

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, 28 September 2022**

PRESENT

Councillors: Alaa Al-Yousuf (Chair), Alaric Smith (Vice-Chair), Hugo Ashton (to item 22), Andrew Coles, Julian Cooper, Suzi Coul (to item 20) Gill Hill, Mark Johnson, Richard Langridge, Charlie Maynard, Michele Mead and Ruth Smith.

Also present: Councillor Dan Levy (Cabinet Member for Finance).

Officers: Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer), Phil Martin (Group Manager, Business Services) Ciaran Okane (Senior Procurement Officer) Michelle Clifford (Business Manager - Customer Experience & Resources) Lisa Cresswell (Customer Services Manager) Alicia Oldman (Customer Services) and Janet Eustace (Democratic Services).

12 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 June 2022 were approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

13 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Michael Brooker and Alex Wilson.

14 Chairs announcements

There were none.

15 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

16 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

17. New Procurement and Contract Management Strategy

Ciaran Okane (Senior Procurement Officer) presented an updated draft Procurement and Contract Management Strategy for comment and consideration by the Committee. He explained that the updated document had Social Value and the Climate Change agenda embedded within it.

In discussion Councillors sought assurances that the strategy would maximise competition, would not be overly bureaucratic and would provide value for money. Mr Okane explained that there were separate Contract Procedural Rules which were available on the web site and that the Internal Commissioning Board sought to minimise red tape. He confirmed that contracts would be listed on the Contracts Register which is posted on the website.

Councillor Ruth Smith welcomed the emphasis on Social Value and Climate Change but asked whether it was possible to go further and include apprenticeships and links to the living wage. Mr Okane undertook to make these changes before submitting the Strategy to Cabinet.

Resolved to note the updated Procurement and Contract Management Strategy and recommend it for approval by Cabinet.

18 Treasury Management Update

Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer) advised Members of the latest position with regard to the re-tendering of the Treasury Management Advisors Contract. She explained that the proposed specification provided for a Basic Level of Treasury Management Service as well as an enhanced Level of Service. Partner Councils would be free to choose the level that they required but she advised that as the S151 Officer for West Oxfordshire District Council she recommended that an enhanced level was needed to provide a more proactive approach to Treasury Management.

In discussion, Councillors commented that the financial benefit of the enhanced service was not clear and questioned whether the Council's fund was sufficiently large to justify the higher costs of an enhanced service. It was suggested that there may be suitably qualified people in the area who could provide free financial advice.

The Chair emphasised that the Council's Treasury Team had to make decisions in real time. They needed the best advice available and the ability to react swiftly. A small forum of advisors could be helpful but would slow down decision making.

In response to a question about what happens in other Councils, the Chief Finance Officer explained that the contract was currently shared with Cotswold District Council who have similar concerns. She would bring another paper to the Committee once there was an indication of the possible costs of both levels of service.

Resolved that the Committee note the latest position with regard to the re-tendering of the Treasury Management Advisors.

19 Greenwich Leisure Limited Response to Energy Crisis

The Chief Finance Officer presented an update on how Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) is responding to the energy crisis.

She explained that business had been slow to pick up post pandemic but that GLL was now being hit by a dramatic increase in utility costs of £750,000 from 2019 actuals to 2023 projections. The Council's contractual position was strong with the risk resting with GLL but in reality they were unlikely to be able to pay the sums owed unless business recovered. She was pressing GLL to come forward with innovative ideas to maximise footfall and increase income. She also noted that the roof on the Chipping Norton Leisure Centre needed major repairs with the cost of this falling to the Council.

Councillors expressed concerns that GLL had become complacent relying on local government contracts. They reported having received complaints about the dirty conditions of changing rooms and there was concern that staffing shortages were adding to the problems. Privately owned gyms with smaller, and therefore much lower cost facilities were able to offer much more attractive prices, particularly to youngsters. Councillors asked whether GLL was solvent. The Chief Finance Officer said they had told the Council that they were. She would make more detailed enquiries but that the company was not obliged to share details of its finances, outside of the West

Oxfordshire Leisure Centres, that weren't already in the public domain.

Councillor Johnson queried the 281% uplift in utility costs which compared with a national figure of 133%. The Chief Finance Officer said it was likely to do with the period reviewed but that she would ask GLL for the underlying calculation.

There was a discussion about the viability of the open air pool at Woodstock and Councillor Cooper asked that officers check the freehold ownership of the facility.

The Chief Finance Officer expressed concerns that there was no resource for strategic support for Leisure in Publica and that she was discussing this with the Chief Executive and the Cabinet.

Resolved that the Committee noted an update on how Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) are responding to the energy crisis.

Councillor Coul left the meeting at 3.12pm

20 Service Performance Report - Quarter I

Michelle Clifford (Business Manager - Customer Experience & Resources) introduced Lisa Cresswell (Customer Services Manager) who provided details about the Customer Service Quarter I figures. She explained that the graph showed average figures for time taken to respond the calls, time on calls and after call work. It was agreed that the tables should be given headings to make explain what they showed.

In response to queries from Councillors, Ms Cresswell explained that a period of high staff turnover had resulted in slower response times and temps had been brought in to answer questions concerning the government's announcements about extra fuel payments. A support officer had been recruited to consider how advisors could operate more efficiently. Nine advisors worked in West Oxfordshire with twelve covering the wider area. This helped to build resilience. Advisors were very well trained and quickly picked up on local issues.

Monday mornings and lunchtimes were pinch points but the team were looking to find solutions to this. The system currently in use does not tell the caller their position in the queue nor record calls. The emphasis was on encouraging people to make more use of the web site but it was noted that there were people who preferred to visit the Town Centre Shop or to ring in. Emergency Out of Hours Cover is provided by a contractor backed up by On Call Duty Officers. It was recognised that the Live Chat function needed improvement.

The Chair thanked the Customer Services team for attending the meeting and asked that they convey the Committee thanks to the Advisors for the excellent service they provide.

The Committee considered other aspects of the Service Performance Report. It was noted that aged debt continued to fall. The Chair queried whether the Committee should receive more details about the performance of the Planning department and there was discussion about which of the Scrutiny Committees should receive this information.

Trade Waste was an area where a backlog had built up but this was now being actively addressed. It was confirmed that the Ukrainian families in the district were not included on the Housing List. Those that were moving on from staying with hosts were looking to move to the Private Rented sector.

Resolved to note the 2022/23 Q1 service performance report.

21 **Committee Work Programme**

The Chair asked for comments the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2020/2021.

Councillor Cooper suggested that there be a report on the possibility of residents moving from paying rates in 10 instalments to 12. The Chief Finance Officer said that this facility was already available so a report was not required.

It was noted that the Waste Contract was due for renewal towards the end of 2023. Work had already started on this and a paper would be coming forward in March 2023.

Resolved to note the Scrutiny work programme.

Councillor Ashton left the meeting at 4.05 pm

22 **Cabinet Work Programme**

The Chair invited comments on the Cabinet Work Programme published September 2022.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that work was progressing on the review options for Hensington Road, Woodstock and she hoped that a report would come forward to Cabinet by December. She said that the paper on Commercial Investment in Solar VP had not come to the Committee as it was primarily an update on the project which was in very early stages and did not contain any business case for the committee to consider.

Councillor Coles welcomed the disposals of the play areas to Witney Town Council.

Resolved to note the Cabinet work programme.

The Meeting ended at 4.10pm

CHAIR