

# Minutes

of a meeting of the

## Scrutiny Committee



held on Monday, 5 February 2024 at 6.30 pm  
at Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon OX14 3JE

**Open to the public, including the press**

### **Present in the meeting room:**

**Councillors:** Katherine Foxhall (Chair), Judy Roberts (Vice-Chair), Ron Batstone, Oliver Forder, Hayleigh Gascoigne, Debby Hallett and Robert Maddison

**Officers:** Andrew Busby (Head of Development and Corporate Landlord), Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance), Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive for Transformation and Operations).

**Guests:** Cabinet members Councillors Helen Pighills (Community Health and Wellbeing), Andrew Crawford (Finance and Property), Andy Foulsham (Corporate Services and Policy and Programmes).

**Also present:** Council Leader, Councillor Bethia Thomas and Councillor Kiera Bentley.

### **Also present online:**

**Councillors:** Sally Povolotsky

**Officers:** Suzanne Malcolm (Deputy Chief Executive for Place), Vivien Williams (Head of Legal and Democratic- interim) Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services), Anna Winship (Strategic Finance Manager), Brian Lichfield-Cant (Insight and Policy Team Leader), Carole Cumming (Arts Centre Director)

## **1. Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from Councillor Cox. Councillor Povolotsky joined the committee online and was able to join the discussion, but could not vote.

## **2. Urgent business and chair's announcements**

Chair ran through housekeeping matters and reminded members on meeting etiquette.

As set out in the Constitution, chair of scrutiny had been consulted with on fees and charges for the 2024/25 budget for the Planning, Housing and Environment, The Beacon and Development and Corporate Landlord services. Comments were provided back to officers and chair thanked the officers involved. Chair wanted to make it aware that as per the Constitution, they had been consulted on this.

## **3. Declaration of interests**

None

## **4. Minutes of the last meeting**

### **Resolved:**

The minutes of 2 November 2023 and 5 December 2023 were agreed as correct records, and the chair shall sign them as such.

## **5. Public participation**

Mr. John Salmons addressed the committee online. He spoke to the budget setting paper and questioned the capital growth bid budget figure related to a grounds maintenance hub. Mr Salmons was concerned about the potential siting of such a facility – explaining that he considered it was more suited to an existing industrial park, and not a residential area. He urged scrutiny to question the proposals when they emerge. Chair asked the speaker to send his full question to democratic services and a written response will be provided.

## **6. Work schedule and dates for all Vale and Joint scrutiny meetings**

Committee reviewed the work programme, and chair encouraged members to bring forward their ideas.

Chair updated the committee on developing an approach to monitor outcomes of Scrutiny recommendations made to Cabinet. There should be an update by the next committee meeting.

A member asked about the speaker's suggestion regarding scrutinising plans for a future grounds maintenance depot. It was asked what was deemed appropriate and at what stage.

Action: Chair responded that she would speak with Cllr Gascoigne and officers, to look at possible ways forward for scrutiny involvement. It was raised that this may be a Joint Scrutiny consideration.

Another suggestion was for scrutiny of community centres and other facilities. Chair would consult with officers.

It was explained that consideration of whether items needed to go to Joint Scrutiny or individual council scrutiny committees was discussed with the Scrutiny Lead Officer, Democratic Services and reporting officers and was agreed with the Scrutiny chairs. Chair reminded ward members that they were welcome to speak at any meeting where items affected their wards.

A member asked that the committee consider the effectiveness of scrutiny. Chair reminded committee that the conducted scrutiny review would provide some guidance around March 2024, to help bring further discussions on effectiveness.

## **7. Revenue budget 2024/25 and capital programme 2024/25 to 2028/29**

Cabinet member for Finance and Property introduced the item, and thanked officers involved for their support, particularly with resource challenges that were encountered and the added pressure of an external audit that needed completing. Cabinet member requested that anything of commercial sensitivity, such as future contract negotiations, would be suited for confidential discussion. Head of Finance was present to answer questions. Members asked questions, some of which were clarifications answered within the meeting. Chair added that the committee were to consider the budget setting process and that particular line item queries could be considered at full council. The below summarises the main points raised:

- A member asked for clarification on the base budget number. It was confirmed that line 17, the base budget, was a net figure. We can add explanation of gross amounts that lead to

the net amounts in future reports. **Action:** Gross amounts to be added in future reports as discussed.

- Regarding the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and assumptions used: a member felt that forecasting income and expenditure was difficult, however it was likely true that it was easier to forecast expenditure over income. Can revenue incomes be seen as over conservative? Cabinet member explained that a less conservative and a more conservative option had been provided, but it was difficult to know what would happen due to uncontrollable variables such as central government leadership changes, rate of planning applications and interest rates as examples. There were four major contract renewals coming up in the next two years, and it was very difficult to know what the market was likely to be at those times when contract renewal was due. We decided that costs should be estimated as being the same as present, realising that this might go up or down. Member asked can we have sensitivity analysis? Cabinet member added that there were so many sensitivities that it may not be feasible to commit to modelling all variables. Head of Finance added that he may be able to take this point away and add other variables in future. **Action:** officers to consider modelling other variables in future budget setting reporting.
- D2 appendix: capital programme – a member asked about council contribution to building properties. Cabinet member explained that this figure was for buildings which were 50% funded by government for the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. We had so far purchased 19 properties under this scheme.
- Appendix A3 – regarding staff salaries, a member questioned the change in the figure. Cabinet member explained that the increase was inflation, related to the staff pay settlement. The spending profile was cumulative rather than one-off increases each year. Referring to 24/25 and 25/26.
- Regarding the base budget challenge exercise that was conducted with service areas, the chair asked for details on that and what the outcomes were? Cabinet members explained the chosen areas included the waste contract renewal, areas which were the biggest and which we had most control over. Each cost code was detailed. Proposed essential growth items were reviewed and proposed income was looked at and whether that could be raised. Each Cabinet member for each cost code, including Head of Finance and Cabinet member for Finance, would challenge officers on whether there was any duplication. It was felt it was worthwhile to interrogate those three chosen areas and it made officers justify reasons for the budgets.
- Appendix A4 essential growth – Cabinet member explained it captured everything we know about. We weren't expecting any other essential growth areas. It was confirmed by Cabinet member that the budget outturn reports overall picture tended to be reasonably close to predictions.
- Page 19 – salary increments had increased to reflect staff moving up the salary spine / increments – a member asked were we hoping to grow our own expertise / staffing using budget after 5CP arrangements end? Noting that the transformation team cost was the same for a few years. Cabinet member explained the increment (moving up pay scale bands) did increase. Cabinet member stated that for the purpose of the budget, we had assumed the staffing cost was the same. Head of Finance explained that some staff will reach the top increment and won't have a pay increase also. There would be staffing related to contract changes, but we needed to wait and see what those changes would require.
- Can we do a three-year MTFP over five-year? Officer responded that five year was considered minimum best practise.
- A member asked about grounds maintenance – at what point does the budget confirm a project was going ahead. Cabinet member explained that it was based on expected cost of a depot and was not location specific. Needed to allocate a budget to ensure we can complete the works if required.
- A member asked about communications and graphics to help the public to digest budget figures. Cabinet member explained that the budget was not yet approved by Council, so communications would need to be at that point and Head of Finance was already working towards this. Cabinet member added that it was a legal requirement to consult the public on budget cuts, but this council was not cutting budgets. Another member added that it was

important to show the difference in costs for council tax for County vs District (District was a lot less of a proportion). Members asked some questions for future consideration, such as, were people engaging with Oxfordshire County Council's budget simulator? How do we issue press releases and get to as many people as we can in an understandable format? A member considered that the simulator was a useful tool - should we go back to consulting before final approval?

### **Recommendations:**

Scrutiny committee considered the report of the Head of Finance and asked Cabinet to consider the following:

1. In future, to include gross amounts in the reporting, to help with understanding the base budget. A fuller explanation of the base budget was requested.
2. Appendix D1 links to corporate plans – committee considered that the council should highlight links between capital expenditure and corporate plan themes, and this should be reflected in communications as well, and be revisited when the new corporate plan was approved.
3. To add sensitivity analysis for the MTFP where possible - to model the impact of variables.
4. Communications and public consultation on budget – Scrutiny ask that Cabinet members for Finance and Communications work together to decide best methods for communicating and consulting with the public on budget reports.

Thanks were given to all involved in this item.

## **8. Corporate Plan 2024-2028 - to agree an approach to the new corporate plan**

The Corporate Plan approach item was introduced by Cabinet member for Corporate Services, Policy and Programmes, and supported by the Head of Policy and Programmes.

Three main themes were presented with three supporting principles. Emphasis on putting residents needs first, and being cautious and maintaining financial stability and ensuring services are best-fit for resident's needs. The Cabinet member confirmed there would be further engagement in developing the plan, with a list of projects to take forward as the development progresses. Below summarises the comments raised by scrutiny committee:

- Paragraph 12 major themes. A member raised that there was less mention of fiscal responsibility and transparency. The member questioned the change. Cabinet member explained that transparency and fiscal responsibility was more engrained now and underpinned all three themes. In response to a committee member asking about lessons learned and having adequate measures of success in place, Cabinet member said he would want to see clear measurable items and a member of the committee suggested asking the public what they wanted to be measured. Members considered that transparency with fiscal responsibility should be more explicit in the Corporate Plan.
- Homes that people need – a member felt that it did not cover what these homes and place-shaping look like? Cabinet member responded that the Corporate Plan themes does not refer in detail to the Joint Local Plan, and this was still out for consultation. This would be reviewed at the right time. Will be using Citizen Space and Story Maps to engage many sectors of the community.
- Theme two on Climate – a member suggested that climate wording was harder to relate to at a local level – 'nature recovery' felt more relatable to residents and where they live. Would like to see more resilience at a local level, with local initiatives, such as the Climate Action Fund. Felt that we could try to draw more out in consultation about these aspirations.
- A point was raised about consulting out of working hours for those in work. Cabinet member added that digital access helps and had proven to increase response rate. Work will continue to assess the best ways to consult.
- A member considered that three themes were better to digest and other members showed agreement. Felt the new section explained how we do things covered transparency but

could be more obvious. Another member considered that fiscal responsibility and openness and transparency should be embedded so approved of a three-themed plan.

- Aspirational projects were confirmed to be examples at this stage.
- A member felt that the Corporate Plan was a good way to explain the 'personality' of the council – can we give examples of the impact the corporate plan had, so that residents can relate to it?
- Noted that the name 'corporate plan' is referenced throughout council records and documents, although members briefly discussed whether to change this and the impacts of this. Cabinet member suggested subtitles for the plan, to help make it accessible to residents, such as "Heart of the Vale". Another member felt that this was not like any corporate plan he had encountered, so some renaming felt more appropriate. A member raised that a corporate plan was due process, hence it was labelled as such to follow the correct procedure and for officers to have the paperwork to back their work.
- A member asked about how do we tell the public we have completed projects – Cabinet member favoured the headline pages of the quarterly reporting and was keen on more accessible reporting rather than pages of tables. Some documentation needed to be done, but not all of it was appealing for the public and needed to be in a more digestible form. Committee member asked whether public could be asked about their reporting preferences?
- Can we have a line explaining the principles and the detail of how we intend to deliver the three schemes.
- Discussed building an element of 'lessons learned' on things not achieved yet.
- Page 14 regarding milestones and progress – officer explained that the themes being developed was the stage the team was at, and that the formulating of engagement material was to come. Will be gathering learnings from the Joint Local Plan (JLP) engagement. Officers were going out to local areas to engage with residents in person. A member explained that the practical communications approach was not detailed so felt that the detail was not there for endorsing. It was noted that this was not a statutory consultation like the JLP. Cabinet member had confidence in the team who would formulate the materials for the work.
- Another member stated that risks should be identified and addressed. Cabinet member responded by talking about the new software – Citizen Space had been tested with staff and was seen as better than other options on the market. He identified risks that the consultation would not capture what people wanted or there would be a lack of resources to deliver everything, which the Cabinet member had a close eye on.

## **Recommendations**

Scrutiny committee asked Cabinet to consider the following:

1. In Corporate Plan quarterly reporting – members would like to see measures and milestones presented, suggesting that headline graphics had more impact and might be more useful for the public.
2. Transparency, openness and fiscal responsibility were embedded but needed to be explicit in the document. Even if no longer a main theme, committee suggested these should be explained in the document in relevant places.
3. Renaming the Corporate Plan – members felt that internally within the Council it would be better to keep the name "Corporate Plan" due the potential work involved in changing this, but public facing communications and headings could change to better engage the public.
4. Active risk management should be taken on by the project board proactively in their meetings.

Members generally approved the approach and the three themes. All those involved in the item were thanked.

## **9. Future direction of The Beacon, Wantage**

The chair agreed a two-minute break for attendees, ahead of beginning discussion of the following item.

Cabinet member for Community Health and Wellbeing opened the item and described a brief history of the centre over recent years, including Covid closure and redeployed staff, leading to reviews of operational changes and use, resulting in the report today. The report sets out future options and an action plan for Cabinet approval.

The centre provided contribution to community health and wellbeing, but also there was financial responsibility to consider. The team had created an action plan to maximise income opportunities and reduce any further funding required.

There were several measures to improve performance, some had already begun to ensure the in-house model operated as best as possible. The Beacon team would be giving updates to the officer team, Cabinet members and key stakeholders to monitor progress.

Supporting the Cabinet member was the Head of Development and Corporate Landlord (Head of Service), and The Arts Centre Manager and the Deputy Chief Executive for Place were online.

Members raised the following comments and questions:

- A member questioned whether there were alternative ownership strategies? It was felt the report mentioned different ownership options but gave reasons not to do that. Cabinet member felt that although in Wantage, the centre did service other surrounding areas, and this was confirmed by other member's experience and expressed that it was a well-loved resource. She stressed the importance of getting the in-house model in better shape to see what can happen next. She explained that some of the information was outdated post-pandemic, but she was optimistic that the action plan would progress improvements.
- Fundraising was raised as being important. It was explained by Cabinet member that £22k was budgeted mainly for a fundraising officer.
- A member asked about engaging with the community, a vibrant community existed that may be willing to help turn around the facility or are doing similar activities. Head of Service explained that consultation with local groups was included in the action plan. The Arts Centre Director explained that many consultation activities had been conducted already and would continue. There were other teams that would be involved – community engagement team and enablement teams.
- A member considered that it was expensive to keep going, a cost to residents, especially those that don't use it or know of it. Felt that fundraising should have been done much sooner. Cabinet member responded that we needed to use the action plan to help bring the in-house service where it needed to be in the meantime, and decisions needed to be made on what was adequate funding.
- A member asked whether previous transfers to Town Council ownership had worked well and could there be something to learn from. From committee members who had some knowledge, it was suggested that it was mixed. A member suggested a private operator would be an option and that he felt the building needed some refurbishment.
- Was it the case that the action plan was the only option until any ownership discussions were had? It was responded that those discussions with Town Council were key.

Just before 9pm, chair asked members if they wished to extend the meeting by the allowable 30 minutes as per the Constitution. All agreed by a vote.

- A member expressed concern over the age of the building. New housing developments mean that new infrastructure was built around developments, therefore further outdating the Beacon. Another member suggested an opposite view that we should look to work with what we already have.
- A member considered that a time-limit was required to move things forward meaningfully.
- Climate bond fundraising was mentioned as an option.
- Can ward members be involved in a brainstorming exercise as they will know groups who may want involvement.
- A member considered that there were many plans within the action plan for the next 12 months, so another 12 months' time may show some positive news and seemed a reasonable expectation.
- Best value considerations – officer confirmed that this was considered.

- Members felt that the fundraising aspect should be for larger sums and schemes.
- A member asked what was different this time around, in terms of the plans to improve the service. Officer explained that baseline data and reflection from consultation reports was incorporated into the action plan.
- A member asked about the 18-month timeline for revisiting decarbonisation, and the 12-month timeline for discussions with Wantage Town Council. Officer explained that fire safety was being addressed through CIL, decarbonisation would be revisited.

In summary:

There was some caution shown by members on the finances for the arts centre, but overall the committee agreed that accelerated progress of the action plan and discussions with stakeholders would bring results in 12 months with clear options for going forward being wanted. Chair did check whether committee wanted any confidential discussion (from confidential appendices), but members felt it wasn't needed.

### **Recommendations:**

Scrutiny committee asked Cabinet to consider the following:

1. Request that Cabinet accelerate work on the action plan, particularly focussing on fundraising efforts, future commercial options, revisiting decarbonisation timescales, ownership structure and discussions with Wantage Town Council, with clear time parameters for the whole action plan.
2. Scrutiny were in support of revisiting consultation with local ward members - to meet, share ideas and contacts – will any community action groups want to be involved in the Beacon's future? (Officer added that there was an action to set up a Community Board.)

**Action:** Scrutiny Committee would like an update brought to a meeting of scrutiny in quarter three as stated in the report.

Thanks were given to those involved in the project.

## **10. Exclusion of the public**

Not required

The meeting closed at 9.23 pm

Chair:

Date: