

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 **Wednesday, 10 January 2024**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Thomas Ashby, Hugo Ashton, David Cooper, Julian Cooper, Rachel Crouch, Jane Doughty, Phil Godfrey, Nick Leverton, Andrew Lyon, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Carl Rylett, Sandra Simpson, Ruth Smith, Harry St John, Alistair Wray, Liam Walker, Alex Wilson and Dan Levy

Officers: Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrew Brown (Democratic Services Business Manager), Georgina Dyer (Chief Accountant), Anne Learmonth (Strategic Support Officer, Democratic Services) and Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

Other Councillors in attendance: Alaric Smith (Executive Member for Finance) and Andy Graham (Leader)

27 Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments

Apologies for absence were noted from Councillors Natalie King, Mathew Parkinson, Rizvanna Poole and Mark Walker. Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Andy Goodwin.

Councillor Dan Levy substituted for Natalie King.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Economic Development.

28 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

29 Participation of the Public

There was no public participation.

30 Minutes of Previous Meetings

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2023 were approved by the Committee and signed by the Chair as an accurate record.

31 Chair's Announcements

There were no announcements from the Chair.

32 Draft Budget 2024/25

The Executive Member for Finance introduced the report which set out the Council's budget at the time of publication. There was an updated version for the meeting of the Executive the following week. The Executive Member thanked the finance team for their work on the budget.

The Director of Finance said that the proposals represented a balanced budget. The budget papers for the Executive were adjusted for recent decisions taken in respect of the review of legal services and the local government finance settlement which the Council had received on

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18 December. The effect was to move the budget into a surplus position of £14,700. The version of the budget that would be presented to the Council budget setting meeting would also take into account the latest Business Rates information and any further Executive decisions that affect the budget.

The Director of Finance highlighted some key information in the report including:

- The forecast overspend in the current financial year of £433,041 over and above the approved deficit budget of £350,129.
- The draw-down of reserves over the period of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) set out in Annex A and the need to think ahead and manage finances carefully.
- The budget pressures caused by general and wage inflation.
- The uncertainty surrounding the financial impacts of the transfer of the majority of services from Publica to the Council.
- The challenging economic environment and the fact that a number of other local authorities had issued Section 114 notices.

In discussion the Committee noted that:

- Inflation in wages and energy had created an in year overspend and the revenue position was more than double the anticipated deficit.
- The reversal of one off items from 2023/24 (para. 5.2 in the report) did not represent items that had been promised to the public and not delivered, rather it was the reversal of income contingencies which had been put aside last year against planned income.
- The main differences from last year were around the levels of income rather than expenditure, e.g. increases to planning application fees and charges for green waste licenses.
- The Council was unable to calculate the retained Business Rates figure until the end of January and this would be reflected in the final report to the Council budget setting meeting.
- A decision had been taken in 2021 to reduce the opening season for Woodstock Swimming Pool due to the high cost to the Council of keeping the pool open for longer.
- Charging green waste customers on a pro rata basis was likely to be operationally difficult to implement and would likely reduce income. The Council could look at improving the information on the website and consider the cut-off date for buying a license.
- The Council Tax base was unlikely to grow strongly in the short term and it was difficult to identify alternative funding streams so it was considered prudent to propose raising Council Tax by the maximum of £5 per band D property. This had been factored in to the MTFS.
- The Council did not yet have a plan for dealing with the budget gap in future years but there was a lot less growth in the budget this year compared to last year.
- If legislation allowed the Council would look at charges on second homes.
- The budget consultation had largely taken place online and there had been an increase in the number of responses received this year to 377. The survey had asked people to rank their priorities. The Council wanted to continuously improve how it does consultation.

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- The Council had not received a formal request from Witney Town Council to release £75,000 in S106 monies for Raleigh Crescent Play Area but there was optimism it would be dealt with in the current financial year.
- Proposals would be coming forward to the Executive on the replacement of the waste vehicle fleet and the intention was to replace the fleet over the coming 3-4 years and to switch to alternative fuels.

The Chief Accountant committed to discussing the possibility of providing green waste licenses on a pro rate basis with the waste team, and to get back to the Committee with information about the cost of holding a Council Tax Referendum.

The Committee resolved to submit the following recommendation to the Executive:

- I. That the Cabinet Member for Finance writes to the Minister for Local Government requesting that local government finance settlements be announced earlier in future.

33 Report back on recommendation to the Executive

The Executive response to the recommendation on the Review of Weekly Markets was noted.

34 Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Democratic Services Business Manager updated the Committee on some changes to the work plan following the publication of an updated Executive Forward Plan:

- The Carbon Action Plan item had slipped to the March Executive meeting and would now be taken at the 29 February committee meeting.
- The Business Case for Acquiring Emergency Accommodation had slipped to the June Executive meeting.

In response to questions the Business Manager confirmed that an item on waste would likely come to the Committee after the local elections. The Business Manager also confirmed that the Executive reports on biodiversity and climate change were still on track for the February Executive meeting.

35 Executive Work Programme

There were no comments on the Executive work plan.

The Meeting closed at 6.58 pm

CHAIR