

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Held in the Council Chamber at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 9 February 2022**

PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chairman), Geoff Saul (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Alaa Al-Yousuf, Julian Cooper, Rupert Dent, Harry Eaglestone, Gill Hill, Mathew Parkinson, Elizabeth Poskitt, Alex Postan and Andrew Prosser.

Officers: Jon Dearling (Group Manager - Resident Services) and Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer)

31 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2021 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

32 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Steve Good.

Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt substituted for Councillor Dan Levy.

33 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

34 Participation of the Public

There was none.

35 Cabinet report - Draft 2022/23 Budget

The Committee received the Cabinet report dated 19 January 2022 which had asked Members to consider the initial draft base budgets for 2022/23, fees and charges for 2022/23, adoption of the Council Tax base and the submission of the business rates return.

The Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to consider the Cabinet report, along with an update from the Chief Finance Officer and decided on any comments to be passed to Cabinet, prior to consideration of the final report in February.

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report and provided Members with a number of updates including Treasury Income and additional growth items.

The Chairman referred to paragraph 1.4 of the report which related to the annual budget consultation and commented on the amount of written text received at the end of the submissions. He felt this was interesting feedback and highlighted that the public were not always clear on the role of the District Council.

Officers provided clarification on the requests for growth and discussed the Future Oxfordshire Partnership costs. The Chief Finance Officer explained that additional years' funding was required to enable the administrative support needed to deliver projects.

In addition, further details were provided about the Air Quality work referred to in paragraphs 2.4 and 3.13. The funding for this was required on a rolling basis to produce plans, which was being outsourced due to a lack of capacity with the ERS department.

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Councillor Al-Yousuf advised that this topic had been scrutinised by the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee who had received a presentation at their last meeting from officers. He also referred to the joint report with the County Council and explained that this work was currently in a draft form.

Councillor Prosser agreed that the plan needed to be followed up and a decision made as to what would happen next. Members noted that monitoring had been taking place over a number of years and discussed the potential measures to reduce air pollution.

Councillor Cooper expressed his disappointment that this was the only scrutiny committee considering the budget which he felt demonstrated a lack of process. He asked that the Management Team and Cabinet consider the process in the future. He had a concern that the first time some Members would see the budget report would be at the Council meeting.

The Chief Finance Officer explained that many budget requests had been received along with requests for funding from officers. Members were reminded that the Cabinet reports were available to all Members, along with the opportunity to attend Cabinet and/or approach officers directly to ask questions. It was confirmed that a number of Councillors had submitted questions to the finance team and had been responded to directly.

With regards to the Air Quality concerns, officers advised that this was the role of the Environment Scrutiny Committee to consider and amend their work plan accordingly, should they wish to do so.

Councillor Saul asked for clarification on the Medium Term outlook and whether the Local Government Association were pushing for a three or five year settlement. He noted that every year Councils were warned of a financial 'cliff edge' and he recognised the difficulty for officers to make strong commitments. Councillor Saul felt that in order to serve residents better, a greater period of certainty was required.

Officers agreed that this was massively frustrating and explained the impact of this on the rates re-set, the phasing out of the New Homes Bonus and the magnitude of the swings in the finance being provided by Central Government.

In response to a number of comments made relating to more visibility and information in the report, Members were reminded that the papers were extensive but could not cover every aspect in detail. It was noted that the Built Facilities Strategy would be coming forwards, enabling the Council to unlock more S106 contributions.

Further discussions were had relating to the economic state of leisure facilities and in particular the ability for GLL to pay their management fees. Members noted that this was a sector that had been hit hard during the pandemic and revenue had not been generated.

The Levelling Up agenda was debated and officers confirmed that webinars were due to take place in due course.

Councillor Cooper proposed moving an amendment to the budget to include £250,000 funding in the Capital Programme to install solar panels on all Council owned buildings. This was seconded by Councillor Poskitt.

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The Chief Finance Officer reiterated her comments that funding for energy efficiency measures had already been included in the budget, and advised that she had given this response to Councillor Cooper twice in previous meetings.

On being put to the vote, the motion was lost.

Following a query from Councillor Dent relating to the formula used for calculating precepts, the Chief Accountant agreed to go through the setting of the Council Tax Base and Precepts with any interested Members.

Councillor Prosser received clarification on the raise to Council Tax which was limited to 2% or £5. It was noted that to increase Council Tax by any more would need a referendum to be called.

Members were advised that next year's budget would be more granular and would include the increases to wages and National Insurance contributions, along with the respective increases in utility costs.

Having considered the report and having heard from the Members present, the Scrutiny Committee

Resolved that the recommendations to Cabinet and Council be supported.

36 Performance Monitoring Q2

Members received a report from the Chief Executive which provided details of service performance during Q2.

The Council monitors service performance each quarter, and a report on progress towards achieving the aim and priorities set out in the Corporate Plan is produced at the end of Q2 and Q4. The Q2 update on progress on the priorities will be encompassed within the Annual Monitoring Report and presented to Cabinet in December 2021 followed by the Overview and Scrutiny committees.

The Group Manager for Resident Services introduced the report which drew attention to a number of key issues including the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, the Agile Working Strategy, the leisure industry, customer satisfaction rates and website usage.

The fall in average waiting time for calls to be responded to was noted, along with the increase in staff numbers within the Planning Department and the impact this was having on workload. It was noted that the Revenue and Benefits team had been affected by a number of staff being diverted onto Covid Business Grants and Test and Trace processes.

Councillor Dent queried the processes for dealing with fly tipping and in response Mr Dearing outlined the digital reporting system which allowed a caller to provide greater information and upload photographs where possible. It was noted that Ubico would report information back to Environmental Services if they found evidence.

Councillor Al-Yousuf commented that he had used the web facility but it was not always clear if the fly tipping had occurred on private or public land. He also referred to the map which showed mostly red, indicating wide spread instances of fly tipping.

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The Chief Finance Officer explained that the next iteration of this report would be an overhaul of the existing design and would include helpful dashboards, providing more visual graphs, trends and statistics.

Having considered the report and having heard from the Members and Officers present, it was

Resolved that the report be noted.

37 Committee Work Programme

Members received the Committee's work programme detailing the items to be considered at forthcoming meetings.

Councillor Saul provided an update to Members on the progress of the Investment Policy Task and Finish Group. It was noted that there had been many discussions between officers and Members since the last meeting but due to the pressures of producing the Budget papers, the group had been unable to meet. A decision had therefore been taken to reconvene post Budget setting.

Councillor Saul explained that the renewal of the Arlingclose contract was being looked at and the group was mindful to narrow their focus to what the Council wanted from them or any potential alternative providers. He advised that officers were also working alongside the group on this and a further update would be provided in due course.

Having considered the report, it was

Resolved that the work programme be noted.

38 Cabinet Work Programme

Members received the Cabinet Work Programme and were advised of a number of changes since the publication of papers.

Having considered the report, it was

Resolved that the report be noted.

39 Members Questions

There were no Member Questions submitted however the Chairman took the opportunity to thank all Members of the Committee for their assistance and thanked the officers present for their work on this year's budget.

The Meeting closed at 3.27 pm

CHAIRMAN