

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee
held via video conferencing at 12:30 pm on **Wednesday 14 April 2021**

PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chairman); Alex Postan (Vice-Chairman); Alaa Al-Yousuf, Louise Chapman, Julian Cooper, Maxine Crossland, Harry Eaglestone, Steve Good, Liz Leffman, Dan Levy, Geoff Saul, Harry St John and Duncan Enright.

Also in Attendance: Councillors Norman MacRae, Michelle Mead and Toby Morris.

Officers: Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer and Deputy Chief Executive); Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica); Jasmine McWilliams (Asset Manager); Andrea Clenton (Principal Planner - Major Developments and Appeals); Andrew Sherbourne (Accounting Technician); Georgina Wilkinson (Shared Compliance Officer); Adrienne Frazer (Strategic Support Officer) and Amy Bridgewater-Carnall (Senior Strategic Support Officer).

42. MINUTES

Having considered the minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2021, the Committee

RESOLVED: That the minutes be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

43. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Councillor Enright substituted for Councillor Bolger.

44. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members or Officers in matters to be considered at the meeting.

45. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no requests received.

46. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2020-2021

The Committee considered the previously circulated report from Democratic Services, which invited it to consider its Work Programme for the remainder of 2020/2021.

No comments were raised other than the desire to add more items to the programme for future scrutiny. Councillor Al-Yousuf indicated that he would be requesting an additional item under Agenda Item 12 on the agenda, Report from Arlingclose on the Council's Externally Managed Pooled Funds (see Minute 52).

RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted with the following addition:

(a) the establishment of a Task and Finish Group be added to the work programme to look at defining the Council's Investment Policy.

47. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Democratic Services which gave Members the opportunity to comment on the Cabinet Work Programme published on 23 March 2021.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

48. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

There were no Members' Questions.

49. PUBLICA BUSINESS PLAN

The Committee considered the report from the Chief Executive which gave Members the opportunity to comment on the Publica Business Plan 2020-22 before its presentation to Cabinet on 21 April 2021.

The Group Finance Director addressed the Committee and outlined the report, highlighting that this was a mid-point update within the two year business plan. He reminded Members that a lot of the original work planned for the first year, had been impacted by Coronavirus. He also noted that some of the images used in the plan had since been updated to reflect the new Leader of the Council and a revised version would be submitted to Cabinet in April.

Councillor St John asked if the issue of empty dwellings could be addressed in the plan as he was mindful that whilst it was important to build new houses, it was also important to work on reducing the number of existing, empty properties in the District.

Mr Wilson advised that an Empty Homes Co-ordinator had recently been recruited and would continue the ongoing work of the Homelessness Team in this area of work. He advised that an update could be provided at a future meeting if the Committee requested it.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and no further comment be expressed to Cabinet.

50. SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2020-21 QUARTER THREE

The Committee considered the report from the Chief Executive which provided detail of the Council's Service Performance during Quarter 3.

The report outlined the Performance Management Framework which had been developed along with the Commissioning Framework, approved by Cabinet in October 2020. Section 3 of the report highlighted the performance impacted by Covid-19 and explained the support that had been rolled out to residents across the district as well as an overview of the various business grants that had been administered.

Councillor Levy queried the level of work carried out by the enforcement team at the Forest of Dean and Cotswold District Councils with regard to fly-tipping, who appeared to be operating at a higher level than West Oxfordshire.

In response, the Portfolio Holder for Environment, Councillor MacRae advised that the department were in the process of appointing additional resources to tackle this issue. He advised that he had been in discussion with the Group Manager for Waste and two agency staff were being introduced to the team.

Councillor St John applauded the team at West Oxfordshire for responding swiftly to an abandoned caravan in his ward recently and stated that the process for reporting issues was working well.

RESOLVED: That the Service Performance for 2020-21 of Quarter Three be noted.

51. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED: That, in view of the likely disclosure of exempt information, as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, (information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person) the public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining item of business.

52. REPORT FROM ARLINGCLOSE ON THE COUNCIL'S EXTERNALLY MANAGED POOLED FUNDS

The Committee considered the report from the Chief Finance Officer and the Council's external financial advisors, Arlingclose. The report set out the performance of the externally managed pooled funds, covering the 12 months up to 28 February 2021.

Phiroza Katrak (Client Director) attended as a representative of Arlingclose, outlined the highlights of the report and answered questions from Members.

Councillor Al-Yousuf proposed that a Task and Finish Group be established to look at defining the Council's Investment Policy and requested that a special meeting be held following the elections to review Arlingclose's service contract and investment mandate.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

53. INVESTMENT PROPERTY REVIEW

The Committee received a verbal update from the Asset Manager in relation to the current situation regarding property lettings across the District and how the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted on them.

The Asset Manager provided information on the businesses hardest hit by the pandemic and following a question from Councillor Leffman advised that officers were guided on which businesses to rent to by the Councils Commercial Rents Policy. It was noted that some premises had been purchased with business tenants in occupation.

RESOLVED: That the update be noted.

54. CALL-IN OF CABINET DECISION – GARDEN VILLAGE DESIGN WORKS

The Committee considered a report from the Chief Executive following the Call-In request relating to the Cabinet decision of 24 March 2021 (minute number 124) relating to the funding of design works for the access roundabout and underpass to the Garden Village Science Park to integrate with Oxfordshire County Council Housing Improvement Fund (HIF) A40 improvement works.

Councillor Levy outlined the reasons for the Call-in and the areas of work that he felt required further clarification.

Officers responded to each of the queries raised in the Call-In request and provided background information on the desire to retain employment opportunities in the area and how S106 money is used and managed in a development of this size.

In response to a query from Councillor Cooper, officers explained the responsibility of each individual party and authority with regards to funding.

The Cabinet Member, Councillor Haine answered a number of questions from the Committee and reminded them that it would be down to the Planning Committee to determine any application on its merits.

The Chief Finance Officer provided assurances regarding the Council's funding arrangements and advised that she was comfortable with the decision as approved by Cabinet.

Following a robust debate, the Committee concluded that the decision had been scrutinised appropriately. The Chairman therefore proposed that the Call-In was not supported and this was seconded by Councillor Good. Members noted the importance of moving ahead with the work required.

RESOLVED: That the Call-In was not supported and the decision could proceed.

The meeting closed at 2.22pm

CHAIRMAN