

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, 25 November 2021**

PRESENT

Councillors: Councillor Andrew Beaney (Chairman), Councillor Andy Graham (Vice-Chair), Councillor Jake Acock, Councillor Jill Bull, Councillor Laetisia Carter, Councillor Owen Collins, Councillor Gill Hill, Councillor Mark Johnson, Councillor Nick Leverton, Councillor Lysette Nicholls, Councillor Mathew Parkinson, Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, Councillor Andrew Prosser and Councillor Alex Wilson

Officers: Mandy Fathers (Business Manager - Operations Support and Enabling), Giles Hughes (Chief Executive) and Phil Martin (Group Manager - Business Support) and Adrienne Frazer (Strategic Support Officer)

37 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2021 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

The Business Manager – Corporate Responsibility had provided the following update on the Member's question about the Members' Portal,

"Officers have recently met and acknowledged some of the concerns that Members have raised. The portal is there as a tool to help them so it's important to us that it isn't seen as a hindrance.

We will shortly be issuing a survey seeking feedback on the portal so that we can capture issues and take them forward. In the meantime, we note the points raised around logging on and have asked IT to produce a quick guide for members.

Moving forward we really want the portal to be something that members actively use for updating their register of interests, declaring and gifts/hospitality and making their expenses claims. It is pleasing to see from the data that some members are already doing this but we acknowledge that some may be unsure. With that in mind we will be rolling out a selection of bite sized training sessions in due course."

Councillor Leverton reminded the Committee of his question about whether armed forces properties were classed as social housing. Officers agreed to respond to this question outside the meeting.

38 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence and Councillor Hill substituted for Councillor Crossland.

39 Declarations of Interest

Declarations of Interest were received as follows:

Councillor Beaney declared an interest in the agenda item on the Re-use of IT Equipment, as Oxford IT Bank had made donations to the school he worked at.

40 Participation of the Public

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

41 Chairman's Announcements

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The Chairman noted that officer's weekly updates on the Afghan refugee resettlement programme were very helpful.

42 Long Term Empty Homes Report

The Committee received and considered the report of the Customer Enabling Manager on the current status of Long Term Empty Homes in the District.

The Business Manager – Operations Support and Enabling highlighted the enforcement action available to the Council which included:

- Enforced Sale – Allows the council to force the sale of a property to recover debts owed to the council that are registered as a charge on the property
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) – Enables the council to secure occupation and responsible management of some privately owned house and flats that have been empty for two years or more
- Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) – Enables the council to purchase and sell an empty property for the purpose of providing housing accommodation or facilities connected to housing accommodation

She noted that both EDMOs and CPOs were time consuming to implement. She also noted that Council Tax premiums were put on properties that were empty for over two years. The officer advised the Committee that it was hoped to establish the Empty Homes Officer post as a permanent role.

Councillor Collins asked how many EDMOs and CPOs there are in place. The officer replied that there were none currently as officers worked with residents to get properties into use and there is a strategy in place to manage empty homes.

Councillor Prosser commented that this was a useful report and asked to see the figures split by urban areas and also by second homes. The officer agreed to respond to the questions outside the committee and added that second homes are not classed as long term empty homes as they are furnished.

Following a question from Councillor Poskitt, officers confirmed that individual flats are counted as one property and are included in the empty homes strategy.

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

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

43 Re-use of IT Equipment

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager, Business Support Services on the re-use of IT equipment. He advised that the Oxford IT Bank provided a great service to Oxfordshire residents, particularly refugees.

Councillor Beaney expressed a preference for Option 2 in the report and agreed that Oxford IT Bank's work was good.

Councillor Graham thanked the officer for the report.

Having received the report and discussed the details with officers, it was

RESOLVED: That the Committee recommends Option 2 to Council that, "The Council donate their 'end of life' laptops, computers and phones for re-use to either the Oxford IT

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Bank or IT Schools Africa” and continue to use the existing arrangements for all other ICT Hardware.

44 Our House and Housing First Project Updates and Funding Extension Options

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager for Resident Services on the Our House and Housing First Project Updates and Funding Extension Options presented by the Chief Executive. He noted that the project’s focus was on younger people and included providing skills training as well as housing to the clients.

Councillor Bull asked about the funding for the scheme and whether West Oxfordshire’s funding would be spent on the young people of the District. The officer advised that the project is intended to address the needs of young people in West Oxfordshire. He acknowledged that some people with West Oxfordshire connections may present as homeless in Oxford City and therefore may be referred back to the District including into this project.

Questions were raised by Councillors Acock, Graham and Carter requesting further detail on the funding of the project as well as on tenancy failures. Members requested that the questions be responded to by officers before the Committee’s comments on the report are returned to Cabinet.

Councillor Poskitt noted that homeless people do not see District Council borders and do need a lot of officer input. She commented that the project seems to be very successful and hoped that this good work had been spread to other Districts.

The Chief Executive responded saying that West Oxfordshire works with all the other Oxfordshire Councils and a common approach was being developed across Oxfordshire. The Housing First approach recognises that people need a home before being able to tackle other issues they may have.

Councillor Wilson requested information on the type and condition of houses used for the project. The officer replied that Cottsway properties which are suitable for conversion were used.

Councillor Leverton stated that over the last three years this was the best initiative he had seen and that he supported the project one hundred percent, subject to the answers to the questions raised.

Having received the report and discussed the details with officers, the Committee noted the report and, subject to the responses to the Committee’s questions, it was

RESOLVED: That the Committee would send comments on the report to Cabinet and recommends that Cabinet:

- a) Agrees the recommendation to continue the projects for a further 18 months from April 2022
- b) That Cabinet agrees to outsource the Support element of both projects via waiver
- c) That the Council agrees to the exploration of external funding sources including bidding for Government and/or community grant funds in order to continue the projects
- d) That the Council agrees to use Housing Reserve / Housing Grant Underspend as set out in 2.35 to guarantee the continuation of the projects whilst alternative funding options are explored

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e) Approves the delegation of any amendments to these allocations to the Housing Manager in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness subject to compliance with funding allocation conditions.

45 Committee Work Programme

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

Following a discussion about the number of reports due to be considered in the January 2022 Committee. The Chairman proposed that a second, additional meeting be arranged in January 2022.

Having discussed the matter, it was:

RESOLVED: That the work programme be updated accordingly and that a second meeting be arranged in January to accommodate the volume of work.

46 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 12 October 2021.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted

47 Members Questions

Councillor Hill asked about the recent information sent to Parish Councils on rural domestic abuse. Councillor Beaney advised that domestic abuse issues had arisen at this Committee regularly including the best way to communicate with rural areas in the District about it. He offered to discuss the matter with officers and update Councillor Hill outside the meeting.

Councillor Hill also asked about the information on terrorist threats recently received. Councillor Leverton advised that this had come from Oxfordshire County Council which was suggesting the setting up of an emergency committee in each parish for events such as floods, power failures, bombs etc.

Councillor Poskitt requested a poster containing emergency contact details that can be put up on web pages as well as hard copy on local notice boards. The Chief Executive agreed to discuss this with the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee and circulate their responses to Parish Clerks.

Councillor Doughty informed the Committee that there was an emergency helpline over last Christmas's floods and this will be introduced if flooding occurs again. She also noted that there is a rota in place for emergency support this winter.

Councillor Bull reminded Members that there was a flood day exhibition recently in Witney, organised by Councillor MacRae, where all relevant information was available.

Councillor Nicholls requested a follow up on the NHS Dental Services issue.

Councillor Bull updated the Committee saying that the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee had raised this again this morning. She noted that it is a nationwide problem.

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The Meeting closed at 7.23 pm

CHAIRMAN