ii. The proposals for budget growth included in the table below;
- iii. Draft fees and charges for 2022/23, as detailed in Annex D, for inclusion as part of the Budget recommendations to Council on 23rd February 2022;

b) Council be recommended to approve:

- i. The Council Tax Base shown in Annex E, calculated as £46,172.42 for the year 2022/23;
- ii. Authorising the Chief Finance Officer to submit the National Non Domestic Rates Return 1 (NNDRI) to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government by the submission date of 31 January 2022; and
- iii. Authorising the Chief Finance Officer to approve the annual uprating of allowances and non-dependant deductions in the Local Council Tax Support Scheme in line with national regulations.

75 Discretionary Rate Relief Policy

Members received a report from the Business Manager for Operations and Enabling which asked them to consider the implementation of a Discretionary Rate Relief Policy in line with Section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act (1988).

The report explained that at present the Council did not have a Discretionary Rate Relief policy in place. Instead, it had always relied on Government legislation, guidance manuals and the Council's Constitution when administering and awarding such reliefs.

However, following on from the Local Government Ombudsman's (LGO) recommendations to Council in August 2021 to implement a Discretionary Council Tax Discount policy, and to ensure the Council was not at risk of future criticisms, a Policy to address Business Rate reliefs had been created as set out in Annex A to the report. Members noted that the Policy would be implemented from 1 April 2022, did not change the current delegated arrangements nor how the Council had previously administered its discretionary rate relief in previous years. The policy simply set out to formalise the Council's process.

An alternative option was that an extended period of relief beyond the one-year period could be considered, but, in the light of the potential risks outlined in Section 7 of the report, the view had been taken that a one-year period was appropriate.

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Councillor Coul introduced the report and proposed the recommendations as laid out.

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This was seconded by Councillor Mead. Cabinet therefore,

Resolved that the Discretionary Rate Relief Policy at Annex A to the report, be approved.

76 Waste & Recycling - Future Service Modelling

Members received a report from the Business Manager – Contracts which updated them on the risks associated with the current waste depot site provisions and, in order to review the business case for a single waste depot, recommended that service design and cost evaluation work was brought forward to enable a more informed decision on site acquisition.

The report outlined the existing situation relating to the waste collection contract with Ubico which currently operated from two main depots in Witney. There were also two smaller sites at Greystones in Chipping Norton and Hensington Road Woodstock, which were used mainly for storage. The Council had identified that acquiring a single depot to house all of the operations and storage may provide operational efficiencies and opportunities to enhance services and generate financial savings. Further history relating to past discussions and work on this proposal were outlined in paragraph 1.5.

Members noted that the current contract with Ubico was due to end in 2024, coinciding with the majority of vehicles being seven years old and it was agreed that a service redesign was due. A redesign would also be an opportunity to consider future collection service design, fleet procurement choices (bearing in mind the climate emergency) as well as the size, cost and location of depot needed.

The report therefore recommended that an external specialist consultant be brought in to support the Council, at a cost of £31,000 to be allocated from the general reserves.

The alternative options available to Members were to purchase a depot now, accepting the financial risks associated with it; conduct a service options appraisal closer to 2024 when there would be a greater degree of assurance on price, however, acknowledging that there would likely then be not a necessary time available to purchase and mobilise a new depot; or continue with the current arrangement.

The Cabinet Member for Environment, Councillor MacRae introduced the report and reiterated the advantages of engaging a specialist to undertake the work. He reminded Members of the need to consider future waste options in light of the contract renewal in 2024. Councillor MacRae stated how the Council already delivered an excellent service to residents, with collection rates in excess of 99%, however, it was vital to consider the needs of an expanding population and future government plans.

Finally, Councillor MacRae assured the meeting that the external specialist would look at all available and potential options to shape the waste collection service before moving to the next contract in 2024. He therefore proposed the recommendations as laid out.

This was seconded by Councillor Harvey who advised that he had been involved in this process in previous years and it was the best way to ensure that the Council continued to deliver an excellent service for the people of West Oxfordshire.

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Councillor Graham asked a question on behalf of Councillor Dan Levy who was unable to attend and who was keen that any review would look at efficiencies to be made working with other Councils, including those that co-owned Ubico.

Councillor MacRae reiterated his previous comments, advising that at this stage nothing would be ruled in or ruled out and the review would be all encompassing.

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

Resolved that

- a) the risks set out in this report are noted and service design and cost evaluation work is undertaken before a decision is taken on depot site acquisition;
- b) revenue funding of up to £30,000 is allocated to appoint a specialist consultant, to undertake an evaluation of waste service options and a cost appraisal of each option, and provide an expert opinion on likely cost of each service from Ubico and the open market, together with the likely costs to acquire and develop land for mobilisation of an operational waste depot;
- c) revenue funding of £1,000 is allocated to support a waste redesign consultation (if required); and
- d) the decision to award a contract for this consultancy work, following a procurement process, is delegated to the Head of Paid Service in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment.

The Meeting closed at 2.44 pm

CHAIRMAN