

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

### Minutes of the meeting of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Held in the Committee Rooms 1 & 2, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire  
OX28 1NB at 5.30 pm on **Monday, 18 December 2023**

#### PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Thomas Ashby, Hugo Ashton, David Cooper, Julian Cooper, Rachel Crouch, Jane Doughty, Phil Godfrey, Natalie King, Andrew Lyon, David Melvin, Sandra Simpson, Ruth Smith, Harry St John, Alistair Wray, Liam Walker, Mark Walker, Colin Dingwall and Jeff Haine

Officers: Giles Hughes (Chief Executive) and Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance), Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrew Brown (Democratic Services Business Manager) and Michelle Ouzman (Democratic Services Officer).

Executive Members in attendance: Andy Graham, Leader of the Council.

#### **22 Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments**

Apologies were noted from Councillors Nick Leverton, Michele Mead, Mathew Parkinson, Rizvana Poole and Alex Wilson.

Councillor Jeff Haine substituted for Councillor Alex Wilson.

Councillor Colin Dingwall substituted for Councillor Michele Mead.

Councillors Andy Goodwin and Carl Rylett were both absent.

#### **23 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

#### **24 Minutes of previous meeting**

The draft minutes of the meeting held on the 6 December 2023 will be considered at the meeting on 10 January 2024.

#### **25 Participation of the Public**

There was no public participation.

#### **26 Publica Review**

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Andy Graham introduced the Publica Review report and explained that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would have further opportunities to review progress at various stages in the new year. The next progress report was due early in the new year.

The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Andrew Beaney, explained to members that the Human Engine report would be summarised by Jonathon Noble, Managing Director of Human Engine first, followed by questions. Then the second part of the item would be to scrutinise the Executive recommendations and next steps in the process of transferring the majority of services delivered by Publica to the Council.

The Managing Director of Human Engine informed the Committee that the Publica Review report reflected the Council's Senior Team's view that the majority of services should return

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to the Council. The Publica Senior Leadership Team viewed that services should remain with Publica.

The Committee asked a number of questions and noted that:

- Some Services like, ICT, HR, and Payroll would remain with Publica but this could be reviewed again at a later date.
- ICT at present had a high level of specialist expertise which was costly. There would be significant financial and other risks associated with returning this service to the Council at the same time as other services were being transitioned back to the Council.
- The Council had thought that Publica was fairly responsive and local services were good. However, the other councils in the partnership had other views.
- The Future Publica model included investment in technology but the Council could invest in technology themselves and many other councils were delivering savings in a similar way.
- Publica had originally been established to provide an acceptable level of service at the lowest cost. Now the councils wanted a “turn key” style of operation.
- A new Programme Director would be appointed to run the transition programme, supported by a Transition Team. This post would be funded and shared by all councils. The day rate for this interim post and which Council they would be employed by had not been decided upon, although this information should soon be available.
- Communication to Councillors, the Councils’ management teams and all staff must be a key responsibility of the Transition Manager and each Council.
- Communication to staff must be sensitively managed.
- There was a lack in detail within the report, especially on costings. The financial implications would become clearer as transition and due diligence continues.
- The Human Engine (HE) report helped the Council decide on the direction of travel for the future but only gave a high-level indication of the financial implications such as pension costs.

In the discussion about next steps the Committee noted that:

- The councils would have free assistance and advice from the Local Government Association.
- A new Council structure would be designed which would help with understanding staffing costs. Pension costs were the biggest variable. Each Council would adopt a new management structure, they did not need to be the same.
- Staff retained by Publica and staff moving to the Council would have different terms and conditions of employment, such as pension entitlements and healthcare benefits.
- Currently the councils collectively saved c. £1 million annually on pensions through the Publica model.
- The Council would explore working with other councils in partnership.
- It was reported that some staff were positive about moving back to the councils while others were unsettled. The mitigation of staff concerns must remain a priority during the transition.
- More detail and legal advice would be required before decisions could be made effectively.
- Recruitment was underway for a new Chair of the Publica Board.

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- HR advice, TUPE rules, and finance details were all key areas for the Transition Team to focus on.
- The Council had found itself in this position as a result of the wishes of other partner councils.
- It was expected to take something like 18 months to complete the transition, but the timescales had not yet been finalised.
- The Overview and Scrutiny Committee would have a role in scrutinising the Transition Plan and at other key decision points.

Giles Hughes, the Chief Executive, stated that he was grateful to Publica and all the staff for the services provided. Publica directors had informed the Chief Executive that Publica was committed to working with the Council, and together to make a success of the services provided. The Chief Executive also wanted to thank Jan Britton the outgoing Publica Managing Director and to wish him well with his new appointment and future endeavours elsewhere.

The Chief Executive committed to getting back to the Committee with more information about the Transition Director post including costs and how they would be shared.

The Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council were committed to ensuring that Councillors would be kept informed of all progress during transition, and would report back to the Committee on how this information would be communicated.

The Committee **Resolved** to:

1. Agree to scrutinise the transition plan before it goes to the Executive.
2. Invite the Publica Executive, the Chair of the Publica Audit and Risk Committee, and the Programme Director to a future meeting for scrutiny of the Transition Plan.

The Chair thanked the Committee and those present and called the meeting to a close.

The Meeting closed at 7.47 pm

CHAIR