

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the Council

Held in the Council Chamber at 2.00pm on **Wednesday 19 July 2023.**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Coles (Chair), Elizabeth Poskitt (Vice-Chair), Alaa Al-Yousuf, Lidia Arciszewska, Thomas Ashby, Hugo Ashton, Andrew Beaney, Michael Brooker, David Cooper, Julian Cooper, Rachel Crouch, Colin Dingwall, Jane Doughty, Duncan Enright, Phil Godfrey, Andy Goodwin, Andy Graham, Jeff Haine, David Jackson, Edward James, Mark Johnson, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Charlie Maynard, Martin McBride, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Lysette Nicholls, Mathew Parkinson, Rosie Pearson, Andrew Prosser, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Ruth Smith, Harry St. John, Tim Sumner, Dean Temple, Liam Walker, Mark Walker, Adrian Walsh, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray.

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance and Monitoring Officer), Frank Wilson (Executive Finance Director - Publica), Bill Oddy (Assistant Director - Commercial Development), Andrew Brown (Business Manager - Democratic Services), Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer), Maria Harper (Democratic Services Assistant), Barry Clack (Communications Officer), Elise Chowdhury (Communications Officer), Georgina Dyer (Chief Accountant) and Hannah Kenyon (Climate Change Manager).

Other Councillors in attendance: Nil.

CL.87 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from the following Members:

Carl Rylett, Rizvana Poole, Nick Leverton and Joy Aitman.

CL.88 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members of the Council.

CL.89 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 24 May 2023, were agreed unanimously by Council, and signed by the Chair as a correct & accurate record.

CL.90 Receipt of Announcements

The Chair of the Council, Councillor Andrew Coles, detailed the civic and local engagements that he had undertaken since the last meeting of the Council in May 2023. These included the official opening of the 2nd Witney Pride parade, and a further Pride parade, which took place in Chipping Norton.

The Chair had also visited Libyan refugees at a location near to Ducklington, and highlighted the people who he had met, and the stories & experiences he had encountered during the visit, such as living conditions, food provision, access to dental care and the prevention of boredom. The Chair praised the work of Phil Martin, Assistant Director for Business Services, for his thorough work on the project, and also the work of St. Mary's Church and St. Bartholomew's in Witney and Ducklington respectively.

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The Chair had also made a visit to United States Air Force Base in Fairford, Gloucestershire. The Chair had been invited to a ceremony with 501st Combat Support Wing, where command of the Unit had been handed over to a new incumbent. US Colonel Phillips had taken command of the base during the ceremony, and the Chair made reference to, and highlighted the strong connections West Oxfordshire has with the Armed Forces community, most notably with personnel from Royal Air Force Station Brize Norton in the West Oxfordshire District.

The Chair also paid tribute to the work of the Council's Vice-Chair, Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, who had also undertaken a number of recent engagements.

The Chair congratulated Hannah Bourne-Taylor, a resident of West Oxfordshire, who had recently ensured that a Parliamentary petition relating to Swift Bricks and New Housing Developments, was debated in the House of Commons, having achieved almost 110,000 signatures. The subject had also been considered at WODC Committee meetings.

The Chair welcomed Hannah Lee and John Slaveykov, who had undertaken a work experience placement from Woodgreen School with Council's Democratic Services and Communications team respectively. The Chair stated that he hoped the students would gain vital experience during their placements with the Council.

The Chair also announced that he had invited all Members to a self-hosted fundraising event at Woodgreen. The event would include Afternoon Tea in the Committee Rooms, a tour of the Woodgreen Council Chamber, and a tour of the underground WWII Bunker.

The Chair advised Council that the meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee, which had been cancelled on 29 June 2023, was rearranged for 10 August 2023 at 6.00pm, and would take place in Committee Room 1. An Audit training session for Members had also been arranged for the same date at 5.00pm. The Chair advised that further information would be cascaded to Members in due course.

The Chair asked Members of the Council to regularly check their mail 'pigeon holes' in the Members' Room at Woodgreen, to prevent excess mail build up.

The Chair advised Council that Agenda Item 8, "Appointment of Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer)", would be considered as the last item of business of the meeting, as there was possibility of Council having to enter private session.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Andy Graham, paid tribute to the Chair and Vice-Chair for all the work they had undertaken, and said that they were promoting the Council in the best regard.

The Leader paid tribute to the Council's Chief Finance Officer, Elizabeth Griffiths, who would leave the Council ahead of the next meeting of Council to take up a position at Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Council. The Leader stated that the Chief Finance Officer would leave with the warmest wishes of the entire Council and its staff, and thanked her for all her hard work during her time in office.

The Executive Member for Climate Change, Councillor Andrew Prosser, introduced and gave an overview of a recent online platform hub called 'Greenlight'. The Executive Member noted that Greenlight would bring people together to share ideas, best practise, challenge each other through competition, to become involved in activities around climate change and nature, by seeking advice on creating a space in their garden for pollinators to thrive, or finding an environmental group to get involved with.

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CL.91 Participation of the Public

There was no public participation at the meeting.

CL.92 Questions by Members

Questions by Members, as listed on the agenda, and the responses to those questions, which had been circulated in advance, were taken as read. The Chair invited the questioners to ask a supplementary question and then invited the relevant Executive Members to respond. The questions and responses were as follows:

Q1 – Councillor Thomas Ashby, to Councillor Joy Aitman, Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities.

For some time, it has been the belief that both the play area and recreation ground on Raleigh Crescent would be transferred to Witney Town Council. It is disappointing that only the play area has been transferred. There is a significant amount of Section 106 Money from the Windrush Place development which is designated for an “Offsite MUGA” and the current location of the basketball court and green shelters would be ideal.

Enabling Witney Town Council to undertake a design and build procurement would mean that our young people in West Witney would have a new fantastic outdoor space built reasonably quickly. Now that West Oxfordshire District Council have not transferred the land, what are the plans to procure a MUGA for Raleigh Crescent?

A1 – Officers meet with Officers from Witney Town Council every month to monitor progress transferring playgrounds and sports facilities to the Town Council as well as using s.106 funding to deliver new facilities like the proposed MUGA (Multi Use Games Area) in West Witney. Because of the nature of the s.106 agreement for the proposed MUGA, Officers from the District and Town Council are working together to deliver this facility. The intention is for West Oxfordshire District Council to transfer the land of the proposed MUGA to Witney Town Council in the future.

Q1a – When the play area was transferred to Witney Town Council, the Raleigh Crescent Recreation Field was not transferred also. Can a date be given for when this will be done, so that the dedicated Section 106 money can be spent quicker than it would be here at WODC?

A1a (answered by Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council) – I believe a written reply is needed to full address this detailed question, and that it needs a very precise answer. So we will get that to you very quickly, in light of what you said about expedition, and on that basis, a written reply will come.

Q2 – Councillor Julian Cooper, to Councillor Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Economic Development.

Can the Executive portfolio holder for Tourism (Visitor Economy) please update the Council as to what progress is being made to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of Sir Winston Churchill’s birth in November 2024?

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A2 – As of yet, we are not aware of any plans to commemorate the anniversary locally or nationally. Blenheim Palace have indicated that they intend to run related activity - though as yet no information is available.

The Tourism and/or Communications Teams will promote any relevant events.

Q2a – I would like to ask the Deputy Leader of the Council to assist to try and pressurise the leader of the Estate, as it would appear that the estate are going to do virtually nothing to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of Churchill's birth. My intention is try and get people into West Oxfordshire hotels, and also to do an education programme about this great man. I realise that we are battling against the Estate, but I wonder if the Deputy Leader will assist in that effort?

A2a – Thank you Councillor Cooper, the second most famous resident of Woodstock, 150 years after Councillor Cooper himself. I would be happy to contact the Chief Executive of the Blenheim Estate and find out if there is more we can do.

Q3 – Councillor Jane Doughty, to Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects.

The Town Centre office has been closed since May with no indication displayed on the window as to when the office is reopening. Please can you tell me the reopening date? and in the meantime, what provision is being made for residents who do not have access to the internet and need to speak to an officer in customer service face to face?

A3 – Customer Services have relocated to Woodgreen whilst the work is being carried out at Welch Way, and the team are available to speak to customers face to face, do scanning of evidence/documents, collect recycling containers and provide similar services. Customer Services are providing the same services as at Welch Way, so there has not been any impact on the customer other than needing to visit a different location. There is a poster in the window at Welch Way advising customers that Customer Services are currently based at Woodgreen, or alternatively to telephone Customer Services to obtain help over the telephone. A reopening date will be made available to residents and councillors around the time of the Full Council meeting.

Q3a – We have recently had an email at Witney Town Council, telling us that our town offices are going to be open again on 24 July. Is that still going to happen?

I have also looked through the finances, and can you tell me how much exactly the alterations and renovations to our town Council offices are going to cost?

A3a – I can confirm that the offices will reopen on Monday 24 July 2023. The teams have been moving back into the offices ahead of this date. I am not able to confirm those numbers, but will be happy to get back to you on those.

Q4 – Councillor Martin McBride, to Councillor Joy Aitman, Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities.

The District Council owned Kilkenny Country Park is still closed to the public. Many people used to travel to this park and it had a fantastic reputation as a great destination to visit. This has very quickly changed and is disappointing that after several site visits by officers and members, the park is still out of use. Can you give a date for when the repairs will be carried out?

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A4 – Kilkenny Country Park in the Parish of Brize Norton has never been closed. An estimated 100,000 people visit the play park in the Country Park every year. A press release was published on 5 July 2023 updating Members and the Community that the Executive has committed over £80,000 of Section 106 funding for improving the play park with new equipment and the refurbishment of some of the existing apparatus.

Q4a – I would like to thank Councillor Joy Aitman for the written response, and it was quite useful to get that. I think it is important for the residents to see progress is being made.

What are the three most important lessons that the Executive Member has learnt from this situation, so that moving forward into the future, we don't end up with similar situations where significant parts of play parks are out of action for such a long period?

A4a (answered by Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council) – I do understand the tenor of what Councillor McBride is saying. I will come back on that one as it asks the question in a different way. We will come back with a more detailed answer, if helpful to you.

Q5 – Councillor Michele Mead, to Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for the Environment.

Carterton has suffered with many streets not having their bins collected. This has gone on for four consecutive weeks. Why has this problem gone on for so many weeks, and what action are you taking to improve the service?

A5 – The overall performance of the waste collection service remains very high with over 99% of household bins being collected when they are scheduled. The current collection vehicles are in the final stages of their usable life, which is leading to increased numbers of vehicle breakdowns. When this happens collection crews in the surrounding area are sent in to assist, but it's not always possible to make all of the collections on the scheduled day due to vehicle capacity and HGV driving hour restrictions - This leads to them being delayed. There has been increased oversight by the management team who recognise the issues and there were fewer service failures last week. The increased monitoring will continue.

Q5a – As you may have realised by this, this is personal to me as it was my bin that was missed 4 weeks in a row. I live on the straightest, longest road in Carterton. A third of the town was missed 4 weeks in a row. You say that 99% of the household bins are collected when scheduled, so you're rescheduling our bins. Take that word away, what is the percentage of bins being missed? Are you registering them? As soon as our bins are missed, I go online, it states that missed collections are known, so we don't then have the right to register our bins as being missed, because you've already decided that you're not coming. That can happen at 10 o'clock in the morning. You've already decided that you're not coming that day. So how are you registering the statistics for the ones you're rescheduling, because as far as I am concerned, that's my bin being missed?

A5a – The bins are occasionally missed, yes. We are tracing which bins are being missed. We currently have some problems with our waste and recycling service resilience, and if the bins are missed, it may not necessarily be possible for the collection crews to return the next day due to other collection patterns. We are working very hard to resolve these issues as soon as possible. Part of the problem here is that the National Government is delaying provisions in the Environment Bill, where councils would be able to go and plan a waste and recycling collection service properly. Therefore, we have a fleet that is ageing. When there is a

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breakdown, it is difficult to catch up. If you would like any data, I would have to provide this to you in writing.

Q6 – Councillor Hugo Ashton, to Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council.

With regards to the requirement for Voter ID at last May's elections, please could the Leader of the Council provide any data obtained on the following:

- The number and age profile of voters who were turned away from polling booths because they had not brought the appropriate ID with them?;
- The proportion of those turned away who subsequently returned to vote with their ID?;
- The number of polling stations where WODC employed somebody to address residents before they reached the polling area asking whether they had the necessary ID?;
- How many people were turned away by these greeters before being formally registered as being without the required ID?

A6 – 54 electors applied for a ballot paper and were initially refused, 35 of these electors later returned with accepted ID and were issued with a ballot paper. The Returning Officer is not required to record age profiles of voters, either in the polling station or by way of 'greeters'.

The proportion of those initially turned away, who subsequently returned to vote with their ID, was 64.8%.

The Returning Officer employed 26 additional staff members to 'greet' voters. These included all multi stations and those with a greater proportion of electors.

The Returning Officer is not required to record the number of voters turned away by the polling station 'greeter' and therefore no information is available in this regard.

Q6a – Thank you for the full answers on the data. My question relates to the lack of recording of the number of voters turned away before they enter the polling booth areas. It states that the Returning Officer is not required to record that number, however is the Returning Officer permitted to record that number, as if it were possible, there would be a fuller estimation of the impacts of Voter ID?

A6a – As we all know, the Voter ID has actually disenfranchised a number of people who weren't able to actually produce the necessary photo ID, and this has been a serious problem for those who couldn't do it. Whilst the staff did themselves follow the guidance and the processes that were set and laid out by the Electoral Commission, we don't have that discretion, so we are following the guidelines as set.

What it does underpin, however, is the inaccuracies of data when it is produced, because you are only counting those who got to the point of being in the polling station and are about to vote, and there are those people, as you say, who came to the door and were turned away and not recorded.

We also have those people who didn't even go to the polling station at all, as they felt they were disenfranchised, and that quite frankly, from a Council point of view, is not good enough. The principles of democracy are based on the fact that we can all vote, and that we all that equality of opportunity, to make our views known when at the ballot box.

The way forward, I would suggest, and that it may be for a future Council meeting, is that we do make these views known to the Secretary of State, because it is them who actually set this

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up more than the Electoral Commission, who set the guidance following a directive from the Secretary of State.

So that's the answer, Chair, and although it is unsatisfactory, we feel for those who felt that they were unable to go to the ballot box and express their vote.

CL.93 Recommendations from the Executive

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report, which detailed recommendations made by the Executive, since the Council's last meeting on 24 May 2023.

The Leader advised members that the first two recommendations had arisen from the Executive meeting held on 21 June 2023, and that the remainder had arisen from the most recent Executive meeting, held on 12 July 2023. The Leader highlighted that the agenda and papers for Full Council had been published before the meeting of the Executive on 12 July 2023, and that the updated, remaining recommendations, for consideration by Council, were found in a supplementary paper circulated to Members prior to the meeting.

In debate, the carry forward of £2,372,557 from the Capital Budget, was stated as being related to surplus funds from the previous financial year, and that it was not uncommon for a capital budget to have an underspend, because of the perceived difficulty in spending the entire capital budget. The amount carried forward related to the Council's purchase of Marriott's Walk in Witney, and the decarbonisation of Carterton Leisure Centre.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree the Recommendations from the meeting of the Executive, held on 21 June 2023. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was agreed unanimously by Council.

Council Resolved to:

1. Adopt the final version of the West Oxfordshire District Council Developer Contributions Supplementary Planning Document (SPD);
2. Amend the delegation arrangements to give authority to the Chief Finance Officer, in consultation with the Executive Member for Finance and the Executive Member for Economic Development, to approve future lettings at Marriott's Walk.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree the Recommendations from the meeting of the Executive, held on 12 July 2023. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was agreed unanimously by Council.

Council Resolved to:

1. Approve the carry forward of the Capital Budget of £2,372,557;
2. Approve the transfers to and between earmarked reserves as detailed in the report, and to include an additional adjustment from the bad debt provision of £670,207 to be placed in a budget deficit smoothing reserve as explained by the Chief Finance Officer for reasons set out at the meeting;
3. Adopt the final version of the Combe Village Design Statement as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD);
4. Agree to proceed with investment in roof mounted solar PV based on the business cases in the Executive report;
5. Agree that funding for contingency costs of £27,634 is approved, with delegation to the Section 151 Officer for expenditure of contingency subject to the business case still

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being viable or expenditure being unavoidable due to structural condition of the building;

6. Add £125,000 to the Capital Programme for this item to be financed from the Property Improvement and Incentive Reserve.

CL.94 Appointment of Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer)

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report, which considered the appointment of a Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) for West Oxfordshire District Council, following interviews undertaken by the Performance and Appointments Committee. The report further outlined interim arrangements to cover the anticipated period between the departure of the Chief Finance Officer, and arrival of the Director of Finance.

The Leader gave a detailed overview of the processes taken by the Performance and Appointments Committee, and explained to Council how the Committee had reached its decision to recommend the appointment of the subject candidate to the post of Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) to Council. The Leader gave a further overview of the working and personal characteristics associated with the subject candidate, and how they would fit the role of Director of Finance for West Oxfordshire District Council. The Leader also thanked the work of Officers for their support during the recruitment process.

The Chief Executive gave Members a brief overview of the anticipated timeline for the period between the meeting and the subject candidate commencing employment with West Oxfordshire District Council. It was anticipated that the subject candidate would commence employment at the end of October 2023.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree recommendations 3 to 6, as listed within the supplementary Council paper, agreeing to the recommendations made to Council by the Performance and Appointments Committee, at its meeting held on Monday 17 July 2023. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair of the Performance and Appointments Committee, to appoint Madhu Richards to the role of Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer), subject to two references, medical clearance and eligibility check (BPSS check) in accordance with the Council's policies;
2. Agree that the appointment will be made on a salary of up to £85,000 per annum plus pending pay award;
3. Agree that the appointment commences on a date to be mutually agreed between the Chief Executive and the successful candidate;
4. Confirm the appointment of an Interim Director of Finance, James Howse, who will undertake the role of Section 151 Officer, until the appointed, permanent Director of Finance is able to take up post.

CL.95 Establishment of Local Plan Cross Party Member Working Group

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report, giving an overview of the proposals which considered the establishment of a cross-party Member Working Group, to help inform the preparation of the new WODC Local Plan 2041.

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The Leader highlighted the importance of the Working Group, and said that it would ensure that the views of Members are taken fully into account during the formative stage of plan preparation. The Group would discuss the emerging Local Plan as it takes shape, including the consideration of technical supporting evidence as it is produced and the development of plan content and policies. The Group would be chaired by the Executive Member for Planning and Sustainable Development and primarily supported by the Council's Planning Policy Manager. The Leader proposed an increase to the size of the Group from that set out in the paper to 11 Members (4 Lib Dem, 4 Con, 2 Lab, 1 Green).

It was highlighted that the quorum could remain at 3 members even with the increased size of the Group, as the Group would not take decisions, and that the Chair of the Working Group would be taken from the allocation of the Liberal Democrat membership.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree to the establishment of a new Local Plan Cross Party Member Working Group, in accordance, with the Draft Terms of Reference, with the group membership levels amended and increased as set out by the Leader, having obtained prior agreement from Group Leaders. This was seconded by Councillor Michele Mead, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council Resolved to:

- I. Agree the establishment of a new Local Plan Cross Party Member Working Group, in accordance with the Draft Terms of Reference, with the following, amended group membership levels:
 - 4 Conservative;
 - 4 Liberal Democrats;
 - 2 Labour;
 - 1 Green.

CL.96 Climate Bi-Annual Report

Councillor Andrew Prosser, Executive Member for Climate Change, introduced the report, which updated Council on the climate action taken by West Oxfordshire District Council, in response to the climate and ecological emergency, over the previous 12 months (July 2022 to June 2023 inclusive).

The Executive Member paid tribute to the work of Hannah Kenyon, the Council's Climate Change Manager for her work and the work of her team more generally in responding to the climate emergency, declared by the Council in 2019.

In debate, Council paid tribute to the work of the Climate Change team in engaging with local Town and Parish Councils on climate change action and that good feedback had been received from Members. Council also made reference to a High Court legal challenge to the Planning Inspector's decision to water down the net zero ambitions of the Council in its plan for Salt Cross Garden Village, and that the challenge was independent of the Council.

The next Climate Bi-Annual report would be considered by the Climate and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Oxfordshire County Council also conducted carbon literacy training, and it was highlighted that Council would explore to the possibilities of adopting a similar approach in due course.

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Ideas of geo-thermal technology and local cycling & walking infrastructure were also highlighted by members, identifying the benefits these ideas could bring to the Council and the wider local area. Members also praised work invested into improvements in the Deer Park South area of Witney regarding wildflower planting, thanked Officers and the enhancement it had made to the area. Extra resourcing ideas would be explored with Council partners.

The Director of Governance and Monitoring Officer, Andrea McCaskie, stated she had attended training regarding Carbon Literacy, and that ideas around member training on the matter would be explored in due course.

Councillor Andrew Prosser proposed that Council note the contents of the Bi-Annual report on climate action for West Oxfordshire. This was seconded by Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Note the contents of the Bi-Annual report on climate action for West Oxfordshire.

CL.97 Motions on Notice

There were no motions considered by Council at the meeting.

The meeting closed at 2.49 pm

CHAIR