



Minutes of a meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Monday, 31 March 2025

Members present:

Gina Blomefield (Chair)

Angus Jenkinson

Dilys Neill

Tony Slater

Clare Turner (Vice Chair)

Michael Vann

Jon Wareing

Patrick Coleman

Len Wilkins

Officers present:

Andrew Brown, Head of Democratic and Electoral Services

Angela Claridge, Director of Governance and Development (Monitoring Officer)

Nickie Mackenzie-Daste, Senior Democratic Services Officer

David Stanley, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer

Julia Gibson, Democratic Services Officer

Claire Locke, Interim Executive Director

Cabinet Member present:

Councillor Mike Every

OS.163 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Cunningham and Councillor Spivey.

OS.164 Substitute Members

Councillor Wilkins substituted for Councillor Cunningham and Councillor Coleman substituted for Councillor Spivey.

OS.165 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations on interest.

OS.166 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2025 were discussed.

Councillor Slater suggested that the entry regarding Councillor Selwyn chairing the meeting had been duplicated.

Councillor Dilys Neill proposed accepting the amended minutes and, Councillor Jon Waring seconded the proposal.

RESOLVED: To APPROVE the amended minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2025

OS.167 Matters Arising from Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Members asked whether a point raised at the previous Committee meeting regarding the Publica Transition Report, had been primarily focused on clarifying whether the Phase one of the Publica Transition was largely a matter of resolving HR and administrative matters. The Deputy Chief Executive had circulated a response to the query demonstrating the total and one-off costings of the Publics Transition Costs and other outstanding raised issues.

OS.168 Chair's Announcements

The Chair thanked Claire Locke for her help in supporting the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair also thanked Gary Selwyn, who prior to his recent resignation as a Councillor had been a very effective and valued Deputy Chair of Overview and Scrutiny.

The Chair highlighted the British Farming Motion, proposed by Councillor Julia Judd at the last full Council meeting, as an important topic for the meeting. The intention was to establish a task-and-finish group to investigate this matter, with a report to be presented at the July Council meeting. The Chair acknowledged that the timeline was tight, considering the Easter and Bank holidays before the timing of the Council meeting.

OS.169 Public Questions

There were two public questions.

Question 1

Mr Andy Farmer, a resident farmer on the edge of Cirencester and the newly elected Secretary of the South Cotswold Labour Party.

Mr Farmer noted that the proposed British Farming Task-and-Finish Working Group would be cross-party membership, with all political groups invited to nominate one or two members. Mr Farmer asked whether the Committee believed that having a Labour representative on the working group would be beneficial?

The Head of Democratic and Electoral Services confirmed that the Working Group would be representative of the political parties elected within Cotswold District Council

but not of all political parties that existed in the wider District. It was confirmed that speakers could be invited to attend the Task-and-finish Working Group meetings to contribute to the findings.

Question 2

Mr Farmer expressed concern that the Task-and-finish Working Group, as outlined in the terms of reference, was tasked with considering the local impacts of inheritance tax and providing suggestions on how to campaign against the reforms, rather than focusing on determining the facts and data surrounding the issue. He asked whether the terms of reference for the working group could be adjusted accordingly?

The Chair reminded attendees to remain non-political due to the upcoming May elections and clarified that the motion requested a letter to Chancellor of the Exchequer based on the outcome of the discussions. The Chair noted that it was for the Task & Finish Group to decide how they would approach their investigations into the impact of the IHT changes on the farming community.

OS.170 Member Questions

There were no Member questions.

OS.171 Report back on recommendations

In discussion the Chair suggested that, beyond keeping Town and Parish Councils informed about the transition to unitary councils, they should have been invited to share their views with each other. This would allow Town and Parish Councils to understand how their roles would be impacted by the changes to a unitary authority and what increased powers or financial resources they might seek to help them perform their responsibilities. It was emphasised that Councils wanted to be actively consulted rather than just informed, as various models for their involvement existed. Members requested insights from Town and Parish Councils in existing unitary councils on the upcoming Local Government Reorganisation.

The Monitoring Officer announced that a Town and Parish Summit would be held on 4 June 2025 in Cirencester, aimed at informing Town and Parish colleagues on Local Government Reorganisation, including lessons shared from other regions. A briefing note summarising key updates could also be provided for Members to share at Town and Parish meetings.

Concerns were raised about attendance difficulties due to the timing and location of the Town and Parish Summit, prompting discussions on satellite meetings in other areas. The Monitoring Officer suggested recording the sessions or enabling remote participation.

Members also discussed the financial implications of Local Government Reorganisation. The Deputy Chief Executive stated that no funding had been provided yet, though inquiries were being made.

OS.172 Work Plan and Forward Plan

Suggestions for inclusion on the Work Plan were:

- The Chair had suggested inviting Bromford Housing Association, as the largest provider of affordable and social housing in the district, to provide an update on their strategies for tenant care, property maintenance and estate expansion.

- As part of the work plan, members suggested the Committee should scrutinise the impact of government tax changes on employment in the district. They noted that some businesses had paused recruitment or had made redundancies due to rising tax burdens, including business rates, national insurance, minimum wage increases, and new employment legislation. It was suggested that the Cotswold District Council explore ways to support economic vitality in response to these challenges.

The Deputy Chief Officer highlighted the reduction in business rate relief from 75% to 40% for the 2025/26 tax year.

- The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Review had highlighted the need for a new Local Plan, warning that without it, developers could challenge Council planning application decisions. The Deputy Leader of the Council stressed the importance of reviewing the PAS report upon receipt. It was evident that the Local Plan needed updating, particularly due to changes in housing targets. The uncertainty caused by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) changes was acknowledged, and it was stated that further decisions would be made once more information was available. It was suggested that Overview and Scrutiny would be well positioned to examine the Cabinet's response to the PAS Review and report its findings back to Cabinet. Members had discussed the resources allocated to supporting the delivery of the Local Plan.

The Deputy Chief Executive had noted the further £250K of funding allocated into the Council priority Ear Marked Reserve for the delivery of the Local Plan.

Members had explored engaging with the Enforcement team to receive an update on ensuring large estate developers fully complied with S106 obligations. Councillor Jenkinson would provide further information to support a report from the Planning Enforcement Team around the area of development obligations and their enforcement.

OS.173 British Farming Motion

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The Chair had introduced welcomed the formation of the British Farming Motion Working Group, as proposed by the Council Leader at the Full Council meeting, 19 March 2025.

It was explained that the British Farming Motion Working Group would focus on examining the financial implications of inheritance tax changes on farming in the Cotswold District.

Paul James, Business and Economic Officer for Cotswold District Council (CDC), had agreed to support the group. Whilst he acknowledged that farming and taxation were not his specialist areas, his strong understanding of the local business and economic context was considered to be a valuable asset. The Chair had expressed thanks for this involvement.

David Cunningham had been approached by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to chair the Farming Motion Working Group. The Chair asked the Committee to support his appointment, as his strong financial knowledge was considered vital to the group's focus on inheritance tax and its impact on the farming sector.

Members expressed concerns that the Task-and-Finish Group's approach might be influenced by political considerations, potentially limiting its ability to objectively assess the impact of Inheritance Tax on Cotswold farmers. Members suggested that the Terms of Reference be refined to ensure an impartial approach.

The Chair explained that the structure of the British Farming Motion Task-and-Finish Group should reflect the political makeup of the Council. Additional Councillors could be invited to attend meetings to reflect their areas of expertise. A variety of external bodies would be sought to attend and inform the Task-and-Finish Group.

The Head of Democratic and Electoral Services explained that the Working Group's Draft Terms of Reference stated that its purpose was to engage with interested parties to understand the local impacts of inheritance tax changes. Any wording about opposing the Inheritance Tax changes had come from the Farming Motion presented to the Full Council. The Group's role was to better understand the impacts of the tax change rather than taking a stance against the changes.

Members considered the content of the Farming Motion and discussed the scope of issues to be included. Clarification was sought on whether the focus would be solely financial or encompass broader farming matters. Members discussed the processes by which Members could put forward suggestions to be considered by the Task-and-Finish Group.

The Interim Executive Director noted that the Committee did not need to delve into the scope of the discussion of the British Farming Motion Group or any prejudgments at

this time, as the first meeting of the Task-and-Finish Group would determine the scope and approach for reviewing the information.

Members discussed the composition of the Working Group. The Head of Democratic and Election Services explained that, to meet the July deadline to report to Council, electing the Chair of the Working Group would facilitate the scheduling of meetings.

The Head of Democratic and Election Services outlined the points for approval in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting as follows:

- Agree on the draft terms of reference for the farming motion, with the caveat that these would be reviewed at the first meeting of the Working Group.
- To appoint a member from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to Chair the Farming Motion Working Group. A proposal had been made by the Chair, but if there were alternative suggestions, a vote would be held.
- To agree to seek nominations from political groups for the remaining seats on the Working Group and delegate authority to the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services to appoint the members. This would enable the group to be formed quickly and begin scheduling meetings.

It was emphasised that scheduling early meetings was crucial to providing external bodies with sufficient notice for participation and to ensure adequate time for reporting back by July.

The proposal to elect David Cunningham as the Chair of the Farming Motion Working Group was seconded, put to the vote and agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED: The Committee elected David Cunningham as the Chair of the British Farming Motion Task-and-Finish Working Group.

The recommendations in the agenda supplement were then proposed by Councillor Neill, seconded by Councillor Tony Slater, put to the vote and agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

1. To agree the draft terms of reference for the Farming Motion Working Group.
2. To appoint Councillor David Cunningham chair of the Farming Motion Working Group.
3. To agree that nominations will be sought from political groups for the remaining seats on the Farming Motion Working Group. (Two Conservative, two Liberal Democrat, and one Green Member)
4. To delegate authority to the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services to appoint the membership of the Working Group based on the nominations made by political groups.

OS.174 Financial Performance Report 2024-25 Quarter Three

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Transformation introduced the Financial Performance Report for 2024/25 Quarter Three. They raised the following points:

- The budget tracking had shown progress since the second quarter and the shortfall had reduced to £81 000
- The forecasted surplus for the year was £435 000.
- Cabinet was asked to allocate the forecasted surplus to financial resilience reserves.
- Cabinet to approve a revised Capital programme of £7.5m, including an additional £238 000 for disabled facilities grants.

The Deputy Chief Executive added the following points:

- The overall service variations showed a change of about £91 000 from Q2. Most of this change was in non-service areas, particularly in Treasury management, which had improved due to higher-than-expected interest rates.
- The Treasury management income was still projected prudently, with potential upside risk for an improved position towards the budgeted forecast.
- There were no significant changes in revenue variations, income shortfalls or agency staff spend between Q3 and Q4.

Members discussed the report, raising the following points:

- Members asked how the reduced footfall in the District's Public Conveniences was measured, what was the evidence for this and whether it reflect reduced footfall in the locality. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that devices installed at each of the Public Conveniences supplied the data for the number of visits and not an indication of the footfall in the localities. The Deputy Chief Executive described a change in the contract that was provided for the cleaning of those facilities. Whilst there had been a reduction in the income shortfall, it was still short of the income target of around about £100k per annum.
- Members asked if there had been any charge to the Town Council for the Chesterton by-election. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance informed that the Chesterton had been a by-election for the Cotswold District Council and there had been no costs to Cirencester Town Council.
- Members highlighted the £100 000 profit from the green waste collection service. Clarification was requested on whether this surplus would be banked or used in the next year, especially since the service was supposed to be cost neutral. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Transformation explained that the garden waste service was intended to be revenue neutral, with charges set before knowing how many people will use it. They explained that the revenue collected balanced out over time rather than accumulating a specific profit or loss fund. The Deputy Chief Executive added that there had been lower costs for garden waste collections due to the waste collection rezoning. There had also been a higher-than-expected number of subscribers to the garden waste collection service.

- The Publica Transition had cost £1.495 million this financial year, with £726,000 being an additional annually recurring impact. Concerns were raised that this figure excluded internal costs (e.g. officer time, HR, legal costs), which could significantly increase the true cost. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Transformation noted the importance of distinguishing between one-off transition costs and ongoing revenue commitments, such as increased pension contributions. The recent changes aligned staff pay and conditions with other councils and supported recruitment and retention. Whilst there was a modest cost increase for taxpayers, the transition was viewed as a necessary investment with long-term benefits.
- Members asked whether the Publica Transition was still the biggest single risk for the financial stability of Cotswold District Council. The Deputy Chief Executive stated that the November Mid Term Financial Statement report identified Publica Transition Phase two as the biggest risk to balancing the budget. By February 2025, the focus shifted to three main risks, including changes to external funding and local government reorganisation. Initially, funding cuts from 2026–27 were the main concern, but unforeseen issues like local government reforms were now seen as greater threats to financial stability.
- Members requested a simple table showing the number of garden waste licenses sold and the prices charged, ideally covering at least the last six to seven years. They expressed concern that price increases did not seem to affect demand, as sales had risen despite higher charges, and sought data to better understand this trend.
- Members were concerned about the connection between Council spending, the value delivered, and performance outcomes. They suggested the need for a more integrated information system linking spending with tangible benefits, making it easier to determine whether value is delivered. The Deputy Chief Executive agreed that aligning service and financial performance would allow Officers to direct resources to the Council's priorities.
- Members enquired whether the election costs for portable tablets would continue with the May elections. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that the additional cost of tablets for elections was part of a trial to explore their use, which had been ongoing in recent elections. The tablets were not purchased by the Council but provided by Civica and the Council was looking to achieve a cost reduction in future elections due to the way that votes are verified. The Deputy Chief Executive agreed that the rental for the tablets would be a recurring cost.
- The Chair asked how much of the service charges applied to existing tenants versus newer tenants at the Trinity Road Offices. They also raised a question about the commercial property, specifically regarding the rental income shortfall, and where that shortfall might be coming from. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that the charges applied to existing tenants.

The Committee noted the report and did not agree any recommendations to Cabinet.

OS.175 Updates from Gloucestershire County Council Scrutiny Committees

Councillor Jenkinson provided an update on the Gloucestershire Economic Strategy Scrutiny Committee and the following points were noted:

- Gloucestershire's farming sector was evolving, with a focus on agri-tech and agri-technique. The County Council's farms were reviewed, and the county planned to reduce its land holdings, leading to more tenant farmers seeking new land.
- The county was reducing its land for capital generation, and there were various farm units across the district, some of which may not be in active use.
- The county was focusing on climate change and how to link economic data to strategy and policy. A new local growth plan was being developed, highlighting the need for better digital infrastructure in rural areas.
- Local growth hubs were crucial for business support but were limited to one per district, with the Southern Cotswolds Hub being the most accessible for businesses in the area.

Councillor Neill provided an update on the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the following points were noted:

- The focus was on preventing illness, staying well, and delivering care in the community but there was a need to raise awareness about community-based options like pharmacies and self-care at home.
- Community events were held to promote healthy lifestyles, offering advice on diet, exercise, and health screenings.
- There had been a spike in hospital admissions due to Influenza, Respiratory syncytial virus and COVID-19 cases, leading to a critical incident declaration in Gloucestershire Acute hospitals.
- Virtual wards were allowing patients to monitor themselves at home using pulse oximeters, thermometers, and blood pressure monitors.
- Average ambulance handover times were reduced from 65 to 35 minutes between January and February.
- Emergency Departments had been enhanced to include new acute assessment units and better communication between paramedics, GPs, and hospital teams to reduce unnecessary hospital admissions.
- New technologies in Gloucestershire included image-guided intervention surgery and advanced stroke treatment in district hospitals.
- Community hospitals like Morton and Cirencester hospitals were discussed.

Rollout of the spring COVID vaccine for those over 75 and individuals with pre-existing health conditions was planned.

The Meeting commenced at 4.00 pm and closed at 6.50 pm

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Chair

(END)