

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Held in the Council Chamber at 6.30 pm on **Thursday, 16 September 2021**

PRESENT

Councillors: Councillor Andrew Beaney (Chairman), Councillor Andy Graham (Vice-Chair), Councillor Jill Bull, Councillor Laetisia Carter, Councillor Maxine Crossland, Councillor Marilyn Davies, Councillor Duncan Enright, Councillor Mark Johnson, Councillor Nick Leverton, Councillor Lysette Nicholls, Councillor Mathew Parkinson, Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, Councillor Andrew Prosser and Councillor Dean Temple

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Mandy Fathers (Business Manager – Operational Services), Adrienne Frazer (Strategic Support Officer)

25 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 July 2021 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record, with the following amendment:

Minute Number 19 – Enforcement Update: the wording “especially with the limited current resources available.” be changed to “especially with the limited staff available.”

26 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Acock.

Councillor Enright substituted for Councillor Collins and

Councillor Temple substituted for Councillor Wilson.

27 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

28 Participation of the Public

There were no submissions from members of the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

29 Chairman's Announcements

There were no Chairman's announcements.

30 Cottsway Housing - Presentation

The Committee received a presentation by the Operations Director and Chief Executive Officer of Cottsway Housing, which provided Members with a broad range of information about the organisation. Copies of the presentation had been circulated prior to the meeting. The Operations Director and Chief Executive Officer informed the Committee that West Oxfordshire was the main focus of their work.

Members expressed their appreciation of Cottsway Housing for their presentation and for: the £250,000 they allocate for adaptations to homes; the support Cottsway provide to the Witney and West Oxon Food Bank; and the upgrading of homes in Chipping Norton.

Members asked questions about:

- Building new homes as homes for life and adaptations for people with disabilities
- Solar panels being installed on Cottsway houses
- The regulations relating to the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme

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- Empty property rates during the pandemic
- The number of bungalows owned by Cottsway
- The Osprey site, Carterton Avon Way, Rye Grass and Caroline Court in Woodstock, residents' concerns and Langford village
- Ensuring operational staff work to the Cottsway's values
- Board diversity
- Supporting the Afghan refugees
- Affordable rent levels and the planned drop in Universal Credit
- Improving communications with Councillors when they were advocating for residents

The Operations Director responded to the queries as outlined below and provided further detail on:

- The process which Cottsway used to acquire new homes, was mainly through buying them from large house builders. This created significant difficulties in requesting specific types of housing. The Operations Director advised that the Planning Department's use of section 106 agreements could help in this area.
- Central Government was exploring ways to increase the RTB scheme to all housing association tenants.
- Cottsway did not hold a waiting list and all new sites were let to a mixed, balanced community.
- The future of the almost empty Ryegrass site in Woodstock was under discussion but there were no specific plans to present yet. There were no plans for change at Caroline Court.
- Cottsway had 642 homes in contract, 543 of which were in West Oxfordshire (WODC) and would be delivered over the next two to three years.
- The Elms at Langford – Cottsway were working with WODC who were finalising the housing need for the scheme (size and tenure).
- Cottsway worked very closely with officers at WODC to provide the most appropriate mix of homes in a development.
- The policy on affordable and social rents and the challenges to provide houses at a social rent as well as their concern about the reduction in Universal Credit and its impact on rent collection and tenants' need for the food bank.

The Operations Director agreed to respond to any further specific questions directly to the relevant Councillor should they contact him.

The Committee noted the presentation and thanked the Operations Director for attending.

Councillor Enright left the meeting.

31 Preparation for the Arrival of Refugees from Afghanistan

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager, Resident Services on the Afghan Resettlement Programme.

The Business Manager Operational Services provided an update on progress since publication of the report. She reported that a Cabinet Support group had been formed and advised that West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) had agreed to offer support to the council's fair share of Afghan refugees. In addition, that the Council had agreed to recruit a support officer and a final agreement would be in place with Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (GARAS) next week. The private rented sector would be approached and encouraged to offer suitable homes, with Cottsway Housing offering a three bedroom house

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and properties would be declined if they were not suitable. The officer confirmed that there would be a full time resettlement officer at the Council.

The Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing, Councillor Davies, provided the meeting with a further update which included:

- WODC was likely to receive 5 or 6 families
- WODC had decided to take the actions outlined above before Government regulation came in
- The support work mentioned above was in addition to existing support provision
- GARAS would organise wrap around care and settle the families in
- All actions had been informed by the work with Syrian refugees
- The Home Office would vet all accommodation offered and would veto homes that were not suitable
- That £10,500 per person had been allocated by Government
- WODC had asked the Blenheim Estate for the offer of accommodation
- That a sensitive communications strategy was being developed with the people already on the housing waiting list particularly in mind
- That the approach had been developed by the Oxfordshire District Councils working together rather than by Oxfordshire County Council

Councillors and officers expressed their confidence in GARAS and said they were excellent and a known quantity since they had supported the Syrian refugees. It was anticipated that GARAS would be funded to provide support for as long as was needed.

Councillors Carter and Graham expressed their thanks and congratulations to officers and particularly to Councillor Davies, on all that had been done so promptly.

The Chief Executive confirmed that some of the funding allocation would be used to fund the support worker post.

Councillor Davies added that WODC had decided not to collect furniture and other items for the refugees as these would be provided by the Home Office. A targeted appeal would be made when the refugees' additional needs were known.

Councillor Poskitt asked for a paragraph for all Members to use in local publications outlining this approach. Councillor Davies agreed to provide this.

Having received the report and discussed the details with officers, the Committee

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

Councillors Davies and Parkinson left the meeting.

Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc

The Chief Executive presented the report of the Planning Policy Manager on Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

The Chief Executive explained that the report was for the Committee to consider and comment on. This was the Council's formal consultation response to the public consultation on the development of a new Spatial Framework Plan for the Oxford – Cambridge Arc, the area which spanned the five counties of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire,

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Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. He assured Members that he would take their comments forward and encouraged Members to complete the consultation's online survey.

The Chief Executive explained that the focus of central Government in creating the Arc was around economic, environmental and planning policy across the whole of the Arc's area. He noted that it was unusual for consultation to occur this early in the process and that the Council's draft response had been prepared drawing on work across the whole of Oxfordshire.

Following Members questions, the Chief Executive clarified that the Arc included the whole of West Oxfordshire and the planning spacial framework would rely on Local Plans for implementation. He advised that there was an opportunity to influence planning policy through the Arc as it would be a high level planning document that Council's within the Arc would be required to have regard to when drawing up their Local Plans.

The Chairman expressed concern about section 1.3 of the report and the suggestion that considerable new house building was part of the plan. Councillor Leverton questioned the phrase "truly affordable" homes. Councillor Poskitt suggested that implementation was important and that it was necessary to provide the infrastructure first, also that the plan needed to be flexible as technology was developing very fast. Councillor Prosser strongly supported the rail link emphasising that it was vital it was electrified and ran to the west of the District to Carterton and Brize Norton. In section 3 of the report, The Economy – Education and Training, Councillor Beaney asked that Special Educational Needs requirements be added as Oxfordshire could improve its provision in this area.

Councillor Graham indicated that mechanisms were needed to evaluate the progress of the project and ensure that it had a meaningful impact.

RESOLVED that:

- a) the report be noted and that the Committee's comments be included in the Council's response; and
- b) the amended draft response be submitted as the Council's formal response to this consultation.

33 Council Priorities and Service Performance Report 2021-22 Quarter One

The Committee considered the previously circulated report of the Chief Executive, which provided details of the Council's progress towards achieving its aims and priorities set out in the Council Plan 2020-2024, and service performance during Quarter One.

Comments and queries on the report were as follows:

- The report was to be provided in a new format in future
- The reporting dates across the three Districts did not coordinate, making comparisons difficult. The Chief Executive explained that this was because West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) data was more current. However, he agreed that this made comparison difficult and asked the Democratic Services officer to follow this up with officers.
- What were the outcomes and impact of agile / hybrid working?

Councillor Johnson noted that the report's main message was about a lack of resources compared to last year. The Chief Executive explained that the comparison was difficult to make because of the impact of the pandemic, affecting services and altering the Council's activity. He commented that Planning was where the staff resource issues were mainly felt

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and a plan was in place to address this. Councillors Leverton and Temple asked further questions about the loss of staff in the Planning Department. The Chief Executive informed the meeting about the new career grade structure and revised salaries that had been put in place to address the staffing issues in Planning. It was agreed to put this issue onto the Committee Work Programme for January 2022 for an update.

Councillors Prosser, Poskitt, Graham and Bull asked for more detail on the performance indicator for empty homes. The Chief Executive suggested this was put on the committee's work programme. The Chairman noted that a new officer for empty homes had been appointed across the three Districts.

Having received the report and discussed the details with officers, the Committee

RESOLVED that: the report be noted.

Councillor Carter left the meeting.

34 Committee Work Programme

The Committee received and considered the report which gave members the opportunity to comment on the Work Programme for 2021/2022.

The Chief Executive provided an update from the Deputy Head Estates (Accommodation Optimisation), Defence Infrastructure Organisation relating to REEMA North as follows:

“While our new housing project on the REEMA North site continues to move forward through our scrutiny and approvals process, unfortunately we are not in the position that we would like to have been at this point. At this time, we do not have sufficient certainty on future timelines to brief your committee or to discuss the way forward on the project. However, behind the scenes a huge amount of effort continues to go into obtaining authority to proceed with this initiative, and we remain as keen as ever to work closely with West Oxfordshire District Council to move the project forward to the benefit of both organisations. To this end we have already produced preliminary layouts for the planned 182 Service family homes (and for the remaining land that is planned to become available for private housing) and have been reviewing previous planning submissions to inform us ahead of working up an application to a full submission.”

Councillor Leverton asked whether service homes were classed as social housing and the Chief Executive agreed to respond to him directly, after the meeting.

The Chief Executive informed the Committee that the Group Finance Director and the Shared Healthy Communities Manager were in discussions with Ministry of Defence staff about supporting new military families to settle into the area.

Following discussions, it was noted that:

- Members would be asked for questions to be put to the Police by the Committee who were due to attend the next meeting
- Health Watch could be invited to speak to the Committee with regard to the lack of dentists in the District. Councillor Davies also offered to raise the issue at the Health Improvement Board.
- Other items for the work programme had been suggested throughout the meeting.

RESOLVED that: the work programme be updated accordingly.

35 Cabinet Work Programme

The Committee received and considered the report of the Business Manager – Corporate Responsibility and Interim Monitoring Officer, which gave Members the opportunity to comment on the Cabinet Work Programme published on 17 August and 15 September (tabled) 2021.

Members noted that discussions on the Community Infrastructure Levy had been postponed until the Government bill had been heard in the Autumn.

36 Members Questions

Councillors Bull and Crossland raised the issue of the Members Portal not working well. Councillor Leverton agreed and suggested that it was due to the high security settings on the Portal. Councillor Graham commented on a lack of training in using the Portal. A majority of Members agreed with these comments. The Strategic Support Officer was asked to raise this with the Business Manager – Corporate Responsibility.

Councillor Bull requested that it be recorded when Members leave a meeting and Councillors expressed broad agreement with this request.

Councillor Beaney agreed to speak to the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Member training, Councillor Doughty, about the Portal and recording Members attendance.

The Meeting closed at 8.50 pm

CHAIRMAN