

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Executive.**

Held in Committee Room One, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB at 2.00pm on
Wednesday 17 January 2024.

PRESENT

Councillors: Andy Graham (Leader), Duncan Enright (Deputy Leader), Joy Aitman, Charlie Maynard, Andrew Prosser, Alaric Smith, Geoff Saul and Tim Sumner.

Officers: Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance), Frank Wilson (Interim Managing Director – Publica), Phil Martin (Assistant Director – Business Support Services), Mandy Fathers (Business Manager, Environment, Welfare and Revenue Services), Andrew Brown (Business Manager, Democratic Services), Chris Hargraves (Planning Policy Manager), Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Andrew Thomson (Planning Policy Officer) and Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer).

Other Councillors in Attendance: Michele Mead, Liam Walker, Dan Levy, Harry St. John, Julian Cooper and David Melvin.

128 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillor Lidia Arciszewska.

129 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members of the Executive.

130 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Andy Graham proposed that the minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 13 December 2023, be agreed by the Executive as a true and accurate record, and signed by the Leader of the Council.

This was seconded by Councillor Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was unanimously agreed by the Executive.

The Executive **Resolved** to:

1. Agree the minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 13 December 2023, as a true and accurate record.

131 Receipt of Announcements

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council, welcomed all attendees to the meeting, and thanked members of the public for attending. The Leader also welcomed the public watching proceedings on the Council's website.

The Leader gave the public and officers in attendance an overview of the way that the meeting would run. Public attendees were also advised that Members of the Executive would remain in attendance after the meeting had concluded, so that those in attendance could meet each other on an informal basis.

The Leader further advised that the final Agenda Item contained commercially sensitive information and details of a private nature, and if the meeting required such action, the meeting would need to agree to enter private session, with the appropriate juncture being highlighted when necessary.

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The Leader stated that the next meeting of the Executive would be held on Wednesday 14 February 2024, starting at 2.00pm and would be held in the Upper Hall, at the Town Hall in Chipping Norton.

The Leader informed the meeting of the intention to appoint a Publica Programme Director in the week following the meeting, as a result of a recent recruitment exercise. The Publica Programme Director would take up post upon the completion of successful pre-employment checks and would oversee the transition of council services and the transfer of employees to the Council from Publica.

The Leader informed the meeting of the appointment of Dr. Christine Gore to the position of Chair of the Publica Board, following the departure of Sally Walker, who held the role previously. The Leader stated there had been unanimous support across partner councils for the appointment of Dr. Gore to the Chair.

The Leader congratulated Frank Wilson on his appointment as Interim Managing Director of Publica, following the departure of the previous Managing Director, Jan Britton, in December 2023. The Leader stated there had been unanimous support across partner councils in the appointment of Mr. Wilson to the position of Interim Managing Director.

Councillor Tim Sumner, Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects, stated that refurbishment works had begun at the Chipping Norton Leisure Centre and that work was progressing well.

There were no other announcements made by the Executive.

Phil Martin, Assistant Director for Business Support Services, provided an update on the ongoing Agile Working Project, which included renovation works and modernisation changes at the Woodgreen, Elmfield and Welch Way Council Offices. The works included the renovation of the Council Chamber, a new reception area, and proposed renovation work to the Council's committee rooms. The Assistant Director stated that the overall project was on track for completion in March 2024, and was currently on budget.

132 Participation of the Public

There was no public participation at the meeting.

133 Local Plan Annual Monitoring Report (AMR)

Councillor Charlie Maynard, Executive Member for Planning and Sustainable Development, introduced the report, which considered the Council's Local Plan Annual Monitoring Report for the two-year period 2021-2023.

Non-Executive Members addressed the Executive about the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). The Planning Policy Manager stated that consultants were routinely producing viability evidence relating to the Levy, and that results were anticipated in the coming weeks. A report to the Executive on the subject matter was anticipated in Spring 2024.

The Executive welcomed the introduction of new employment sites around the town of Witney, and agreed there were common aims to continue to make the West Oxfordshire local economy vibrant. The Executive further highlighted logistical problems associated with the district, and how this had resulted in larger scale employers not basing themselves in the district.

The Executive also confirmed intentions to ask the Local Plan Cross Party Member Working Group to discuss the Annual Monitoring Report, in conjunction with the Planning Policy Manager.

Councillor Charlie Maynard proposed that the Executive agree to the recommendations as listed on the report. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham, was put to a vote, and was agreed unanimously by the Executive.

The Executive **Resolved** to:

1. Note the content of the report.

134 Oxford City Local Plan 2040 - Regulation 19 Consultation

Councillor Charlie Maynard, Executive Member for Planning and Sustainable Development, presented the report which sought to agree West Oxfordshire District Council's response to the Oxford Local Plan 2040 Regulation 19 consultation.

In debate, Executive Members stated that they were encouraged by the positive and collaborative tone of the proposed response to the Oxford City Council (OxCC) 2040 Local Plan. Work undertaken in conjunction with neighbouring Council's would be of a constructive nature and completed within statutory timescales.

Councillor Liam Walker addressed the meeting and queried whether the Council was obliged to agree to accommodate additional housing from Oxford's unmet need within the district. The Planning Policy Manager stated that the Council had a duty to co-operate, but had no duty to agree when discussing matters surrounding residual housing numbers.

Councillor Charlie Maynard proposed that the Executive agree to the recommendations as listed on the report. This was seconded by Duncan Enright, was put to a vote, and was agreed unanimously by the Executive. The Executive Member for Planning and Sustainability thanked the Planning Policy Team for their ongoing work on the subject.

The Executive **Resolved** to:

1. Note the content of the report;
2. Approve the draft response, attached at Annex A of the original report.

135 Draft Budget 2024/25 - Version 2 (including Local Government Finance Settlement)

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the report, which provided an update on the developing Budget for 2024/25.

The Executive Member gave a detailed overview of the second version of the developing Budget, which had come before the Executive following receipt of a Local Government Funding Settlement, since its last meeting on 18 December 2023.

The Executive Member for Finance stated that they had received a recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee requesting that the Executive Member write to Simon Hoare MP, Minister of State for Local Government, to request that future Local Government Funding Settlements are received earlier in the budget setting process in future years. The Executive Member confirmed that the Executive agreed with the recommendation.

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Councillor Julian Cooper addressed the meeting and queried the increase in payments made to external auditors. The Executive Member for Finance stated that increases were as a result of increased inflationary rises and a perceived increase in difficulty of hiring auditors to carry out such work.

Councillor Cooper also queried the re-opening of the outdoor swimming pool located in Woodstock. The Director of Finance referred to a decision taken by Cabinet in 2021, which had reduced the opening hours of the pool. The financial burdens rested with the Council, rather than the Council's leisure provider GLL, and opening the pool for prolonged periods over summer months was not considered to be financially viable.

Councillor Harry St. John queried ongoing pension contributions relating to the Publica Review and Transition, investment properties voids and rent-free periods, and funding for temporary officer posts, for example in the Economic Development department. The Executive Member for Economic Development highlighted that budget deficiencies from investment properties would be kept as low as possible, but it was highly unlikely that deficiencies would never fall away overall. The Director of Finance stated that the relevant information would be disseminated to the appropriate non-Executive Member outside of the Executive meeting.

Executive Members also discussed the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, stating that the strategy is based on the best information available at the time of budget setting, and that communication issues surrounding the base on which Council Tax is set, had been an ongoing problem for a significant period.

Councillor Alaric Smith proposed that the Executive agree to the recommendations as listed on the report. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham, was put to a vote, and was agreed unanimously by the Executive.

The Executive **Resolved** to:

1. Approve the draft fees and charges for 2024/25, as detailed in Annex G, for inclusion as part of the Budget recommendations to Council on 28th February 2024.

And Resolved to Recommend to Council to:

2. Approve the Council Tax Base shown in Annex F, calculated as £47,841.03 for the year 2024/25;
3. Authorise the Director of Finance to submit the National Non-Domestic Rates Return I (NNDRI) to Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities by the submission date of 31 January 2024.

136 Business Rates Discretionary Rate Relief Reconsideration

Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Finance, introduced the report, which reconsidered an application for Discretionary Rate Relief, submitted under Section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1998 for the financial year 2023/24.

Councillor Alaric Smith proposed that the Executive agree to the recommendation as listed on the report. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Graham, was put to a vote, and was agreed unanimously by the Executive.

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The Executive **Resolved** to:

- I. Uphold the original decision not to award an additional 10% Discretionary Rate Relief submitted under S47 due to sufficient surplus held by the organisation.

137 Exclusion of Press and Public

This agenda item was not considered at the meeting.

138 Exempt Annex A - Business Rates Discretionary Rate Relief Reconsideration

This agenda item was not considered at the meeting.

The Meeting closed at 2.56pm.

CHAIR