

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of Council.

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB,
at 4.00pm on **Wednesday 25 September 2024.**

PRESENT

Councillors: Elizabeth Poskitt (Chair), Andrew Coles (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Lidia Arciszewska, Thomas Ashby, Andrew Beaney, Michael Brooker, Adam Clements, David Cooper, Julian Cooper, Rachel Crouch, Jane Doughty, Genny Early, Duncan Enright, Phil Godfrey, Andy Goodwin, Andy Graham, David Jackson, Edward James, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Charlie Maynard, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Rosie Pearson, Andrew Prosser, Nigel Ridpath, Carl Rylett, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Ruth Smith, Sarah Veasey, Liam Walker, Mark Walker, Adrian Walsh and Alistair Wray.

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance), Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer).

CL.183 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hugo Ashton, Steve Cosier, Roger Faulkner, Martin McBride, Tim Sumner and Alex Wilson.

CL.184 Declarations of Interest

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

CL.185 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, proposed that the minutes of the previous meeting of Council, held on Wednesday 24 July 2024, be agreed by Council as a true and accurate record and signed by the Chair of the Council. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright and was put to a vote.

There were 38 votes for, 0 votes against and 4 abstentions. The vote was carried.

Council **Resolved** to:

- I. Agree the minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 24 July 2024 as a true and accurate record.

CL.186 Receipt of Announcements

Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, Chair of the Council, welcomed members and officers to the meeting.

The Chair gave an update of their engagements since the last meeting of Council in July 2024, and stated that after a quieter month in August, September had gathered pace once more. The Chair stated they had attended two Battle of Britain church services in Carterton and Banbury.

The Chair also stated they had attended an event hosted by the Lord Lieutenant where awards were presented to various Cadet forces.

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The Chair also advised that a Chair's reception would possibly take place on 1 November 2024 at Woodgreen in support of Woodgreen School. The Chair advised that the Council's Executive Assistant would disseminate more details to Members as appropriate when they were available.

The Chair advised Council that the meeting started at 4.00pm on a trial basis, owing to a resolution that was passed at the Council's previous meeting. The Chair advised that members would be surveyed on the start time of the meeting, to ascertain their views and thoughts as to how the trial had proceeded. In the same vein, the Chair advised that the next meeting of Council would take place on 27 November 2024 in the Council Chamber and would revert to its normal start time of 2.00pm.

The Chair reminded Council that there was a recent cyber security incident at Tewkesbury Borough Council. The Chair reminded Council that officers had rolled out a training programme on Cyber Security, which was referred to as "Cyber Ninjas". The Chair advised that for those who successfully completed the training package, it was time to complete the Cyber Security Refresher Training programme, and that the information had been sent to all Members. The Chair stated that the incident at Tewkesbury Borough Council was a useful reminder that training on Cyber Security was 'mission critical' for all to complete. The Chair reminded Councillors that they were the last line of defence as individual ICT users.

Councillor Andrew Coles, Vice-Chair of the Council, paid tribute to the Council's Senior Democratic Services Officer (SDSO), Max Thompson, who would leave the Council after the meeting to pursue a new, external role in Parliament.

The Vice-Chair gave a brief overview of the SDSOs career within Publica, and more generally of their post-military career. The Vice-Chair thanked the SDSO, on behalf of the whole Council, for their service and contribution to West Oxfordshire District Council and the residents of the district. The SDSO would leave WODC after the meeting to become Executive Office Manager to Charlie Maynard MP, Member of Parliament for Witney.

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, advised that Rizvana Poole had resigned as a WODC Councillor due to personal reasons. The Leader thanked them for their service and contributions to Council, and to the town of Chipping Norton which they represented. The Leader also confirmed that Councillor Rachel Crouch, would replace Rizvana Poole as the Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities with immediate effect.

CL.187 Participation of the Public

There was no public participation at the meeting.

CL.188 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.

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CL.189 Appointments Made under Delegated Authority

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the item, which updated Council on appointments to committees and sub-committees made by the Director of Governance under delegated authority (Constitution Part 5A, 2.4).

The Leader advised that since the previous meeting of Council held on 24 July 2024:

1. Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt had replaced Councillor Joy Aitman on the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee; and
2. Councillor Julian Cooper has resigned from the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel and had been replaced by Councillor Carl Rylett.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree the recommendation as listed on the agenda. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Note and ratify the appointments made under delegated authority.

CL.190 Recommendations from the Executive

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report, which sought to agree recommendations made to Council by the Executive, from its meetings since 24 July 2024.

At the invitation of the Leader, Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, gave Council an overview of the recommendation, that the Executive had made at its meeting of 11 September 2024, which asked Council to agree to include an additional £750,000 in the revised Capital Budget for 2024/25, [as set out in paragraph 2.25 of the original Executive report](#).

In debate, members of opposition parties highlighted they could not support the proposals owing to an overspend within Quarter 1 of 2024/2025, and other budget shortfalls contained within the published figures, including additional spending on planning appeals and investment properties such as Marriott's Walk shopping centre in Witney.

Members of alliance parties highlighted that the additional £750,000 in the revised Capital Budget for 2024/25 was to invest in the Council's properties to enable the best return on taxpayer's money, adding perceived mismanagement of finances and a lack of an Asset Management Strategy from a previous Council administration had meant that the current administration had to bring forward a revised Capital Budget for 2024/25.

Members also highlighted the differences in day-to-day spending that the Council makes, compared to capital spending on property and managing the Council's assets. Members also highlighted that the cost of a WODC Green Waste Licence was the second lowest in Oxfordshire.

Members also stated that misinformation could be construed in different ways to what the reality showed, and that sound financial management of the Council had allowed the Council to undertake significant projects and investment across the district, thus enabling the best return for residents.

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Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree the recommendation as listed on the original report. This was seconded by Councillor Alaric Smith and was put to a vote. There were 31 votes for, 11 votes against and 0 abstentions. The vote was carried.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Agree to include an additional £750,000 in the revised Capital Budget for 2024/25, as set out in 2.25 of the original Executive report.

CL.191 Recommendations from Constitution Working Group

Councillor Alaric Smith, Chair of the Constitution Working Group, introduced the report, which presented Council with recommendations that arose from a meeting of the Council's Constitution Working Group, held on Friday 19 July 2024.

In debate, Members stated that the recommendations made would enable a general tidy up the Council's Constitution and would make the document more user-friendly. Members also added that the document would retain its non-controversial nature.

Councillor Alaric Smith proposed that Council agree the recommendations as listed on the original report. This was seconded by Councillor Joy Aitman, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Adopt the Lawyers in Local Government (LLG)'s Members Planning Code of Good Practice, as an addition to Part 6 of the Council's Constitution, following appropriate revision by Officers;
2. Agree to extend the time period for Councillor Call-In from 21 days to 28 days (from the date of notification), to align with the time period for representations;
3. Agree to make the size of the Lowlands and Uplands Area Sub-Committees more flexible in Part 3C: Committee Functions:
 - The Uplands and Lowlands Sub-Committees must have a minimum of 10 members, with the Chair of the Development Control Committee being appointed to both sub-committees and all other members of the Development Control Committee being appointed to either the Uplands or Lowlands Sub-Committee, depending on the ward they represent. Where wards cross the Lowlands and Uplands boundary the ward member may be appointed to either Sub-Committee. This would also be kept under review in future;
4. Agree that instruction be given to private practice solicitors or suitable counsel to undertake legal work when considered necessary or appropriate;
5. Agree to include the Protocol for Recording at Public Meetings in Part 6 of the Council's Constitution.

CL.192 Appointment of Independent Persons

Councillor Carl Rylett, Chair of the Audit and Governance Committee, introduced the report, which recommended the appointment of two appropriately skilled and experienced members of the public to be "independent members" of the Audit and Governance Committee.

In debate, Members added the independent members would bring dedicated expertise to the Committee, resonating from their professional experience and that the Committee would gain further strength to pursue its formal business.

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Members welcomed the closer alignment with recommendations made to the Committee by CIPFA, and also welcomed the addition of external expertise and independent thinking to the Committee. Members also thanked the work of officers for their rigorous selection process, highlighting that the recommendations would not have been put before Council if officers had not exercised the required due diligence during the recruitment process.

Councillor Carl Rylett proposed that Council agree the recommendation as listed on the original report. This was seconded by Councillor Ruth Smith, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

- I. Appoint Gemma Collings and Richard Deuttenburg to the Council's Audit & Governance Committee for a four-year term, commencing immediately.

CL.193 Motion A: Winter Fuel Payments – Proposed by Councillor Thomas Ashby, Seconded by Councillor Michele Mead

Councillor Thomas Ashby, proposer of the original motion [as listed on the agenda](#), stated that they had accepted the amendment to the motion, which had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

The tabled amendment, proposed by Councillor Alaric Smith and seconded by Councillor Andrew Prosser, sought a cross-party consensus to promoting a district awareness campaign working with local NHS partners, Parish Councils and charitable, civic and religious groups, to encourage elderly residents who are eligible for means-tested benefits such as Pension Credit, to register and claim Pension credit to ensure that they continue to receive Winter Fuel Payments (WFPs) during the Winter, and to ensure that those in need are sign-posted to the continuing Household Support Fund.

The tabled amendment also sought to request that the Leader of the Council write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves MP, urging an impact assessment of the government's decision to means test WFPs without public consultation and asking HM Treasury to examine transitional measures to ensure that vulnerable pensioners, particularly those who are eligible for, but who do not – or cannot – claim, other benefits under current thresholds are protected from fuel poverty.

In the debate of the substantive motion (as amended), members stated that the decision by Government would mean that 22,000 pensioners across the West Oxfordshire district would become worse off, and that a collaborative approach to requesting that the Government means-test WFPs was the right approach and made sense.

Members agreed that WFPs should be means-tested, and also highlighted that communications had been sent out to residents by individual councillors to ensure that residents were signposted to the appropriate support where required. Members also stated that they would consult with their individual Town and Parish Councils to help signpost support to residents.

Members highlighted the Household Support Fund, and said that the fund could also give residents the help they were entitled to, and also encouraged all residents of the district to apply for help, even if they were unsure of entitlements. Members also reminded the Council of the ongoing Cost-of-Living Crisis and further emphasised the need for communications to be disseminated to residents regarding the financial help and support that was available during the winter months.

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Members referenced the history of the WFPs, stating it was a Labour government who introduced the WFPs in 1997 as part of a series of measures introduced to tackle pensioner poverty. Members also stated that several previous governments have reviewed the modelling of WFPs and whether it was the best use of limited public funds.

Members stated that there would be many 'not-well-off' pensioners in the district who would lose out as a result of the decision taken by Government, and that an impact assessment and the means testing of WFPs was the right approach to attempt to tackle inequality.

Members highlighted that communication with residents had already taken effect on the subject matter, with a number of Councillors having received contact from residents regarding WFPs and questions about what the impact that the government's decision would mean for them. Members also called for a unanimous voice when liaising with residents and those across the wider district when it came to signposting available support.

Members also referenced a vote that had taken place on the subject matter in the House of Commons, where Liberal Democrat MPs had voted against the government's decision, and reaffirmed the need for Council to work together to ensure that Pension Credit could be accessed more effectively.

Councillor Michele Mead, seconder of the substantive motion thanked members for their contributions to the debate and for their support to the motion that had been tabled. Councillor Mead also highlighted communications received from residents, emphasising that it was proof of the strength of feeling on the issue. Councillor Mead also advised Council of the unfortunate conversation had with a neighbour regarding the subject matter which had arisen as a result of the government's decision.

Councillor Mead highlighted that the affected generation of people tended to be very proud and may shy away from admitting that they were struggling, and urged all Councillors to consider these people when providing help towards support and information.

At the request of Councillor Michele Mead, a recorded vote was taken on the substantive motion (as amended) in accordance with Section 17.6, Part 5A of the Constitution (Council Procedure Rules). All 11 Conservative Group members present voted in favour a recorded vote, as outlined by Section 17.6.

FOR the proposition – Councillors:

J Aitman, L Arciszewska, T Ashby, A Beaney, M Brooker, A Clements, A Coles, D Cooper, J Cooper, R Crouch, J Doughty, G Early, D Enright, P Godfrey, A Goodwin, A Graham, D Jackson, E James, N King, L Leffman, N Leverton, D Levy, A Lyon, P Marsh, C Maynard, S McCarroll, M Mead, D Melvin, R Pearson, E Poskitt, A Prosser, N Ridpath, C Rylett, G Saul, S Simpson, A Smith, R Smith, S Veasey, L Walker, M Walker, A Walsh and A Wray.

There were 42 votes in favour, 0 votes against and 0 abstentions, with 6 Members not in attendance and one vacancy following Councillor Poole's resignation. The vote was carried.

Council **Resolved** to pass the following Motion:

This Council notes the government's decision to means-test Winter Fuel Payments (WFPs). Age UK estimates that the government's changes to WFPs could hit 2 million people across the country, some of whom badly need the money to stay warm this winter. This Council also notes the parlous state of the Public Finances that the new Government has inherited.

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This Council resolves to:

1. Request that the Executive considers a report from officers with proposals for promoting a District awareness campaign working with our local NHS partners, Parish Councils and charitable, civic and religious groups, to encourage elderly residents who are eligible for means-tested benefits such as Pension Credit to register and claim them to ensure that they continue to receive WFPs this Winter and to ensure that those in need are sign-posted to the continuing Household Support Fund;
2. Request that the Leader of the Council writes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, urging an impact assessment of the government's decision to means test WFPs and asking HM Treasury to examine transitional measures to ensure that vulnerable pensioners, particularly those who are eligible for, but who do not – or cannot – claim, other benefits under current thresholds are protected from fuel poverty.

The Meeting closed at 4.55pm.

CHAIR