

Minutes

of the budget meeting of the

Council



held on Thursday 22 February 2024
at 6.00 pm in Didcot Civic Hall,
Britwell Road, Didcot, OX11 7JN

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: David Turner (Chair), Kellie Hinton (Vice-Chair), Pieter-Paul Barker, James Barlow, Tim Bearder, Robin Bennett, David Bretherton, Sam Casey-Rerhaye, Sue Cooper, Peter Dragonetti, Maggie Filipova-Rivers, Stefan Gawrysiak, Mike Giles, Ali Gordon-Creed, Kate Gregory, Georgina Heritage, Sam James-Lawrie, Alexandrine Kantor, Katharine Keats-Rohan, Mocky Khan, Ben Manning, Zia Mohammed, Andrea Powell, Leigh Rawlins, Jo Robb, David Rouane, Anne-Marie Simpson, Ed Sadler, Ian Snowdon, Andrew Tinsley, and Tony Worgan

Officers: Steven Corrigan (Democratic Services Manager), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer), Mark Stone (Chief Executive Officer), Vivien Williams (Head of Legal and Democratic (Interim) and Monitoring Officer), and Darius Zarazel (Democratic Services Officer)

63 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence was received from Councillors Ken Arlett, Axel Macdonald, James Norman, Freddie van Mierlo, and Denise Macdonald.

64 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2023 as a correct record and agree that the Chair sign them as such.

65 Declarations of interest

None.

66 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, outlined the procedure to be followed, and advised on emergency evacuation arrangements. He also noted that there was no urgent business.

The Chair then provided details of the events he had attended since the last meeting of Council.

67 Public participation

One member of the public had registered to ask a question as set out below.

(1) Mr McLaren had submitted the following question to Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, but was unable to attend the meeting:

“I am writing formally to seek the Council’s view on a strategic matter which is currently adversely affecting the environment within this council’s area. It is an issue which has also affected over 100 other sites in 12 councils over the last 20 years.

This concerns the purchase of environmentally sensitive agricultural land and ancient woodlands, often in AONB’s and often by an Special Purpose Vehicle company, which is then divided into many small lots by the purchaser to be auctioned to individual buyers at an inflated price (known as woodlotting). These new owners exercise their permitted development rights and erect fences, huts and other temporary buildings. Because of the large number of individual plots each with infrastructure, fragmentation and environmental damage occurs, destroying the quiet and unspoilt amenity of the sites, seriously affecting biodiversity, and representing in aggregate a fundamental change of use in a context where no planning change of use was ever contemplated. It also means that no-one has the responsibility for the management of the overall site, which deteriorates as a direct result.

Only one remedy has so far been found by Councils elsewhere which successfully and instantly prevents these particular adverse consequences, and that is the imposition of an A4 Direction on a site thus threatened, which removes permitted development rights.

In a particular current instance, Swyncombe Parish Council has been in correspondence with SODC requesting that an A4D be issued on an area of ancient woodland which is currently in the process of being lotted, auctioned, and where new infrastructure is already being put in place.

I would be grateful if you could state the Council’s reasons for refusing to impose an A4 Direction on this site, which is already being adversely affected in the manner described. I would also request that the Council’s general view on A4Ds as a precautionary proactive response to woodlotting be reconsidered. This would at a stroke greatly benefit sites of great environmental importance and help to deter further instances of the cynical practice of lotting. By not issuing an A4 Direction a signal is being sent to developers that the AONB is not protected.”

Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, responded as follows:

“Thank you for your question. I am familiar with the situation where land is being auctioned off into smaller plots, such as the example currently occurring within Swyncombe parish.

Government advises in the National Planning Policy Framework that the use of Article 4 directions to remove national planning permitted development rights should be limited to situation where it is necessary to avoid wholly unacceptable adverse impacts to protect local amenity and the well-being of an area. They should be based on robust evidence and applied to the smallest geographical area possible. Local Planning Authorities are required to notify the Secretary of State about new Article 4 directions, who will consider whether to exercise his power to intervene, either to modify or cancel an Article 4 direction.

The removal of permitted development, through an Article 4 direction does not stop development, but it means planning permission should be first sought. An Article 4 does not prevent a breach of planning and does not change the position that an area of land may have different owners and thus there will be no overall management of the land. An Article 4 does not prevent the suggested adverse consequences.

Each consideration of an Article 4 direction is on a case by case basis and assessed carefully on the evidence, following national planning guidance. Whether it is in a National Landscape (AONB) or any part of our district, we will use, appropriately, the planning tools available to us to ensure our attractive environment is maintained for our communities.

At this time there is no justification for the council to pursue an Article 4 Direction at the site in Swyncombe parish. The land is agricultural/woodland within a National Landscape (AONB) and due to the size of the plots being auctioned, most acts of development associated with the lawful use will be subject to the prior notification procedure. As advised locally, there is no credible evidence of permitted development activity being undertaken and no breaches of planning have been reported. The land continues to be in one ownership, based on current Land Registry data. We have proactively served a Tree Preservation Order on part of the site.

We have written to all the auction houses reminder them of the planning rules and status of the land, which we note is set out in the sales particulars.

I encourage you to report any alleged breaches of planning via the council's online form and we will consider the planning concern raised in line with our Planning Enforcement Strategy."

68 Petitions

There were no petitions for Council to consider.

69 Treasury management 2023/24 mid-year monitoring report

Council considered Cabinet's recommendations, made at its meeting on 15 February 2024, on the treasury management performance in the first six months of 2023/24.

Both the Joint Audit and Governance Committee, at its meeting on 30 January 2024, and Cabinet, at its meeting on 15 February 2024, were content that the treasury management activities had been carried out in accordance with the treasury management strategy and policy.

Councillor Barker, Cabinet member for finance and property assets, reported that income was strong in the first two quarters of the financial year, exceeding the expected budget due to higher than forecasted interest rates, and that the forecast was also very positive for the remaining two quarters. He also highlighted to Council that there was no need to borrow for the first six months and that there was no expectation of any need to borrow for the remainder of 2023/24.

Council was satisfied with the report and that treasury management activities were being carried out in accordance with the strategy and policy. Therefore, they agreed that the treasury management 2023/24 mid-year monitoring report should be approved.

RESOLVED: to

1. note that Cabinet is satisfied that the treasury activities are carried out in accordance with the treasury management strategy and policy; and
2. approve the treasury management 2023/24 mid-year monitoring report.

70 Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2024/25

Council considered the head of finance's report on treasury management and investment strategy for 2024/25 which set out Cabinet's recommendations, made at its meeting on 15 February 2024.

The Joint Audit and Governance Committee, at its meeting on 30 January 2024, had supported the draft strategy and had recommended it to Cabinet, along with approving the prudential indicators and limits, approving the annual investment strategy and lending criteria, and approving the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) policy.

Councillor Barker, the Cabinet member for finance and property assets, introduced the report and Cabinet's recommendations. He highlighted that there were no changes to the counterparty selection in the strategy, although there had been a suggested inclusion of an environmental, social, and governance (ESG) policy that would be a factor in determining the council's investments. Councillor Barker emphasised that the council understood the importance of ESG factors, and that they would be taken into account in the council's investment decision, noting that the prioritisation of security, liquidity, then yield remained central to the council's investment strategy.

Councillor Barker notified Council about an additional recommendation Cabinet made, to note that the section 151 officer had confirmed that he would conduct a review of investment options with the council's treasury advisors, Link, accounting for ESG factors, and that that the report would be brought to the Joint Audit and Governance Committee.

Council was satisfied with the treasury management and investment strategy for 2024/25 and agreed that it should be approved.

RESOLVED: to

1. approve the treasury management strategy 2024/25, as set out in Appendix A to the head of finance's report to Cabinet on 15 February 2024;

2. approve the prudential indicators and limits for 2024/25 to 2026/27, as set out in Appendix A of the report;
3. approve the annual investment strategy 2024/25, as set out in Appendix A of the report, and the lending criteria detailed in table 6; and
4. approve the Environmental, Social and Governance Policy, as set out in Appendix E to the report.

71 Capital Strategy 2024/25-2033/34

Council considered Cabinet's recommendation, made at its meeting on 15 February 2024, on the council's capital strategy for 2024/25 to 2032/34.

Councillor Barker, the Cabinet member for finance and property assets, introduced the report and the Cabinet's recommendations. Cabinet had supported the strategy, and he noted that it was a requirement for the council to review its capital strategy annually. In this review, he noted that a key change to the strategy was in section five of the report, as the ending of commercial investments would bring the council in line with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) requirements. He also drew members attention to Annex A which was the proposed strategy for the flexible use of capital receipts.

In addition, Councillor Barker noted that, since the report was published, there had been amendments made to the figures presented on page 74 of the agenda, but that they did not have any material effect on the strategy. Some members indicated that an improvement to future strategies would be for the charts to also present the raw data alongside them in order for members and residents to more easily examine the data.

Council was satisfied with the strategy and agreed that it should be approved.

RESOLVED:

1. approve the capital strategy 2024/25 to 2033/34, as set out in Appendix 1 of the head of finance's report to Cabinet on 15 February 2024; and
2. agree the strategy for flexible use of capital receipts, as set out in Annex 1 of the capital strategy.

72 Revenue budget 2024/25 and capital programme 2024/25 - 2028/29

The chair referred to regulations that require councils to record the names of those councillors voting in favour, against or abstaining from any vote on the budget, including amendments, and the council tax. In accordance with the regulations, he would call for a named vote on each of these matters at this meeting.

Council noted the report of the chief finance officer on the robustness of the budget estimates and the adequacy of the reserves.

Council considered Cabinet's recommendations, made at its meeting held on 15 February 2024, on the revenue budget for 2024/25 and the capital programme to 2028/29.

Councillor Barker, Cabinet member for finance and property assets, presented Cabinet's proposals for the revenue budget and capital programme. He moved and Councillor Powell, Cabinet member for corporate services, policy and programmes, seconded a motion to approve Cabinet's recommendations as follows:

To

1. set the revenue budget for 2024/25 as set out in appendix A.1 to the report,
2. approve the capital programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29 as set out in appendix D.1 and D.2 to the report, together with the capital programme changes as set out in appendix D.3 and Appendix D.4 to the report,
3. set the council's prudential limits as listed in appendix E to the report,
4. set the medium-term financial plan to 2028/29 as set out in appendix F to the report,
5. allocate £500,000 to fund the Communities Capital and Revenue grant scheme,
6. ask officers to review the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) at the end of the current spending review period.

In introducing the budget, Councillor Barker noted that he was presenting a budget without any cuts to services in what was a very challenging time for local authorities across the country. It was noted that part of the reason for this was due to an increase in business rate collections.

Councillor Barker highlighted to Council that the budget was £1.5m better than the forecast and that the draw on reserves was down from £3m to £1.5m, whilst the settlement from central government had remained relatively stable. He also noted certain key areas of the budget including £500,000 for the community hub, support for the Cornerstone Arts Centre and performing arts across the district, the maintenance of the previous year's level of grant funding, decarbonisation funding, a range of grants and investments in affordable housing, and for the continued support for the Future Oxfordshire Partnership. Overall, Councillor Barker was satisfied that the council was on a firm financial footing for the upcoming year and the years beyond.

A minority of members spoke against the budget proposals. They opposed it on the grounds that it was not ambitious or transformational enough, that it did not put the environment at the heart of funding decisions as shown through the continued use of diesel vehicles, and that there were no real term increases for grants. Some members commented that future budgets would benefit from having the views of members from other political groups included in the budget discussions.

However, the majority of members supported the budget proposals. As it was a budget with no cuts to services in a time where other local authorities were struggling with their finances, members commended the budget and thanked the officers for their support. Specifically, members welcomed the micro and small enterprise grants which would provide support for small business, and they noted that one of the reasons for the increased business receipts was due to the success of small businesses across

the district. Members also praised the inclusion of funding for local arts and culture, continued support for the community hub, funding for decarbonisation efforts, and the investments planned for leisure centres. The inclusion of funding for homelessness prevention and affordable housing was also mentioned as members were proud of the support that the council provided in this area and indicated that these services would likely be increasingly needed moving forward. It was also highlighted that the council remained the seventh lowest taxing district in country and that the budget showed how they were providing value for money.

Overall, as members were satisfied with the relatively strong position of the council's finances, and with the proposed areas of allocated funding, they agreed that the budget and capital programme should be approved.

In accordance with regulations requiring councils to record the names of those councillors voting in favour, against or abstaining from any vote on the budget, the Chair called for a recorded vote which was carried with the voting being as follows:

For	Against	Abstain
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Pieter-Paul Barker	Ian Snowdon	Mocky Khan
James Barlow		
Tim Bearder		
Robin Bennett		
David Bretherton		
Sam Casey-Rerhaye		
Sue Cooper		
Peter Dragonetti		
Maggie Filipova-Rivers		
Stefan Gawrysiak		
Mike Giles		
Ali Gordon-Creed		
Kate Gregory		
Georgina Heritage		
Kellie Hinton		
Sam James-Lawrie		
Alexandrine Kantor		

Katharine Keats-Rohan		
Ben Manning		
Zia Mohammed		
Andrea Powell		
Leigh Rawlins		
Jo Robb		
David Rouane		
Ed Sadler		
Anne-Marie Simpson		
Andrew Tinsley		
David Turner		
Tony Worgan		
29	1	1

RESOLVED: to

1. set the revenue budget for 2024/25, as set out in Appendix A.1 to the head of finance’s report to Cabinet on 15 February 2024;
2. approve the capital programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29, as set out in Appendices D.1 and D.2 to the report, together with the capital programme changes, as set out in Appendices D.3 and D.4 to the report;
3. set the council’s prudential limits, as listed in Appendix E to the report;
4. set the medium-term financial plan to 2028/29, as set out in Appendix F to the report;
5. allocate £500,000 to fund the Communities Capital and Revenue grant scheme; and
6. ask officers to review the Medium-Term Financial Strategy at the end of the current spending review period.

73 Council tax 2024/25

Council considered the report of the head of finance on the setting of the Council Tax for the 2024/25 financial year.

Councillor Barker, the Cabinet member for finance and property assets, introduced the item. He moved and Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, seconded a motion to approve the recommendations outlined in the report.

In accordance with regulations requiring councils to record the names of those councillors voting in favour, against or abstaining from any vote on the council tax the Chair called for a recorded vote which was carried with the voting being as follows:

For	Against	Abstain
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Pieter-Paul Barker		
James Barlow		
Tim Bearder		
Robin Bennett		
David Bretherton		
Sam Casey-Rerhaye		
Sue Cooper		
Peter Dragonetti		
Maggie Filipova-Rivers		
Stefan Gawrysiak		
Mike Giles		
Ali Gordon-Creed		
Kate Gregory		
Georgina Heritage		
Kellie Hinton		
Sam James-Lawrie		
Alexandrine Kantor		
Katharine Keats-Rohan		
Mocky Khan		
Ben Manning		

Zia Mohammed		
Andrea Powell		
Leigh Rawlins		
Jo Robb		
David Rouane		
Ed Sadler		
Anne-Marie Simpson		
Ian Snowdon		
Andrew Tinsley		
David Turner		
Tony Worgan		
31	0	0

RESOLVED:

1. To note that at its meeting on 14 December 2023 the council calculated the council tax base 2024/25:
 - (a) for the whole council area as 62,683.2 [Item T in the formula in Section 31B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as amended (the “Act”)]; and
 - (b) for dwellings in those parts of its area to which a parish precept relates as in column 1 of appendix 1.
2. That the council tax requirement for the council’s own purposes for 2024/25 (excluding parish precepts) is £9,166,791
3. That the following amounts be calculated for the year 2024/25 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Act:
 - (a) £96,205,984 being the aggregate of the amounts which the council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) of the Act taking into account all precepts issued to it by parish councils.
 - (b) £79,487,903 being the aggregate of the amounts which the council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3) of the Act.
 - (c) £16,718,081 being the amount by which the aggregate at (3)(a) above exceeds the aggregate at (3)(b) above, calculated by the council, in

accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act as its council tax requirement for the year. (Item R in the formula in Section 31B of the Act).

- (d) £266.71 being the amount at (3)(c) above (Item R), all divided by Item T (1(a) above), calculated by the council, in accordance with Section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year (including parish precepts).
 - (d) £7,551,290 being the aggregate amount of all special items referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act, as set out in column 2 of appendix 1.
 - (e) £146.24 being the amount at (3)(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at (3)(e) above by Item T (1(a) above), calculated by the council, in accordance with Section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no parish precept relates.
4. To note that for the year 2024/25 Oxfordshire County Council has stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

Band A	£1,213.71
Band B	£1,415.99
Band C	£1,618.28
Band D	£1,820.56
Band E	£2,225.13
Band F	£2,629.70
Band G	£3,034.27
Band H	£3,641.12

5. To note that for the year 2024/25 the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley has stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

Band A	£179.52
Band B	£209.44
Band C	£239.36
Band D	£269.28
Band E	£329.12
Band F	£388.96
Band G	£448.80
Band H	£538.56

6. That the council, in accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the aggregate amounts shown in appendix 3 as the amounts of council tax for 2024/25 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings shown in appendix 3.
7. To determine that the council's basic amount of council tax for 2024/25 is not excessive in accordance with principles approved under Section 52ZB Local Government Finance Act 1992.

74 Pay policy statement 2024/25

Council considered the report of the head of corporate services on the adoption of a pay policy statement to meet the requirements of the Localism Act.

RESOLVED: to approve the statement of pay policy 2024/25 attached to the report of the head of corporate services to the Council meeting on 22 February 2024.

75 East Hagbourne Neighbourhood Development Plan Review

Council considered the recommendation of Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, made on 12 February 2024, to make the East Hagbourne Neighbourhood Development Plan Review.

Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, introduced the item and outlined the review and the recommended that the plan review be made. Specifically, he noted that adjustments to the plan emphasised sustainable development, carbon reduction, and preserving greenspaces. The plan also introduced a People and Nature strategy and introduced a bespoke design code for the parish. Councillor Rouane also assured council that the plan met its legal obligations.

Council welcomed the East Hagbourne Neighbourhood Development Plan Review, praising its People and Nature strategy, and agreed that it should be made.

RESOLVED: to

1. make the East Hagbourne Neighbourhood Development Plan Review with the modifications specified in the Examiner's report;
2. authorise the Head of Policy and Programmes, in consultation with the appropriate Cabinet Member and in agreement with the Qualifying Body, East Hagbourne Parish Council, the making of minor (non-material) modifications, the correction of any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual errors together with any improvements from a presentational perspective.

76 Report of the leader of the council

Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, provided an update on a number of matters.

77 Questions on notice

No questions were submitted on notice from members.

78 Motions on notice

- (1) Councillor Giles moved, and Councillor Kantor seconded, a revised the motion with an additional bullet point to reflect the content of a written ministerial statement issued since the submission of the original motion below.

Following debate and being put to the vote, the motion was declared carried.

RESOLVED:

Council notes:

- South Oxfordshire is a welcoming place for all, including people seeking sanctuary.
- The council is committed to playing its part in supporting people displaced by war and persecution of any background, evidenced by the key role officers and councillors play in coordinating and delivering support in Oxfordshire for people from across the various government schemes.
- South Oxfordshire is home to around 400 Ukrainian refugees who have arrived under the Home for Ukraine, Family and the Ukraine Extension schemes.
- These schemes are temporary for 3 years, sit outside immigration rules, and do not provide a route to settlement.
- Russia's war on Ukraine sadly continues and people's ability to return remains uncertain.
- Thousands of temporary visas are set to expire in 2025 which is already causing problems in terms of securing employment and tenancies. Ukrainian refugees are also unable to plan for the future of their children in terms of education and other commitments, significantly impeding their quality of life and future prospects.
- On Monday 19 of February 2024, via a written ministerial statement various changes to Ukrainian schemes were announced including:
 - o an 18th month extension for current visa holders which they will be able apply for within 3 months of the end of their 3 year leave
 - o The closure of the vital Ukraine family scheme
 - o And that with immediate effect new arrivals under HfU would only be able to stay in the UK for 18 months, instead of 3 years

Council Believes that:

- Government needs to urgently remove uncertainty around Ukrainian's ability to make the UK their home
- Ukrainians that come to the UK under the Ukraine Family Scheme, Homes for Ukraine, and Ukraine Extension scheme should be able extend their stay and apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (in line with other refugee schemes) with minimum cost and bureaucratic burden on families, hosts and support agencies.

Council resolves to:

Agenda Item 4

- Ask the leader of South Oxfordshire District Council to write to the Minister of State for Immigration to request that Ukrainian refugees are provided with a route to settlement.
- Make information accessible to Ukrainian refugees who are considering their options on the services and support available, and signpost to appropriate (legal) advice.
- Continue to collaborate with Oxfordshire councils, statutory and voluntary sector partners in the development of a strategic approach for supporting people seeking sanctuary from any background which is coherent, effective, and compassionate.

The meeting closed at 7.56 pm
