

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Council

Held in the Council Chamber at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 22 March 2023**

PRESENT

Councillors: Julian Cooper (Chair), Andrew Coles (Vice-Chair), Andrew Prosser, Mike Cahill, Joy Aitman, Alaa Al-Yousuf, Andrew Beaney, Jill Bull, Nathalie Chapple, Owen Collins, Jane Doughty, Harry Eaglestone, Duncan Enright, Ted Fenton, Andy Graham, Jeff Haine, Gill Hill, David Jackson, Richard Langridge, Nick Leverton, Norman MacRae MBE, Martin McBride, Michele Mead, Elizabeth Poskitt, Carl Rylett, Geoff Saul, Harry St John, Mathew Parkinson, Colin Dingwall, Andy Goodwin, Mark Johnson, Lysette Nicholls, Alex Wilson, Lidia Arciszewska, Michael Brooker, David Cooper, Natalie King, Dan Levy, Charlie Maynard, Rosie Pearson, Rizvana Poole, Alaric Smith and Ruth Smith.

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), Frank Wilson (Executive Finance Director - Publica), Elizabeth Griffiths (Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer), Susan Sale (Monitoring Officer), Bill Oddy (Assistant Director, Commercial Development), Phil Martin (Assistant Director, Business Services), Andrew Brown (Business Manager, Democratic Services), Maria Harper (Democratic Services Officer), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer), Michelle Ouzman (Democratic Services Officer) and Barry Clack (Communications Officer).

Other Councillors in attendance: Nil.

CL.63 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from the following Councillors:

L Ashbourne, H Ashton, L Leffman and S Coul.

CL.64 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

CL.65 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 15 February 2023, were unanimously approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record, subject to page 2 of the previous meeting minutes, stating Councillor Michael Brooker, not Councillor Matthew Brooker.

This was subsequently amended by Democratic Services.

CL.66 Receipt of Announcements

The Chair of the Council, Councillor Julian Cooper, started by thanking the public for their attendance at their meeting, and also for their anticipated engagement during the meeting. The Chair also welcomed Rohanna Saunders to the public gallery – Miss Saunders was in attendance as a guest of Councillor Ted Fenton, and is a local sixth form student studying politics.

The Chair, in his last Council undertaking the role, paid tribute to all councillors for allowing him the privilege of the Chair. The Chair also put on record his thanks to the Council's Vice-Chair, Councillor Andrew Coles for his support to the Chair. The Chair also thanked the Council's staff for their support during the Chair's time in the role.

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The Chair reminded members of the unique challenges faced during the municipal year, such as the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and the pending Coronation of His Majesty Charles III. Additional events saw the Chair judging cake, and walking on hot coals to raise money for Charity.

The Chair paid tribute to the Members of the Council that were standing down at the next District Elections in May 2023. Councillors Coul, Eaglestone, Hill, MacRae, Chapple, Ashbourne & Collins. Amongst the Members standing down were former Chairs of the Council, as well as past members of Cabinet. The Chair thanked these Members for their loyal and committed service to West Oxfordshire District Council, and wished them all the best for the future.

The Chair also congratulated Councillor Colin Dingwall for his invitation to the upcoming Royal Garden Party, and stated that his invitation was a full reflection of the outstanding service given to the Council.

Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for the Environment, rose to inform Members that the day of the meeting was also World Water Day. Councillor Arciszewska updated Council on the work and discussions undertaken with Thames Water, underpinned by Windrush against Sewage Pollution.

Councillor Arciszewska encouraged Members to sign a parliamentary petition, number 633609, relating to the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) and work carried out by the Angling Trust.

Councillor Andy Goodwin stated that he was also working with the water companies to settle an ongoing two-year problem in Eynsham, and asked Councillor Arciszewska where the talks between WODC and Thames Water had got to. Councillor Arciszewska responded stating that talks had discussed the capacity of Sewage Treatment Works and the key components, such as population and usage of water, that have been used to treat waste water and sewage across the District.

Rising on a point of order during the response, Councillor Norman MacRae MBE queried whether the response given to Councillor Goodwin was related to the question raised. The Chair confirmed that the response was an answer to the question raised, and in order to save time, asked Councillor Arciszewska to write to Councillor Goodwin and share the response with Members.

Councillor Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Economic Development, was pleased to announce the introduction of an advisory board, working on business support and skills over the coming years. Councillor Enright stated that work would be undertaken on the viability and future of the district's market towns, such as Carterton. A biodiversity 'toolkit' would be available to Town and Parish Councils, as well as other organisations in the district.

Councillor Enright also updated Council on the ongoing projects being undertaken to advance the outlook on Marriott's Walk in Witney, such as arts and planting, and outdoor trading solutions. This will also help the hospitality sector, increase footfall on Witney Town Centre, and help to support the local economy.

CL.67 Participation of the Public

Karen Squibb-Williams, Chair of 'Stop Botley West Campaign, Oxfordshire', read out the following question, which was responded to by Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the

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QI – In the current stages of proclaimed climate emergency, energy crises and the lemming-like rush to renewables, is this community (Oxfordshire) at risk of being led to believe that the proposal for the UK's largest ever ground mounted solar park is actually a good thing?, bearing in mind that:-

- a. The so-called informal “public consultation” provided by the Developer (“PVDP”) was notably lacking in any detail, and could not, and did not, help the public to appreciate just what was being planned;
- b. The Developer’s boast that Botley West Solar Farm will provide enough electricity for 330,000 homes (impliedly in Oxfordshire) is utterly misleading, given that any generated electricity, should this proposal go ahead, will be fed directly into the National Grid, and will end up anywhere, possibly even for sale;
- c. The assault on Oxford’s Green Belt is quite unprecedented and seriously damaging to the whole intent and purpose of green belts; this proposal intends to build about 75% of its industrialised landscape on that Green Belt including most of the “middle section”, which is stretching from Bladon and Begbroke to Cassington, and all of the southern section at Cumnor;
- d. Solar energy is proven beyond doubt to be the least efficient method of renewable energy generation, especially when compared to wind power, and indeed the most damaging to the natural environment, with absolutely no evidence to show that solar farms can be reasonably restored to agriculture at the end of their useful life without considerable cost.

AI – The initial consultation on the Botley West Solar Farm initial proposal, focused primarily on the benefits of the scheme and as expected with early consultation of this kind, there was limited information available on the wide ranging potential impacts of the proposal.

It is clear that the scale of this proposal and total greenfield land take required, could result in a range of impacts on the natural & historic environment and directly affect a large number of communities.

The response to the initial consultation clearly shows, that the community understands how building a solar farm at such a large scale could detrimentally impact the local environment, particularly in proximity to communities in West Oxfordshire and beyond.

The promoters of the solar farm will understandably from their viewpoint, focus on the potential benefits of the scheme, whether it’s on the potential to deliver a supply of renewable energy, to contribute towards meeting net zero carbon targets or to contribute to national energy security.

In determining whether the proposal should be granted permission however, the Planning Inspectorate must look at the balance of benefits and harms of the proposed scheme.

There is no doubt that the solar farm will result in a range of both harms and benefits and the promoters of the Solar farm must make clear what these are, so that a balanced judgment can be made on the appropriateness of the scheme.

We await further details of the proposal, as well as detailed assessment of the environmental impacts of the solar farm, so that we can decide, on balance whether the Botley West Solar Farm is a good thing or not. Communities will benefit from more detailed information that will

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be published through the developer's detailed consultation, to decide themselves whether the proposal is a good thing.

It is clear to us, from the correspondence we have received so far, that the community are concerned about the impacts of the solar farm. The scale, location, impacts on landscape and biodiversity, the use of farmland and availability of alternative renewable technologies and locations, all shape the community view, that the solar farm as currently proposed is not appropriate. There has been very little emphasis on the benefits of the proposal arising from the affected communities to date.

We know that there is scepticism about the energy generating claims made by the solar farm promoter and we will request clarity to be provided on these claims.

We are required to report on the local impacts of the proposed solar farm. Consideration will be given to the impacts on Green Belt, landscape, biodiversity, the health and wellbeing of communities, heritage and flood risk, and we will submit our Local Impact Report as part of the decision making process.

The efficiency of solar panels and whether this is a viable proposal, is ultimately a decision for the developer and landowner. It is apparent that they consider the proposal to be commercially viable, although the scale of the proposal is likely to have a bearing on such viability and the ability to make financial returns.

It is unlikely that large scale wind farms would be considered appropriate within the West Oxfordshire landscape, so we must accept that such speculative proposals for other renewable energy technologies are to be expected. That is clear from the significant number of applications we have received for new solar farm developments in Oxfordshire.

In the absence of a clear strategy for renewable energy generation, decisions will be made on an ad-hoc basis, considering each individual scheme on its own merits, taking account of the cumulative impact of all other planned development, which in the case of West Oxfordshire is significant.

We wish to make a fully informed judgment as to whether the harms of the proposal outweigh the benefits and will carry out any assessments as considered necessary to inform this.

As far as we are aware, the community, at present, is not convinced of the merits of the draft proposal as outlined to them.

The District Council declared a climate emergency in 2019. We support measures to help us achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050, and recognise the importance of renewable energy generation in achieving such goals. We also recognise however, as the community does, that the race to increase renewable energy capacity should not be at the expense of the environment or the health & wellbeing of our communities.

We therefore wish to reassure the community that we are taking the Botley West Solar Farm scheme seriously, but haven't yet reached a position, until all that evidence is gathered.

Q1a – As I understand it, there are two elements that West Oxfordshire District Council we be involved in. One is to review the statement of community consultation, and the other is to carry out your impact assessment. Please can you reassure us that these things will be done well and rigorously, and that they will be using valid and scientific data over the claims of PR and marketing?

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A1a – Yes, is the real answer to that one and I wouldn't say anything other. I actually believe in robust testing and challenge and proper evidence that can actually be challenged too.

CL.68 Questions by Members

Questions by Members, as listed on the agenda, and the responses to those questions, which had been circulated in advance, were taken as read. The Chair invited the questioners to ask a supplementary question and then invited the relevant Executive Members to respond. The questions and responses were as follows:

Q1 – Councillor Dr. Alaa Al-Yousuf, to Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for the Environment:

Will the Executive Member commit to "putting residents first" when it comes to the future of the waste and recycling service?

A1 – Absolutely! Cllr Dr. Al-Yousuf can be assured that residents will always come first in any considerations regarding waste and recycling service in West Oxfordshire.

Q1a – I take it that if the Executive Member, whoever that might be going forward, were to be presented with options to cut the waste and recycling service in order to save money, that at the expense of increasing the burden on residents, in terms of more recycling bins and procedures, that option would not automatically be taken on, if it does mean that residents won't be put first?

A1a – We are currently in the process of a major review of the waste and recycling service, and in that review, we consider first the convenience of service to the residents, and the value for money to the taxpayer. There will be no major changes to the services that are currently offered, without a proper, public consultation. The review is ongoing and will take a while.

Q2 – Councillor Dr. Alaa Al-Yousuf, to Councillor Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Economic Development:

Can the Deputy Leader confirm that Marriott's Walk will be managed as per the approved business plan to prioritise increasing rental income to support services for the District as a whole through the regeneration of the site in order to increase footfall?

A2 – The business case associated with the acquisition of Marriott's Walk will be used to guide us through the process of re-energising the development to deliver more to the residents of Witney, West Oxfordshire and beyond. This will mean additional investment in empty units to bring them into occupation which will drive footfall and yes rental growth. I have no doubt that there will be variations in timing and values within the process of implementing the regeneration but we will be steered by the direction of travel as set out in the business case.

Q2a – My supplementary question was, more or less, addressed in the announcement that the Deputy Leader made earlier in the meeting, but for further clarity if I may, please would you explain what and when the next steps will be in the regeneration of the site. I would be grateful if you could expand on these, and when this will be brought back to my scrutiny committee.

A2a – On your second point, that one is easy as it is, of course, a matter for the scrutiny committee. It is up to them to request when they want to hear more information and what they would like to explore. I welcome the assistance of the scrutiny committee in planning the future of this exciting development.

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I am afraid I have no firm dates, but I can reassure the Member that it will be a small number of weeks, rather than months away, that you will be able to see a clear difference in the operation of Marriott's Walk, and the management team there are actively engaged with council officers in planning a series of events. We discussed recently an event in Witney, which would be a festival of food & drink – a large market, if you like, taking place over three days at the end of September into early October, which we hope will include Marriott's Walk. When I say we, I mean, as you might expect from the Council, local traders, including market traders on the charter market, representatives from the emergency services, the chamber of commerce, and local transport provision representation so that we can engage with them as to how to make the best use out of not only Marriott's Walk, but also the whole High Street, for expanding the number of events and markets that we hold across Witney town. This is also something we will be looking to achieve in our other market towns. We believe that this is the key, not only to addressing the cost of living crisis, but having affordable and open events for people right across the district. It is also a great way for people to supplement their income by managing a market stall too, so we are looking also to young, enterprising people to take part in those events.

They will also have music and dancing!

Q3 – Councillor Ted Fenton, to Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for the Environment:

How often since May 2022 have replacement (as a result of breakdown or other reason) recycling collection vehicles had to be used which are unable to keep glass and other recycling materials separate? How many vehicles (e.g. those used on narrow streets) in regular use are unable to keep glass and other recycling materials separate?

A3 – Ubico does not record this specific information, because commonly when a vehicle experiences a breakdown it can be fixed the same day and so the crew would return to the depot and pick up a spare, then go back out to continue making collections. In some instances, they then return to the depot when the split back vehicle is fixed and then go back and make the remaining collections.

The contamination levels are within the tolerances set out in the contract between the Council and Suez, which receives the recycling material and then sorts it into its component commodities. There are two vehicles used on the narrow access collection rounds which aren't able to accept separate glass and this is sorted by Suez at the recycling plant.

Q3a – I have to say that I was rather surprised to hear that records are not kept about the reliability of the vehicles used for the collection of waste – I would have thought they were a major part of the operation, and I wonder if the Executive Member agrees with me that it would be a good idea going forward to monitor vehicle breakdowns and keep a record of how often they happen?

A3a – I believe that records are being kept, but it is impossible to say at what point a vehicle broke down and was subsequently repaired & returned into operation, and that is difficult at this moment. However, the contracted waste and recycling facility is perfectly suited to sorting out glass away from other dry materials, and there is no credible damage to the operation if some glass does slip through into dry material.

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Q4 – Councillor Norman MacRae MBE, to Councillor Joy Aitman, Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities:

The District Council continues to hold money from developers to be used for the provision of a 3G pitch in Witney. Please update the Council as to when this money will be spent and when will the very much needed facility be built?

A4 – As members are aware the sum of £941,335.54 (includes indexation) was secured in 2016 from the Downs Road development towards the provision of grassroots football development in Witney. In addition to this a further £22,801.30 (includes indexation) was secured from the same development towards either the provision of a spectator stand for a football pitch(es) in Witney or the surrounding area or the improvement of football facilities in Witney or the surrounding area. Giving a collective sum of £964,136.84, which has an expiry clause of 08/07/29, the final instalment for this was received in December 2021.

Officers have met on several occasions to determine the optimum site for a 3G facility – including West Witney Sports Ground (owned by Witney Town Council). Although follow consultation with WODC Planning Development Management, there would be planning constraints on the site in terms of sports lighting and the existing ancillary facilities are not fit for purpose. Following this Officers met with Woodgreen School who expressed an interest in locating the 3G pitch on their site. Officers intend to consult with Henry Box School as well, with the recommendation for the two schools to submit Business Cases for locating the facility at their sites if they are interested, discussions need to be held with both schools regarding this.

In order to support this piece of work and the wider Playing Pitch Strategy, Officers are in the process of appointing a designated districtwide post to support the delivery of the Playing Pitch Strategy, which will incorporate the new 3G provision in Witney.

Q4a – Witney and West Oxfordshire sports clubs are desperately crying out for more football pitches. Whilst it is great that the Council has adopted a playing pitch strategy, the Executive Member promised, at a meeting held at West Witney Sport club in October 2022, that there would be a working group in Witney formed to take this forward. Why has this group not yet been formed, when will it be set up, and who will be members of the group?

A4a* – Can I start by saying that at the meeting that was set up, I wasn't actually invited to, and neither were any other people involved in the playing pitches. At the meeting, which was supposedly chaired, the two speakers, Councillor Smith and I were abused by attendees and the meeting was not chaired properly to prevent such abuse.

I would have thought that as a Chair, we would have been allowed to have a voice and people prevented from continually shouting out at that meeting, therefore it was actually felt that we would not meet with that group again because we felt totally abused and nothing was accomplished. Therefore I have individually spoken to the football teams that were there and have discussed plans going forward. We have also employed staff to follow through on the whole playing pitch strategy, so that this is addressed very quickly. We are also working with the town councils to make sure that this goes ahead, particularly in Witney. Witney Town Council do a lot of work and spend a lot of money on football, and are happy to carry on with that, and have laid on extra training pitches, and are looking at bringing other fields up to standard that have recently fallen by the wayside in terms of upkeep.

As you know, we are looking for the provision of an all-weather playing surface in Carterton, so hopefully that will move along very quickly, so that West Oxfordshire can have adequate

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football pitches, as well as pitches for other sports. We have spoken to rugby and cricket clubs also. We are looking at the whole policy, right across the district or all sports.

At that meeting, there was also no female representation for women's and girls' football, so we will look at ways in which we can also champion that.

*During the response to supplementary question 4, a minor disturbance occurred in the public gallery of the Council Chamber. The Chair reminded public attendees that they would be removed from the Council Chamber if order was not kept.

Councillor Norman MacRae MBE, rose to put on record his regret at the abuse that Councillors Aitman and Smith had endured at the public meeting.

Q5a – Has this Council applied for a Government grant that was made available for indoor and outdoor pools?

A5a – We are going to apply for the grant, but at this stage it is unclear how much the grant will be and how we do apply for it. But of course we will be looking for more money so that our pools do not have to close or reduce the amount of service. With the recent costs of energy, pools are a major drain on resources, in fact 80% of the energy costs incurred are for heating pools, and this may not be seen as a good use of monies. It's essentially the same as putting your home heating on full blast then opening all the windows.

There will be a fantastic range of events at GLL and at the pool when it opens, and if anybody has a dog, the last day of opening will even be a doggy paddle!

Q6 – Councillor Ted Fenton, to Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for the Environment:

How many Food Waste caddies in particular and other household waste/recycling containers in general, have been replaced in the last year by WODC because householders' original ones have been damaged?

A6 – The Council doesn't record the number of containers which need to be replaced as a result of solely being damaged. Instead all requests for new containers are recorded on the customer records management system (CRM) and individual requests are raised for Ubico to action. The number of containers requested since 1st April 2022 are shown below:

- 1737 x Combination of 180 litre (ltr) and 240 ltr Refuse bins;
- 3297 x 240 ltr Recycling bins;
- 15 x 360 ltr Recycling bins;
- 538 x 240 ltr Garden Waste bins;
- 896 X 23 ltr External Food Caddy;
- 193 x 44 ltr Black Boxes.

Q6a – I am sorry that there aren't records kept of how many containers have been replaced because they are damaged, but the reason for my question is because I have received quite a number of complaints from residents, indeed I have been a victim of it myself, that sometimes collection crews seem to be under so much time pressure to complete their rounds that, particularly food waste caddies that can be slung, are slung, and that they don't always land in one piece.

You sometimes can put the lid back on, but sometimes bits break off, and they then can't be repaired & have to be replaced.

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I wonder if the Executive Member would commit to looking in to the pressure that crews are put under to ensure timely completion of their rounds and daily business, and see if there is any way that they can be guided to put the containers down, rather than be thrown down.

A6a – I agree with the Member, that sometimes food bins do become damaged, and I have seen it for myself. Sometimes they are not damaged by the crews, but sometimes caddies can be destroyed by events such as high winds blowing the caddies in to the road and then they are subsequently ran over by vehicles.

We are seeing a lot of requests for waste bin replacements and this in turn, does cost the Council £100,000 per year. This is a very high number, and this needs to be looked into in order to save money, and this expenditure on bins is unnecessary. As part of the current review, we are going to look into this process and attempt to make it better.

CL.69 Recommendation from Executive to Council

Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for the Environment, introduced the report, which would ask Council to agree a recommendation made to Council by the Executive on 8 March 2023, where by the Council's waste contract with Ubico, would be extended until 31 March 2026.

Councillor Arciszewska proposed that the recommendation made by the Executive be adopted by Council. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham, was put to a vote and agreed unanimously.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Extend the current waste contract with Ubico until 31 March 2026.

CL.70 Recommendations from Independent Remuneration Panel

Councillor Julian Cooper, Chair of the Council, introduced the report, which outlined the findings of the Council's Independent Remuneration Panel regarding Member's Allowances. By law, the Council is required to appoint an Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP), which recommends the level of allowances for Councillors. The Panel was made up of three persons who were independent of the District Council.

Councillor Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Economic Development, rose to thank the members of the Panel for the time they had invested in bringing forward their report to be determined at the meeting.

Councillor Michele Mead also thanked the Panel for the work they had undertaken to build the report and recommendations for Council's consideration. Councillor Mead also stated that it was not the time to be entertaining an increase in member allowances, owing to the cost of living crisis being endured across the country, and reminded Members that revenue generated by the Council should be wholly spent on services and residents, not on an uplift in Council Member allowances.

Councillor Richard Langridge stated that the meeting of the Panel with officers took place on the same day of a Lowlands Area Planning Sub-Committee, which the Member chairs, and this was a factor in Councillor Langridge not being able to make representations to the Panel as a result. Councillor Langridge asked that the next meeting of the Independent Remuneration Panel be held on a day when no Council or Committee Meetings are due to take place.

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Councillor Harry St. John asked for clarity on some of the allowance figures contained within the Panel's report, which were recommended to be reduced for the next year, and if any reductions were also to be backdated, as well as those that had been recommended for uplift.

Councillor Charlie Maynard asked if Council knew of any other public or local authorities that would, if Council were to agree the recommendations, vote to lower their pay or allowances, when levels of inflation are at their highest levels for over 40 years.

Councillor Norman MacRae MBE also thanked the panel for their excellent work on the subject. Councillor MacRae added that he would not support any uplift in member allowances, when Council, at the last meeting, voted to increase levels of Council Tax by the highest amount possible, adding that this would be grossly unfair and unjust.

Councillor Julian Cooper proposed that Council adopt the findings and recommendations made to it by the Independent Remuneration Panel. This was seconded by Councillor Andrew Coles. This was put to a vote, and there were 25 votes for, 18 votes against and Nil abstentions. The vote carried.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Note the report of the Independent Remuneration Panel (Annex A);
2. Thank the Independent Remuneration Panel for their work;
3. Agree that a backdated uplift of 4.04% will be applied to members' allowances for the 2022/23 financial year;
4. Adopt the Draft Allowances Scheme 2023-27 (Annex B), or an amended version of it;
5. Note that if Council adopts a multi-year allowances scheme the Independent Remuneration Panel will hold a mid-term review;
6. Instruct officers to produce a business case for issuing electronic devices to members.

CL.71 Recommendations from the Constitution Working Group

Councillor Ted Fenton, Chair of the Council's Constitution Working Group (CWG), introduced the report, which considered proposals from the Council's CWG for amendments to the West Oxfordshire District Council Constitution. The report sought to ask Council to adopt a new protocols on the Pre-Election Period, Local Petition Scheme, Officer Decision Making Protocol, Social Media Policy and Executive Procedure Rules.

Councillor Fenton sought approval from the Chair, for the provision of two separate votes on the recommendations contained in the report, which would see recommendations 1, 3, 4 and 5 be taken together, with recommendation 2 being voted on separately.

A separate vote on recommendation 2, would arise as a result of the CWG being unable to come to a view, either individually or collectively, on the subject of accessibility of e-petitions, as detailed in the main reports pack on page 58.

In debate, Councillor Fenton paid tribute to the Council's Interim Monitoring Officer, Susan Sale, for all her hard work in support of the CWG, and for bearing with members when technology stalled and providing sound advice when it was required. Personal experiences of submissions of an e-petitions to West Oxfordshire District Council regarding sewage were also highlighted, and that signatories were not limited to those with postcodes in the district,

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but also included people from Cotswold district and beyond, and that managing e-petitions would impact the burden on officers to facilitate these. Concerns were also raised as to subject matter of e-petitions, and that petitions only represent one ideology rather than both viewpoints on a desired outcome.

It was also envisaged that e-petitions help residents of the district engage more with democratically elected representatives, which is what the Executive were seeking to achieve, and that a greater emphasis on e-petitions would be of benefit to the Council.

Councillor Ted Fenton proposed that Council approve recommendations 1, 3, 4 and 5, made to it by the Constitution Working Group. This was seconded by Councillor Michele Mead, was put to a vote, and agreed unanimously by Council.

Councillor Andy Graham further proposed that Council approve recommendation 2, made to it by the Constitution Working Group. This was also seconded by Councillor Michele Mead, was put to a vote, and agreed unanimously by Council.

Council Resolved to:

1. Approve the Protocol on the Pre-Election Period, at Annex A to this report, and formally adopt it as part of the Council's Constitution from 23rd March 2023;
2. Approve the Local Petition Scheme, at Annex B to this report, and formally adopt it as part of the Council's Constitution from 23rd March 2023;
3. Approve the Officer Decision Making Protocol, at Annex C to this report, and formally adopt it as part of the Council's Constitution from 23rd March 2023;
4. Approve the Social Media Policy, at Annex D to this report, and formally adopt it as part of the Council's Constitution from 23rd March 2023;
5. Approve the Executive Procedure Rules, at Annex E to this report, and formally adopt it as part of the Council's Constitution from 23rd March 2023.

CL.72 Motion A: Botley West Solar Farm - Proposed by Councillor Lysette Nicholls, Seconded by Councillor Michele Mead

Councillor Lysette Nicholls introduced the motion, which detailed that the Council fully supports the Government's Net Zero target and restates the importance of ensuring that the UK generates more of its own energy at home, whilst at the same time, would object to the Botley West Solar Farm development.

The motion requested that the Leader of the Council writes to the Secretary of State for Business & Trade, and all Members of Parliament in Oxfordshire, informing them that the Council objects to the proposed Botley West Solar Farm on Blenheim Palace and Merton College land developed by 'Photovolt' Development Partners.

In formally seconding the motion, Councillor Michele Mead stated the importance of listening to the public viewpoint on the matters being discussed, and highlighted the evidence of this by events which took place outside of the Council Chamber ahead of the meeting. Councillor Mead confirmed to Council that is was requesting that the Leader of the Council writes to both the Secretary of State and Oxfordshire MPs in objection to the development. Councillor Mead believed that this was not a heavy task to be undertaken by the Leader of the Council.

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Councillor Carl Rylett rose to propose an amendment to the motion, which then developed in to a point of order raised by Councillor Michele Mead (15.7 – Amendment of Motion) regarding a proposed amendment to the motion. Councillor Mead reminded Council that any amendments, in line with the Council's constitution, must be relevant to the motion and any amendment mustn't negate a motion, or to introduce a new proposal.

In responding to the point of order on invitation from the Chair, the Monitoring Officer stated that advice given was that the amendment would not negate the motion, and that the amendment would instruct further work to be undertaken to enable options to be considered, and that the amendment would not reverse any request for the Leader's letter to be written.

Councillor Carl Rylett stated that he had received regular correspondence on the Solar Farm Project and had attended engagement sessions on the proposals. Viewpoints on scale, biodiversity impacts and the aesthetics of the proposed site were also noted. Councillor Rylett further stated that the motion is unhelpful to residents and counterproductive, whilst highlighting that impact assessments must be dealt with by officers appropriately and objectively.

Whilst formally proposing the amendment to the motion, Councillor Rylett read out the intended, amended Motion in Full, as follows:

“This Council fully supports the Government’s Net Zero Target, and recognises the importance of the UK generating its own carbon-neutral energy, and further recognises that West Oxfordshire must play its part in this process.

This Council recognises that many residents and local businesses, including farmers, and Parish Councils, have expressed concerns with the proposed Botley West Solar Farm on land owned by Blenheim and Merton College, and developed by ‘Photovolt’ Development Partners.

This Council notes and approves of the approach being taken by this council to respond to this proposed development, which will be determined by the relevant Secretary of State.

The Council will produce an Impact Statement, which will detail the effect of the solar farm on the environment, population and businesses in the area, and which will be based on robust and empirical evidence. It notes that an officer is dedicated full-time to this role, and further notes that the Council has hosted meetings with Parish Councils to support their response to the application.

Council Resolves to:

- 1. Give careful consideration to the Impact Assessment and decide at that stage whether any further action should be taken.”*

Councillor Andy Goodwin seconded the amendment to the motion, and highlighted that whilst there were emotional responses given in the round to the scale of the development, and that members were not in place to make emotional responses.

Councillor Goodwin reiterated his attendance at ‘Stop Botley West’ campaign meetings and that there was strong opinion in the community against the proposals. Councillor Goodwin stated that he had also been out actively campaigning and canvassing in his ward in relation to the proposals. Councillor Goodwin also stated that the proposal lacked detail and evidence, and that the consultation and impact assessment must be high quality.

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In the main debate, it was highlighted that West Oxfordshire, as an area, has a relatively large electricity grid capacity with a less dense population by square mile, and that this makes the area a desired location for solar projects, and that there may be more proposals forthcoming. The consultation must be politically neutral, and must not show any bias. Attention was drawn to the site not falling within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and that some existing solar farm did not have the desired capacity.

It was widely stated that the evidence given in the consultation must be taken in to account, and that taking opposite views of others is important within wider debate.

The removal of coal in energy provision was also highlighted, and that making more self-generated electricity was of benefit.

Many members raised concerns about the overall vast scale of the proposals.

The time scale of the opposition to the project was highlighted, and that the proposed letter should be written and sent, ahead of any consultation regarding alternative ideology that may be proposed later down the line.

There was a reminder that the Council was not responsible for determining the outcome of the planning application, and that meetings of the Council, we not planning committees.

Recognition was given to the fact that, as an authority, actions must be carried out with integrity, and should not be party political.

The actions of the Council were deemed to be very influential in the wider process, and that objections raised at an initial stage, would cause harm to the overall process, and that patience and effective communication with local residents and Town and Parish Councils were crucial in early stages of the process.

There was also an urge from members to pull together, and not let emotions be uppermost in the perceptions of how people express their views.

In summing up the debate, Councillor Rylett made reference to the points made in the debate, and stated that the original motion would undermine representations made to the planning inspectorate, and would be counterproductive. Attention was drawn to an upcoming meeting of Development Control, at which it was anticipated that there would be a presentation on Botley West.

Rising on a Point of Order, (15.14 Questions Previously Asked), Councillor Ted Fenton asked the Chair that in relation to a point made in the substantial debate by Councillor Norman MacRae MBE, as to how the amended motion had found its way on the order paper, and had not been made at the meeting. It was perceived that there had been notice given to the motion being put down, ahead of the publication of the meeting agenda.

In response, the Monitoring Officer stated that there is no earliest point in which a motion can be put, although there is always a deadline. The Monitoring Officer committed to writing to Councillor Fenton with a more detailed answer in due course.

Councillor Carl Rylett proposed the amendment to the motion, as described above. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Goodwin and was put to a vote. There were 25 votes in favour, and 18 votes against with no abstentions. The amendment was carried.

In debating the amended motion, it was highlighted that Members must keep an open mind in relation to solutions to climate change, and that care must be taken to reach the right outcome. It was suggested that the original motion expressed serious concerns about the

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proposal rather than objections. A lot of debate could have been avoided. It was further highlighted that this was a national project, and that the proposals were far too large in scale.

In formally summing up, Councillor Nicholls stated that the amended motion, and the original motion, were in fact two different motions, despite clarification given by the Monitoring Officer, and that the whole issue had become too confusing.

Councillor Carl Rylett proposed the amended motion be adopted by Council. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Goodwin and was put to a vote. There were 25 votes in favour, and 18 votes against with no abstentions. The vote carried.

Council **Resolved** to pass the following Motion:

- I. This Council fully supports the Government's Net Zero Target, and recognises the importance of the UK generating its own carbon-neutral energy, and further recognises that West Oxfordshire must play its part in this process.

This Council recognises that many residents and local businesses, including farmers, and Parish Councils, have expressed concerns with the proposed Botley West Solar Farm on land owned by Blenheim and Merton College, and developed by 'Photovolt' Development Partners.

This Council notes and approves of the approach being taken by this council to respond to this proposed development, which will be determined by the relevant Secretary of State.

The Council will produce an Impact Statement, which will detail the effect of the solar farm on the environment, population and businesses in the area, and which will be based on robust and empirical evidence. It notes that an officer is dedicated full-time to this role, and further notes that the Council has hosted meetings with Parish Councils to support their response to the application.

Council therefore resolves to give careful consideration to the Impact Assessment and decide at that stage whether any further action should be taken.

CL.73 Motion B: Local Economy - Proposed by Councillor Mark Johnson, Seconded by Councillor Jane Doughty.

Councillor Mark Johnson introduced and proposed the motion, which would recognise the importance of supporting local businesses in Witney and West Oxfordshire, given the difficult economic climate local businesses on the Witney High Street in particular were facing.

The motion to the Council would call on the Leader to write to the Cabinet Member for Highways Management at Oxfordshire County Council, to undertake a full review and further consultation into the vehicle restrictions that were currently in place.

In debate, it was highlighted that the High Street in Witney was not closed, but that it was fully open. No reductions of openings have been made and the High Street was still a very welcoming place for people to go about their daily business.

There was no deterrent to the public in coming to Witney, and reminders were given that there was extensive free car parking in the town for users of the town centre to make use of.

Several members stated that they were disappointed that the motion had been brought forward, and that it was a waste of time, given that the High Street had only been closed to through traffic.

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Emphasis was given to the historic trading styles that Witney had seen over generations, and that the town would remain the most key town for trading in the district for years to come.

The current arrangements did increase trade, footfall, aid the night time economy and provides opportunities to unique events that could take place on the High Street itself – events that would not be able to take place if through traffic was allowed to be reinstated.

The current arrangements maintained a vibrant, engaging town centre that helped both businesses and residents, especially with the recovery post-Covid-19.

It was also highlighted that the term ‘closed’ isn’t necessarily the right thing to say. There were several contributions stating that the consultation on the current arrangements would need to be brought forward, so that quick progress could be made.

Members were keen to stress that shopping habits had changed recently and that the current arrangements reflected such habits.

Many Members were also keen point out that Witney was a beautiful town in its own right, and that the current arrangements help protect that viewpoint.

Councillors were in agreement that work needs to be done, and done effectively, but that views needed to be sought as to how improvements could be made, and how access could be addressed & improved.

Concerns of safety were also raised and that the safety of other road users, such as cyclists would be compromised should the current arrangements be undone.

Suggestions were also made that would see Corn Street be made one way, and that the High Street should be fully pedestrianised, which would also help deal with current issues that were being faced.

In summing up the debate, Councillor Johnson thanked members for their contributions, and for adding great effectiveness to the debate. Councillor Johnson stated that the debate had been lively in parts, but was keen to point out that it was a good thing, although the exercise hadn’t been executed particularly well.

The issue of ‘closure’ of the High Street was a perception, not a reality, and the motion would go some way to rectifying the perceptions of the public.

The longer the project went on, the more risk of an accident further down the line.

Councillor Mark Johnson proposed that the motion be adopted by Council. This was seconded by Councillor Jane Doughty and was put to a vote. There were 18 votes in favour, and 24 votes against with 1 abstention.

The motion was defeated.

CL.74 Motion C: Strategic Planning - Proposed by Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf, Seconded by Councillor Michele Mead.

Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf introduced and proposed the motion, which would seek to regain residents' confidence in the Council's strategic planning process.

Councillor Al-Yousuf highlighted that the Local Plan 2031 was now, at best, a weak defence against speculative development applications. The Council's claim in its current Position Statements on Housing Land Supply of 4.1 years had been successfully challenged by developers and set aside by Planning Inspectors.

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The Chair advised that the motion should, as a result of advice received, be referred to the Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and its referral was proposed by Councillor Al-Yousuf. This was seconded by Councillor Michele Mead, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Refer the Motion on Strategic Planning to the Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Meeting closed at 4.28 pm

CHAIR