

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the **Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Held in the Council Chamber, Woodgreen, Witney OX28 1NB at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 12 April 2023**

PRESENT

Councillors: Alaa Al-Yousuf (Chair), Alaric Smith (Vice-Chair), Andrew Coles, Julian Cooper, Charlie Maynard, Michele Mead, Ruth Smith and Jane Doughty.

Officers: Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica), Georgina Dyer (Chief Accountant), Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer) and Michelle Ouzman (Democratic Services Officer).

Other Councillors in attendance: Dan Levy and Mathew Parkinson.

46 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 1 February 2023, were approved and signed by the Chair as a true and correct record.

47 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hugo Ashton, Richard Langridge, Suzi Coul, Gill Hill, Michael Brooker and Alex Wilson.

Councillor Jane Doughty substituted for Councillor Gill Hill.

48 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

49 Participation of the Public

There was no public participation at the meeting.

50 Service Performance Report 2022-23 Quarter Three

The Chair stated that whilst no officers were available to present the Service Performance Q3 Report, both the Chief Accountant and the Executive Finance Director for Publica were in attendance, and would answer any questions raised by the Committee.

The Chair enquired if that despite Quarter 4 of 2022/23 having come to an end, if it were possible in future to have the Q4 report by the end of the municipal year.

The Chief Accountant and Executive Finance Director both explained that the Easter break had occurred after the end of the last quarter and that it had not helped matters, although due the enormity of the data that is involved presently, it is not possible, and usually takes a month to explore the data and review the data narrative. It was also highlighted that there was a desire to improve on data collection, and to improve time mechanisms to the reporting.

Councillor Ruth Smith drew the Committee's attention to section 3.9 of the agenda report regarding Housing, and asked what option would be best for West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC).

The Chief Accountant explained that the Council had received £250,000 less in government grants, and that it would be similar for the coming financial year, making decision making difficult. If a building was found it would require capital plus, refurbishment and ongoing costs.

12/April2023

The Council had done this successfully before with the Horsefair building, but it was a risk as Horsefair was to resolve the emergency housing issue. More options were needed, but would this be long-term issue.

Another solution would be to focus and invest in a 'move on' programme, and not keep people in emergency accommodation, especially families that need stability.

The issue is not solvable instantly. The Government added a mandate during Covid-19, which expanded the category of homelessness but was not fully offset by subsidy grants. Putting people into hotels was not sustainable as properties aren't owned.

Councillor Maynard requested clarity on ownership. The Chief Accountant confirmed that if the Council did not own the property then the Council could not recover housing benefit subsidy. Councillor Maynard suggested if the Council invested in an extra ten beds internally, that may be a better solution. The Chief Accountant advised that if the Council bought an asset that was designed to be used daily, then Cottsway Housing Association would work with the Council to try and bridge the subsidy gap .

The Chair enquired if a business case could be developed to look at a property solution. The Executive Finance Director stated that the key problem was finding a suitable property. The Chief Accountant explained that options were being reviewed, especially regarding family accommodation. In some cases, a solution would be to pay off rent arrears and make repayment plans, giving families stability. However it was stated that this was not an option to resolve all, but one that could be applied. Councillor Julian Cooper asked if the Council worked with local town councils to see if they had properties vacant.

The Executive Finance Director informed the Committee that on the Executive Agenda for 19 April 2023, the Consideration of Local Authority Housing Fund Application would be considered, with a purpose to confirm the preferred method of delivery of up to sixteen new affordable homes utilising the Local Authority Housing Fund Allocation previously approved by the Executive on 8 February 2023. The Chair concluded that the Committee would like to be kept informed on progress, and requested a financial update on the Local Authority Housing Fund Allocation issue in 6 months, and that it be added to the Committee Work Programme.

Councillor Maynard asked for clarity of the bar chart titled WODC Financial Performance Summary, and if there could there be a 'post 6 months' column. The Chief Accountant explained that these were summaries lifted from the Financial Performance Reports Q3 which had the full detail and was part of the February Agenda.

The Chair stated the figures on the Write Off Table on page 26 looked high. The Executive Finance Director concurred that some businesses that had ceased trading were still in receipt of services from Ubico. The Assistant Director – Commercial Development would be able to inform the Committee of the current situation, and be invited to the next meeting.

Committee **Resolved** to:

1. Invite the Executive Finance Director to the Committee in six months, for a update on the Local Authority Housing Fund Allocation;
2. Invite The Assistant Director – Commercial Development to the next Committee meeting for an update on the Ubico Write Off Table reported in the Service Performance Report Quarter Three;
3. Note the Service Performance Report 2022 -23 Quarter Three.

12/April2023

The Chair asked the Committee if there were comments on the Committee Work Programme, of which none were received.

Committee **Resolved** to:

1. Add Update of Local Authority Housing Fund Allocation to the Committee work Programme;
2. Add Update of the Ubico Write Off Table the Committee work Programme;
3. Note the Committee Work Programme.

52 Executive Work Programme

The Chair invited comments on the Executive Work Programme, of which none were received.

Committee **Resolved** to:

1. Note the Executive Work Programme.

53 Exclusion of the Press and Public

The Committee agreed to exclude the press and public from the remainder of the meeting for exempt items of business, on the basis that the public interest in maintaining the exemption, outweighed any public interest in disclosing the information.

Committee **Resolved** to:

1. Pass a resolution in accordance with the provisions of Paragraph 4(2)(b) of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 on the grounds that their presence could involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in specific paragraphs of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

54 Unicorn Public House update

The Committee had received an update on the Unicorn Public House in Great Rollright, which has been closed since 1991.

Councillor Julian Cooper had a list of questions following the updated response, and agreed to forward this list to Democratic Services following the meeting.

The Executive Finance Director shared Councillor Cooper's frustration and confirmed that the Council had undertaken work to secure the property, and that the Assistant Director – Property and Regeneration had been trying to work with the owners, and that the Parish Council have been kept fully informed.

Committee **Resolved** to:

1. Request that Councillor Julian Cooper emails a list of questions to Democratic Services to be passed onto the Assistant Director – Property and Regeneration;
2. Note the update.

The Meeting closed at 2.50 pm

