WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the

Council

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 19 March 2025**

PRESENT

Councillors: Elizabeth Poskitt (Chair), Andrew Coles (Vice-Chair), Lidia Arciszewska, Thomas Ashby, Hugo Ashton, Andrew Beaney, Michael Brooker, Adam Clements, Julian Cooper, Rachel Crouch, Jane Doughty, Genny Early, Duncan Enright, Roger Faulkner, Phil Godfrey, Andy Goodwin, Andy Graham, David Jackson, Edward James, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Michele Mead, Rosie Pearson, Andrew Prosser, Nigel Ridpath, Carl Rylett, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Ruth Smith, Tim Sumner, Sarah Veasey, Liam Walker, Adrian Walsh and Alistair Wray

Officers: Ana Prelici (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Giles Hughes (Chief Executive Officer), Madhu Richards (Director of Finance), Andrea McCaskie (Director of Governance), Frank Wilson (Group Finance Director - Publica), Phil Martin (Director of Place), Anne Learmonth (Democratic Services Officer) and Maria Harper (Democratic Services Assistant)

CL.240 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Andy Graham proposed approving the minutes and Councillor Duncan Enright seconded this. The minutes were put to the vote and approved unanimously.

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2025 were approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

CL.241 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors; Alex Wilson, David Cooper, Martin McBride, Mark Walker, Joy Aitman, David Melvin, Stuart McCarroll, Steve Cosier and Mike Baggaley.

CL.242 Declarations of Interest

Declarations of Interest were received as follows in regard to the motion on the Botley West Solar Farm:

- Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt stated that she was a representative for Woodstock Town Council on the Botley West Solar Farm Community benefits group.
- Councillor Lidia Arciewska stated that she lived near to the proposed site so it would impact her property
- Councillor Tim Sumner stated that he was a resident impacted by the application.
- Councillor Sarah Veasey also stated that she was a representative on the Botley West Solar Farm Community Benefit Group.

- Councillor Duncan Enright declared that he conducted work for a group called the Community Communications Partnership, which worked on planning matters but not within the District.

CL.243 **Receipt of Announcements**

The Chair provided an overview of her civic commitments;

- The raffle and quiz which took place the previous week had been successful. The Chair thanked Members and Officers who attended and purchased tickets, highlighting that their contributions raised £1430. The Chair also thanked the Vice-Chair and his partner for producing the quiz questions.
- The Chair had visited the Branch Community Hub alongside the Chair of Oxfordshire County Council and the Mayor of Chipping Norton. The Chair encouraged other members to visit the Branch, which provided support for people in the community to overcome challenges and barriers.
- The visit to the Hanborough bus museum, referenced in the minutes of the previous meeting, had been cancelled.
- There was a sale of cakes, marmalades, jams and chutneys outside of the Council Chamber that day.

The Chair also wished Councillor Jane Doughty a happy birthday.

The Leader had no announcements.

Councillor Duncan Enright, the Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Economic Development welcomed Hotter Shoes to Marriot's Walk. The Deputy Leader explained that the Council was in the process of recruiting a new communications officer, who would be working on promoting Mariott's Walk. The Deputy Leader also stated that the official opening of the Hexagon Business Centre, in the Council's Elmfield site would take place the following day. A paper would be brought to the Executive to highlight the work undertaken to support businesses, highlighting the use of the UK shared prosperity fund.

Councillor Andrew Prosser, the Executive Member for Climate Action and Nature Recovery, stated that the Council had been successful in securing a £2.3m grant to decarbonise Chipping Norton Leisure Centre. The Executive Member also stated that the Oxfordshire Climate Adaptation Strategy and Route Map had been launched, and that there were steps that everyone needed to take in order to improve resilience. More information would be coming forward on this at a future point.

Councillor Tim Sumner, The Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects, stated that he had attended the 50 year anniversary celebration of the Windrush leisure centre, which had provided a range of free family friendly activities. Councillor Sumner stated that the Council was proud of its leisure centres and that it provided a good service.

Councillor Hugo Ashton, the Executive Member for Planning, stated that the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) draft charging schedule had been submitted for examination, and that following an eight-week public consultation, all feedback had been reviewed and minor amendments made. The next step was a hearing which would take place in the second half of May, followed by a report, likely in June. CIL would apply to smaller developments and would apply to applications that received permission after the date CIL was implemented. The Council had been successful in securing £228,000 of Government funding to assist with the plan making process.

The Chief Executive stated he was deeply saddened to report the sudden passing of Daisy Catterall. Daisy joined Publica as a Customer Service Advisor in January 2020 and then transferred to the Waste Contracts team in 2023. A service of remembrance was held for Daisy the previous day in Cirencester and was attended by over 400 family, friends, and colleagues. The Council held a moment of silence in her memory.

There were no further announcements.

CL.244 Participation of the Public

There was no participation of the public.

CL.245 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 if they wished and then invited the relevant Executive Members to respond.

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.

Councillor Micheal Brooker raised a point of order under 6A of the Constitution, the Council's Code of Conduct over the use of language in question five. The Chair stated that Members were only able to raise points of order under the Council's procedure rules, and that the code of conduct was not part of this. The Chair reminded members that it was important nonetheless to abide by the code of conduct at all times.

CL.246 Publica Phase two transition plan

Councillor Andy Graham, the Leader of the Council, introduced the item. The purpose of the item was to consider the Transition Plan, to note its contents and to approve the recommendations therein. Councillor Graham highlighted the services that were being transitioned, explaining that phase two was smaller, containing 60 roles across the whole partnership as opposed to the 271 roles that were transferred in phase one.

The Leader explained that the hope was that as many of the existing staff would be able to transfer either through TUPE or through an expressions of interest process. Publica would continue to deliver a range of services for the councils.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed accepting the recommendations in the report and Councillor Duncan Enright seconded this proposal, which was put to the vote and agreed unanimously by Council.

Council resolved to:

1. Approve the implementation of Phase 2 of the Publica Transition on the basis of the Phase 2 Transition Plan.
2. Delegate to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council the decision to deal with any final detailed matters arising from the Phase 2 Transition Plan.
3. Delegate authority to the Director of Governance in liaison with the Leader to update the Constitution by making any consequential changes required as a result of Phase 2 of the Publica Transition.
4. Agree to carry out a budget re-basing for the 2026/7 financial year so that the funding provided to Publica is proportionate to the services received.

CL.247 Provision of an Empty Property Lending Scheme

The purpose of the item was to consider a loan provider for owners of long-term empty properties who need financial support to bring their properties back into use.

Councillor Andy Graham stated he would be proposing the item, but asked Councillor Alaric Smith to introduce it as he had worked on the details of the project.

Councillor Alaric Smith, the Executive Member for Finance, introduced the item, highlighting the following;

- The report set out a proposed initiative to put vacant homes into use.
- An initial financial investment of £300,000 would be used to create lending pot for repair work to put these properties into use.
- Lending would be at a favourable rate.

- The scheme was aligned to the Council's priorities.
- Should the scheme be approved, it would be for a one year trial period and loans would be available in the coming months.
- The scheme was to be delivered in partnership with Lendology, a not-for-profit social enterprise lender.
- At the end of March 2025, there were 1,128 properties in the district which were empty, and 125 had been vacant for over two years. As many of these homes required financial investment to make them habitable, the scheme would help meet local housing need.

Members asked the following questions for clarity.

- Whether there was a cap on the scheme. The Executive Member explained that the maximum loan amount would be considered in the development of the scheme, but that the indicative average loan amount was £20,000.
- How cost would be recovered if a borrower defaulted on a loan. The Executive Member stated that Lendology would be responsible for collecting the debt and had processes in place, having worked with other councils on similar schemes.
- Whether social housing providers would be able to utilise the scheme. The Executive Member explained that the scheme was currently intended for individual homeowners only.

In debate, members raised the following points;

- Another member of the Executive stated that in discussion with Lendology, it was clear that they would not secure loans against the property, utilising instead other protections such as restrictions on the owners' legal title. Lendology had very low default rates in other areas of the country.
- Whether £20,000 was sufficient. The Executive Member stated that as this was indicative, the final details would need to be worked out with Lendology.
- The item had not gone to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Executive member stated that the Committee's workplan was the responsibility of that Committee, and it could have looked at it as a pre-decision scrutiny item if it had wished to.
- It was stated that temporary accommodation was an expense for the Council, and the Council was likely to make a saving if individuals were placed into permanent accommodation. However, there was no restriction on what would happen to the homes after refurbishment.
- The scheme was welcomed by some for being an imaginative solution.
- The scheme could be used in situations such as when an individual has passed away or moved into a care home, and the family didn't have the money available to renovate the home to bring it back into use.
- Lendology had worked with councils across the country on similar schemes.

- It was felt by some that the scheme should be extended to social housing providers.

In summing up, Councillor Andy Graham stated that the scheme would be reviewed constantly, and that it was a new and proactive scheme that had the ability to help the district's supply of houses.

Councillor Andy Graham proposed accepting the recommendations. Councillor Alaric Smith seconded this proposal, which was put to the vote and agreed by Council

Council resolved to;

1. Approve a capital investment of £300,000 to create a lending pot.
2. Approve an initial set up fee of £30,125.

Voting record- For 34, against 4, abstentions 1, did not vote 0.

CL.248 Recommendations from the Constitution Working Group

The purpose of the report was to present Council with recommendations arising from meetings of the Constitution Working Group (CWG).

Councillor Alaric Smith, the Chair of the CWG, introduced the item, highlighting the changes to the proposed changes to the Council's Constitution:

- To amend part 5C of the Constitution so that only key decisions would be subject to call-in by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, consistent with part 3A of the Constitution.
- To amend part 4C of the Constitution so that it included the Chair of the Council as being authorised to apply the common seal of the Council, consistent with Article 2 of the Constitution. To further include the Vice-Chair of the Council and the Director of Place in this authorisation.
- To amend part 3C to make it explicitly clear that the Development Control Committee is responsible for agreeing the Council's responses to nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, as per the Council's established customs and practice.
- To amend part 4B of the Constitution to include delegations that would allow proactive enforcement work by the Head of the Counter Fraud and Enforcement Unit.

Councillor Smith also stated that the CWG would be meeting on 26 March to consider an updated version of the Council's Contract Procedure Rules. Council was asked to delegate authority to the Director of Governance and Regulatory Services to adopt this following consideration by the CWG and in consultation with the Chair of the CWG.

Councillor Alaric Smith proposed accepting the recommendations, and Councillor Rosie Pearson seconded this. The proposal was put to the vote and agreed by Council.

Council resolved to:

1) Agree to remove the following provisions from paragraph 36 of Part 5C of the Constitution to ensure consistency with other parts of the Constitution in setting out which decisions are subject to call in (as shown in Annex A):

   ii. is taken by the Executive itself; or

   iii. is taken under powers delegated by the Executive to Page 59 Agenda Item 9 individual Executive Member(s); or

   iv. is taken under powers delegated by the Executive to a Committee or Sub-Committee.
2) Agree to include the Chair of the Council in Part 4C and the Vice Chair of the Council and the Director of Place in both Part 4C and Article 2 as being authorised to apply the common seal of the Council and sign documents (as shown in Annexes B and C).
3) Agree to include in the responsibilities of the Development Control Committee at Part 3C responsibility for determining the Council's response to Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects within the District (as shown in Annex D).
4) Agree to include in Part 4B additional delegations to the Head of the Counter Fraud and Enforcement Unit relating to reactive enforcement functions (as shown in Annex E).
5) Delegate authority to the Director of Governance, in consultation with the Chair of the Constitution Working Group (which is due to meet on 26 March 2025), to adopt the new Contract Procedure Rules which have been rewritten following the implementation of the Procurement Act 2023.

The recommendations were agreed unanimously.

CL.249 Motion A: Botley West Solar Farm (proposed by Councillor Roger Faulkner, seconded by Councillor Sarah Veasey)

Councillor Roger Faulkner proposed the motion which was;

"This Council is deeply concerned about the impact that the Botley West Solar Farm project will have on both the local community and countryside. This Council requests the Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero objecting to the proposal."

Councillor Dan Levy proposed an amendment to the motion, the amended motion would read as follows;

"This Council is deeply concerned about the impact that the Botley West Solar Farm project as currently proposed will have on both the local community and countryside. This Council requests the Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero objecting to the proposal. as currently promoted by the developer. This Council also recognises the excellent report written by officers as part of its representations to the Planning Inspectorate, which set out the main issues of concern with the current proposal, and supports WODC in its role as a statutory consultee in the inspection of the proposed scheme."

In proposing the amendment, Councillor Levy stated that the amendment recognised the work of officers, and the role of the Council as a statutory consultee. Councillor Levy stated that the amendment removed the political angle to the motion.

Councillor Faulkner accepted the amendment to the motion. Councillor Sarah Veasey stated she would be seconding the motion and also accepted the amendment.

The motion was debated as amended. The following points were raised;

- Some members felt that the amendment had improved the motion, and that while there was concern over the impacts that the Botley West solar farm would have on residents, the countryside and heritage, the motion did not identify any specific concerns.
- It was stated by some that sending a letter would not cause any harm.
- It was stated that in debate on the Council's response to the Botley West application on 24 February, the Development Control Committee had asked that an objection letter be sent, but this had not been done.
- Some members objected the motion on the grounds that the Development Control Committee had already agreed the Council's response to the application, and that sending a letter would have the risk of contradicting the response, potentially downgrading the role of the Development Control Committee. It was stated that the original report was nuanced and detailed, and that any letter sent would not add anything.
- The importance of the application in decarbonising the country's energy supply was also raised by some who opposed the motion.
- On the other hand, some members in support of the motion stated that the objections that were being raised were to the specific plan, not against solar in principle and that they did not feel it fulfilled the needs of the community.
- Some Members stated that the amendment had improved the motion, and that it provided recognition of the role of the Development Control Committee and of the response produced by officers.

- Other Members stated that the debate showed why planning matters should remain matters for the Council's planning committees.

Councillor Sarah Veasey spoke as seconder of the motion. Councillor Veasey stated that the proposed development was too large, and that the Council had a duty to represent its parishes and the district's residents.

Councillor Roger Faulkner summed up the debate on the motion. Councillor Faulkner thanked officers for the report outlining the Council's response and stated that the detrimental impact of the application outweighed its benefits. Councillor Faulkner stated that the motion clarified the Council's position and urged members to support the motion

Council resolved to approve the amended Botley West Solar Farm motion as set out above.

Voting record - For 27, Against 7, Abstention 3, Did not vote 1

CL.250 Motion B: Public Engagement in Council Meetings (proposed by Councillor Michele Mead, seconded by Councillor Liam Walker)

Councillor Michelle Mead proposed the motion which was:

"Public participation in council meetings is something we should all encourage and support. Currently the council constitution sets out different rules regarding public participation in our meetings. For committee meetings members of the public must register to speak by 10AM on the working day before. For Executive it's by 2PM two clear working days before, and for Full Council it is by 12NOON seven working days before and therefore before the council agenda is published two days later.

In order to improve and encourage public participation in our meetings this council asks the constitution working group to review these deadlines and to report back to full council within six months with an update on any new changes decided by the committee."

In debate it was stated that the current rules seemed to be anomalous.

Councillor Liam Walker supported the motion as seconder but did not speak on it.

Council resolved to approve the Public Engagement in Council Meetings motion as set out above.

The motion was approved unanimously.

The Meeting closed at 3.23 pm

CHAIR