

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Council



Listening Learning Leading

**Held on Thursday 14 December 2023 at 6.00 pm
in Didcot Civic Hall, Britwell Road, Didcot, OX11 7JN**

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: David Turner (Chair), Pieter-Paul Barker, James Barlow, Tim Bearder, Robin Bennett, Sam Casey-Rerhaye, Sue Cooper, Peter Dragonetti, Stefan Gawrysiak, Mike Giles, Ali Gordon-Creed, Georgina Heritage, Alexandrine Kantor, Katharine Keats-Rohan, Mocky Khan, Axel Macdonald, Denise Macdonald, James Norman, Andrea Powell, Leigh Rawlins, Jo Robb, David Rouane, Anne-Marie Simpson, Ed Sadler, Ian Snowdon, Andrew Tinsley and Tony Worgan

Officers: Steve Corrigan (Democratic Services Manager), Steve Culliford (Democratic Services Team Leader) and Simon Hewings (Head of Finance)

45 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ken Arlett, David Bretherton, Maggie Filipova-Rivers, Kate Gregory, Kellie Hinton (Vice-Chair), Sam James-Lawrie, Ben Manning, Zia Mohammed, and Freddie van Mierlo.

46 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the Council meetings held on 12 October and 17 November 2023 as correct records and agree that the Chair signs them as such.

47 Declarations of interest

None

48 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The chair made some housekeeping announcements and updated Council on his work as chair of the council since the last meeting.

The chair also read a statement in memory of two members of staff, Patrick Arran and Louise Franklin, who had passed away recently. Council also remembered former councillor Bernard Cooper, who had passed away. Council paused for a moment of silence.

49 Public participation

None

50 Petitions

None

51 Treasury Management Outturn 2022/23

Council considered the head of finance's report on the treasury management outturn for 2022/23. The Cabinet member for finance reported that the outturn report had also been considered by the Joint Audit and Governance Committee and Cabinet, both of which were satisfied that the treasury activities during 2022/23 had been carried out in accordance with the treasury management strategy and policy. There had been an overachievement of treasury income during the year, largely due to high interest rates. Performance had exceeded expectations and there had been no breaches of the counterparty limits or the prudential indicators.

In answer to questions regarding the council's strategy on environmentally harmful investments, the Cabinet member reported that the treasury management and investment strategy would be reviewed by the Joint Audit and Governance Committee, Cabinet and Council in the new year.

RESOLVED to:

- (a) approve the treasury management outturn report 2022/23; and
- (b) approve the actual 2022/23 prudential indicators within the report.

52 Council tax reduction scheme 2024/25

Council considered the head of finance's report on the review of the council tax reduction scheme.

The Cabinet member for finance reported that the scheme was reviewed each year to ensure that any person in receipt of specific benefits was given a reduction in their council tax but the benefits' recipient must notify the Department of Work and Pensions of any change in their circumstances.

Due to changes in operation of the Department of Work and Pensions whereby some of its local offices would be closed, it was proposed that a change should be made to the council's scheme to protect it from potential fraud. Cabinet had recommended Council to make the change.

RESOLVED:

- (a) that for the 2024/25 financial year onwards the council continues to adopt the previous 2023/24 Council Tax Reduction Scheme but with the following amendment:

“Where the council has identified that a taxpayer has failed to notify the Department of Work and Pensions of a relevant change in circumstances, affecting their legacy benefit or Universal Credit, then (where necessary) their entitlement to council tax reduction will be stopped, until that notification has taken place and revised Department of Work and Pensions benefit entitlement known.”

- (b) that the above change be incorporated into the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for the oncoming 2024/25 financial year onwards.

53 Council tax base 2024/25

Council considered the head of finance’s report on setting the council tax base for 2024/25.

The Cabinet member for finance reported that each year the council was required to calculate its council tax base and pass this information on to Oxfordshire County Council, Thames Valley Police, and parish councils, to allow them to calculate their council tax element for the forthcoming year. The council tax base calculation was made up of the number of homes in the district, adjusted for discounts and exemptions. This produced a number, which was recorded as a council tax Band D equivalent. The calculations assumed a council tax collection rate of 98.5 per cent.

RESOLVED to:

- (a) approve the report of the head of finance for the calculation of the council’s tax base and the calculation of the tax base for each parish area for 2024/2025;
- (b) agree that, in accordance with The Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by South Oxfordshire District Council as its council tax base for the year 2024/25 be 62,683.2; and
- (c) agree that, in accordance with The Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by South Oxfordshire District Council as the council tax base for the year 2024/25 for each parish be the amount shown against the name of that parish in Appendix A of the report of the head of finance to Council on 14 December 2023.

54 Lewknor Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan

Council considered the recommendation of the Cabinet member for planning, made on 5 December 2023, to make the Lewknor Neighbourhood Development Plan.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) make the Lewknor Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan, so that it becomes part of the council’s development plan; and
- (b) authorise the head of policy and programmes, in consultation with the Cabinet member for planning and in agreement with the Qualifying Body – Lewknor Parish Council, to correct any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual errors together with any improvements from a presentational perspective.

55 Towersey Neighbourhood Development Plan

Council considered the recommendation of the Cabinet member for planning, made on 5 December 2023, to make the Towersey Neighbourhood Development Plan.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) make the Towersey Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan, so that it becomes part of the council's development plan; and
- (b) authorise the head of policy and programmes, in consultation with the Cabinet member for planning and in agreement with the Qualifying Body – Towersey Parish Council, to correct any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual errors together with any improvements from a presentational perspective.

56 Wheatley Neighbourhood Development Plan Review

Council considered the recommendation of the Cabinet member for planning, made on 5 December 2023, to make the Wheatley Neighbourhood Development Plan. The plan had first been made in 2021 and had been subject to a review.

RESOLVED: to

- (a) make the Wheatley Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan, so that it becomes part of the council's development plan; and
- (b) authorise the head of policy and programmes, in consultation with the Cabinet member for planning and in agreement with the Qualifying Body – Wheatley Parish Council, to correct any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual errors together with any improvements from a presentational perspective.

57 Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003 - proposal to re-appoint a joint Independent Remuneration Panel

Council considered the head of legal and democratic's report, which sought authority to appoint a joint Independent Remuneration Panel for the purpose of reviewing members' allowances. Council noted that the current panel members were appointed until May 2024, after which a new panel would carry out the next review.

RESOLVED to:

- (a) appoint a joint independent remuneration panel with Vale of White Horse District Council to carry out reviews of the members' allowances schemes at both councils and make recommendations on any changes to the schemes to the relevant Council;
- (b) make the appointment of the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel effective until May 2028, one year after the 2027 district council elections; and
- (c) authorise the head of legal and democratic to make appointments to the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel.

58 Review of the council's constitution

Council considered the head of legal and democratic's report on the review of the council's constitution.

Council noted that the Joint Constitution Review Task Group had recommended that requests for a scrutiny call-in of executive decisions should be accompanied by reasons for the request. The task group had recommended a new paragraph for inclusion in the Scrutiny Procedure Rules.

Council also noted that the Joint Audit and Governance Committee had recommended a change to its terms of reference to allow the committee to remove its independent person, should that person not make a meaningful contribution to the committee's work. The committee had asked that the independent person should have a right of reply.

Council supported these changes.

RESOLVED to:

- (a) adopt the following sections of the Constitution with immediate effect:
 - (i) the revised Scrutiny Procedure Rules regarding scrutiny call-in, as set out in paragraph 9 of the head of legal and democratic's report to Council on 14 December 2023;
 - (ii) the revised Joint Audit and Governance Committee Procedure Rules regarding the terms of reference for the appointment of the independent person, as set out in paragraph 13 of the report; and
- (b) authorise the head of legal and democratic to make these changes and any further minor or consequential amendments to the Constitution.

59 Appointment of interim monitoring officer

Council considered the report of the deputy chief executive – transformation and operations. Following the passing of Patrick Arran, the council's monitoring officer, Council agreed to appoint Vivien Williams as the interim monitoring officer.

RESOLVED: to appoint Vivien Williams, interim Head of Legal and Democratic, as the council's monitoring officer with immediate effect, this appointment to run until Council appoints a permanent monitoring officer at a later date.

60 Report of the leader of the council

Councillor Rouane, Leader of the Council, provided an update on a number of matters. The text of his address is available [on the council's website](#). The Leader thanked all staff and members for their work over the year and wished everyone a merry Christmas.

61 Questions on notice

- A. Question from Councillor Snowdon to Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council.**

The council's six point corporate objectives include to "1, Protect and restore our natural world" and "3, Action on the Climate Emergency", and full of promises to "Invest responsibly and ethically with the Climate Emergency at the heart of what we do" along with to "Promote and encourage behavioural change with informational campaigns and leading by example."

Can the leader advise if the purchase of a fleet of diesel vehicles is achieving these goals, and how residents should have any trust in the council to achieve any of its 6-point corporate plan if they will not lead by example?

Response

Thank you for the question, and the opportunity to outline what we have been doing regarding new waste vehicles.

Firstly it is worth reminding us all that any decision requires us to consider a number of our strategic priorities. In this case this includes not only those mentioned by Councillor Snowdon but also "Promote the circular economy (reduce, reuse and recycle)" which requires our waste collection service to be reliable, and "Exercise strong stewardship of all council assets" which requires us to make cost effective decisions.

It is useful to remind councillors that the council has a statutory obligation to ensure that waste and recycling collection services are offered to every household, and it would fail in this duty, and in its duties to all residents, if we were unable to undertake the hundreds of thousands of doorstep collections we provide on a weekly basis. The council therefore will undertake all endeavours to ensure that collections continue to take place, and maintain the high performing service that we currently have. Indeed a failure to operate a well-functioning collection service would not only put us at risk of legal challenge, but also potentially result in some valuable resources not being recycled but instead ending up in incineration.

As part of considering how these services will be provided beyond June of next year, the council is required to begin the purchase of new waste collection vehicles. These vehicles are required to replace existing vehicles as they come to the end of their life, and we have been made aware that some will not be economically viable to operate beyond next summer. Therefore we have placed orders for new vehicles that will work across both this district and Vale, with the aim of being as efficient and effective as possible. The council has taken the approach to purchase replacement vehicles in a phased approach as they reach the end of their life, rather than all together in one go, so that we can take maximum advantage of technology in this fast moving area.

At the time of placing orders, officers needed to consider a range of factors to ensure that the vehicles were able to operate immediately, and research was undertaken as part of the procurement process to understand what vehicles were available in the market and how any new purchase would meet the needs of the waste collection service next summer.

Unfortunately, the only widely available and affordable alternative to diesel powered vehicles at this time is electric fuelled trucks. Whilst such trucks are less polluting, and can be charged from sustainable fuel sources, these vehicles are still relatively

new to the market, expensive and, most importantly would need to complete a round on a single charge and be charged at the end of each working day at the depot. The councils did test an electric waste vehicle in 2022 and found that, at that time, it did not fully meet the needs of the service. As time passes, the range of the vehicles will improve, and we are aware that Reading Borough Council has recently purchased five electric trucks, although they have a much smaller geographic area to cover than the district and will need a suitable place to charge each day.

When officers looked into the infrastructure required to charge all of these vehicles, it was found that it was not possible to do so safely at the current depot, which is the safe and legal place for them to be stored. Therefore, purchasing such vehicles would have resulted in them being unable to be charged in order to complete their rounds, making them non-operational. The council considers vehicle charging infrastructure on any property it operates from. This is subject to several key considerations, including the capacity of the local electricity network and fleet route optimisation. Future performance reports will continue to capture any progress made to improve infrastructure to provide on-going transparency around this matter.

I am pleased to confirm that we have jointly purchased one, smaller all electric vehicle to undertake food collections. As the smallest and lightest waste collection vehicle being purchased, it will be able to complete the necessary rounds, as well as access the limited overnight charging option at the current depot. It will give us an opportunity to test and learn about the operation of these vehicles in our area and will also show that we are leading in the journey to decarbonise the fleet. I am also pleased to confirm that all new diesel vehicles will be supplied to the latest Euro 6 engine standards, which means that they are cleaner and more efficient than the vehicles they are replacing on the current fleet.

Of course, it is disappointing that we are not able to provide more non-fossil fuel based vehicles at this time, and the approach to decarbonising our fleet is something I am expecting to see in a waste vehicle procurement strategy coming forward in the spring. However, it would be irresponsible of the council to purchase vehicles that cannot operate when needed, which would lead to the failure of vital services, resulting in poor health and environmental outcomes.

Finally, I am confident that this council will continue to lead by example as it brings forward its new waste and street cleansing strategy, and waste vehicle procurement strategy next year. Both of these will enable us to continue to provide the best services whilst aiming for the highest standards and leading the way on environmental change.

Supplementary question

Should the council lead by example, such as by providing electric vehicle charging points in places like Didcot?

Response

The council is leading by example, within the constraints referred to above. Technology is not ready to provide electric-powered waste vehicles for our rural

areas just yet. We urge all residents to do what they can to fight climate change by using energy saving devices where they can.

B. Question from Councillor Snowdon to Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council

The council should be there to support our local businesses where possible. However, I recently had a business owner asking if it is normal to pay for a revisit for food hygiene rating in March and still be waiting in November. I assured him it was not and was astounded to find this to be true. With the fact that we carry out these visits annually in any case, will the Cabinet member agree with me that waiting nine months is completely unacceptable?

Response

The purpose of the Councils' Food & Workplace Safety Team is to ensure public safety and reduce the likelihood of food poisoning outbreaks from food consumed from food manufacturers to newsagents including all caterers. They aim to ensure that all food businesses within the district are providing safe food which is in compliance with the law and they do this by inspecting food premises on a risk basis laid down by the Food Standards Agency. Environmental Health officers issue the national food hygiene rating scheme stickers to all eligible food businesses and of the approx. 1250 food establishments in the district, over 60% of them achieve the highest rating of 5.

When a new food business is set up, the team inspect and provide the rating based upon the assessment of the professional officer during that visit. An establishment can challenge that rating, or can request a reinspection. When a reinspection is requested, the business will do so via our online form and generally the revisit happens swiftly (within 3 months).

Whilst Councillor Snowdon refers to a specific case, it is not appropriate in this forum to discuss the details of that case, but I would certainly agree with Councillor Snowdon that a waiting time of nine months for a return visit from our food safety team is unacceptable. Officers believe that this length of wait has only happened in a single case, which Councillor Snowdon refers to.

Generally, upon being notified of such an issue occurring, the team would take swift action to book in the revisit, and also contact the specific business to discuss the reasons for the issue. Should any delay be due to the Council, we would of course apologise for the length of time taken to respond. Additionally, when the Service Manager becomes aware they would review the details of the particular case, and seek to identify why any error had occurred. The team would then review the process and undertake any changes required with the aim of minimising the chances of this issue happening again.

Supplementary question

Have you apologised to the business owner since the revisit, and how long is the average wait for a visit?

Response

I will provide a written answer to your supplementary question. However, not all inspections are the same, some require more time than others.

C. Question from Councillor Snowdon to Councillor Barker, Cabinet member for finance and property assets

The February 2023 decision on the height of the new offices indicated that a final decision on whether or not to build the offices would be subject to a full financial review. Can you give any update on the current viability or business plan for the proposed four storey plan as one of the reasons we were previously told it needed to be five was the viability of the scheme?

Response

Thank you for your question. As you say, the February 2023 decision on the height of the building did indicate that a final decision on whether or not to build the offices would be subject to a full financial review. The original proposal for the five-storey building was based on the council occupying three floors (the ground floor, first and second) with the third and fourth floors being let commercially. It is now apparent that the council only expects to need to accommodate around 100 usable desks on any one day, with the remaining space being used for collaboration, rather than an indicative higher number of desks previously assumed before detailed work had been finalised. This number of staff can be accommodated on the ground and first floors, leaving the top two floors for commercial let. The commercial space therefore remains at two floors and so viability has not been negatively impacted by the height reduction.

Supplementary question

Can I have an update on how the project review is going?

Response

We do not revisit the project's business case constantly. However, before the planning application stage we will review it.

62 Motions on notice

Councillor Casey-Rerhaye moved and Councillor Kantor seconded the motion set out at agenda item 18.

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

RESOLVED:

This Council

- expresses deep sympathy for all those affected by the conflict in Israel and Palestine. To those in the South Oxfordshire area who have been affected by this conflict we offer our support in this very difficult time;

- hopes for an immediate further release of all hostages and an end to the violence;
- believes Muslims, Jews and people of all faiths and none should feel safe and supported throughout the world and unreservedly condemns the increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic violence and abuse in the UK.

This Council resolves to offer appropriate support to any local resident who needs our assistance as a result of these horrific, violent events.

1. Stand ready to participate in any government re-settlement scheme and open our arms to innocent people displaced and affected by these events.
2. Condemn the use of all dehumanising language and calls on our communities to treat each other with respect and good will and refrain from inflammatory terms to describe either the Palestinian or Israeli populations, especially in a time of crisis.

The meeting closed at 7.26 pm

Chair

Date