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WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of Council.

Held in the Council Chamber, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB, at 2.00pm on
Wednesday 28 February 2024.

PRESENT

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

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance), Frank Wilson (Managing Director, Publica), Andrew Brown (Business Manager, Democratic Services), Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Christine Elsasser (Democratic Services Officer), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer), Hannah Kenyon (Climate Change Manager), and Georgina Dyer (Chief Accountant).

Other Councillors in attendance: Nil.

CL.136 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from the following Members:

Councillors Hugo Ashton, Phil Godfrey, Rizvana Poole, Andrew Lyon, Ed James, Mark Johnson, Alistair Wray, and Colin Dingwall.

CL.137 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made by Members of the Council.

The Chair drew Members' attention to Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, which provided that if any Members were in Council Tax arrears of two or more months, they must have declared the fact and could therefore not vote on the Budget or Council Tax resolutions.

CL.138 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Alaric Smith asked that the word "perceived" be removed from the minutes of the previous meeting, in the minutes text of "Motion A: Thames Water Sewage 'Task Force'". This was subsequently amended by Democratic Services.

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, proposed that the minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 31 January 2024, be agreed by Council as a true and accurate record, and signed by the Chair.

This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was agreed unanimously by Council.

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Council **Resolved** to:

1. Agree the minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 31 January 2024, as a true and accurate record.

CL.139 Receipt of Announcements

Councillor Andrew Coles, Chair of the Council, welcome all attendees to the meeting, and thanked the public in attendance and those watching the meeting online for joining Council.

The Chair thanked Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, Vice-Chair of the Council, for Chairing the last meeting of Council. The Chair stated they'd watched the Council meeting online whilst on holiday and that it was pleasing to see the new Council Chamber in action.

The Chair asked Members to remember Sergeant Darren Ostler of Royal Air Force Station Brize Norton, who had suddenly passed away. Sergeant Ostler, a C-130 Hercules Aircraft Engineer, was a prominent, well-known, and much-loved Member of the RAF Brize Norton community, in particular with his comrades on No. 47 Squadron. The Chair offered the Council's condolences to Sgt Ostler's family, friends and Royal Air Force colleagues at a very difficult time.

The Chair advised Members of an invitation to a Quiz Night, being held in the Committee Rooms on Friday 17 May 2024, in support of the Chair's chosen charities. The Chair also advised there would be a raffle to support their charities, and that donations would be gratefully received.

The Chair also drew Member's attention to some all-Member briefings that were to take place in the future. There would be an online GLL and Leisure Briefing, on Tuesday 5 March 2024, starting at 5.30pm. There would also be an all-Member briefing regarding the Boundary Commission after the next meeting of Council on Wednesday 13 March 2024, and an online briefing regarding Health and Well-Being would take place on Thursday 14 March 2024 at 6pm, with the Council's Community Wellbeing Manager, Heather McCulloch. The Chair encouraged all Members to attend wherever possible.

The Chair welcomed Christine Elsasser, who had joined the Council's Democratic Services Team. Christine Elsasser had joined the Council until Summer 2024 to provide cover and resilience to the Democratic Services Team in the absence of Michelle Ouzman. Michelle Ouzman had been unwell and had taken time away from the Council. The Chair passed on their best wishes to Michelle Ouzman and wished them a speedy and full recovery, adding they would look forward to welcoming Michelle Ouzman back to the Council soon.

The Chair advised Council that the next meeting would take place on Wednesday 13 March 2024 at 2.00pm in the Council Chamber.

Councillor Charlie Maynard, Executive Member for Planning and Sustainable Development, advised Council that a High Court Judge had ruled that the Planning Inspectorate was incorrect to 'water down' the Council's Net-Zero Plans for the Salt Cross Area Garden Village. The Executive Member relayed a short statement that had been made regarding the Site, adding they were proud of the work that had been undertaken previously by Officers and Local Councillors regarding the site.

CL.140 Participation of the Public

There was no public participation at the meeting.

CL.141 Questions by Members

Questions by Members, as listed on the agenda, and the responses to those questions, which were circulated in advance, were taken as read.

The Chair invited the questioners to ask a supplementary question if they wished and then invited the relevant Executive Members to respond.

The Written Questions, Written Answers, Verbal Supplementary Questions and Verbal Supplementary Answers are detailed in a separate document appended to the Minutes of the Meeting.

CL.142 Recommendations from the Executive

Councillor Andrew Prosser, Executive Member for Climate Change, introduced the report, which sought to agree recommendations made to Council by the Executive, from its meetings since 31 January 2024, other than recommendations relating to the budget which were included at agenda item 9.

The Executive Member thanked the Climate Change Officer Team, and the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, for their work and comments respectively, which both helped to formulate the Nature Recovery Plan to be recommended by the Executive to Council for adoption.

In debate, Members queried resource levels within the Council's Planning Team and if improved staffing levels would help to achieve Biodiversity Net Gain and the ambitions of the Nature Recovery Plan. The Executive Member stated that a specialist Ecologist would be recruited, which would help strengthen commitments and ambitions surrounding Biodiversity Net Gain.

It was also highlighted that the findings of an external judicial review would allow the Council to impose their own standards surrounding Biodiversity Net Gain. The Executive Member further emphasised the importance of Biodiversity Net Gain on the district and wider region.

Councillor Andrew Prosser proposed that Council agree to the recommendations as listed on the report. This was seconded by Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council Resolved to:

1. Adopt the Nature Recovery Plan as part of the Council's compliance with the new biodiversity duty.

CL.143 Report of the Chief Finance Officer on the robustness of the budget estimates, adequacy of the Council's reserves and risk 2024/25

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the report, which provided an update to Council on the robustness of the budget estimates and the adequacy of the Council's reserves. Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 placed a duty on the Chief Financial Officer to bring a report to Council.

In debate, Members referred to the Council's Transformation Group, which was set up to address challenges faced by local Councils during the current economic climate, and how to use Council assets to the fullest extent.

Members also highlighted that the Council's corporate priorities should have been taken into consideration during a public consultation, made available to residents as part of the Budget

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setting process. It was subsequently confirmed that there was a public consultation as a part of the budget setting process.

Councillor Alaric Smith proposed that proposed that Council agree to the recommendation as listed on the report. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham, was put to the vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the report, and have regard to it when making its decisions about the Budget and Council Tax provisions for 2024/25.

CL.144 Budget 2024/25 and Medium Term Financial Strategy

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report, which provided the proposed Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy for the Municipal Year 2024-2025. The Executive had recommended to Council the approval of the Budget proposals by Council at their last meeting.

A copy of the Leader's Speech is appended to the minutes of the meeting.

The Leader's speech raised a point of clarity surrounding references made to 'external funding'. This was confirmed by the Leader to have related to funding received by Council from both partnership working and funding received from Central Government.

Councillor Michele Mead, Leader of the Opposition, responded stating that the opposition could not support the budget proposals as a result of the details and forecasts provided and a predicted budget overspend. Councillor Mead referred to resident's Council Tax being used to purchase a local shopping precinct, to contribute to the Publica transition programme, and on refurbishment & internal modernisation projects that were not necessary. Councillor Mead also highlighted that the administration was not committed to partnership working, and had previously dodged scrutiny by the Council for a recent purchase of a new waste collection vehicle fleet.

Councillor Mead further highlighted that the residents of West Oxfordshire were set to pick up the bill for the spent money by an increase in Council Tax and an increase to the Garden Waste License, and that these increases would squeeze the budget of low-income households within the district.

Councillor Mead summed up stating that the administration had not learnt lessons from last year's budget, and the same lines from twelve months ago were being repeated. Councillor Mead stated that the residents of West Oxfordshire deserved better.

In the wider budget debate, Members of the Executive thanked the Leader for their budget speech and said that they would support the budget. Executive Members individually stated that the Budget would provide great help and assistance to their individual portfolios, and would better support employment, the community, residents and the wider district more generally.

Executive Members stated that the proposed budget and projects completed within their own portfolio areas were brought as a result of the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing Cost of Living crisis.

Executive Members highlighted that the priorities and ambitions of the Council would be met because of the budget proposals, and individually thanked Officers from across the Council for their continued hard work.

Members referred to predicted budget overspends in the current and next financial years. Several Members alluded to the opposition not proposing budget amendments or any alternative budget proposals. Members also highlighted their surprise to not see any alternatives offered, adding that there was only one option to vote upon.

Members also made references to the responses received from the Council's budget consultation, stating that there were anomalies in the 'scoring' within responses submitted by residents, and that the anomalies helped to unbalance the budget overall.

Members stated that the opposition were looking to score political points by making references to 'Pet Projects' undertaken by the administration, and that the tactic was also being used at a County Council level. Members also highlighted that political point scoring was a tactic to make headlines in the local media and in the local press, adding that it was not a true reflection on the measures proposed.

Members stated they believed that the term 'Pet Projects' was not appropriate, as the projects were undertaken by the administration with the residents of West Oxfordshire in mind.

Members also queried if Councillors from opposition parties were prepared to vote for the budget proposals, go against a 'status quo' and vote with the alliance to accept the budget proposals. Members also stated that no decisions of the Executive had been called in and made further references to a lack of alternative budget proposals or amendments.

Members made reference to the impacts of austerity measures and spending cuts made from central government and how this had impacted the pressures faced by local governments across the country, adding that the proposed budget would provide the best return for residents that it could, despite a central lack of funding. Members also highlighted that other local authorities were suffering as a result of inadequate funding, with some authorities declaring, or being close to declaring effective bankruptcy.

Members also stated that the proposed budget would allow the Council to make further progress on existing projects whilst continually promoting the needs of residents and promoting the environmental benefits.

Members of the opposition parties stated that the proposed budget was one of convenience for the administration and Council, and did not put the resident's priorities first. Members highlighted that proposed rises in Council Tax levels and increases to the Garden Waste License Fee would impact residents when they were already struggling, whilst the administration prioritised needless projects, made unnecessary spending commitments, and residents would pay more Council Tax as a result to cover the associated costs.

Members also referred to the budget surplus of £5,107 and that the figure was being celebrated by members of the alliance parties, when it was suggested that the figure would be a reason for concern.

Many Members individually thanked the work of the Council's finance team for their work in the preparation of the budget proposals, making reference to the amounts of time and resource this would have taken.

During the wider budget debate, Councillor Liam Walker left the Council Chamber for three minutes before returning. Upon being called to speak, the Director of Governance advised that Chair that under Rule 23.2 of Part 5A of the Council's Constitution, Councillor Liam

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Walker would not be permitted to take part in the vote on the budget proposals put forward by the Executive.

After receiving advice from the Director of Governance, the Chair stated that he would allow Councillor Liam Walker to make representations during the debate, but that under Rule 23.2, Councillor Liam Walker would be recorded as Absent during the budget vote. The Chair apologised to Councillor Liam Walker and Council generally for not advising of the procedure rule ahead of the Budget agenda item.

It was subsequently confirmed that Rule 23.2 would be discussed by the Council's Constitution Working Group at their next meeting.

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance and seconder of the recommendations, thanked Members for their contributions in the Budget debate and for their engagement during the wider process. The Executive Member also echoed the appreciation given to the Council's Finance team for their resolve in the budget preparation and their engagement in the wider process.

The Executive Member stated that commercial property management was not generally understood by those who did not have the relevant experience. The Executive member stated that the Budget had been built upon the foundations of the Council's priorities, and the predictions of the upcoming financial year.

The Executive Member highlighted that the backdrop to the budget was one of ongoing uncertainty surrounding local government finance, inflationary pressures and an ever-increasing stretching of resources.

The Executive Member highlighted that the increase in Council Tax was the only way to ensure that services to residents were maintained to the highest level they could be. The Executive Member stated that the proposed increase in Council Tax had arisen due to economic pressures that had filtered down through central government, and that no lectures would be taken from a party that had been responsible for this at national level. The Executive Member assured Council that the alliance would do all they can to ensure that residents were put first despite the challenges faced in the round.

The Executive Member stated that the Alliance of Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Greens, were fully aligned and committed to delivering for residents of West Oxfordshire. The Executive Member highlighted the administration's Asset Management Strategy programme, and described how this would be of vital importance in the future so that the Council's assets could be fully maintained whilst offering the greatest return in the interest of residents. The Executive member made reference to the commercial leasing of the Council's Elmfield site, the refurbishment of the Woodgreen Council Chamber to enable the facility to be used as a community space, and improvements made to the Town Centre Shop on Welch way in Witney.

The Executive Member referred to the ongoing review into the Publica model, emphasising that the administration were committed to ensuring that the Council delivers for the residents of the district, whilst providing sound management of the finances and resources they currently had.

In formally summing up the Budget Debate the Leader of the Council, thanked Members for their contributions in the Budget debate, thanked officers for their ongoing work, and also thanked Member colleagues within the West Oxfordshire Alliance for their engagement during

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the wider process. The Leader concluded by stating they commended the budget to the residents of West Oxfordshire.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree the Budget resolutions, as recommended by the Executive. This was seconded by Councillor Alaric Smith.

In accordance with legislation, a recorded vote on the proposition was taken and administered by Democratic Services, and the result was as follows:

FOR the proposition: J Aitman, A Al-Yousuf, L Arciszewska, M Brooker, A Coles, J Cooper, R Crouch, D Enright, A Goodwin, A Graham, D Jackson, N King, L Leffman, D Levy, C Maynard, D Melvin, M Parkinson, R Pearson, E Poskitt, A Prosser, C Rylett, G Saul, S Simpson, A Smith, R Smith, H St. John, T Sumner and M Walker.

AGAINST the proposition: T Ashby, A Beaney, D Cooper, J Doughty, J Haine, N Leverton, M McBride, M Mead, L Nicholls, D Temple, A Walsh, and A Wilson.

Abstentions: Nil.

There being 28 votes For, 12 Against, and 0 Abstentions, with 9 Members not in attendance. The vote was carried.

Council **Resolved** to approve:

1. The General Fund revenue budgets as summarised at Annex B of the report;
2. The updated Medium Term Financial Strategy at Annex C of the report;
3. The Capital Programme for 2024/25 to 2032/33 as set out at Annex E of the report;
4. Fees and charges for 2024/25, as detailed at Annex J and K of the report;
5. The Council's Pay Policy Statement as set out at Annex M of the report;
6. The Council's Capital Strategy as set out at Annex N of the report;
7. The Council's Investment Strategy as set out at Annex O of the report;
8. The Council's Treasury Strategy as set out at Annex P of the report.

The Chair announced a 5-minute comfort break at the end of the Agenda Item, to allow Members to ensure they did not fall foul of Procedure Rule 23.2.

The meeting was adjourned at 3.56pm and reconvened at 4.01pm.

Councillor Natalie King left the meeting at 3.56pm.

CL.145 Council Tax 2024/2025

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the report, which enabled the Council to calculate and set Council Tax levels for the municipal year 2024-2025.

The Council was lawfully required to make resolutions in respect of the tax base (Schedules 1 and 2) and aggregate levels of Council Tax. The aggregate levels of Council Tax comprise the 'basic amount' – Parish and District levy (Schedules 1 and 2), amounts for each Council Tax band (Schedule 3) and precepts for Oxfordshire County Council and the Police & Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley (Schedule 4).

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Councillor Alaric Smith proposed that Council agree to the resolution as set out in the report annex. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham.

In accordance with legislation, a recorded vote on the proposition was taken and administered by Democratic Services, and the result was as follows:

FOR the proposition: J Aitman, A Al-Yousuf, L Arciszewska, A Beaney, M Brooker, A Coles, J Cooper, R Crouch, D Enright, A Goodwin, A Graham, D Jackson, L Leffman, D Levy, C Maynard, D Melvin, M Parkinson, R Pearson, E Poskitt, A Prosser, C Rylett, G Saul, S Simpson, A Smith, R Smith, H St. John, T Sumner and M Walker.

AGAINST the proposition: T Ashby, D Cooper, J Doughty, J Haine, N Leverton, M McBride, M Mead, L Nicholls, D Temple, L Walker, A Walsh, and A Wilson.

Abstentions: Nil.

There were 28 votes For, 12 Against, and 0 Abstentions, with 9 Members not in attendance. The vote was carried.

Council Resolved to:

1. Note that, for the purpose of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 Section 35(2), there are no special expenses for the District Council in 2024/25;
2. Note that at its meeting held on 17th January 2024, the Executive acknowledged the calculation of the Council Tax Base for 2024/25:
 - a) For the whole Council area as £47,841.03 [item T in the formula in Section 31B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as amended (the “Act”)]; and
 - b) For dwellings in those parts of its area to which a Parish Precept relates as in the attached Schedule 1.
3. Agree that the Council Tax requirement for the Council’s own purposes for 2024/25 (excluding Parish Precepts and Special Expenses) is £124.38;
4. Agree that the following amounts be calculated for the year 2024/25 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Act:
 - a) £53,370,154 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) of the Act, taking into account all precepts issued to it by Parish Councils and any additional special expenses.
 - b) £42,341,615 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A (3) of the Act.
 - c) £11,028,539 being the amount by which the aggregate at 4(a) above exceeds the aggregate at 4(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its Council Tax requirement for the year (Item R in the formula in Section 31B of the Act).
 - d) £230.52 being the amount at 4(c) above (Item R), all divided by Item T (2(a) above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year (including Parish Precepts and Special Expenses);
 - e) £5,078,072 being the aggregate amount of all special items (Parish Precepts and Special Expenses) referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act as per the attached Schedule 2.

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- f) £124.38 being the amount at 4(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at 4(e) above by Item T(2(a) above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no Parish Precept or special item relates;
 - g) The amounts shown in Schedule 2 being the amounts given by adding to the amount at 4(f) above, the amounts of the special item or items relating to dwellings in those parts of the Council’s area shown in Schedule 2 divided in each case by the amount at 2(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 34(3) of the Act, as the basic amounts of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which one or more special items relate;
 - h) The amounts shown in Schedule 3 being the amounts given by multiplying the amounts at 4(f) and 4(g) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation band divided by the number which in that proportion is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation Band D, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 36(1) of the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwellings listed in different valuation bands;
5. Note that for the year 2024/25 the Oxfordshire County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley have issued precepts to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each category of dwellings in the Council’s area as indicated below:

Valuation band	Oxfordshire County Council £	Police and Crime* Commissioner for Thames Valley £
A	£1,213.71	£179.52
B	£1,415.99	£209.44
C	£1,618.28	£239.46
D	£1,820.56	£269.28
E	£2,225.13	£329.12
F	£2,629.70	£388.96
G	£3,034.27	£448.80
H	£3,641.12	£538.56

- 6. Agree that the Council, in accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the amounts shown in Schedule 4 as the amounts of Council Tax for the year 2024/25 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings;
- 7. Agree that the Council’s basic amount of Council Tax for 2024/25 is not excessive in accordance with principles approved under Section 52ZB Local Government Finance Act 1992;
- 8. Agree that the following Council/Publica Officers: Director of Finance, Assistant Director – Resident Services, Legal Services Manager, Legal Executive, Business Manager – Operational Support, Revenues Manager, Revenues Lead and Court Officer be authorised to:

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- a) Collect and recover any National Non-Domestic Rates and Council Tax; and
- b) Prosecute or defend on the Council's behalf or to appear on its behalf in proceedings before a magistrate's court in respect of unpaid National Non-Domestic Rates and Council Tax.

CL.146 Motions on Notice

There were no Motions on Notice considered by Council at the meeting.

The Meeting Closed at 4.06pm.

CHAIR

Questions by Members – Council – 28 February 2024

<u>Written Question</u>	<u>Written Answer</u>	<u>Verbal Supplementary Question</u>	<u>Verbal Supplementary Answer</u>
Q1. Councillor Michele Mead to Councillor Joy Aitman, Executive Member Stronger, Healthy Communities:			
<p>Can you tell us how many local organisations have been successful in reaching their fundraising goals through WestHive and how much has WODC given so far (not including current pledges)?</p>	<p>WestHive has only recently launched its first round.</p> <p>One of the five projects that are currently live on the WestHive platform has reached its target - 'Cycles of Good'.</p> <p>All other projects are still campaigning one of which is currently at 95% of its target - 'Cotswolds Arts Through Schools'.</p> <p>Beyond current pledges there is no further funding given as this is the first round.</p> <p>All information about projects and Council pledges is fully transparent and available on the WestHive website.</p> <p>At the bottom of the homepage, information about the impact to date is available (number of backers, projects and total amount of pledges to date).</p>	<p>Thank you very much for the response, Councillor Aitman. A little disappointing that in the last year we haven't given any of the good projects any money, only pledged.</p> <p>Can you tell me if the money that we were hoping to pledge this year will be carried over to next year, or are we starting from the beginning again?</p>	<p>I don't know what you mean by starting at the beginning again. I don't think we should worry too much about who we've reached so far, and with a lot of these projects it is a slow burn to start with.</p> <p>Nobody wants to be the first up on the platform.</p> <p>As you can see if you follow the platform, that one Group "Cycles for Good" have reached their target and "Cotswolds Arts Through Schools" is just about there. An additional workshop was held today for the new round of funding, and 25 applicants attended that, and they all had really interesting projects.</p> <p>The funding is being given in cycles as we move through them, and where people are apply for funding.</p>

Q2. Councillor Thomas Ashby to Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance:

Can the Executive Member provide a breakdown of costings for the refurbishment of Committee Rooms 1 and 2?

The costs associated with the refurbishment of Committee Rooms 1 & 2 are -

Replace ceilings and upgrade lighting to LED - £10,484 (£7,084 for ceiling, and £3,400 for LED).

Decorating (walls, woodwork) - £4,174

Carpet
£4,200

Blinds
£1,868

Total - **£20,726**

The upgrade of the lighting to LEDs, is aligned with the Council's drive to reduce its overall carbon footprint. Due to the age of the existing ceiling, replacement tiles are no longer available to fit the existing grid so as part of the lighting upgrade a new ceiling will have to be installed.

Thank you for your answer. Now that we have spent £500,000 on this Chamber, and £21,000 downstairs, will there be any other refurbishments in the next 12 months?

In terms of the Agile Working Project, I think we are more or less coming to the end of that. There are other projects that we will look at potentially as we go through the asset strategy.

We will be looking at later in the year, because basically what we are trying to do is review all of our assets to see what needs to be done with each of them, and we will put forward proposals in due course where they make sense.

Q3. Councillor Thomas Ashby to Councillor Tim Sumner, Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects:			
<p>There is a significant sum of S106 money which is designated for an Adventure Play Area in West Witney. Can the Executive Member provide me with an update on the progress on this please?</p>	<p>Monthly project meetings are already taking place between Officers from WODC and Witney Town Council (WTC) to discuss play and leisure facilities in Witney to ensure a joined-up approach. Discussions are taking place about WTC project managing the implementation of the Adventure Play Area in West Witney.</p>	<p>Thank you to Councillor Sumner for your initial response. Is there a date in which these reports will come to Council, and can we have a meeting in the next few weeks to discuss this project?</p>	<p>As it says, it is anticipated that reports will come forward to councillors as the project progresses, so there isn't at this stage a definite date.</p> <p>I will check with Officers that we can have a follow up meeting.</p>
	<p>WODC Officers are currently in the process of obtaining a quote from SSE in order to look at having the overhead electric cabling put underground to allow for safe development of play structures at the site. Once these are received, the next stage will be to discuss and develop project timelines with WTC. It is anticipated that reports will come forward to councillors as the project progresses.</p>		

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INTRODUCTION

Today I am pleased to present the second budget of this West Oxfordshire Alliance made up of a partnership of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green Councillors that form this administration since May 2022. We present is a balanced budget with a surplus of £5,107 that shows our commitment to maintaining the financial stability of this Council.

We have been clear over recent years that this council belongs to the people of West Oxfordshire and our investment in our staff, and therefore our services are of paramount importance in setting a budget because this is not just a budget that adds up the numbers on a spreadsheet.

It is a budget that delivers what local people have told us they want to see us deliver while also carefully managing our finances during what is a challenging time for all local government.

ACHIEVEMENTS OVER THE YEAR

The background to this budget is the ambitious Council Plan, which this council approved.

It is a plan based on what our residents told us they wanted this council to focus its efforts on. We have five priorities of equal importance:

1. Putting Residents First
2. Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All
3. Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife
4. Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency
5. Working Together for West Oxfordshire

Over the past year we have made real progress across the board.

When it comes to our commitment to putting residents first, we have.

- Installed new technology so that residents can now watch our meetings from wherever they may be.

- We have continued in our commitment to better, more meaningful consultation whether it be for our new local plan or seeking feedback from the young people in the district who are seldom heard.
- We have continued our Executive on Tour – taking our decision making out to local communities so people get more of a chance to engage with us.
- We have opened our new council chamber facility – taking the opportunities of external funding and much needed maintenance and in doing so have created a community space that will be used by our residents and community groups across the district far more than in the past.

In our efforts to enable a good quality of life for all we have:

- Invested in and regenerated Marriotts Walk which has seen new shops opening and the hugely successful Christmas Market that saw nearly 15,000 shoppers visiting the centre. We are also working on supporting other markets across the district.

-

Creating a better environment for people and wildlife is crucial along with tackling the climate and ecological emergency. In this area we have:

- Seen great progress in our work with Thames Water to stop the polluting of our waterways. We held another successful, sold-out Waterways Day to discuss action on protecting our waterways. We have also made changes to our planning process to make sure any new homes have the sewage treatment infrastructure they need.
- Officers continued to work tirelessly to reduce our carbon footprint as a Council and across the district. This includes work to install low-carbon heating in our buildings, creating more natural habitats and expanding our electric vehicle fleet.

At the heart of a lot of our work is working together. For this priority we have:

- Launched WestHive, our Crowdfunding website to help local communities access the funding they need. This programme is designed to help residents

and groups to collaborate and deliver locally led projects that are genuinely supported by local community networks, businesses and the Council. We have already seen our first project funded through the site and we expect many more will follow.

- Worked closely with our residents, campaign group and
- town and parish councils to help them respond to the proposed Botley West Solar Farm project.
- Continued work on our local plan with over 2000 responses to our latest consultation. The Local Plan will be crucial for the whole district, and we are committed to delivering it in partnership with our communities.

On top of the progress, we have made against our priorities we have also continued to deliver council services. In the past year we have:

- responded to over 775 fly tips.
- answered 74,361 queries through our customer services team.
- emptied over 6.83M million bins.
- Processed over 2600 planning applications.
- supported over 170 households to avoid them becoming homeless.
- investigated 390 abandoned vehicles.
- processed over 750 benefits and financial support claims for people in need of support.
- In 2023, our work with housing providers has helped us deliver a range of affordable homes, including 164 rental and 99 shared ownership properties.
- We also built 4 First Homes, a new form of affordable home ownership, bringing us a step closer to meeting our community's housing needs.

Most importantly, we have been supporting people and communities during the cost-of-living crisis.

Many people from all walks of life struggle from time to time and during the cost-of-living crisis many people have found themselves in difficult positions they were not expecting.

We have continued to support communities through the cost-of-living crisis by providing funding to our amazing community groups that provide support to local people such as foodbanks and community larders.

There is support available from us at the District Council along with many our national and local organisations. We have pulled together a wide range of resources our residents can go to for support whether that be help with energy payments, benefits, or childcare costs through to making your home more efficient.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Now while we have made good progress, there is still much more for us to do and that is where this year's budget comes in.

Before I get to specifics for this year it is important, we recognise the national context in which we set this budget.

This year has seen local government funding enter the national spotlight. Multiple councils have issued section 114 notices and many more are warning of significant financial challenges.

As you will all be aware local government funding has reduced over a number of years. We have lost 60% of our funding in real terms as government grants have disappeared and inflation has increased costs.

We also need to consider and prepare for the fundamental changes to Local Government Finance by central government which are expected in 2026/27. If these go through as we have been told, we could lose up to 38% of our current funding.

Single year settlements add to the financial strain on the Council, restricting our ability to confidently plan for more than one year in advance.

And on top of the funding challenges there is the prospect of a general election and inflation remains high, adding a lot to the costs of running the organisation.

For this budget we have made reasonable assumptions with regards to this pressure and uncertainty and these assumptions underpin the 2024/25 budget and also our Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

THIS YEARS BUDGET

Now with that context in mind I would like to propose the budget for the next financial year.

This is a balanced budget, continuing to deliver local services but also gives us opportunities to invest in improvements across the district. It also sets us up for the future funding challenges, creating a sound platform for us to move forward.

Given the reduction in government funding, we work diligently to attract external funding whenever possible. Over the past year

- The Climate team, in collaboration with other Oxfordshire authorities, secured £298k of Innovate UK funding to enable nature-based carbon offsetting in Oxfordshire.
- The Climate Team submitted an application for £1.6m Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS) 3c funding for the decarbonisation of Windrush Leisure Centre.
- The Leisure team secured £355k of Swimming Pool Support Funding from Sport England. to assist with the running costs of swimming pools in the district.

It will be crucial to continue this work over coming year to make the most of external funding opportunities to offset some of the core funding we are losing. We don't know when or where these opportunities will come up, but we will be sure to attract as much external funding as we can.

As I said before this budget also looks to build on the progress, we have made against the priorities set out in the Council plan. I would like to highlight some key areas of investment that we believe will deliver for local residents:

- A Strategic Housing Development & Enabling Manager who will help us to shape a more proactive approach to increase the supply of affordable housing within the district.
- A Youth Development Officer to help us better support young people and build on the results and findings of the recent Youth Needs Assessment where over 3000 young people engaged.
- A Nature Recovery Officer to help deliver the Council's Nature Recovery Plan.
- A Climate Change Officer post made permanent to continue to deliver against the ambitious target of carbon neutrality by 2030.
- A capital allocation for a phased waste fleet replacement programme. This will ensure that we continue to deliver the most efficient service. A phased approach will also allow us to take advantage of new technologies as they mature and become more reliable and spread the cost over a number of years – thus reducing the amount of external borrowing needed.

And finally, John Donne famously said, “no man is an island” and we cannot make progress, on addressing the challenges facing West Oxfordshire, as a Council standing alone.

Partnership is the key, meaningful partnership with our town and parish councils, and beyond, to ensure we are working together in the most effective way.

Working together we can create more opportunities to invest and attract inward investment so that our residents have secure jobs, housing and a healthy and green environment to sustain a quality of life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have taken a prudent approach to the budget setting which is appropriate as we enter turbulent waters in terms of local government finances with funding reforms, continued single year settlements and a general election on the horizon.

This administration will continue to deliver against our priorities and keep a steady hand on the tiller of our finances.

This balanced budget for 2024/25 is a sign of our commitment to our residents, local businesses and other organisations that we will continue to take action on the issues that matter most to them.

West Oxfordshire is a fantastic district with amazing people, and we will continue to work hard as an administration to support residents, business and communities over the next year.

I commend this Budget for approval.

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