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## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

### Minutes of the meeting of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB  
at 5.30 pm on **Wednesday, 5 March 2025**

#### PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Joy Aitman (Vice-Chair), Thomas Ashby, Mike Baggaley, Julian Cooper, Steve Cosier, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, Elizabeth Poskitt, Carl Rylett, Sandra Simpson, Ruth Smith, Alistair Wray, Liam Walker and Alex Wilson

Officers: Andrew Brown (Head of Democratic and Electoral Services), Georgina Dyer (Chief Accountant), Giles Hughes (Chief Executive Officer), Phil Martin (Director of Place), Bill Oddy (Assistant Director for Commercial Development), Heather McCulloch (Community Wellbeing Manager), Gemma Moreing (Business Information and Performance Lead), Andrew Pollard (Interim Programme Director), Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Janine Sparrowhawk (Community Funding Officer) and Mathew Taylor (Democratic Services Officer)

Other Councillors in attendance: Andy Graham, Hugo Ashton, Rachel Crouch and Alaric Smith

#### **103 Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments**

Apologies were received from Councillors Genny Early and Mark Walker.

There were no substitutions.

Councillor Sandra Simpson arrived at 17:33, partway through the Chair's announcements.

Councillor Natalie King arrived at 17:49, partway through the financial performance report.

#### **104 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **105 Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 February were considered.

The agenda stated that the previous meeting took place 12 February, this was stated correctly in the minutes. This correction was noted.

Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt proposed accepting the minutes. Councillor Stuart McCarroll seconded this, and the minutes of the meeting were approved unanimously.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 5 February be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

**106 Chair's announcements**

The Chair explained that an additional meeting of the Executive had been scheduled in order for the Executive to make a decision on the Local Plan. An additional meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be held on 13 May to scrutinise the local plan.

There was discussion between Members as to why the meeting could not be held a week prior. The Head of Democratic and Electoral Services explained that due to the pre-election period ahead of the County Council Elections as well as bank holidays, 13 May was the earliest date the meeting could be held while allowing the papers to be circulated five clear working days before the meeting. The Head of Democratic and Electoral services explained that he would circulate a written response to Councillor Leverton explaining which elections were taken into account for pre-election periods.

It was also suggested that the start time be reviewed as the 5:30pm start time conflicted with Town and Parish Council meetings.

RESOLVED: To hold an additional meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 13 May, delegating authority to the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services, in consultation with the Chair, to finalise the start time.

**107 Participation of the Public**

There was no participation of the public.

**108 Report back on recommendations**

The Head of Democratic and Electoral Services introduced the item and explained that the recommendations made at the previous meeting, as distributed in the agenda had been considered but not agreed by the Executive.

**109 Publica Phase Two Transition Plan**

The Leader of the Council introduced the item, explaining that phase one staff had been transferred over to the Council, and this had been successful. While Local Government Reorganisation proposals had affected the scope of phase two transition proposals, it was considered appropriate to still transfer over some Publica roles to the Council. The purpose of the report was to consider the Publica Transition Plan for the phase 2 transfer.

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The Chief Executive explained the details of the phase two transition plan. The Chief Executive explained that most of the roles concerned were fragmented roles, and that this meant that members of staff carried out work for two or more of the Publica Councils. The Chief Executive

Explained that staff in fragmented roles would be ring-fenced and able to apply for new council-side roles while the remaining staff would be transferred over through the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) regulations (TUPE). The areas included in phase two were areas of significant focus for the Council. The Chief Executive stated that there were many people in Publica who would continue to be key to the Council and were doing great work, but that by moving some staff across to direct employment, the Council would be able to create more capacity for West Oxfordshire. The proposals also made sense in the context of Local Government Reorganisation. The roles included those in areas such as project management, contract management and assets.

In discussion the following points were noted;

- Roles that were fragmented could not be transferred through TUPE to reduce redundancy costs. Options for redeployment would be looked at in order to ensure that as many staff were retained as possible.
- Twelve roles were to be transferred through TUPE.
- Work on Local Government Reorganisation would be reported to the Council at a later stage.
- It was stated by some members that in light of reorganisation, Publica may be in an advantageous position. The Publica Assistant Director for Commercial development explained that the future of Publica was a matter for Publica's shareholders.
- It was too early in the process to understand what impact unitarisation might have on staff being offered new roles e.g. if the office location was to change in the future or further redundancies were necessary. Environmental and Regulatory Services (ERS) had been on the initial list of services included in phase 2 that was provided to members when they scrutinised the previous report in September. While this was recognised as an important area for the Council, it was felt due to the scale and size of the prospective transfer, there would not be sufficient benefit in transferring this service to the Council to justify the significant cost.

The Committee noted the report.

## **110 Community Grants - Westhive Review**

The Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities introduced the report. The purpose of the item was to provide an overview of the Westhive Crowdfunding scheme to date and consideration of the outcomes as detailed in the report. The Executive Member highlighted the review summary in 9.1 of the report which stated "Westhive is garnering greater community engagement and involvement and the momentum of groups coming onto the platform and being successfully funded is increasing with each round. It is recognised that the new initiatives take a little time to get established."

The Committee discussed the report and raised the following points;

- The report was good and answered the questions that the Committee had raised in the meeting on 6 November 2024.
- The introduction of the small grants scheme was welcome by Members. Officers explained that a report to Executive in July would include details on the amount of funding and details regarding how this will operate but that the scheme would be broadly similar to the small grants scheme operated in the past.
- The Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF) was part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and it was not clear whether or not future funding could be extended to a Westhive-type platform for future rounds, so this was not included in the funding totals within the report.
- The Executive Member thanked the Officers for their work and also highlighted the work by the Communications Team to promote the Westhive scheme.
- Members asked for details around service level agreements, which Officers stated was not the focus of the report. The Community Wellbeing Manager stated that they were happy to provide further information at a future date if the Committee wished.
- It was important to engage with young people and encourage them to bring forward projects as the report identified that no projects proposed by young people had been brought forward to Westhive. The Community Wellbeing Manager explained that a new Youth Development Officer had been appointed, and that this provided an opportunity to better engage with this group.
- It was stated that smaller organisations struggled to raise funds on the platform and that the future small grants scheme would help them to access funding. Community Wellbeing Manager explained that challenges around the Cost of Living crisis had exacerbated this but encouraged members to promote the Westhive platform within their communities.
- It was highlighted that large grants were also given to organisations such as the Citizen's Advice service.

The Committee noted the report.

### III

#### **West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2041 – Preferred Options Consultation**

The Executive Member for Planning explained that the purpose of the report was to update Members on the status of work on the Local Plan, and in particular the preferred options consultations paper. The Council intended to publish the preferred options consultation paper in May 2025 and invite comments and feedback on the draft planning policies and available choices. A cross-party working group had met several times and had received national policy updates and drafts of the emerging planning policies, which fell into three broad categories:

- Strategic, high-level core policies
- Place based policies e.g. for towns and the Cotswold National Landscape area

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- Development management policies, used for day-to-day decisions on planning applications.

The new Local Plan would fully align with updated National Planning Policy Framework, including the requirement for the district to deliver 905 homes per year for the durations of the 20 year-plan period. The marked differences from the existing Local Plan were set out in paragraph 3.4 of the report.

The Executive Member said that he had hoped to bring forward some draft policies in March but for various reasons that had not been possible. An Executive meeting had been scheduled for 14 May 2025 and, if approved, the Regulation 18 preferred options consultation would begin in late-May. The Local Development Scheme would be amended accordingly as it currently stated early-May.

The Committee discussed the report and noted that:

- There was some disappointment that the consultation had been delayed although this was understandable.
- The Local Plan would seek to protect land for a possible future railway line between Carterton and Oxford. The railway line would be difficult to achieve but the Council wanted to keep the opportunity open.
- The Local Plan could go some way to promoting cycling and walking and there was a need to engage with the County Council.
- There was a greater reliance on private cars in a rural district compared to a city and a need for proper off-street parking.
- There was little to scrutinise at this stage since the report was simply an update on the process.

The Committee noted the report.

## **112 Service Performance Report 2024-25 Quarter Three**

At the Chair's discretion, this was taken as the first substantive item on the agenda.

The Leader of the Council introduced the item. The purpose of the item was to provide details of the Council's operational performance at the end of 2024-25 Quarter Three (Q3). The Leader highlighted the following points;

- Six new electric vans had been purchased for Ubico.
- The amount of planning applications determined within the agreed timescales continued to exceed targets.
- Customer satisfaction continued to be strong.

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- The number of missed bins per 100,000 continued to be below the target for the fifth consecutive quarter.
- Gym memberships remained strong, with memberships exceeding the end of year target by just over 4%.
- Some areas were below target, such as the percentage of land charges completed within the target timeframe, which was due to delays by external partners and visits to leisure centres which was partly seasonal.

A question had been submitted by a member who was absent on the Windrush in Witney funding bid. The Chair read this out: “This project has been in discussion since pre-2022. Was the funding bid submitted in February 2025? If not, what is the mitigation, and should an alternative (such as external expertise from other appropriate organisations) be considered, to enable this bid to be submitted without further delay?” The response to this is included as a supplement to these minutes.

Members discussed the report, raising the following points;

- There were problems with sewerage and water pressure in the new houses in Carterton. A question was asked on how many houses were unoccupied due to this issue. The Senior Performance Analyst explained that a written response would be provided on this. The response to this is included as a supplement to these minutes.
- The difference was between complaints that were “closed” versus “not upheld” was explained by the Senior Performance Analyst. A formal complaint that was processed as such and not upheld was “not upheld”. A closed complaint was one that was closed before being processed.

The Committee noted the report.

### **113 Financial Performance Report 2024-25 Quarter Three**

The Executive Member for Finance Introduced the Item. The purpose of the report was to detail the Council’s financial performance for Quarter Three 2024-2025. The Executive Member highlighted the following points;

- The income target for Development Management was not expected to be met.
- The refurbishment of the Elmfield office had been completed, with a tenant now in occupation.
- A new dry mixed recycling contract (from October) had led to a £23,000 per month cost reduction, contributing to a £300,000 saving in the 2025-26 budget.
- The Four new vehicles which had been approved in January 2024 had been delivered, reducing reliance on hired vehicles.

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- On Decarbonisation projects there had been delays with the works at Carterton Leisure Centre, but the Windrush Leisure Centre was progressing well, with a business case expected to come forward in June.

In discussing the report, the Committee noted that;

- In 2.18 of the report it stated that a report on the asset review of Between Towns Road would be brought to the Executive in the first half of 2025/26. It was asked whether this would still be the case. The Chief Finance Officer said that teams were in discussion on this but that they would have a much better idea in Q1 of the new financial year.
- While the £54,000 refund of bank charges was welcome, it was questioned why the Council had overpaid this amount of money. The Chief Accountant explained that this was a backdated refund extending past the financial year of the report. Due to the large volume of transactions that the Council undertook, these were due to small outliers (e.g. a transaction costing 2p instead of one) over a long period of time.
- The fact that the Elmfield Office was now occupied by tenants was welcome, and members asked how much money the Council was making from this. The Chief Accountant explained that there was a 20% return on the capital investment from the site.
- There was no reason to believe that take up of the garden waste service was low. W Payment schemes or support for garden waste services could be looked at but as this had not been included in the 2025/26 budget it would need to be reviewed as part of the budget setting process for 2026/27.
- A large number of food waste bins damaged. The Publica Assistant Director explained that there had been a 44% increase in broken bins in January but that officers were looking at understanding the reasons behind these cases.
- In 2.28 of the report, it stated that a capital loss of £497,000 had been incurred due to a pooled fund operated by UBS closing. The Council had not been offered any alternatives by UBS. The Council had set up an earmarked reserve and utilised the statutory override provision to ensure that its revenue position would not be impacted.
- Councillor Natalie King made reference to TAC305 of the report, where it stated that the building can be untenanted due to major works required on the roof. Councillor King stated that she had formally complained about this, but did not wish to declare an interest on the matter. The Chief Accountant explained that they could not comment on a live complaint, but that they would clarify whether information within the report had been misleading and ask that property services respond on how buildings could be tenanted if they had major works that needed to be done.

The Committee noted the report.

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Members discussed the Committee's work programme, raising the following points;

- It was stated in the performance report that the public sector decarbonisation item was now expected at June's Executive, if this was the case the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would need to potentially scrutinise this item at their June meeting.
- It was noted that there were no pre-decision scrutiny items at April's meeting.

The Committee resolved to note the work plan.

### **115 Executive Work Programme**

There was a delegation in the Executive work programme for a new 3G pitch. The differences between 3G, 4G and 5G were discussed. It was stated that 4G and 5G had not been tested for sports. The Director of Place said that they would take this away and look at whether it is better in some cases to use others.

The Committee resolved to note the Executive work plan.

The Meeting closed at 7.16 pm

CHAIR



Cllr Leverton asked a question regarding the specific number of houses in Carterton that have been built but are currently unoccupied due to the planning condition relating to the Thames Water Upgrades:

*‘Having spoken to the service we can advise that the development consists of a total of 72 dwellings. However, a planning condition currently restricts occupation to 49 homes until the condition is formally discharged. This restriction is directly impacting the delivery of 14 affordable homes. Of these, 9 are Section 106 units and 5 are funded through the LAHF (Local Authority Housing Fund) grant. Cottsway will be the landlord for these affordable homes and are keen to make the homes available as soon as possible. They are actively working with the developer, Miller, to explore all options to expedite the necessary improvement works by Thames Water in order to lift the restriction.’*

Cllr Early asked: Windrush in Witney funding bid - This project has been in discussion since pre-2022. Was the funding bid submitted in February 2025? If not, what is the mitigation, and should an alternative (such as external expertise from other appropriate organisations) be considered, to enable this bid to be submitted without further delay?

*‘Wychwood Forest Trust has submitted a formal Expression of Interest to the National Heritage Lottery Fund (NHLF) for funding to deliver the Windrush in Witney project. This has been approved and discussions with the NHLF are well advanced with an invitation extended to proceed to the next stage of the NHLF application process, which is to undertake a development proposal ahead of formal submission of the bid. The next application window is May 2025. The Wychwood Forest Trust has the necessary track record and expertise to develop and submit the bid. Moving to a different vehicle for completing the application would potentially hinder its successful timely submission.’*

*The Board of Trustees of Wychwood Forest Trust is the responsible body accountable for the activities of the Wychwood Forest Trust, including the submission of a bid to the NHLF. West Oxfordshire District Council is represented on the Board by District Councillor Rosie Pearson, Green Party Group Leader. The District Council supports the work programme of Wychwood Forest Trust through, for example, the provision of a £9,000 one-off grant to enable the progression of the bid to the NHLF, and Officers will continue to offer support on bid preparation.’*

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