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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, 29 June 2022**

PRESENT

Councillors: Alaa Al-Yousuf (Chair), Hugo Ashton, Michael Brooker, Andrew Coles, Julian Cooper, Harry Eaglestone, Gill Hill, Mark Johnson, Charlie Maynard and Ruth Smith

Officers: Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director, Publica), Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer), Georgina Dyer (Chief Accountant), Jasmine McWilliams (Assets Manager), Michelle Ouzman and Anne Learmonth (Strategic Support Officers).

1 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 April 2022 were approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

2 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Alaric Smith, Councillor Suzi Coul and Councillor Richard Langridge. Councillor Eaglestone substituted for Councillor Mead.

3 Committee appointments and start time for civic year 2022/23

The Committee confirmed the appointment of Councillor Al-Yousuf as Chair of the Committee and Councillor Alaric Smith as Vice Chair for the civic year 2022/2023.

The Chair proposed a vote of thanks for the outgoing Chair Councillor Cotterill and Vice-Chair Councillor Saul. The vote was unanimous.

Members agreed a start time of 2pm for the Committee for the civic year 2022/2023.

4 Chairs announcements

The Chair welcomed members to the Committee. He recommended the LGA workbook on effective scrutiny as useful background. The Chair said that the role of the Committee is to act as a critical friend and to add value wherever possible.

5 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

6 Participation of the Public

There were no participation of the public.

7 Committee Work Programme

The Chair invited any questions or comments regarding the Committee Work Programme.

The Chair highlighted Item 2 on the Committee Work Programme, the Decarbonisation Scheme at the Carterton Leisure centre which was scheduled to go to Cabinet in September. He asked if the Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee, (FMOS), would have sight of the report before Cabinet. Elizabeth Griffiths, Chief Finance Officer, agreed that it would be helpful for FMOS to see the report and because of the timing of both meetings agreed the report could be circulated by email. The Chair invited FMOS Committee Members to attend the Cabinet Meeting if they had any comments to make directly.

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Councillor Smith asked if the report would be circulated to the Climate and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee as it would be helpful when looking at carbon calculations. The Chief Finance Officer said she would arrange this.

The Chief Finance Officer gave further details on the Carterton Leisure Centre Decarbonisation Scheme. A grant of £1.3m was available to carry out the work but the impact of the new heating system might result in other, significantly higher, costs. Discussions with Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) had shown that between 2019 and 2023 utility costs were expected to increase by £750,000 across the district's leisure centres. In answer to a question from Councillor Maynard, the Chief Finance Officer confirmed that they were investigating a further solution including a hybrid solution in order to ensure that all outcomes had been optimised. Officers want to see all information to enable them to make an informed decision.

Councillor Coles queried whether users of the leisure centres had returned to pre-pandemic levels. It was confirmed the numbers were still lower. There was considerably more competition now, particularly from gyms which did not have the overheads involved in running swimming pools.

The Chair recognised that the discussion was important. The issue applied to all leisure centres. A report with an in depth business case would follow in September.

The Chair moved onto Task and Finish Group.

The Chair invited the Chief Finance Officer to give an update.

She explained that the Task and Finish group had been set up to look at the Council's Treasury Management Function. Arlingclose, the Council's current Treasury advisors, provided high level advice. Unlike the Oxfordshire County Council pension fund which was actively managed, the WODC funds were more passively managed. The finance team had drawn up a set of criteria that would need to be considered as part of the new contract due in December.

The Chair thanked the members of the Task and Finish group for its useful work. The subject now needed to be part of the FMOS Committee work programme rather than being delegated to a working group. He confirmed that the contract with Arlington Close would come to an end and a decision would be made about the future of the contract ahead of that.

The Chair listed concerns regarding the investment portfolio in particular compatibility regarding ambitions on zero carbon neutrality. He confirmed that climate objectives had been a high priority for the Committee for 3 years and that it was now important for climate objectives to be included on the Work Programme.

The Chair concluded that much of the Committees business would flow from Council and Cabinet but that other topics would come forward during the year. The important consideration was whether or not the Committee could add value.

Resolved that the Committee Work Programme be noted.

8

Cabinet Work Programme

The Chair invited comments for The Cabinet Work Programme.

Frank Wilson, Group Finance Director, Publica, confirmed that further discussions were being held with Blenheim Estates and Oxfordshire County Council about the review of options at Hensington Road, Woodstock and a report will be on the Cabinet Work Programme in September.

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The Chair noted that the Agile Work Project is on schedule and would come to the Committee once it had been agreed by Cabinet. It was noted that the draft Developer Contributions SPD document related to Section 106 and that the consultation had been delayed until August. The Group Finance Officer confirmed that the purchase of land at Langel Common was still in the legal stages but that the aim was to complete by the end of July with ideally a long lease to the Wychwood Project following for land management purposes.

It was confirmed that Councillor Rylett would be taking the Funding West End Link Survey to the next Cabinet meeting.

Resolved that the Cabinet Work Programme be noted.

9 Council Priorities and Service Performance Report 2021-22 Quarter Four

The Chair invited comments or questions for Council Priorities and Service Performance Report 2021 – 22 Quarter Four.

There was a discussion about the Finance Performance Summary specifically bad debt. The Chief Finance Officer explained the new Credit Controller had made a significant difference. Earlier interventions in the recovery process had been introduced and had reduced debt. She agreed to provide details about how the debt had been reduced or written off. The Chief Accountant agreed to check the figures which did not add up.

Councillors discussed the profile budget. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the information provided is a draft set of accounts that would be sent to Members for approval. The budget profile figures in published reports are seasonally profiled. The final accounts are almost complete and the underspend on the cost of services was confirmed as correct with the surplus largely due to the costs of printing and sending out paperwork during the pandemic. Going forward Councillors would be asked how they wished to receive agenda packs.

Councillor Johnson reported that the dedicated email address set up for the Ukrainian families was not working and he asked how many Ukrainian families were being sponsored. The Chair asked for the question to be answered by officers after the meeting.

There was a discussion about Customer Services targets and officers were asked to clarify if the figures were daily or weekly. The Chief Finance Officer explained that data collection is more difficult where services are shared. The Chair asked that the head of Customer Services attend the next meeting of the Committee to give a presentation on how data is gathered and presented.

The Communities Team was congratulated for work during Covid and the Councillors asked if the team would continue to be funded and staffed. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that budgets had been agreed in February and that officers were now looking at new initiatives to address the cost of living crisis and other emerging priorities. It was noted that employing staff short term to cover initiatives did not help with staff retention.

Frank Wilson, the Group Finance Director, Publica, agreed that the Council need to collect more data and improve reporting. He said that more data could be added to the Member's Portal.

Resolved Council Priorities and Service Performance Report 2021 – 22 Q4 be noted.

10 Investment Property Review and Outturn 21/22

The Assets Manager presented the report. The Chair invited Members to ask questions.

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There was a discussion regarding the financial investments. Frank Wilson, the Group Finance Director, Publica, explained that the Council had moved to investing in bricks and mortar in 2008 and would have used capital receipts to fund the Council's spending programme. The Chair clarified that money earned is earmarked for future spending. He added that the topic of Investment will be on the Work Programme and will come to a future meeting of the Committee.

Resolved that the Investment Property Review and Outturn 21/11 be noted.

II Members Questions

The Chair congratulated the new Members on their questions.

The Chair invited Members to ask questions. There were none. The Chair closed the meeting.

The Meeting closed at 3.26pm

CHAIR