

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Held in Committee Room 1 at 5.30pm on **Wednesday, 4 October 2023**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Rizvana Poole (Vice-Chair), Julian Cooper, Rachel Crouch, Phil Godfrey, Natalie King, Nick Leverton, Andrew Lyon, Sandra Simpson, Harry St John, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray

Officers: Jon Dearing (Assistant Director for Resident Services), Phil Martin (Assistant Director for Business Support), Andrew Brown (Business Manager Democratic Services), Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer), and Michelle Ouzman (Strategic Support Officer).

Other Councillors in attendance: Joy Aitman, the Executive member for Stronger Healthy Communities.

15 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Thomas Ashby, and Liam Walker.

Councillor Natalie King sent apologies to say she may not be at the meeting, however arrived at the meeting 17:40.

Councillor Charlie Maynard was absent and arrived after the meeting had finished.

16 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

17 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 July 2023 were approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

18 Participation of the Public

There were no participation of the public.

19 Asylum Report

Phil Martin, Assistant Director of Business Services introduced the Asylum Report, and gave the Committee a high level overview and summary of the report.

Councillors were interested in discussing the numbers, the support residents of the hotel were receiving from West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC), and support received from local community support groups.

Jon Dearing, Assistant Director for Resident Services, was also present at the meeting, so between Mr Martin and Mr Dearing they were able to answer members queries from their discussion points as follows:

- Asylum seekers that resided within a hotel in West Oxfordshire were placed and supported by the Home Office;
- The hotel owners had a direct contract with the Home Office;

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- The Council would inform the Home Office of the possible change in the hotel ownership so that they were forewarned;
- If the hotel changed ownership, it would be the Home Office's responsibility to ensure that the Asylum Seekers either remained in the Hotel or were relocated;
- The Afghan Resettlement Scheme is government funded, and the Council is utilising this to support six families;
- The Council was awaiting year three funding for hosts for Ukrainian visitors, originally 300, now down to 159 who were embedded into the community successfully;
- Some Ukrainian families had visited Ukraine but had not returned to the district and therefore numbers had fluctuated;
- Syrian numbers remained unchanged, families were settled;
- Ducklington school and the local churches in and around Witney have been very active with assisting the people living in the hotel.
- The Council were working closely with Volunteer Link Up, who were mapping all the local community support groups and what is currently being provided to the people in the hotel as well as identifying opportunities for them to give something back to the community.
- Regular monthly meeting with multi agency partners were taking place;
- Government funds of £147,000.00 had been received to support Asylum seekers. The Council will be facilitating a grant scheme for local community support groups to apply for;
- West Oxfordshire residents, community support groups, churches, local schools and health organisations had all offered goodwill and assistance, it was hoped that the grant scheme would help this to continue;
- Owners of empty private homes were contacted regularly by Council officers to remind them of the options they had and the assistance the Council could offer. However as these were privately owned properties the Council could only offer advice.

Councillor Joy Aitman, the Executive member for Stronger Healthy Communities was pleased to hear that the Council was working with all local agencies and wanted officers to know that they appreciated all the hard work that officers and agencies were doing to assist all the asylum seekers.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

1. Note the report.
2. Request that officers inform the Home Office of the possible change of ownership of the local hotel.

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Service Performance Report 2023/24 - Quarter One

Jon Dearing, Assistant Director for Resident Services, introduced the Performance reports, and called members attention to an error in the number of appeals reported on page 19 of the report.

The Assistant Director highlighted the following points:

- Generally there had been a massive improvement and 96% of minor planning applications were completed on time.

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- On the 5 October the Council would be completing 23 new homes, which would assist housing needs of residents.
- A homelessness report was due to go to the next Executive meeting requesting additional resources, and to make all temporary staff permanent as there continued to be huge challenges within the housing department.

Councillors asked if the staff that were expected to be made permanent would incur additional costs to the Council. The Assistant Director was able to confirm that most temporary staff had been employed by Publica for up to five years, and therefore costs were already equal to permanent staff levels and therefore would not incur additional costs.

Councillor Cooper enquired on one particular case, which the Assistant Director was not able to clarify at the meeting, and took an action away to enquire and get back to Councillor Cooper with the latest update.

Councillor St John enquired about the leaking roof at the old Court House, the Assistant Director confirmed that Council Officers were going to be investigating the original purchase process to see why the roof defects were not picked up.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note and scrutinise the report.

21 Committee Work Programme

The Chair, Councillor Andrew Beaney introduced the Committee Work Programme and reminded members that the new Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be creating a new work programme so that as this was the last Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee all they could do was to suggest any additional items to add to the new committees draft Work Programme.

Councillor Cooper enquired about Cherwell Local Plan, Andrew Brown the Democratic Services Business Manager confirmed that the Officer in charge of the Local Plan was not available to attend this Committee, however there was to be an all councillor briefing on the Local Plan on 26 October where this item could be raised.

Councillor St John enquired about Oxford airport and RAF Brize Norton airport re. airspace new requests. Through the Chair Councillor Leverton was able to advise that the Council would not have influence over the Oxford airspace that would be a Oxford County Council matter, and that Ministry of Defence at Whitehall would be the official airspace applicant, not RAF Brize Norton. All applications would go through the Civil Aviation Authority.

The Chair Councillor Andrew Beaney advised members that to support the new Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme there were to be topical briefings that were to be held virtually and recorded to give all councillors opportunity to attend. The initial briefings would be on Housing and Flood Management Update.

Councillor Wilson enquired if Crime and Disorder would feature on the new committees Work Programme as it stipulated within the constitution. The Democratic Services Business Manager confirmed that Crime and Disorder would be on the new Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme and be an item on the agenda at least once a year.

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The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the report.

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Executive Work Programme

The Chair, Councillor Andrew Beaney introduced the Executive Work Programme.

As there was an Executive meeting scheduled to take place the next week the Chair enquired what would happen if a decision had a call in, how would the new Overview and Scrutiny Committee be managed. Andrew Brown advised that a special Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be called and managed to deal with the call in decision.

Councillor Cooper thanked the Chair for the management of the Committee, this was seconded by Councillor Leverton and supported by all members. The Chair thanked members for their contributions to the committee and wished everyone luck at the new Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the report.

The Meeting closed at 6.12pm

CHAIR