



Minutes of a meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Monday, 6 January 2025

Members present:

Gina Blomefield	Gary Selwyn	
David Cunningham	Michael Vann	Lisa Spivey
Angus Jenkinson	Clare Turner	David Fowles
Dilys Neill	Jon Wareing	

Officers present:

Robert Weaver, Chief Executive	Angela Claridge, Director of Governance and Development (Monitoring Officer)
David Stanley, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer	Claire Locke, Interim Executive Director
Andrew Brown, Head of Democratic and Electoral Services	Gemma Moreing, Business Information Lead
Alison Borrett, Senior Performance Analyst	Nickie Mackenzie-Daste, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Olivia McGregor, Climate Change and Carbon Reduction Lead, joined the meeting remotely.

Cabinet Member present:

Councillor Mike McKeown

OS.122 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillor Tony Slater.

OS.123 **Substitute Members**

Councillor David Fowles substituted for Councillor Tony Slater.

OS.124 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

Councillor Jenkinson suggested that the final bullet point on the waste rezoning item be expanded to read: "It was stated that the reporting process could be improved *by the use of quality management tools.*"

Councillor Cunningham proposed accepting the minutes as amended. Councillor Turner seconded this proposal.

RESOLVED: To APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2024.

OS.126 **Matters Arising from Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The Chair requested that details of training offered by Gloucestershire Domestic Abuse Support Service be circulated to Members.

The Chair commented on the need for residents to be aware which recyclable items go in which recycling bin.

The Chair announced that an Overview and Scrutiny work planning meeting would be held before the next Committee meeting on 10 February 2025.

OS.127 **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair stated that it had been disappointing to find that the financial and service performance reports for quarter 2 had moved into December from January when there wasn't a scheduled Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in December. The reports were on the agenda and the Committee could still make comments or recommendations to Cabinet.

The Chair highlighted the need for Members to engage with Ubico. An all-Member briefing had been scheduled for 4 February 2025 and would be held on Teams.

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to the government's plans for local government reorganisation. The Chair commented that such changes would have significant implications for town and parish councils as well as district councils, and that the Council should seek to support town and parish councils through any changes.

Councillor Neill arrived during this agenda item.

OS.128 **Public Questions**

Councillor Jenkinson asked a question on behalf of residents of Moreton-in-Marsh about the status of the Moreton-in-Marsh Working Group and why it had not met.

The Interim Executive Director clarified that an item would be coming forwards to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting.

Councillor Cunningham requested a specific agenda item at the work planning meeting on the make-up of the Moreton-in-Marsh Working Group and for Forward Planning to provide a written response.

OS.129 **Member Questions**

There were no Member questions.

OS.130 **Climate and Ecological Emergency**

The report provided the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on actions undertaken as part of the Council's Climate Programme.

Councillor Mike McKeown, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Sustainability, introduced the report and highlighted the importance of the issue of climate change and the need for action. The Cabinet Member drew the Committee's attention to the key points as follows:

- The Council was aiming to reduce its carbon footprint by 80% by 2045.
- Solar panels had been installed at the Council's Trinity Road offices, saving costs and emissions.
- Ubico had been tasked with creating a decarbonisation programme for its fleet, which was a significant contributor to the Council's carbon footprint.
- The local plan provided an opportunity to instigate measures to improve climate emergency standards.
- Local households who have already installed solar panels would benefit from £450,000 of lifetime energy savings.
- The South West Net Zero Hub had provided funding for a retrofit home energy efficiency programme.
- Local electricity suppliers were working on a programme of grid upgrades to deal with additional demands on the grid.
- There were plans for a community energy solar farm.
- There was action taking place to reduce emissions across various sectors including farming, business and transport.

The Committee asked about the role of the retrofit officer and commented that there was a lack of understanding about the best approaches to retrofitting buildings, so education was important. The Cabinet Member explained that the aim was to retrofit c. 300 homes and that the officer had experience of delivering training and could give independent advice. The officer would have some level of engagement with social housing providers but their core focus would be on the public.

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A Member commented that the jury remained out on electric vehicles and they arguably weren't the best solution in rural areas. The Cabinet Member responded that there were some concerns about orchestrated misinformation campaigns against electric vehicles and the Council was helping to myth-bust these. For the 35% of homes did not have off-street parking in the District the Council was installing EV chargers in car parks it owns.

In response to a question about government plans to subsidise solar panels, the Cabinet Member stated that solar was a good option for those who could afford it due to the reducing costs of installing solar. The warm homes plan provided funding for low-income households. There was a private members bill in parliament about making solar mandatory on new build properties.

In discussion the Committee also noted that:

- The Council would need to conduct energy audits prior to applying for grants from government, which could include support for solar.
- The Council was still awaiting a response from Brewery Arts about proposals to install solar on their premises.
- A primary focus of the Sustainable Transport Officer would be to add their input into the local plan.
- The Council was speaking to services about embedding climate implications in everything they do. The Council was limited in terms of its resources and needed to prioritise effectively in order to make the greatest possible impact.
- Funding for new charging points was coming from the government and the Council, split evenly. The user charges would cover the revenue costs and make a contribution to capital costs over time.
- External funding for retrofit was from the South West Net Zero Hub.
- A new online tool would help people navigate the decision process as to whether retrofit would benefit them. Low income households could access support through Warm and Well.
- At this stage the new National Planning Policy Framework did not do much to improve climate energy efficiency standards. The Future Homes Standard remained out to consultation and progress on this had been slow.
- There was a need to balance heritage considerations and the ability for people to afford to upgrade their homes.
- There was no data on how many EV charge point users were local and how many were visitors.
- There were longer term plans to spread EV infrastructure far and wide but the Council had started with the easiest sites, which were those it owned.
- There would be a lag between new EV infrastructure being installed and people making decisions to purchase electric vehicles.
- A cut to VAT on EV charging would be welcome.
- Any help the Council could provide to assist town and parish councils to install EV chargers would be welcome.

The Committee commended the work of the Cabinet Member and officers and thanked them for the report.

The Committee resolved to submit the following recommendation to Cabinet:

1. That the Council ensures that it has processes in place for testing and developing the value of the work it is undertaking on the climate and ecological emergency with a view to providing positive ongoing investment in this field.

OS.131 **Publica Transition Update**

The Chief Executive Officer provided a presentation on the Publica Transition, explaining that there had been an intense period of reviewing services and a number of teams were now directly employed by the Council.

In terms of lessons learnt from the Phase 1 transfer of staff, the Chief Executive stated that in hindsight it would have been helpful to have had a dedicated Council-side communications function to get the messages just right. The difficulty of building a financial model for the costs of individual services provided by Publica had also been underestimated.

The Chief Executive highlighted the governance arrangements and the positive role of the Officer Transition Board. The Programme Board comprised the chief executives of the partner councils plus the Programme Director. As part of Phase 2 there was a need to continually improve the functioning of the governance model, which had generally worked well.

The Chief Executive Officer stated that Phase 1 had been delivered under budget with only minor slippage in the timetable and that staff retention had remained good.

A report setting out the detailed transition plan for Phase 2 would come forward to members in March with an implementation date of July 2025. Property, Programme Management and Waste and Recycling were considered to be critical services for inclusion in Phase 2.

The implications of the government White Paper on devolution would need to be considered and may have impacts for the timing of the repatriation of other services remaining in Publica post-Phase 2.

The Committee considered the implications of local government reorganisation for the programme and questioned whether a cost-benefit analysis of Phase 2 was being undertaken. The Chief Executive agreed that reorganisation was a matter of time and that there was a need to ensure that work undertaken now would not be unpicked in future. Phase 2 remained important, especially in terms of managing the relationship

with Ubico, project management, and property but it was unlikely that Phase 2 would extend beyond these three key areas.

In response to a question about whether staff were keen to transfer to the Council, the Chief Executive reiterated that it was important to not create an “us and them” culture.

In discussion the Committee noted that:

- Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire were unlikely to look to each other either for forming unitary authorities or combined authorities. The sharing of services with West Oxfordshire District Council would become defunct in a couple of years’ time.
- Staff included in Phase 1 had had the opportunity to take part in focus groups and a welcome session had been well received. The Council was also working on its emerging People Strategy.
- A small minority of roles included in Phase 1 were shared roles that could not be split and those roles had been advertised internally.
- The Chief Executive felt that Phase 1 had led to a new relationship with staff as he no longer had to go through the Publica Executive and could communicate directly.
- There was no wish amongst the shareholders or the Publica Board for Publica to trade commercially so this option had not been progressed.
- An example of Phase 1 leading to better working methods was the planning case management system, which could now be made to work specifically for the Council, leading to improved automation.

The Committee thanked the Chief Executive Officer for the presentation.

OS.132 Financial Performance Report 2024-25 Quarter Two and Update Report

The Deputy Chief Executive Officer provided an overview of the Financial Performance Report for 2024/25 Quarter 2 and summarised the key points as follows:

- The projected year-end surplus was lower at Quarter 2 than it had been at Quarter 1 but there was still a chance to achieve the budgeted surplus of £0.5m due to the reduced pressure on pay following the pay award.
- The Quarter 2 report took into account the higher than previously expected interest rates, which would bring in additional investment income.
- The income shortfalls weren’t material on their own but together added up.
- There was a capital programme underspend in the provision of affordable housing (capital loan to Cottsway), and support to Bromford. An overspend on Disabled Facility Grants had been removed as this had been funded.

The Committee questioned the net effect of the update report provided in relation to planning services. The Deputy Chief Executive stated that the initial Quarter 2 revenue variance of £250k had moved down to £220k. The net capital underspend had not changed materially.

In discussion the Committee also noted that:

- Recruitment costs were normally met from vacancy savings during the interim period so there was no recruitment budget. The £100k was additional expenditure to ensure that the Council had a robust planning service as quickly as possible. The Deputy Chief Executive Officer committed to providing a detailed breakdown of this spend.
- Two Communications posts had transferred to the Council in Phase 1 (£70k) but the Council had used an agency to provide ongoing support to ensure an adequate communications function. This had caused a £31k adverse variation but this number was expected to come down in next update.
- The Council had to use its resources responsibly and it was incumbent on the Deputy Chief Executive as the S151 Officer to ensure that the services passed over to any future unitary authority reflected the resources available.
- No provision had been made within the Medium Term Financial Strategy for the Phase 2 transfer of staff from Publica to the Council. There was a need to understand whether the cost of services would be higher outside of Publica and any additional cost would need to be justified.

The Deputy Chief Executive Officer presented the additional report on planning services. The report provided an update in view of recruitment to various posts. There was £120k of additional income on planning fees which was largely offsetting the additional costs of £150k over and above the budget. There was a need to understand the relationship between spend and income to inform service transformation. Recent appointments would put the service on a better footing and reduce the reliance on agency staff from 1 April 2025.

The Committee commented that planning services including planning enforcement were important functions that had been under pressure. The Committee noted concern about vacant posts and hoped that the situation would improve now that the service was delivered directly by the Council rather than through Publica.

OS.133 **Service Performance Report 2024-25 Quarter Two**

The Chief Executive Officer introduced the Service Performance Report for 2024/25 Quarter Two and highlighted the progress the Council had made in delivering its priorities, as shown by a number of positive indicators across planning services, leisure and customer services. The Chief Executive also highlighted the indicators that were below target such as missed bin collections.

In discussion the Committee noted that:

- While the Council did not build homes, it did have a role in helping to support the delivery of affordable homes.

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- There was no target for the number of complaints against the Council upheld by the Ombudsman.
- Cabinet had recently approved an Empty Property Strategy.
- The performance of the planning team in processing major and minor applications was to be commended.
- The Council's performance was benchmarked against CIFPA Nearest Neighbours; councils with similar demographics.

Cllr Spivey left the meeting during this agenda item.

As the length of the meeting had exceeded three hours the Chair announced that the remaining business would fall but that the work plan would be circulated to Members.

OS.134 **Report back on recommendations**

This item was not considered.

OS.135 **Updates from Gloucestershire County Council Scrutiny Committees**

This item was not considered.

OS.136 **Work Plan and Forward Plan**

This item was not considered.

The Meeting commenced at 4.00 pm and closed at 7.25 pm

Chair

(END)