

## 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, 13 April 2022**

### PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chair), Geoff Saul (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Julian Cooper, Rupert Dent, Harry Eaglestone, Gill Hill, Richard Langridge, Dan Levy and Alex Postan.

Officers: Jan Britton (Managing Director Publica), Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer), Bill Oddy (Group Manager - Commercial Development), Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica), Beth Boughton (Managing Director – Ubico), Michelle Ouzman (Strategic Support Officer), Anne Learmonth (Strategic Support Officer) and Maria Harper (Democratic Services Assistant).

Also present: Chris Urwin (Finance Director – Ubico)

#### **40 Members Questions**

Councillor Cotterill stated that this was his last meeting as Chairman of the Finance Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as he was retiring from the Council.

Councillors Cooper and Postan both thanked Councillor Cotterill for his years of public service, and this was concurred by all Councillors present.

#### **41 Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 February 2022 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

#### **42 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Alaa Al Yousuf, Mark Prosser, Mathew Parkinson and Steve Good.

#### **43 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

#### **44 Participation of the Public**

There were no participation of the public.

#### **45 Draft Publica Business Plan 2022 - 2025.**

The Chair welcomed officers to the meeting, and asked for introductions,

Bill Oddy the Group Manager - Commercial Development, introduced the following officers who were in attendance:

Jan Britton the Managing Director of Publica

Beth Boughton the Managing Director of Ubico

Chris Urwin the Finance Director of Ubico

Jan Britton attended the meeting to receive questions from the Councillors regarding the Draft Publica Business Plan 2022 – 2025.

Councillor Poston asked if he could carry forward the recommendation from the Audit and General Purposes Committee, for improving the rate of response of temporary shortages for Publica staff, particularly in the planning service. He advised that he had looked at the plan but

13/April2022

could not see any positive way to address the issue. Mr Britton directed the Committee to the 'People' section of the plan which summarised improvements in retaining and attracting staff, including the introduction of career grade posts in development management.

Councillor Langridge thought it was an excellent document, but was concerned that engaging with residents seemed to be reflected by online engagement, and wondered about those residents who were unable to engage digitally. Mr Britton confirmed that online was a good move forwards, however, they would not be turning off the telephones or written communications. Councillor Langridge advised that he had residents complaining that they could not talk to officers directly, and that everything was being directed via Customer Services. Mr Britton advised that the plan was to enhance officers' knowledge within Customer Services to enable them to answer first tier questions, for example how much a planning application would cost to submit. This would allow officers within the wider teams to concentrate on specialist issues and most residents queries should be resolved by Customer Services. Councillor Langridge also commented on staff pride at working for Publica and asked if there were plans to engage with staff to make them feel proud. Mr Britton referred to the 'People' section of the plan, which provided information about the work being undertaken with staff within Publica.

Councillor Saul asked about Publica's Social Value Policy. Mr Britton confirmed that embedding Climate and Social Values was important and Publica would take the lead from the Council's policies, rather than develop separate policies.

Councillor Cooper followed up on Councillor Langridge and Councillor Postan's comments. He too was concerned about the older generation and people who were unable to communicate on-line for Council Services, he was also concerned about the staff vacancies and the time it took to fill these vacancies. Following a query about the average time to fill a vacancy, Mr Britton explained that Publica factored in a 5% vacancy rate, within the staffing budget. As they did not have a separate budget for recruitment, they often ran with a number of vacancies together when recruiting, which took time.

The Chairman asked Elizabeth Griffiths, the Councils Chief Finance Officer, to come back on the vacancy statement. She advised that officers had not been asked to build in a budget for recruitment and that the Council had never been asked to increase the budget to cover recruitment costs. Following a query from the Chairman relating to interim staff, Mr Britton confirmed that there was a small budget for this.

Councillor Dent referred to the plan on page 7, and asked what the financial objectives were for 2023 onwards. He also referred to Section 3 of the plan, Financial Implications. He queried the dates for the business case as there appeared to be a misalignment and asked what the financial objectives up to 2025 were.

Mr Britton explained that each year a financial business plan was supplied, and within that reference would be made to past years business cases from when Publica was first set up. He advised that there should be further savings for future years and he was working with Frank Wilson, the Group Finance Director to project future savings.

Councillor Levy noted that WODC were losing staff to other neighbouring Councils and queried if this issue had been resolved. Mr Britton confirmed that the situation had improved as they had introduced a two tier career grade. Previously, staff had been reaching the ceiling of their grade and were then leaving to join other Councils at a higher grade, enabling them to progress in their career. Now they would be able to progress via the career grading schemes, which would assist with staff retention and continuity. In addition, by using apprenticeship levy funding, Publica had introduced a development management scheme, and staff would be training on the scheme from one to three years.

13/April2022

The Chairman noted that the plan referred to Councillors being informed, including Town and Parish Councils and asked how this would happen. Councillor Cotterill thought communications had been poorly managed and asked how this would be effectively managed in the future.

Mr Britton confirmed that recently they had opened dialog with presentations and question and answer sessions. He added that he would look into how the relationships could be reflected more within the plan. He was able to inform the Committee that they were working with the Communications Team on creating some short films to be available to Councillors and staff on what was happening within Publica.

The Chairman noted that the business plan was dated to 2025, but felt the milestone objectives were missing along. Mr Britton confirmed this was a three year plan that would be refreshed annually. Stakeholders were more receptive to a refreshed plan annually, this is referenced on page 4 of the plan.

Mr Oddy referenced the on line engagement point raised and advised that whilst rolling out the green waste bins, 6,000 letters were sent to residents, with 2,500 people telephoning the council and 22,000 renewing online. Mr Oddy also referred to the carbon literacy training commitment in the plan which, following feedback from other Publica Shareholder Councils, would be amended from silver to gold level.

Councillor Postan referred to the large area that the Shared Lead Flood Risk Management Officer covered. He did not feel that minutes of scrutiny meetings always captured the mood and felt that if Publica management attended more of these meetings they would be able to reflect on the mood, in relation to the service provided.

Mr Britton acknowledged the point and believed that many of his managers attended Scrutiny Committees, which he received feedback from. He advised that he would look at attending more meetings in the future but could not commit to attend all meetings.

Mr Britton acknowledged that Mr King covered a larger area than he did before but highlighted that he now had three assistants working with him, which he didn't have before. However he did understand that all Councils were having budget cuts and gone were the days where Councils had rows and rows of desks with staff to answer every query, but the partnership did offer the benefit of substantial expertise across the partnership which would not be there if operating alone.

The Chairman thanked the Publica Management Team for attending and answering the Councillors questions.

**Resolved** that the Committee noted the Draft Publica Business Plan 2022 – 2025.

#### 46 **Ubico Business Plan 2022 - 2023**

The Committee received a report from the Group Manager – Commercial Development, which asked members to consider the Ubico Business Plan 2022-23 and make any comments that can be considered by the Cabinet and the Leader as Ubico Limited Shareholder Representative.

Beth Boughton the Managing Director and Chris Urwin the Finance Director of Ubico attended along with Bill Oddy the Group Manager - Commercial Development, at Publica. Councillor Langridge welcomed the detailed report but queried the resilience of the refuse fleet, asked if this was sufficient and whether it was working under the partnership.

Beth Boughton confirmed that the partnership definitely worked on skills and knowledge, but recognised this was not always the case in practice, citing an example of vehicles braking down.

13/April2022

Procurement of equipment, parts and fuel across Councils had delivered efficiencies, resulting in the more buying power the partnership has.

Councillor Postan queried the cost of refuse trucks, asked if the Council could design a specification, based on need and put it out to manufacture.,

Beth Boughton agreed that refuse trucks were expensive and confirmed they had looked at specification when replacing the fleet, within the specialist market available. She advised that a new electric design fleet was due to come onto the market soon, but advised it would be at least ten years before they would be available. Mr Urwin added that there were only a handful of manufacturers, and that Ubico buying power was not enough to have a bespoke design.

Elizabeth Griffiths advised on economies of scale, end of life of the fleet and the cost to convert to electric vehicles and the infrastructure required, which she felt could exceed £9 million. Mr Urwin added that a future option could be to move the existing fleet onto the second-hand market. Following a question from Councillor Cooper relating to the recruitment of staff. Beth Boughton summarised the processes in place at Ubico. She explained that Ubico budgeted to backfill vacancies to avoid gaps in service. Councillor Levy complimented Ubico on their service delivery over the last couple of years, and thanked them for working with residents on the timings of fleet rounds. He enquired if there was any coordination between the different authorities, Cotswold and WODC for example, with regards to routes and equipment sharing.

Mr Urwin explained that they were looking at cross boundary collaboration and were keen to come up with pilot initiatives. "In Cab" technology that the Council has led on, would be rolled out across the partnerships.

Councillor Hill commented that prompt action by Bill Oddy, when issues arose, was most appreciated. She went onto explain that some Minster Lovell residents had told her that recycling and glass that was collected separately, was then put in the same container on the truck. Mr Oddy explained that within the truck it was separated although it did look like it was being put into the same bin. Ubico were working with the Councils Communications Team on creating videos to show what happens to waste collection processes. The Chairman asked where the recycling depot was located. Mr Oddy confirmed it went to Witney before being transported to Birmingham.

Following on from Councillor Hill's comments, Councillor Langridge stated he had seen operatives collect glass by tipping it into a wheelie bin. Mr Oddy responded that he believed that some operatives collected glass recycling into one bin, before depositing it into the refuse lorry. Beth Boughton also confirmed that the Birmingham depot would reject any mixed recycling, and Ubico would know if this practice was occurring regularly.

Councillor Dent raised the issue of fly tipping, asked how many instances there had been, how the council would prosecute and how this issue was going to be managed moving forwards. Mr Oddy confirmed that collection and cost was clearly in Ubico's domain, however, Environmental Regularity Services (ERS) had an interest with the management of the issue. He reminded members of the mapping tool that recorded instances and looked at hotspots, identifying repeat locations. In addition there was an online form that residents could use to report fly tipping, and once reported, this would be reviewed by ERS before being passed to Ubico.

Councillor MacRae was able to clarify that ERS had recruited a specialist officer whose job was to investigate fly tipping occurrences and Ubico's involvement was only to collect the rubbish. Once in post, ERS would be able to evidence and prosecute after investigations. Councillor MacRae was also keen to publicise prosecutions once they had occurred to warn off potential future fly tippers.

13/April2022

Councillor Dent queried the procurement and finance issues relating to Publica and Ubico. Elizabeth Griffiths clarified that the Council would be purchasing the fleet of vehicles.

The Chairman concluded that he thought the report was set out well and it was easy to see the objectives. He thanked the Ubico Management Team for their attendance.

**Recommended** that the Ubico Business Plan 2022-23 be approved by the Leader, as the Council's Shareholder Representative of Ubico Limited, subject to any minor amendments that might arise from the final stages of consultation with the other Shareholder Councils and/or general editing.

#### 47 2021-22 Q3 Performance Monitoring v2

The Committee received the 2021 -22 Performance Monitoring Report, which provided details of service performance during Q3.

Councillor Cooper queried paragraph point 3.3, and asked about the target times. Elizabeth Griffiths explained that the report showed current trends, not target times, the next report Q4, which was due soon would show the annual detail of times.

Councillor Langridge congratulated the officers on the level of detail contained in the report. He asked if the Council could buy another narrow refuse truck as a spare, as it kept on breaking down.

Elizabeth Griffiths confirmed that the narrow vehicle had broken down and they had leased another which also broke down. It was just one of those events that sometimes happens.

The Chairman noted that on page 59, there was no data relating to Customer Services, and no explanation. He also noted that there was no record of the Officers responses once the issue was passed over to specialist teams.

Elizabeth Griffiths confirmed that Customer Services also got frustrated at the lack of figures, and she was happy to take back all the comments that had been made. She added that the extra training being given to staff on Customer Services Teams, should reduce the need to pass enquiries onto Officers.

Councillor Levy noted that there were no statistics on leisure services in the report and asked if there was any data on non-renewal of the green bin licence.

Elizabeth Griffiths clarified that some feedback had been received from residents asking if they could pay by instalments, rather than in one lump sum. She confirmed that this was being looked at.

Councillor Hill noted that the Customer Services 151 number after 1700, was directed to a contact centre in Liverpool and was not local.

**Resolved** That the Cabinet report of 16 March 2022 detailing the 2021/22 Q3 finance and service performance be noted.

#### 48 Committee Work Programme

The Chairman asked the Committee if there were any particular questions or updates on the Committee Work Programme.

Councillor Saul updated members on Item 3 - Task & Finish Group - Council's Investment Policy. The task and finish group were working alongside officers, and Elizabeth Griffiths agreed that the plan was in initial first draft state.

13/April2022

Councillor Langridge asked when the next Financial Strategy was due, Elizabeth Griffiths advised that one was completed in February, they were awaiting questions on the budget, and nothing of value had changed so far.

**Resolved** that the Committee Work Programme is noted.

#### 49 Cabinet Work Programme

The Chairman asked Councillors if there were any questions on the Cabinet Work Programme.

Councillor Saul asked about the status of item 16, the disposal and development of land at Walterbush Road, Chipping Norton.

Elizabeth Griffiths explained that the land, bought in 1968 was previously a playground that had fallen into disuse. The Council was now looking to work with a developer for custom self-build homes, which would be carbon net zero. The Council had received a grant from the Secretary of State to move some power cables, and were now looking at how many houses could be built on the land.

Councillor Saul asked if there was a Council Parking Strategy, item 21.

Elizabeth Griffiths confirmed that Chris Hargreaves had almost completed a parking options specification in Chipping Norton. The Chairman commented that Woodstock and Burford would be interested in how the parking options developed for Chipping Norton, as they had similar parking issues.

Councillor Cooper enquired on item 15 Review of Options, Hensington Road, Woodstock, which had slipped from November, now July. Elizabeth Griffiths confirmed that initial works had been completed and updated members on the current situation.

Councillor Dent asked about item 17 Community Facility grants and how many there were. Elizabeth Griffiths confirmed that some grants had already been awarded, and a report circulated, she advised that these fell under the remit of Councillor Doughty as Cabinet member for Customer Delivery.

Councillor Langridge noted that item 19 Agile Working project should be on the FMOS work programme. The Chairman confirmed that the Agile Working project would be considered by FMOS prior to a decision being taken by Cabinet.

**Resolved** that the Cabinet Work Programme be noted.

The Meeting closed at 3.34 pm

CHAIRMAN