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## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB  
at 5.30 pm on **Wednesday, 4 September 2024**

#### PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Joy Aitman (Vice-Chair), Thomas Ashby, Adam Clements, Julian Cooper, Steve Cosier, Genny Early, Natalie King, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, Elizabeth Poskitt, Carl Rylett, Ruth Smith, Alistair Wray, Alex Wilson and David Jackson

Officers: Madhu Richards (Director of Finance - online), Phil Shaw (Development and Sustainability Business Manager), Chris Hargraves (Planning Policy Manager), Alison Borrett (Senior Performance Analyst), Andrew Brown (Democratic Services Business Manager), and Christine Elsasser (Democratic Services Officer)

Other Councillors in attendance: Councillors Andy Graham, Alaric Smith, Hugo Ashton

#### **33 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Rachel Crouch and Liz Leffman, Mark Walker, Sandra Simpson and Liam Walker. Councillor David Jackson substituted for Councillor Liz Leffman.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillors Stuart McCarroll and Ruth Smith.

Councillor Natalie King left at 18:52.

Councillor Alaric Smith left at 18:56.

Councillor Thomas Ashby left at 19:03

Councillor Julian Cooper left at 19:49

Councillor Nick Leverton left at 19:55

#### **34 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received from Members of the Committee.

#### **35 Minutes of Previous Meeting**

Councillor Dan Levy proposed that the minutes of the previous meeting, held on Wednesday 17 July 2024, be approved by the Committee as a true and accurate record. This was seconded by Councillor Steve Cosier, was put to a vote and it was unanimously agreed by the Committee.

It was noted that the word 'Chair' be used instead of the word 'Chairman'.

#### **36 Announcements from the Chair**

The Chair welcomed Members to the meeting and explained that Item 7 would be postponed to the next meeting because the lead officers had been unable to attend the meeting.

#### **37 Participation of the Public**

There was no participation of the public.

**38 Development Management Improvement Programme - Progress Update**

The Business Manager Development & Sustainability introduced the report that outlined the progress with the implementation of the Development Management Improvement Plan (DMIP) and outlined areas of current/future improvement.

It was explained that a series of improvements had been made or were proposed to be undertaken and were contained in a Development Management Improvement Plan (DMIP). The report identified the progress that had been made and then also set out further potential changes and improvements that could be made alongside the repatriation of the planning function to West Oxfordshire District Council.

The many changes were contained in the report; however, in reference to paragraph 4.16 it was to be emphasised that there were a series of other areas that would be examined for improvement.

The Executive Member for Planning thanked the Business Manager Development & Sustainability and his team for the report and the improvements thus far. He wished to add that the recruitment of staff and funds had been approved and that recruitment was currently underway.

The following points and suggestions were by the Committee:

- It was suggested that persistent planning enforcement complaints should be dealt with in a different way and if there could be alerts to notify people that Officers had attended the site. The process was explained, and the system was often misunderstood. Legally the question was not whether a development conformed to the plans that had been approved, it was whether it was causing harm.
- Ecology Officer capacity was the largest concern currently due to changes in requirements around biodiversity net gain. There would likely be a business case done to reflect that anticipated need. Recruitment would be done to ensure employees would be directly employed by West Oxfordshire District Council.
- There were plans for progression within the planning team and for succession planning to ensure career development and retention of staff.
- IT and moving to a cloud-based system would be examined once planning services were in house and the Publica split was complete.
- Proactive monitoring may be required for the larger strategic sites to ensure various housing requirements would be met. The Council had some years ago employed a proactive enforcement officer across planning and building control which had proven to be very effective and had fulfilled its purpose. The reintroduction of a similar resource would be beneficial.
- It was also suggested that the financial implications and pressures on local authorities be considered as a recommendation at a future Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- Members appreciated the report and suggested that it was very positive to see performance improving.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

Noted the existing/proposed improvements to the Development Management process, alongside the direction of travel for future improvements post repatriation of the Planning Service to the Council.

Agreed to submit the following recommendations to the Executive on 11 September 2024:

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1. That a business case is developed and considered for a proactive enforcement officer post.
2. That training is offered to elected Members on planning enforcement, including the legal framework and the role of Members.

### 39 Responding to External Consultations

This item was postponed to the next meeting.

### 40 Financial Performance Report 2024-25 Quarter One

The Executive Member for Finance introduced the report that detailed the Council's financial performance for Quarter One 2024-2025.

It was explained that at quarter 1 (Q1) there was an overall overspend £257,013 against the profiled budget for the period. The key factors driving this revenue position were income shortfalls in garden waste and development management, the delayed Elmfield office letting and increased expenditure in respect of the materials recycling contract.

The recycling contract with Suez expires at the end of September 2024 and with the new contract, if approved at the Executive meeting on 11 September 2024, there would be a budget saving of £300,000 from 2025/26 (£62,000 in 2024/25).

The further circumstances around the Elmfield office letting and other points were explained; the table in the report set out the summary revenue monitoring position for 30 June 2024 against profiled budget by service area.

The following points and suggestions were noted by the Committee:

- Regarding green waste, income recognition would be added to the quarter two report. The Chief Accountant spoke to the team about the mechanics of enabling people to purchase green waste licenses year-round for a 12 month period..
- It was requested that if there were further significant amount increases in the Publica Transition budget spend that full Council be informed. **Action Point:** The Finance Director informed Members that significant changes to the Publica Transition budget would be highlighted to the Executive and brought to Council as appropriate.
- In terms of section 2.25 of the report, where capital works requiring approval were summarised, it was requested if a further breakdown of costs could be provided and also which sites were getting which funds. **Action Point: The Finance Director would enquire with the asset team if there was any commercially sensitive reason not to provide that information. The information would be shared with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members if possible.**
- There was a query on whether Universal Credit benefit recipients could receive a reduced cost for their garden waste subscription.
- There was also concern raised on how Council assets had come into disrepair; it was explained that there was a big piece of work to be done on this, along with looking at which assets should be sold, etc. It was explained there were some properties that had not been inspected because Officers had not been able to enter properties. It was understood that there was a requirement for assessments to take place regularly on Council assets and this would be part of the strategy going forward.
- There were comments made on affordable homes within the Cottsway Housing Association and the inconsistency of rent costs in the area. It was suggested that housing associations should be scrutinised on how they determine rents.

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- Homelessness spend on page. 43 was queried. **Action Point: The Finance Director would provide information on Homelessness, the Afghan Resettlement Programmes and Homes for Ukraine to Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**
- In reference to the performance in Leisure, the quarter one figures had improved due to a better relationship with GLL and payments being made on time.
- The CCTV upgrades remained incomplete. **Action Point: The Finance Director would provide information to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee once received from the Assistant Director of Communities.**
- SI06 money allocations would be provided for in the next quarter.

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the report and it was agreed that there were no recommendations to the Executive on 11 September 2024.

#### 41 Service Performance Report 2024-25 Quarter One

The Leader introduced the report that provided the detail of the Council's operational performance at the end of 2024-25 Quarter One (Q1).

It was explained that this was a relatively positive report and that on page 50 of the report pack one could find those service performances that were below target. The Senior Performance Analyst explained some of the reasons for the sections of service areas that were below target.

The following points and suggestions were noted by the Committee:

- The allowance rate for planning applications allowed was queried and it was explained that the wording "supported" would be clarified to explain that those were application whereby the inspectorate had sided with the Council.
- It was queried if there was information on a breakdown of the leisure centres and where the variances were within them. **Action Point: The Senior Performance Analyst agreed to provide a breakdown of leisure centre performance to Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**
- It was explained that housing benefits numbers had been decreasing and the system migration was meant to be phased with the various stages being brought forward. There would be a compare and contrast on this in later reports.
- Regarding FOI requests, it was explained that they tended to come from research studies, and it would be a blanket across the three councils; there was a varying degree with one hundred and eighty for the quarter for West Oxfordshire District Council on various topics.

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the report and it was agreed that there were no recommendations to the Executive on 11 September 2024.

#### 42 Proposed Reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the Planning System

The Planning Policy Manager introduced the report that considered several proposed changes to National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and to agree West Oxfordshire District Council's response to those proposed changes.

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It was explained that the Government was consulting on a series of proposed changes. This included several specific changes to the NPPF and several broader reforms relating to planning fees, local plan intervention and the thresholds used for determining applications under the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) regime.

The consultation was running from 30 July – 24 September 2024 and the Government had indicated that a new version of the NPPF would be published before the end of the year. The purpose of this report was to provide an overview of the proposed changes together with an initial Officer response, highlighting, where possible, any implications for West Oxfordshire. Annex A provided a more detailed suggested draft response to each of the specific questions included within the consultation document.

The Executive Member for Planning suggested that further comments would be added to the response around the need to ensure the right infrastructure was sought e.g. water and sewerage infrastructure, more leniency on building regulations to enable the Council to specify requirements for net zero homes, suggesting that 5-year land supply calculations be based on permissions granted, and various other requests. Any comments were welcome and would be considered in the response made.

The following points and suggestions were to be noted following Member's questions and queries:

- Concern was raised over the lack of clarification of flooding because there appeared to be no guidance and no clarification. It was explained that the government was not proposing changes to the current regime around flood risk. There was the question of whether it did enough and whether this was a short-term or long-term approach. In terms of water quality, it was felt that a more holistic approach was required.
- There was concern raised over the vagueness of what grey belt land was and it was explained that the remedy for a clear plan was likely to get a new Local Plan put in place with an updated development scheme. This would ensure that any delay was kept to a minimum; the timetable was currently being examined.
- One of the points in the process was to change how developers work and national development plans would still be included; it was suggested that one would hope that a more centralised strategic approach would be undertaken.
- Every opportunity should be taken to put forward a point of view after every question.
- There was a question of how the point could be made that the housing numbers for West Oxfordshire District Council were often not the real numbers for the district which had to help to address Oxford's unmet housing need. The Planning Policy Manager agreed that the method and new formula was flawed, and it seemed like urban numbers were decreasing whilst rural areas were increasing; where growth was difficult to achieve and supporting infrastructure was lacking.
- The Planning Policy Manager suggested that a letter could be provided by the Council to the government in addition to the responses to the consultation questions.
- It was confirmed that strategic working would be undertaken with other councils where possible and joint working between the authorities had been quite successful and effective in Oxfordshire. The Leader explained that there was a piece of work to show the impact and importance of collective working and meaningful partnerships.
- The Local Plan required scrutiny and the Council should stand up to the inspectorate.
- Housing stock should be proportionate to population; what was required was not only infrastructure, amenities, and transport; but it was also important to ensure to make sure

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the funding was available to create functioning communities. The Planning Policy Manager suggested that this could be included in the letter.

- Classification of land was vital to the food supply and it was asked if this could be added to point 83 so that the land could be retained for that purpose. The Planning Policy confirmed it would be linked to the response.

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the report and agreed all Councillors were encouraged to send the Planning Policy Manager and the Executive Member of Planning any further suggestions prior to the Executive meeting on 11 September. A general letter would be put together expressing the view of West Oxfordshire Council once all comments were received.

#### 43 Report Back on Recommendations

There were no recommendations to the Executive arising from the previous Committee meeting.

#### 44 Executive Work Programme

The Committee AGREED that the Infrastructure Funding Statement would be subject to pre-decision scrutiny and an alternative plan would be worked out because the Local Plan Preferred Options Consultation was delayed.

The Committee Work Programme was noted and the above be actioned.

#### 45 Committee Work Programme

The Committee Work Programme was noted with the addition of a bi-yearly report on Nature Recover.

The Committee also requested that consideration be given to how Members could scrutinise the Housing Associations, picking up some issues that had been raised earlier in the meeting.

The Committee also suggested that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was itself subject to a review to ensure it is operating effectively. The Business Manager for Democratic Services advised that a review would be taking place as part of the work of the Constitution Working Group, 12 months on from the new committee structure being implemented. The Committee's views would be sought as part of this exercise.

**Action Point: There was a suggestion from a Member that the Nature Recovery Plan be added and that a bi-yearly report be brought back against KPIs and that a Housing Association report be added to a future meeting.**

The Meeting closed at 8.01 pm

CHAIRMAN