

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Held in the Council Chamber at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 1 December 2021**

PRESENT

Councillors: Derek Cotterill (Chairman), Geoff Saul (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Alaa Al-Yousuf, Julian Cooper, Rupert Dent, Harry Eaglestone, Gill Hill, Dan Levy, Alex Postan, Andrew Prosser and Harry St John.

Also present: Councillor Michele Mead.

Officers: Jan Britton (Managing Director), Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer), Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica), Georgina Dyer (Chief Accountant), Amy Bridgewater-Carnall (Democratic Services Manager).

21 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 October 2021 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

22 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Steve Good.

23 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

24 Participation of the Public

There was none.

25 Committee Work Programme

The Committee considered the Work Programme for the remainder of the civic year.

Councillor Cooper queried whether any scrutiny could be undertaken into the potential for adding solar panels to all Council owned buildings. He felt that buildings such as outdoor pools could be earning income even when closed. In response, the Chief Finance officer explained that all Council buildings were being considered and scoped. She advised that a bid had been placed to look at installing something similar at Carterton Leisure Centre and she would update the meeting in due course.

With regards to any future business cases, these would be considered as and when they came forward.

Councillor St John received clarification on the latest position with regard to CIL and as a result it was noted that this would not be put on the work programme at present.

Councillor Postan advised that the Audit and General Purposes Committee were introducing a work programme and hoped that Members may be able to assist with income generation ideas.

Having considered the work programme, the Committee

Resolved that the report be noted.

26 Cabinet Work Programme

Having considered the Cabinet Work Programme, the Committee

Resolved that the report be noted.

27 Approval of Extension to Agreement for Support Services with Publica

The Chairman introduced the report which sought Cabinet approval to extend the Support Services Agreement with Publica Group (Support) Limited for a further four year term until 31 October 2026.

The Committee were being asked to consider the report and decide whether to pass any comments to Cabinet, prior to their meeting.

The Chief Finance Officer answered a number of questions from Councillors including how much the average cost per resident was and how much it cost to transfer the services. Members noted that there was no data provided to compare the transfer cost but the report did highlight that the service Publica provided demonstrated value for money. The Chief Executive also reminded the meeting that it would cost more money to transfer these services back.

Following further discussions relating to the value of WODC's shareholding in Publica, the Locality Director explained that this was not a traditional trading company.

The Chief Executive addressed Members and explained that due to timescales, the contract needed to be reviewed now, however, the desire to see an analysis of future agreements and a comparison of reverting back to in-house services would be taken into account moving forwards.

Councillor Cooper highlighted the savings that Publica had delivered, alongside the low Council Tax rates for the District. He did feel that Publica could improve on their communications, along with other external companies such as Ubico. The Chairman agreed with these comments and reminded Members that Publica had been set up to save money and services were still being delivered. However, he was saddened that the offices were no longer as populated as they used to be.

Councillor Postan noted that Publica had liberated WODC from the defined benefit pension scheme and felt that it should be recognised for its idea and achievements.

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Councillors discussed the impact that any additional Council's joining Publica could have and were advised that this report had been supported by the other partner councils. Officers explained that if at any point, one of the partner Council's did not wish to continue with a particular element of the service, they would need to be disentangled, resulting in costs.

However, each Council had the scope to carry out their services how they wanted to and were not hampered by different ways of working. The Chairman felt that it was imperative that each Council remained sovereign, retained its own Cabinet and made decisions through Council.

The Publica Managing Director, Mr Britton, addressed Members and assured them that the agreements covered the issue of additional Councils joining, with the partner councils having comment and control.

Councillor Postan was keen to establish the hourly rate of Publica but officers explained that this would prove difficult and a better route would be to determine a global cost for support services.

In response to comments made about staff resourcing and not having time to carry out certain requests, officers advised that each Council chose where to put their resource. Mr Britton explained that this was not a uniform service and each Council could choose the service they wanted.

In conclusion, the Committee noted that it would be useful to look at alternative options, prior to any future reviews, in a timely manner.

Resolved that the report be noted.

28 Update of 2022/23 Budget

The Committee received a report from the Chief Finance Officer which provided an update on the developing budget for 2022/23. Members were asked to note the report and submit any comments to Cabinet as required.

The report detailed several main drivers of the change to the budget from last year's position, outlined in full at paragraph 2.1. At the time of writing the report the current revenue budget position was a deficit of £830,000. Officers hoped to fund the one off cost of the local plan as much as possible from existing planning grants and the balance may be funded from ear marked reserves such as Council Priorities. The report noted that the current draft did not include any increase to fees and charges.

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report and explained that this version concentrated on revenue and there was not definitive decision on the spending review. Officers were awaiting government confirmation on a number of aspects of the budget and long term savings were being considered to bring waste costs down. She assured Members that senior officers

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and managers were very conscious of the need to maintain control of expenditure and were mindful of any additional costs.

Councillor Al-Yousuf addressed the meeting and raised a number of queries including the proposed £5 Council Tax increase, asks for clarification on the role of the Civic Pride Officer detailed on page 38 along with why Suez were the only bidder detailed at paragraph 3.4. In response, Mrs Griffiths explained that the post of Civic Pride Officer had been established at the request of the Waste Team. The role was aimed at responding to and enforcing fly-tipping breaches and had been successful at partner councils.

With regard to the kerbside recycling contract, this had gone out to tender but there had been no response from the market for various reasons. She assured Members that officers had investigated the reasons and a sensitivity analysis had been completed. The Chairman reiterated that the market was small with only six national contractors.

The Chief Executive provided an update on the second bullet point of paragraph 3.12 relating to requests for growth and the Future Oxfordshire Partnership. Three items had been identified including the Inclusive Economic Partnership which sought to promote inclusion in access to economic growth. Mr Hughes highlighted the measures that could be taken to spread economic benefits to everyone in Oxfordshire including skills training and removing educational barriers.

Members raised further questions on a range of subjects and were provided with clarification from officers. The topics included:

- Play equipment and the responsibility of parish and town councils;
- How much an increase in the tax base would bring in;
- The Windrush Leisure Centre and alternatives to making repairs;
- Replacement tenants for Talisman Unit 1 and Des Roches Square; and
- Replacement Ubico vehicles.

With regard to the current situation with the Windrush Leisure Centre, Mrs Griffiths explained that the aim was to prolong the life of the centre as long as possible and any replacement would need funding. Officers were looking at other sources of funding but future decisions would need to be made about where the Council spent its funds.

Having considered the report and having heard from the officers present, the Committee

Resolved that the report be noted.

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Update on Council's Investment Task & Finish Group

The Chairman of the Task and Finish Group, Councillor Saul addressed Members and provided an update on the progress made so far. He advised that the group's scoping

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document would be presented to the Committee at their next meeting and outlined their primary role.

Councillor Saul advised that the group hoped to look at the Statement of Investment Principles and would be inviting Arlingclose along to a future meeting. Questions from members of the group were being collated and they would be meeting informally to discuss these prior to sending to Arlingclose.

Resolved that the update be noted.

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Members Questions

Councillor Cooper had submitted a question as detailed on the agenda as follows:

“When does the District Council want both money raising and expenditure proposals for the 2022/23 budget?”

The Chief Finance Officer advised that this was an issue raised with every relevant service manager and proposals were fed into the budget. If a suitable proposal was received, along with a business case, it would be considered.

Councillor Cooper went on to highlight that “in November 2024 it is the 150th anniversary of Sir Winston Churchill birth and in early 2025 ,sadly the 60th anniversary of his death”. He had previously raised with the Leader and Cabinet Member how these anniversaries could be used as a focus to draw in tourism but had received no response. The Chief Finance Officer suggested that he speak to the Tourism team to see how this could be brought forwards.

The Meeting closed at 3.38 pm

CHAIRMAN