

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet

Held in the Council Chamber at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 16 February 2022**

PRESENT

Councillors: Michele Mead (Leader), David Harvey (Deputy Leader), Suzi Coul, Merilyn Davies, Jane Doughty, Jeff Haine and Norman MacRae MBE.

Also present, Councillors: Joy Aitman, Alaa Al-Yousuf, Julian Cooper, Derek Cotterill, Colin Dingwall, Duncan Enright, Andy Graham, Dan Levy, Mark Johnson and Alex Postan.

Officers: Amy Bridgewater-Carnall (Senior Strategic Support Officer), Georgina Dyer (Chief Accountant), Mandy Fathers (Business Manager for Operations and Enabling), Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer), Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Bill Oddy (Group Manager - Commercial Development) and Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica).

77 Notice of Decisions

The notice of decisions taken at the meeting held on 19 January 2022 were agreed.

78 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

79 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Harvey declared an interest in Agenda Item 8 – Discretionary Rate Relief – Business Rates because he was a retailer.

80 Participation of the Public

There was none.

81 Receipt of Announcements

Passing of former Councillor Eve Coles

Councillor Mead announced the sad death of former District Councillor Eve Coles who had recently passed away. A formal eulogy would be given at the Council meeting next week but Members were asked to hold a moments silence in memory of Eve.

Ice Skating in Witney and Carterton

Councillor Coul was pleased to update Members on the successful take up of the ice skating provision in Witney and Carterton. This had been made possible using funds from the Welcome Back fund. Of the four thousand places available, all but half a dozen had been booked, just in time for the half term holidays.

Hedgehog Highways

Councillor Harvey was delighted to advise that the roll out of the Hedgehog Highway scheme had been well received and applications were being received from households hoping to receive one of the 250 plaques available.

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Consultation on Oxfordshire Plan 2050

Councillor Haine advised that the Economic & Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 : Summary of Consultation report at their meeting last week. The report had been well received with comments made on the housing numbers and a member of the public addressing the meeting from the Need not Greed group.

82 Budget 2022/23

Members received a report from the Section 151 Officer which asked them to consider the revenue budget proposals for 2022/23, the Councils Capital Programme for 2022/23 to 2030/31, and the level of Council Tax for 2022/23.

The report fulfilled the requirements of the Local Government Act 2003 relating to the Council's Treasury Management function, and implementation of the Prudential Code Capital Finance System arrangements. Cabinet would recommend the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, Capital Programme, Capital Strategy, Investment Strategy and Treasury Management Strategy to Council for approval. The report also included the Chief Finance Officer's report on the robustness of estimates and the adequacy of the Council's reserves.

The report advised that the draft base budget had been considered by Cabinet on 19 January and Council on 26 January 2022. This report updated Members on the proposed changes to any expenditure budgets and funding streams and outlined the feedback received from public consultation. In addition, the Council's suite of financial documents for 2022/23 were also included.

The report highlighted the main points including a number of late updates and notifications from Central Government. Whilst the revenue budget remained mainly unchanged, there were increased income expectations, an amendment to funding calculated as part of the NNDR I submission and adjustments to Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) and interest on borrowing. The budget changes were detailed on page 14 of the document pack.

The report concluded with a summary advising that overall the Council was in a strong position this year but funding cuts were expected to pose challenges from next year onwards. The healthy reserves cushion the Council from the immediate impact of that, while plans were in place to mitigate it by generating further income to reduce the reliance on government funding streams beyond our control. All of this was discussed in detail in the Strategy papers and CFOs report attached at Annex K to the report.

Councillor Coul introduced the report and reminded Members that this budget had been discussed at length at Cabinet and Scrutiny. Councillor Coul reiterated that the Council was in a strong position overall with healthy reserves to help mitigate future funding cuts. She therefore proposed the recommendations as laid out and this was seconded by Councillor Mead. In seconding the proposal, the Leader expressed her thanks to all of the officers involved in collating the report which had not been an easy task with a lot of late information and additions from government.

Councillor Postan addressed the meeting and reminded Members of the work that the Finance Team had undertaken in processing over £100 million in grants to local communities, whilst also administering the budget process.

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Councillor MacRae added his support and applauded the work of the Finance Team, who had worked hard to present this budget, under difficult circumstances.

In response to a query from Councillor Cooper, the Chief Accountant provided clarification on the Business Rates pool, administered by Cherwell District Council and explained that the budget did not contain details of any potential gain. She advised that the amount was difficult to predict but could be in the region of £300k to £600k. Mrs Dyer assured the meeting that an estimate would be forthcoming in March with a view to the final results being received towards the end of May.

Councillor Graham queried how the figure relating to interest on long term loans had been reached in paragraph 2.6 of the report. Mrs Griffiths advised that the Medium Term Financial Strategy was a forecast, it had been agreed in the Capital Investment Strategy that the Council would make £10 million investment, with the assumption that £10 million would be borrowed to achieve this.

Councillor Coul reminded the meeting that the Capital Investment Strategy had been agreed and would be reviewed in due course but any potential future investments would undergo full scrutiny and could include the provision of solar energy amongst other opportunities.

Having read the report and having heard from the Members present, Cabinet

Resolved that

a) The following be recommended to Council for approval:

- (i) The updated Medium Term Financial Strategy in Annex A;
- (ii) General Fund revenue budgets as summarised in Annex B;
- (iii) The Capital Programme for 2021/22 to 2030/31 set out in Annex E;
- (iv) Fees and Charges for 2022/23 as set out in Annex D;
- (v) The Council's Pay Policy Statement as set out in Annex F;
- (vi) The Council's Capital Strategy 2022/23 as set out in Annex G;
- (vii) The Council's Investment Strategy 2022/23 as set out in Annex H;
- (viii) The Council's Treasury Management Strategy 2022/23 as set out in Annex I;
- (ix) The level of District Council Tax for 2022/23 for a Band D property of £114.38; and

b) the estimate of Business Rates income for 2022/23, as set out in the excerpt from the government return NNDR1, in Annex L, and the Parish Precepts and Tax Levels set out in Annex M be noted.

83 Covid-19 Additional Relief Fund (CARF)

Members received a report from the Business Manager for Operations and Enabling which sought approval for the Council's Covid19 Additional Relief Fund (CARF) Discretionary Relief to local business ratepayers guidelines.

The report advised that on 15 December 2021, the Government announced details of a £1.5bn scheme providing Local Authorities with additional funding to help businesses with their business rates liabilities to further offset the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Guidance was also issued advising that billing authorities would be responsible for designing

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the scheme that was to operate in their areas. There were set guidelines that authorities had to adhere to and these were outlined at section 1.3 of the report.

Section 2 of the report detailed the qualifying criteria of businesses, ineligible organisations and advised that the funding would be awarded to eligible business rate accounts before the Council started its annual billing processes for 2022/2023 and would be automatically awarded to business rate accounts for the financial year 2021/2022.

Section 3 of the report explained the financial implications and the methodology used to recommend that 15% relief was chosen to provide capacity to award relief to any businesses that were not identified within the modelling but whom might be eligible.

An alternative option was that Members could consider an alternative percentage rate of award to that being recommended.

Councillor Coul introduced the report and highlighted the monumental volume of grants that Council officers had been managing and processing. She reminded Members of the complexity of many of the schemes and applauded the accuracy and timeliness of the officers. Councillor Coul requested that her thanks be expressed to all officers involved in administering these grants over the past few years. In proposing the report, Councillor Coul outlined that this relief was proposed to help those eligible businesses affected by Covid and would be automatically applied to business rate accounts.

This was seconded by Councillor Doughty.

In response to a query from Councillor Graham, officers confirmed that this scheme was not the latest one to be referred to in the Business Matters newsletter.

Having read the report and having heard from the Members present, Cabinet

Resolved that

- a) the scheme that awarded 15% relief to all eligible businesses in respect of Covid 19 Additional Relief Funding, be approved; and
- b) the Group Manager for Resident Services be requested to implement the scheme.

84

Discretionary Rate Relief - Business Rates (Expanded Retail Discount)

Members received a report from the Business Manager of Operations and Enabling, Mandy Fathers which asked them to consider a scheme of rate relief for retail premises as outlined by Government in the Autumn Statement 2021.

The report advised that the Government were introducing a new temporary relief for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in England, to support local high street as they adapted and recovered for 2022/23. The report noted that the government recognised that ongoing difficulties as well as longer-term challenges continued to face the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors.

Therefore, the Chancellor announced in his Autumn Budget that eligible hereditaments would receive 50% business rate relief up to a cash cap of £110,000 per business. Local authorities

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were expected to use their discretionary relief powers (under section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988, as amended) to grant these discounts in line with the relevant edibility criteria as detailed within Annex A to the report.

There were no alternative options available.

Councillor Coul introduced the report and highlighted that this scheme was aimed at assisting those businesses mainly affected by the Omicron strain of Covid-19. She proposed the recommendations as laid out and this was seconded by Councillor MacRae who expressed his support.

In response to a query from Councillor Levy, the Chief Accountant, Georgina Dyer advised that the Council expected to be reimbursed by Government, in line with previous schemes.

Having read the report and having heard from the Members present, Cabinet

Resolved that

- a) the Expanded Retail Discount scheme granting 50% relief to eligible businesses as set out in Annex A (up to a £110,000 cap), be approved; and
- b) the Group Manager for Resident Services be requested to implement the scheme as part of the annual billing processes.

85 Planned Expenditure of the Homelessness Prevention Grant 2022/23

Members received a report from the Group Manager for Resident Services which asked them to consider the planned expenditure of the Homelessness Prevention Grant for 2022/23.

The report advised that the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Local Communities (DLUHC) increased the level of funding allocated to homelessness services in 2021/22 and this had continued into 2022/23. This included an additional small uplift to ensure that local authorities were able to meet any new burdens following the implementation of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

The funding allocated to West Oxfordshire District Council for 2022/23 was £253,328 plus the Domestic Abuse New Burdens uplift of £6,828, giving a total of £260,156. The DLUHC had set out its expectations on how this fund was to be spent in a letter to Chief Executives dated 21st December 2021. A copy of this was attached at Annex A to the report. Section 2.2 of the report outlined how the Council proposed to meet the expectation set by DLUHC and further detail on each area was provided in paragraphs 2.3 to 2.10. Members were asked to approve the expenditure, along with the delegation of any amendments to the allocations, further uplifts or grants to the Housing Manager, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness and the Chief Finance Officer.

There were no alternative options considered as the allocation was ring fenced to specific outcomes, however, Members may want to consider other options that had not been referred to within the report

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness, Councillor Davies, introduced the report and signposted members to paragraph 2.2 of the report which outlined where the

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money would be spent. She reiterated the importance of flexibility when implementing the grants, to enable the funds to reach those in need. Councillor Davies therefore proposed the recommendations as laid out and this was seconded by Councillor Harvey.

Councillor Enright addressed the meeting and applauded the progress made in this area over the past three to four years. He expressed his thanks to Councillor Davies and the officers involved.

Following a question from Councillor Cooper, the Business Manager for Operational Services explained that the allocation of funding displayed in Annex A differed from area to area as a result of the different demographics. The Chief Executive added that this criteria was set by Government and was included in the letter from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Local Communities.

Councillor Graham added his support to the document and asked that the issue of sustainability be brought back to the attention of the minister responsible. The Leader agreed to put the issue back on his radar.

Having read the report and having heard from the Members present, Cabinet

Resolved that

- a) the expenditure detailed within paragraphs 2.1 to 2.10 of this report, is approved
- b) the delegation of any amendments to these allocations to the Housing Manager, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness and the Chief Finance Officer, is approved, subject to compliance with the ring fenced grant conditions; and
- c) the delegation of any other uplifts or grants that may be given over the financial year to contain Covid outbreaks or address increased demands on the Housing Service be given to the Housing Manager, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness and Chief Finance Officer, is approved, subject to compliance with the ring fenced grant conditions as set out in 3.1 to 3.5.

The Meeting closed at 2.27 pm

CHAIRMAN