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WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Held in Committee Room 1 at 2.00pm on **Wednesday, 6 September 2023**

PRESENT

Councillors: Alaa Al-Yousuf (Chair), Charlie Maynard (Vice-Chair), Hugo Ashton, Michael Brooker, Jane Doughty, Mark Johnson, Andrew Lyon, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Rosie Pearson, Elizabeth Poskitt and Alex Wilson.

Officers: Phil Martin (Assistant Director for Business Support) and Michelle Clifford (Business Manager - Customer Services), James Howse (Interim Chief Finance and Section 151 Officer), Andrew Brown (Business Manager Democratic Services), Michelle Ouzman (Strategic Support Officer) and Anne Learmonth (Strategic Support Officer).

Other Councillors in attendance: Dan Levy Executive Member for Finance.

68 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Julian Cooper and Ruth Smith.
Councillor Phil Godfrey was absent.

69 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

70 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 June 2023 were approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

71 Participation of the Public

There was no public participation.

72 Telephone Channel Access

The Chair informed the Committee he was changing the order of the agenda, and that the Telephone Channel Access item would be heard first, the rest of the agenda order remained unchanged.

Michelle Clifford, the Business Manager Customer Services, introduced the Telephone Channel Access Report.

The Business Manager Customer Services summarised the report, highlighting the following points:

- There has been an increase in digital use of services;
- There had been a decline in telephone call volumes received after 2pm, especially on Wednesdays;
- Staffing capacity to be increased over lunchtime to meet demand;
- Trial to begin late October (subject to approval), reducing telephone opening hours by closing lines at 2pm;
- Communications to the public to be managed by the Communications Department;

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- Trial to last between 3-6 months;
- Some staff to operate from 2pm in other services;
- Some staff have asked to reduce their hours, if the trial is successful;
- Staff will get opportunities to learn new skills in other areas of the business after 2pm;
- Trial will be monitored and reviewed;
- Face to Face Service to remain at 9am to 5pm at the Welsh Way office in Witney;

The Business Manager for Customer Services concluded that Homelessness, Dangerous Structures and Election callers would receive a redirection message.

The Chair thanked the Business Manager for Customer Services and asked Members if they had any questions on the trial proposed.

Members of the Committee explored the following issues:

- Redeployment of staff from 2pm to back offices;
- Back office backlogs, which would be reduced through the redeployment of staff;
- Data to backup the decrease in incoming calls;
- Risk areas were identified as being Homelessness, Dangerous Structures and Elections (during the run up to electoral events);
- Out of hours monitoring;
- Staff numbers affected – 7.9 full time equivalent posts;
- There would be a weekly review of the trial;
- The trial period would last 3-6 months;
- Monitoring of emails and complaints;
- Councillors' feedback;
- The need for clear communications;
- Savings and reinvestment.

Following the debate, the Chair Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf, introduced the Interim Chief Finance and Section 151 Officer, James Howse, to the Committee.

The Interim Chief Finance Officer informed the Committee that innovations like the Telephone Access trial was crucial for generating savings.

Councillors were keen to see the data evidence to back up the fall in telephone demand after 2pm.

The Business Manager for Customer Services confirmed that following the meeting, Councillors would be sent the full data via email and be regularly contacted for feedback during the trial period.

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The Chair reminded the Committee of the recommendation within the report, which were for Cabinet to agree.

1. Agree the reduced telephone access hours on a trial basis, with effect from Monday 16th October 2023, and
2. Receive a further report, detailing the findings and recommendations from the trial, to an Executive meeting in the first quarter of 2024/25.

Councillor Michael Brooker proposed to support the recommendations within the report.

Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt seconded the proposal, which was duly put to the vote and was carried.

Councillor Michele Mead voted against the proposal.

The Committee **Resolved** to support the recommendations to Cabinet in the report, which were to:

1. Agree the reduced telephone access hours on a trial basis, with effect from Monday 16th October 2023, and
2. Receive a further report, detailing the findings and recommendations from the trial, to an Executive meeting in the first quarter of 2024/25.

73 Treasury Management Out-Turn Report 2022/23

James Howse, Interim Chief Finance Director, introduced the Treasury Management Out-Turn Report 2022/23.

The Interim Chief Finance Director summarised key points within the report:

- Page 12 – Interest received was £1.3m over the year against a budget of £1.1m but the Capital Value had decreased;
- Page 13 – The Council had complied with all Prudential Indicators;
- Page 16 – Interest rates were high which had a positive impact on the Council’s “in house” investments.
- Page 18 – Section 6.3 emphasised the need to ensure an optimal balance between liquidity, security and yield. This was kept under review and the Council took professional advice in relation to this.

The Interim Chief Finance Officer advised that Arlingclose had been chosen as the West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) Treasury Advisor, after a competitive tender process had occurred. The new contract included an enhanced package of advisory support.

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Councillors asked if the Externally Managed funds at 3.7 within the report were actively or passively managed. The Interim Chief Finance Officer agreed to get back to Councillors with the answer via email, and added that the Council worked closely with Arlingclose in relation to pooled funds. It was added that hopefully in the future years the Council would be able to forecast cash flow more effectively.

Councillors also asked if there were any ethical constraints, the Interim Chief Finance Officer agreed to confirm whether this was built into the Treasury Management Strategy.

The Chair explained that there had been a Treasury working group, but this was during Covid and had been difficult to manage, and was disbanded. The group had commented on the need to review the mandate of Arlingclose and had considered ethical issues, which were complex.

The Executive Member for Finance, Councillor Dan Levy agreed that the Council should ensure ethical management of funds.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the Treasury Management and the performance of internal and external funds for 2022/23.

74 Finance Performance Report 2023/24 Quarter One

James Howse, the Interim Chief Finance Officer introduced the Financial Performance Report 2023/24 Quarter One.

The Interim Chief Finance Officer summarised the report as largely relating to pressures on income:

- Green waste;
- Building control and Land charges;
- Council Tax and Business Rates arrears;
- Investment property voids.

Councillors reviewed the report and discussed the following topics:

- There was unlikely to be a financial case for introducing a 6 month green waste license.
- The need to review income and expenditure in areas such as Building Control during the budget setting process;
- Commercial property void rates and the need to closely monitor the market and buy in appropriate advice;
- It would be useful for reports to show comparisons to last year and forecasts;
- Some of the larger items in the capital programme needed clearer descriptions.

The Executive Member for Finance agreed that there were challenges that needed monitoring and cost management to be continually reviewed.

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The Interim Chief Finance Officer wanted to see increased marketing of space availability to reduce voids, and also confirmed that the Council Tax and Business Rates arrears, 98% budget target was on track.

The Chair concluded that Finance needs to be on balance and stay on target, and that the Property Performance Report should be reviewed when ready.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the Finance Performance Report 2023/24 Quarter One.

75 Service Performance Report 2023/24 Quarter One

Phil Martin, Assistant Director for Business Services, introduced the Service Performance Report 2023/24 Quarter One.

The Assistant Director for Business Services highlighted the following points from the report:

- Customers were increasingly using the Open Portal for Self Service and this was being further encouraged;
- Investigation into automated systems and technical solutions;
- Trade waste was billed twice a year so spikes in the report reflect billing arrangements;
- Historic debt was actively being looked at;
- The GLL contract billed at 100% but 60% had been returned;
- Faster solutions for processing were being looked at.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director for Business Services and asked the Committee for any questions or feedback.

Councillors asked if the team had changed, and how was the Town Centre Shop being used.

The Assistant Director for Business Services confirmed that the team was stable and that they had received positive feedback.

Councillors queried the table data on page 45, and asked if the system recorded the longest time that customers had to wait for a connection to a call, and could another matrix be added for a peak response time.

Councillor Mead also enquired about the percentage increase in customers who had signed up to the on-line portal.

The Chair asked if the Committee could see the positive feedback reflected within the report and recommendations.

The Assistant Director for Business Services agreed to take these additional matrix recommendations back to the team, and to reflect in future reporting.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the Service Performance Report 2023/24 Quarter One.

76 Enhancement Suggestions for the Effectiveness of Scrutiny

Andrew Brown the Business Manager for Democratic Services, informed Members that the Constitution Working Group was sending a report to Full Council in September. The Constitution Working Group was unanimously recommending that the three existing overview and scrutiny committees be replaced by a single Overview Scrutiny Committee which would meet regularly for the rest of the Civic Year. The proposal will suggest that this change takes effect on 5 October 2023, meaning that this Committee meeting would be the last Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting. The planned Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny meeting will still go ahead on 4 October 2023, this will be followed by the first new combined Scrutiny Committee, the week before the Executive meeting planned in November.

The new Overview and Scrutiny Committee was suggested to meet at 5:30pm on a Wednesday evening, with a membership of 24 Councillors. There will also be task and finish group opportunities. Group leaders will nominate the membership, which will be politically balanced.

Regular Councillor briefings were also being planned to take place virtually, where all Councillors would have the opportunity to receive briefings from officers and ask questions. Topics of the briefings would include:

- Health;
- Housing;
- Flood update;
- Waste update.

The Budget was likely to be considered at one Overview and Scrutiny Committee, where it was potentially the only item on the Agenda.

Members could if they wished to arrange substitutes, at any Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting.

The Committee was invited to give the Chair or the Business Manager for Democratic Services any specific recommendation ideas on how to improve the scrutiny within the Council.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the update from the Business Manager for Democratic Services.

77 Executive Work Programme

The Chair asked the Committee if there were any comments Members wished to make regarding the Executive Work Programme, of which none were received.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the Executive Work Programme.

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78 Committee Work Programme

The Chair asked the Committee if there were any comments Members wished to make regarding the Committee Work Programme, of which none were received.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

- I. Note the Committee Work Programme.

The Meeting closed at 3.57pm

CHAIR

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