

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE



Listening Learning Leading

Cabinet

Held on Thursday 15 February 2024 at 6.00 pm
Meeting Room 1, Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon, OX14 3JE

Present in the meeting room:

Cabinet members: Councillors David Rouane (Chair), Pieter-Paul Barker, Robin Bennett, Sue Cooper, Maggie Filipova-Rivers, Andrea Powell and Anne-Marie Simpson
Officers: Steve Culliford (Democratic Services Team Leader), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance) and Mark Stone (Chief Executive)

Remote attendance:

Cabinet member: Councillor Freddie van Mierlo
Officers: Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer), Carole Cumming (Arts Centre Director), Paul Fielding (Head of Housing and Environment), Suzanne Malcolm (Deputy Chief Executive - Place), Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services), Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Bertie Smith (Broadcasting Officer), Sally Truman (Customer Services Manager), Scott Williams (Environmental Services Manager), Vivien Williams (Interim Head of Legal and Democratic), and Anna Winship (Strategic Finance Manager)

62 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the Cabinet meetings held on 30 November and 21 December 2023 as correct records and agree that the chair signs them as such.

63 Declaration of interests

Councillors Pieter-Paul Barker, Robin Bennett, Andrea Powell and David Rouane all declared interests in the agenda item on the garden waste permit scheme, as they were subscribers to the garden waste service. The monitoring officer advised that this declaration did not require those members to leave the meeting; they would be able to take part in the debate and vote.

64 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The meeting noted the fire evacuation arrangements.

65 Public participation

Four members of the public addressed Cabinet.

- (1) Mr Raleigh Hullock made a statement on behalf of the South and Vale Taxi Drivers' Association, seeking Cabinet's support to increase the taxi tariff and to extend the consultation period. He also submitted a supporting document to Cabinet members.
- (2) Mr Jason Atherton, an owner of a local taxi business, made a statement in support of the points made by Mr Hullock, the previous speaker, and seeking consultation on the tariff level that the trade had asked for.

In response to Mr Hullock and Mr Atherton, the chair encouraged them both to respond to the consultation on the proposed new taxi tariff and undertook to speak to the head of service about the points raised.

- (3) Mr Geoff Bushell made a statement on the operation of the Cornerstone Arts Centre. He believed that the Cornerstone needed new marketing and arts management experience and that it should increase marketing to increase ticket sales for events. He believed that the staff should work with the centre's users, and he urged management to read and respond to his previously submitted feedback and act on those suggestions that could be achieved.
- (4) Mr John Salmons put a question to the Leader of the Council, asking why he had claimed to be unaware of progress with the planning application for Didcot Gateway. He also asked the leader to clarify if the council was proposing to allocate additional capital spend on a property development scheme for a proposed new grounds maintenance hub with no plan, and for which it had not decided on a location.

In response, the leader reported that as a Cabinet member, he had deliberately distanced himself from any involvement in the planning application for the Didcot Gateway project and therefore was unaware of the state of its progress through the planning process.

Turning to the proposed grounds maintenance hub, the leader reported that the proposed budget set aside funds for a scheme, which as yet was uncertain in terms of location. Funds were needed to progress the search for a site and to fund any ancillary work to purchase a site. This was the normal budgetary process.

66 Recommendations and updates from other committees

Cabinet received recommendations and updates from the Joint Scrutiny Committee, the Joint Audit and Governance Committee, and the Scrutiny Committee. The committees' suggestions and recommendations were considered under each item on the Cabinet agenda.

67 Introduction of a garden waste permit scheme

Cabinet considered the report of the head of corporate services and the head of housing and environment. The report set out a proposal to improve the way the council's garden waste service was paid for by introducing a permit scheme.

The Cabinet member for the environment presented the report and outlined the issues with the current payment process and explained the new permit approach.

The Joint Scrutiny Committee had supported the proposed scheme but requested that Cabinet:

- continued to offer direct debit payments as well as other payment methods, such as cash and telephone payments;
- retained the minimum number of collections per year, for customer assurance;
- ensured that a clear communications plan was put in place to show residents how to pay and to how to stay updated on the changes;
- gave future consideration to an initial fee to join the service, and to introducing bin microchipping.

Officers had considered the implications of the committee's suggestions and had discussed them with the Cabinet member. The Cabinet member believed that the council needed a better system to administer its garden waste service. This included a more efficient payment system and the ability to retrieve bins where payments had not been made. The proposal would achieve this. The Cabinet member believed that the council should adopt the new permit scheme and monitor its implementation. Regarding direct debit payments, if Cabinet wished to retain a direct debit payment option, the project would need to be paused and reviewed. Moving to an online annual payment would not limit customers' ability to pay through other means. Customers could contact the council's Customer Contact Centre, which would continue to support payments over the telephone or face-to-face at Abbey House. The Cabinet member reported that there would be a minimum of 20 collections per year, and hopefully more, and a clear communications plan would be put in place before the scheme was introduced in April 2025. Regarding Scrutiny Committee's suggestion of introducing an initial joining fee, this would be considered in the forthcoming waste and street cleansing strategy.

Cabinet welcomed the proposal, as it would move the council away from a heavily manual process relying on direct debits payments to a more automated and customer-friendly permit-based approach. Implementation of the scheme should be monitored carefully. This approach had been successful across many districts. However, Cabinet considered that Scrutiny Committee's suggestions to retain the option for direct debit payments and to introducing bin microchipping were rejected at this stage.

RESOLVED to:

- (a) approve the implementation of a garden waste permit payment model commencing 1 April 2025, subject to the approval of growth bids as part of the council's 2024/25 budget;
- (b) authorise the head of corporate services and the head of housing and environment, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet members, to:
 - (i) agree any revisions to the terms and conditions of the council's garden waste provision, and
 - (ii) award a joint contract for provision of garden waste permits as required.

68 Future direction of Cornerstone Arts Centre

Cabinet considered the head of development and corporate landlord's report on the future direction of the Cornerstone Arts Centre in Didcot. Officers had considered options for the ongoing development of the service to offer the most effective and efficient operation. The aim was to maximise community benefit and financial efficiency, thereby establishing the

long-term sustainability of the centre. The report proposed the approval of a development action plan to meet these aims.

The report included several appendices, which investigated service provision options in detail. These options included running the centre by an external organisation, an outsourced operator model, and retaining the operation of the centre in-house. Cabinet noted the appendices, including those that were marked as exempt.

The Scrutiny Committee had supported the progression of the action plan but asked Cabinet to consider the following points:

- better and more frequent reporting on progress with the action plan;
- funding sources should be explored as soon as possible;
- a clear marketing and promotion review, with a review of shows and show types, and marketing to a wider catchment area;
- exploring energy savings;
- providing Scrutiny Committee with an update report in 12 months' time.

Officers had provided a response to the points raised by Scrutiny Committee; Cabinet noted these.

The Cabinet member for community wellbeing thanked Scrutiny Committee for its suggestions. Most were included in the action plan. There would be more frequent reporting of progress against the action plan; subject to budgetary approval there would be more resource to fundraise; a new marketing strategy would be developed as well as more dynamic programming; and energy savings and decarbonisation of the centre were being explored. A progress report would also be submitted to Scrutiny Committee.

The Cabinet member confirmed that the council was committed to the Cornerstone. It was hoped that the action plan would generate more income and make the service more sustainable. Specialist skills were needed to fundraise, market the offering, and bring improved arts management. Recent ticket sales had already shown an improvement.

Cabinet welcomed the officer's report reviewing the service and the proposed action plan, and thanked Scrutiny Committee for its suggestions. Cabinet recognised that there were improvements the council could implement to improve the centre's service delivery. The adoption of the development action plan should have a positive impact on the centre's financial viability and benefit the community. Before the council considered longer-term options for the centre, Cabinet considered that the council should do all it could to ensure the centre was operating to its best potential in-house. Therefore, Cabinet supported the adoption of the development action plan. Members asked for performance progress reports at regular intervals.

RESOLVED to:

- (a) endorse the Cornerstone Development Action Plan, as set out in Appendix 6 to the head of development and corporate landlord's report to Cabinet on 15 February 2024, to optimise operation of the in-house delivery model before any consideration is given to alternative operating models; and
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- (b) acknowledge that the current implementation costs outlined within the action plan, expected to be incurred over the lifetime of the action plan, are subject to agreement of Council at its meeting on 22 February 2024.

69 Treasury Management 2023/24 Mid-Year Monitoring Report

Cabinet considered the head of finance's report. This monitored performance of the council's treasury management function for the first half of 2023/24. The report also updated on the prudential indicators for the remainder of the financial year.

The Joint Audit and Governance Committee had considered the report and was satisfied that the treasury activities had been carried out in accordance with the treasury management strategy and policy.

The Cabinet member for finance reported that the income received on investments was predicted to be above budget by approximately £2.7 million this year. This was due to higher than forecasted interest rates, bringing greater returns. The council was also operating with the prudential indicators.

RESOLVED: to note the treasury management 2023/24 mid-year monitoring report.

RECOMMENDED to Council to:

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

70 Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2024/25

Cabinet considered the head of finance's report on the treasury management and investment strategy for 2024/25. The strategy set out how the council's treasury service supported the financing of capital investment decisions and how its treasury management function operated. The strategy was required to include three parts:

- prudential and treasury indicators, within which the council must operate;
- an annual investment strategy; and
- a minimum revenue provision policy statement.

The Joint Audit and Governance Committee had recommended Cabinet to approve:

- the treasury management strategy 2024/25;
- the prudential indicators and limits for 2024/25 to 2026/27;
- the annual investment strategy 2024/25 and the lending criteria; and
- the new Environmental, Social and Governance Policy.

The Cabinet member for finance welcomed the report and the Joint Audit and Governance Committee's recommendations. He welcomed the addition of new environmental, social and governance policy, which would help assess potential investment options, once the priorities of security, liquidity, and yield has been assessed.

The Cabinet member also proposed an additional recommendation 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, and would report to Joint Audit and Governance Committee, the review to include the latest analysis on environmental, social and governance investment options.

Cabinet supported the recommendations.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) note the treasury management strategy 2024/25, prudential indicator limits and annual investment strategy, as set out in Appendix A to the head of finance's report to Cabinet on 15 February 2024;
- (b) note the Environmental, Social and Governance Policy, as set out in Appendix E of the report; and
- (c) note that the section 151 officer has confirmed that he will conduct a review of investment options with the council's treasury advisors Link and, in line with the Constitution, will report to Joint Audit and Governance Committee, the review to include the latest analysis on environmental, social and governance investment options;

RECOMMENDED to Council to:

- (d) 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;
- (e) approve the prudential indicators and limits for 2024/25 to 2026/27, as set out in Appendix A of the report;
- (f) 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
- (g) approve the Environmental, Social and Governance Policy, as set out in Appendix E to the report.

71 Capital Strategy 2024/25 to 2033/34

Cabinet considered the head of finance's report, which proposed the capital strategy for 2024/25 to 2033/34. The strategy outlined the council's approach to capital spending, based on the council's corporate strategy, and was linked to the council's corporate objectives, the medium-term financial strategy, and the management of its projects and programmes.

This year, the key changes to the strategy included:

- amendments to the Investment Strategy (section 5), including removal of the commercial investments category, in line with the latest Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's (CIPFA) Prudential Code and the Public Works Loans Board's lending requirements.
- a capital expenditure de-minimis level note added to section 4.

Cabinet supported the proposed strategy for recommendation to Council for approval.

RECOMMENDED to Council to:

- (a) 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
- (b) 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 to 2028/29

Cabinet considered the head of finance's report on the revenue budget for 2024/25 and the capital programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29. The report brought together all the information required to enable Cabinet to recommend the budget to Council. It also recommended the Prudential Indicators to be set by Council in accordance with the Prudential Code. The report also contained the chief finance officer's opinion on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the council's financial reserves. Finally, the report included the medium term financial plan for the years 2024/25 to 2028/29.

The Cabinet member for finance reported that Scrutiny Committee considered the budget report and was content with it; he thanked the committee for its input. The budget before Cabinet was the result of a comprehensive effort of budgetary review and challenge by officers and members. The council was under financial pressure due to high inflation over the past year, increasing the council's costs. However, interest rates had been unexpectedly high throughout the past year, bringing in more treasury income than expected. There were no cuts to services, and a lower than previously expected draw upon reserves. All of these factors had allowed the council to set a balanced budget. Council tax would be increased by the maximum before a referendum was required. The district council's element of the Council Tax for a Band D property would be £146.24, an increase of less than 10 pence per week.

Cabinet noted that there was uncertainty over future years' funding from government, meaning that there could be a higher draw on reserves in the medium term.

Cabinet welcomed the proposed budget. It allowed the council to provide resources to deliver its corporate plan. Members were proud of the way the council had stabilised its finances and thanked all staff for their hard work and dedication.

RECOMMENDED to Council to:

- (a) 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;
 - (b) 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;
 - (c) set the council's prudential limits, as listed in Appendix E to the report;
 - (d) set the medium-term financial plan to 2028/29, as set out in Appendix F to the report;
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- (e) allocate £500,000 to fund the Communities Capital and Revenue grant scheme; and
- (f) ask officers to review the Medium-Term Financial Strategy at the end of the current spending review period.

RESOLVED: to authorise the head of finance, in consultation with the cabinet member for finance, to make minor adjustments to the report and the prudential indicators, should they prove necessary prior to its submission to Council on 22 February 2024.

73 Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028 Approach

Cabinet considered the head of policy and programmes' report, which sought endorsement to the approach to develop the new Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028.

Scrutiny Committee had supported the proposed approach to the corporate plan but asked Cabinet to consider the following:

- slight changes in language suggested – use of adaptation (related to climate), participants not audiences, promoting not supporting community-led engagement. Suggestion of having a jargon-buster;
- engagement should be considered with hard-to-reach groups, look at our communications channel and how we use language;
- draft an overarching vision to crystallise the values in the plan;
- the council's procurement strategy should align with principles and values in the corporate plan;
- there should be fairness on housing (relating to theme 4) and equal access to services and infrastructure;
- consider business support and amplifying that in the plan;
- how do we engage with the visitor economy in the plan;
- support engagement with younger people/future generations;
- timetable for lessons learned from the Joint Local Plan engagement process.

Officers had provided a written response to Cabinet following Scrutiny Committee's suggestions.

The Cabinet member for corporate services, policy and programmes welcomed the feedback from Scrutiny Committee. Most of the points raised were in hand; other suggestions would be taken forward as the draft plan was developed further. For example, further consideration would be given to encompass the climate emergency and nature recovery throughout the plan. The overarching vision was crucial.

Cabinet concurred, believing that widespread engagement was important, particularly with lesser heard groups. It was noted that the corporate plan would be brought back to Cabinet in the autumn for further consideration and then recommendation on to Council.

RESOLVED: to endorse approach to develop the new Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028.

The meeting closed at 7.55 pm

Chair

Date