

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

### Minutes of the meeting of Council

Held in the Council Chamber at 2.00pm on **Wednesday 27 September 2023.**

#### PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Coles (Chair), Elizabeth Poskitt (Vice-Chair), Joy Aitman, Alaa Al-Yousuf, Lidia Arciszewska, Hugo Ashton, Andrew Beaney, Julian Cooper, Colin Dingwall, Jane Doughty, Duncan Enright, Phil Godfrey, Andy Goodwin, Andy Graham, Jeff Haine, David Jackson, Edward James, Natalie King, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Charlie Maynard, Martin McBride, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Mathew Parkinson, Rosie Pearson, Rizvana Poole, Andrew Prosser, Carl Rylett, Sandra Simpson, Ruth Smith, Harry St. John, Tim Sumner, Liam Walker, Mark Walker, Adrian Walsh, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray.

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive), James Howse (Interim Director of Finance), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance), Frank Wilson (Executive Finance Director, Publica), Bill Oddy (Assistant Director, Commercial Development), Phil Martin (Assistant Director, Business Services), Andy Barge (Assistant Director, Communities), Andrew Brown (Business Manager, Democratic Services), Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer), Michelle Ouzman (Democratic Services Officer), Barry Clack (Communications Officer), Elise Chowdhury (Communications Officer) and Trushar Patel (ICT Systems Engineer).

Other Councillors in attendance: Nil.

#### **CL.98 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for Absence were received from the following Members:

Alaric Smith, Dean Temple, Geoff Saul, Michael Brooker, Rachel Crouch, Thomas Ashby, Mark Johnson, Lysette Nicholls and Liz Leffman.

#### **CL.99 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made by Members of the Council.

#### **CL.100 Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 19 July 2023, were unanimously approved by Council, and signed by the Chair as a true & accurate record.

#### **CL.101 Receipt of Announcements**

Councillor Andrew Coles, Chair of the Council, welcomed all Members and Members of the Public to the meeting and stated that he hoped all attendees had had a refreshing summer break. The Chair also advised Council of a change to the order in which business would be considered, and that Agenda Item 9 would be considered ahead of Item 8.

The Chair advised Council of the passing of Colin James, a former Member and Chair of West Oxfordshire District Council. Councillor James was first elected to the Council in 1993 and was Chair for the municipal year of 1997-1998. The Chair stated that he had written to Councillor James' family, attended his funeral and expressed the condolences of the whole Council at a difficult time for his family.

Councillors Julian Cooper and Alaa Al-Yousuf also rose to pay tribute to Councillor James before Council was invited to observe a moment of reflection in memory of Councillor James.

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The Chair welcomed Hannah Lee to the meeting. Hannah Lee undertook a period of work experience with the Council's Democratic Services team in July 2023, and was in attendance at the meeting in the public gallery.

The Chair also welcomed and introduced James Howse & Madhu Richards to the meeting. James Howse had recently been appointed as the Council's Interim Director of Finance, and Madhu Richards had been appointed as the Council's new, permanent Director of Finance, taking up her role in October 2023.

The Chair thanked those in attendance who had supported the Afternoon Tea fundraiser held in August 2023, and was delighted to announce that the event had raised £1151 for charities associated with the Chair. The Chair also thanked the Vice-Chair of the Council, Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt, and Councillor Julian Cooper, for their support on the day of the event, as well as the assistance of Council Officers from the Executive Support team.

The Chair also advised Council that a fundraising quiz night was also being planned for a time in the future.

The Chair highlighted the official civic engagements that he had undertaken during the summer months. These included the Royal Air Force's Service of Commemoration for the Battle of Britain, and Carterton' Annual Civic Service.

The Chair also paid tribute to the Vice-Chair for work she had undertaken during the same period of time.

The Chair advised Council of the arrangements made by Democratic Services for the next meeting of Council, which would take place on Wednesday 29 November 2023. Owing to planned refurbishment works at Woodgreen as part of the Council's Agile Working Project, it had been arranged for the next meeting of Council to take place at Carterton Community Centre. It was also highlighted that owing to the availability of the external location, the next meeting would start at 1.00pm, rather than the usual time of 2.00pm. The Chair asked Members and Officers of the Council to note this in their diaries.

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, rose to congratulate the Chair on his fundraising activities, and highlighted the impressive total that had been raised.

The Leader also advised Council of changes in Membership of the Executive, which would take place the day after the meeting of the Council.

Councillor Dan Levy would step down from the Executive with effect from the following day, and the Leader thanked Councillor Levy for his dedication, hard work and support during his time as a member of the Executive.

Councillor Alaric Smith would replace Councillor Levy as Executive Member for Finance, and Councillor Tim Sumner would join the Executive as Member for Leisure and Major Projects.

The Leader also took the opportunity to reassure Council that there was no overall change to the West Oxfordshire 'Alliance', given publicity and news that had arisen from Oxfordshire County Council prior to the meeting.

The Leader advised Council of the arrangements that had been made for the upcoming meeting of the Executive. Owing to the aforementioned refurbishment works, the Executive would once again hold an 'On Tour' meeting. The Leader advised that the next meeting of the Executive would be held at The New Warwick Hall in Burford on Wednesday 11 October 2023.

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The Leader also advised that the meeting would be ‘an evening trial meeting’ commencing at 6.00pm. It was further highlighted that by having an evening meeting, public participation and engagement would be heightened, and would allow more residents and Members of the Public to engage with the Executive.

The Leader also advised that the December 2023 meeting of the Executive was anticipated to take place in Minster Lovell, and that arrangements would be confirmed in due course as appropriate.

Councillor Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Economic Development, rose to congratulate Sports Direct for opening a new store of their franchise in Marriott’s Walk in Witney. The Deputy Leader highlighted the importance of an internationally renowned retailer being part of Witney and its District, making it the only sports retailer available in the area.

The Deputy Leader also advised Council on further plans that were in the offing at Marriot’s Walk, such as a fundraising abseil, Christmas Markets and a new attraction that would replace the Umbrellas.

The Leader also highlighted the importance of the Town Centres in the District, and the ongoing regeneration work that has been undertaken by Council Officers. The Deputy Leader paid tribute to the work of officers Will Barton and Emma Phillips, and said that Town Partnership Meetings would soon get underway across the district to help energise the regeneration projects, using funds made available by the Rural England Prosperity Fund.

Councillor Carl Rylett, Executive Member for Planning and Sustainable Development, rose to advise Council of the ‘Your Voice’ Local Plan consultation that would run until 25 October 2023. The Executive Member highlighted the importance of resident participation in the consultation, explaining that input would help protect the West Oxfordshire District and secure the plan up to the year 2041.

The Executive Member also advised that there would be Town and Parish Council events, such as workshops and drop-in sessions, which would feed into the consultation period, and the Executive Member further encouraged all residents to participate in the consultation.

Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for the Environment, advised Council that 23 November 2023 would be ‘Waterways Day’, taking place at The Corn Exchange in Witney. There would be an extensive list of speakers at the event, such as the Environment Agency and Oxfordshire County Council, and the Executive Member expressed a desire for maximum participation at the event.

Councillor Dan Levy, Executive Member for Finance, rose to advise Council of the upcoming Council Tax Support Scheme consultation, forming the initial stage of the Budget consultation for the next financial year, was open and would run until 22 October 2023.

#### **CL.102 Participation of the Public**

There was no public participation at the meeting.

#### **CL.103 Questions by Members**

Questions by Members, as listed on the agenda, and the responses to those questions, which were 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.

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The Written Questions, Written Answers, Verbal Supplementary Questions and Verbal Supplementary Answers are detailed in a separate document appended to the Minutes of the Meeting.

#### **CL.104 Recommendations from the Constitution Working Group**

The Chair advised Members that there would be three separate votes in consideration of the agenda item, whereby Recommendation 1, Recommendations 2a to 2f, and Recommendations 3-7 would be taken as individual votes.

Councillor Mathew Parkinson, Chair of the Constitution Working Group, introduced and gave an overview of the report, which presented the recommendations of the Council's Constitution Working Group, made to Council from its meetings held on 23 June 2023 and 11 August 2023. The report also included a recommendation to replace the three existing Overview and Scrutiny Committees with a single, new Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

In debate, Members highlighted that the proposals would be of benefit to the Council's accountability process, would be a more effective use of Council time and holding the Executive and Council to account.

Multiple members thanked the work of the Constitution Working Group in this area and thanked the work of Officers involved in bringing the recommendations to Council.

Members also highlighted that it was reasonable to have an opposition member be Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Members also highlighted the importance of the views of those who would not sit on Committee should still be considered, and that this would further add to the effective scrutiny process. Members also stated that streamlining the process would give greater accountability where there was perceived lack of accountability in the past.

Reference was made to the work of the proposed Committee, and reassurance was given by Officers that there would be a formal work plan, thus helping to provide the Committee with timely reports and allowing for effective time to be taken to provide scrutiny to work in the correct manner.

Members questioned whether the quorum for the Council's Planning Sub-Committees should be reviewed in view of the change to the size requirements of the sub-committees. Reassurance was given whereby the quorum is calculated as being 25% of the Committee membership in attendance at a meeting for it to be convened and allow decisions to be made.

The Chair paid tribute to the Chairs of the Council's three individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees for their work, stewardship, and support to the Council in their times as Chairs of the Committees.

Councillor Mathew Parkinson proposed that Council agreed Recommendation 1 as detailed within the original report. This was seconded by Councillor Joy Aitman and was put to a vote. There were 36 votes in favour, 3 votes against and no abstentions. The vote carried.

**Council Resolved to:**

1. Agree to include in the Constitution that the Chair of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee must be an opposition member.

Councillor Mathew Parkinson proposed that Council agree Recommendations 2a to 2f as detailed within the original report. This was seconded by Councillor Joy Aitman and was put to a vote. There were 36 votes in favour, 3 votes against and no abstentions. The vote carried.

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Council **Resolved** to:

2. Agree to replace the three current overview and scrutiny committees with a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee with 24 Members with effect from 5 October 2023, and in doing so:
  - a) Agree to update Part 2: Articles and Part 3C: Committee Functions as shown in Annex A and Annex B respectively;
  - b) Authorise the Director of Governance to make other consequential amendments to the Constitution (at parts 1A, 3A, 3D, 5A, 5B, 5C, 5F, 5G, 6E, and 6H);
  - c) Delegate authority to the Director of Governance to appoint members to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with effect from 5 October 2023 in accordance with political proportionality and the wishes of political groups;
  - d) Agree that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will meet monthly on the dates set out in paragraph 3.7, with the first meeting being held on Wednesday 8 November 2023 at 5.30pm;
  - e) Request that the Council's Independent Remuneration Panel considers whether the Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be paid a special responsibility allowance, and if so, at what level and any backdating to be applied, and report back to Council;
  - f) Note that a programme of member briefings is being developed as an alternative to officers providing information to members through verbal updates and presentations at overview and scrutiny committee meetings.

Councillor Mathew Parkinson proposed that Council agree Recommendations 3 to 7 as detailed within the original report. This was seconded by Councillor Joy Aitman and was put to a vote. There were 37 votes in favour, 1 vote against and 1 abstention. The vote carried.

Council **Resolved** to:

3. Agree to include in the Constitution (at Part 5A: Council Procedure Rules, paragraph 6.2) that the Monitoring Officer is authorised to cancel meetings and to reschedule meetings with reasons and in consultation with the Chief Executive and the relevant Chair of Council, a Committee or Sub-Committee, provided that the agenda for the meeting has not been published;
4. Agree to include in the Constitution (at Part 3C: Committee Functions) how the parish areas within the Brize Norton and Shilton ward and the Hailey and Minster Lovell and Leafield ward are split between the Lowlands and Uplands areas;
5. Agree to replace the requirement (at Part 3C: Committee Functions) that there are 13 seats on the Lowlands Sub-Committee and 11 seats on the Uplands Sub-Committee with a rule that the Lowlands and Uplands sub-committees must have a minimum of 11 members, with the Chair of the Development Control Committee being appointed to both sub-committees and all other members of the Development Control Committee being appointed to either the Uplands or Lowlands sub-committee, depending on the ward they represent. Where wards cross the Lowlands and Uplands boundary the ward member may be appointed to either sub-committee;
6. Note that the Constitution Working Group agreed for the Director of Governance to address a number of items on the Constitution Working Group's work plan under delegated authority, as set out in paragraph 7.1;

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7. Note that future versions of the Constitution will be published to the website using the Modern.gov system in order to improve transparency, ease of updating and version control.

#### **CL.105 Review of Political Proportionalities**

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report, which reviewed the political proportionalities on Committees, following receipt of a notice that a Member of the Council had joined a political group.

The Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council both paid tribute to the work of Council Officers, and for the time that had been invested in ensuring that the political proportionalities of the Council's Committees were correct given the change in numbers within the Council's political groups.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree the recommendations as listed within the original report, with reference to 'Annex A', contained within Recommendation 1, being disregarded. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Agree the political proportionalities as set out in Annex B (political proportionalities with one overview and scrutiny committee);
2. Note that group leaders are asked to confirm any changes to committee membership to the Monitoring Officer;
3. Note that any vacancies on committees shall be appointed to by the Monitoring Officer in accordance with the wishes of the political group to which the vacant seat is allocated and that Council will be asked to ratify and note the appointments at the next ordinary Council meeting.

#### **CL.106 Strategic Partnership Update**

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, introduced the report, which provided an update to Council on his portfolio responsibility for Strategic Partnerships.

In debate, Members highlighted that local democracy functions best when local authorities within the same region work soundly together facing outwards, to achieve common goals and work in the best interest of residents. Members also referenced strengths and assets which were fundamental to the district such as Blenheim Palace and areas of the district contained within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The Leader also highlighted the important roles that Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) and the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOxP) have within the sphere of local government, and how these organisations are also a vital mechanism for achieving common goals and making the best decisions.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that Council agree to the recommendation contained within the original report. This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

Council **Resolved** to:

1. Note the contents of the Strategic Partnership Report.

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**CL.107 Motion A: Mobile Network Coverage – Proposed by Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf, Seconded by Councillor Liam Walker.**

Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf introduced the motion, which proposed that the Leader of the Council engaged with Digital Mobile Spectrum Limited (DMSL) to seek to address issues regarding perceived poor mobile network coverage in West Oxfordshire.

In debate, Members highlighted that the issues surrounding poor network coverage are not unique to West Oxfordshire, and that many areas of the countryside are affected by 'Total Not Spots'. It was further highlighted that in 2025, the use of telephone 'landlines' would cease, and mobile connectivity would be of even more vital importance. Members alluded to the ever-changing way in which professionals work, and behavioural changes surrounding the workplace, such as working from home and holding virtual meetings.

It was also highlighted that desired funding for improvements to connectivity would be available through the Rural England Prosperity Fund, and further improvement works could come to fruition in Section 106 agreements contained within applications for development.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Liam Walker stated that he was grateful for support from all sides of the Council Chamber, and that it was pleasing to see members in full agreement on such a vital issue.

Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf proposed the motion as set out on the agenda paper, be adopted by Council. This was seconded by Councillor Liam Walker, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by Council.

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

- I. Mobile network coverage is inadequate in many rural areas of our District either because of Total Not Spots or the coverage failing to meet the "at least one Mobile Network Operator (MNO) measure". Very often coverage is poor outdoors let alone indoors. It is therefore vital that MNOs expedite their investment in infrastructure. The four MNOs agreed with the Government in 2020 to build a Shared Rural Network with licence obligations to achieve good quality coverage across 88% of the landmass by June 2024, and 90% of the landmass to be covered by January 2027. To that end, the four MNOs created Digital Mobile Spectrum Limited (DMSL) as a joint venture to manage and run the Shared Rural Network programme. As a largely rural District that makes a significant contribution to the national economy, West Oxfordshire deserves to be prioritised.

Council Resolves to:

- I. Instruct the Leader to engage with Digital Mobile Spectrum Limited and, as a first step, invite it to send senior representatives to brief Councillors and residents at a public meeting at the earliest opportunity.

**CL.108 Motion B: Keeping West Oxfordshire Safe and Tidy – Proposed by Councillor Jane Doughty, Seconded by Councillor Liam Walker.**

Councillor Jane Doughty advised Council that the Motion was not being proposed. It was therefore treated as withdrawn and was not be considered at the meeting.

The Meeting closed at 3.45pm.

CHAIR