

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the

Executive

Held in the Eynsham Village Hall, 46 Back Lane, Eynsham, OX29 4QW at 2.00 pm on
Wednesday, 11 December 2024

PRESENT

Councillors: Andy Graham, Duncan Enright, Hugo Ashton, Rachel Crouch, Andrew Prosser, Geoff Saul, Alaric Smith and Tim Sumner

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive Officer), Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance), Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica), Bill Oddy (Assistant Director for Commercial Development), Phil Martin (Director of Place), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer), Maria Harper, Alison Borrett (Senior Performance Analyst), Chris Hargraves (Head of Planning), Hannah Kenyon (Climate Change Manager), Gemma Moreing (Business Information and Performance Lead), Andrew Thomson (Lead Planning Policy & Implementation) and Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer)
Other Councillors in attendance: Julian Cooper, Dan Levy and Carl Rylett

259 Apologies for Absence

Apologies had been received from Councillor Lidia Arciezweska.

260 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

261 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were considered, and no amendments were made to these.

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council, proposed that the minutes of the previous meeting held on Wednesday 20 November 2024, be agreed by the Executive as a true and accurate record.

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

The Executive resolved to:

1. Agree the minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 20 November 2024, as a true and accurate record.

262 Receipt of Announcements

The Leader, Councillor Andy Graham welcomed members of the public in attendance at the meeting, and asked Executive Members in attendance to introduce themselves and their portfolio areas. The Leader stated that a net zero workshop was taking place after the meeting and that it was open to all. The Leader had no further announcements.

The Deputy Leader, Councillor Duncan Enright outlined the work that the Council had been carrying out to re-vitalise District's town centres. The Deputy Leader explained that the number of visitors to the Witney Town Markets had increased by 6%, despite the impact of storm Darragh. This was good news and the Council would continue to carry out work to help encourage footfall into the District's Towns.

The Executive Member for Finance, Councillor Alaric Smith stated that the Council was carrying out its budget consultation, which was open until 15 December.

The Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects, Councillor Tim Sumner gave an overview of the work the Council was undertaking to promote its leisure centres and encouraging healthy, active lifestyles.

The Executive Member for Planning, Councillor Hugo Ashton had written to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government asking to clarify the written ministerial statement on planning, allowing Councils to adopt net zero targets.

The Executive Member for Climate Action and Nature Recovery, Councillor Andrew Prosser announced the launch of the CAPzero project.

The Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities, Councillor Rachel Crouch explained that the council was working towards recognition as a Council of Sanctuary.

263 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

264 Reports from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

There were four recommendations on Item 6, Ubico Business Plan 2025-26 made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday, 4 December 2024. The Leader explained that the recommendations were to be deferred to the new year, when the finalised Ubico Business Plan was on the agenda for consideration.

265 Matters raised by Audit and Governance Committee

No matters had been raised by the Audit and Governance Committee.

266 Local Plan Annual Monitoring Report 2023-24

The Executive Member for Planning introduced the report that considered the Council's Local Plan Annual Monitoring Report for the period 2023-2024. The Executive Member explained that the AMR highlighted the process the Council was undertaking in consulting on its local plan.

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Under current planning legislation, the Council was required to produce an Annual Monitoring Report (AMR). The main purpose of the AMR was to monitor the implementation of adopted Local Plan policies but it must also include information on the following:

- Progress of the Local Plan and any other related documents against agreed timetables;
- Neighbourhood Planning;
- The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), which the Council had consulted on and was planning on introducing in the next year.
- And how the Council has fulfilled its obligations under the Duty to Co-Operate.

The new draft AMR for 2023 – 2024 was attached at Annex A and the key points of interest were summarised in Section two of the report and included: Local Plan Progress, Salt Garden Village Area Acton Plan, Supplementary Planning Documents, Neighbouring Planning, Community Infrastructure Levy, Duty to Co-Operate, Implementation of Local Plan Policies, Overall Strategy, Providing New Homes, Sustainable Economic Growth, Transport and Movement and Environmental and Heritage Assets.

The report was discussed by other Members in attendance at the meeting, who raised the following questions and points of clarification;

- If an overview could be provided of the proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The Executive Member for Planning explained that they were expecting to receive the finalised version following a government consultation on the topic.
- Page 51 of the report stated that 120 houses were to be built in Woodstock, it was asked what the access through the town from this development would be. The Head of Planning and Lead Planning and Implementation Officer stated that they would provide a written response on this.
- Paragraph 2.14, on page 4 of the report would be amended to include the next steps for the Salt Cross development.

Councillor Hugo Ashton proposed that the Executive agree the recommendations as listed on the report. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by the Executive.

The Executive resolved to:

1. Note the content of the report.

267 Service Performance Report 2024-25 Quarter Two

The Leader of the Council introduced the report that provided details of the Council's operational performance at the end of 2024-25 Quarter Two (Q2).

Progress on actions in the Corporate Plan for Q2 were contained in the report.

The Council Priority highlight report was attached at Annex A with an overview of progress against all actions in the Corporate Plan is attached at Annex B.

Overall, the Council's performance for the quarter had been largely positive, with notable progress in Percentage of FOI requests answered within 20 days and the percentage of Planning Appeals successfully defended. Planning Determination Times, Gym Memberships, and Land Charges Response Times remained high. Additionally, Customer Satisfaction continued to be strong, with the Council topping the Gov Metric league table in July and August.

A full report was attached at Annex C. As previously agreed, where possible, broader benchmarking had been included in the full performance report to gain a more robust and insightful evaluation of performance. Where benchmarking data was not currently available or outdated, this is noted, and further investigations will be undertaken to look at options.

The Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects, explained that the Council was ahead of target on its leisure centre footfall.

The work of the homelessness prevention team was also explained.

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

The Executive resolved to:

1. Note the 2024/25 Q2 service performance report.

268 Draft Budget 2025 – 2026, Version One

The Executive Member for Finance introduced the report that provided an update on the developing budget for 2025/26

This was the first draft of the budget and it for the purposes of the report had assumed that there would be no fundamental changes in government funding in 2025/26, following the recent Budget announcement by the new Government. The official settlement announcement, however; was expected in late December 2024. The focussed work had been done on the revenue part of the budget i.e. the cost of providing services, with the funding element left largely as it was for now.

In-year reporting, at Quarter 2 was forecasting an overspend this financial year of £85,686 compared to the approved budget which anticipated a contribution of £5,107 to General Fund

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Reserves. The key factors driving this revenue position were income shortfalls in garden waste and development management, the delayed Elmfield office letting, the empty Carterton Industrial Estate units and increased expenditure on waste and recycling container replacement.

The draft budget for next year being a small surplus after growth assumptions at this initial stage, was encouraging, but the picture from 2026/27 onwards was less optimistic with an unsustainable reliance on the use of reserves to fund front line services. While the reserves position for the Council was currently relatively healthy, there remained a financial gap from the estimated impact of changes to Local Government Financing (i.e. the long delayed reform of the Retained Business Rates system) and the end of the current leisure contract in 2027 which unless resolved would exhaust reserves over the life of this MTFs.

Local Government Finance reform, also known as the Fairer Funding Review, was supposed to ensure a fairer formula for the allocation of funding to Local Authorities. Originally due to be implemented from April 2020, reform of the Business Rates system, which was estimated to reduce the Council's Retained Business Rates by 45% or circa £2m, had been pushed back until at least April 2026. The New Homes Bonus was also due to end in 2025/26 after originally being scheduled to end in 2022/23.

Phase 2 of the Publica transition had added a significant element of uncertainty around the financial impact of returning the next tranche of services back to the Council in terms of both one off and ongoing costs. One off costs would be funded from earmarked reserves in 2025/26 and ongoing costs would be included in the 2026/27 base budget.

The use of reserves to manage short term fluctuations in the Council's financial position was necessary but could not be sustained over the longer term as reserves could only be spent once.

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

CLlr Graham stated that they are willing to invest in people, in better positions than most, other councils in different position.

The Executive resolved to:

1. Note the update on the developing budget for 2025/26

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The Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects introduced the report, which provided a mid-point update on the progress of the recommendations

arising from the 'Review of Car parks' report approved by Executive in

October 2023. A corrected version of Annex A of the report was contained in the Supplementary report published on Monday, 9 December.

The Business Manager for Service Support explained the contents of the report on the Leader's invitation. West Oxfordshire District Council parking strategy was approved in 2016 and covered the period up to and including 2031. A review of car parks was carried out in 2023 to ensure that the current strategy still met the needs of the district considering changes to parking behaviour, post COVID. A report was presented to the Executive on 11 October 2023 summarising the findings of the initial 'review of car parks'. The report summarised the midterm progress on the recommendations agreed in the report of 11 October 2023. The recommendations of the report dated 11 October 2023 were agreed and listed in the report.

The Leader explained that the Council had introduced new signage in its car parks. In discussing the report, other Members in attendance asked whether there was any data on the back lane car park. The Business Manager for Service Support explained that this would be contained in a future executive report, and welcomed any feedback from Members.

Annex B provided a summary of the condition surveys on West Oxfordshire District Council car parks carried out to safeguard Council assets and the report also summarised the actions taken to date following ongoing engagement with customers and Town and Parish Councils.

Councillor Tim Sumner proposed that the Executive agree the recommendations as listed on the report. This was seconded by Alaric Smith was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by the Executive.

The Executive resolved to:

1. Note the content of the report.

The Meeting closed at 2.50 pm

CHAIR