

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Cabinet



held on Friday 16 February 2024 at 10.30 am
in Meeting Room 1, Abbey House, Abbey Close, Abingdon, OX14 3JE

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Cabinet members: Councillors Bethia Thomas (Chair), Mark Coleman (Vice-Chair), Sue Caul, Andy Crawford, Lucy Edwards, Neil Fawcett, Andy Foulsham, Diana Lugova and Helen Pighills

Officers: Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer), Steve Culliford (Democratic Services Team Leader), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance) and Mark Stone (Chief Executive)

Remote attendance:

Officers: Emma Creed (Principal Accountant), Carole Cumming (Arts Centre Director), Andrew Down (Deputy Chief Executive – Partnerships), Paul Fielding (Head of Housing and Environment), Jessie Fieth (Senior Climate Action Officer), Jeremy Lloyd (Broadcasting Officer), Suzanne Malcolm (Deputy Chief Executive – Place), Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services), Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive – Transformation and Operations), Donna Ross (Principal Accountant), Richard Spraggett (Strategic Finance Officer), Vivian Williams (Interim Head of Legal and Democratic)

Guests: Councillors Kiera Bentley, Katherine Foxhall, Jenny Hannaby and Sally Povolotsky

64. Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the Cabinet meetings held on 1 and 19 December 2023 as correct records and agree that the chair signs them as such.

65. Declarations of interests

Councillor Andy Crawford declared an interest in the agenda item on The Beacon, as he was a member of Wantage Town Council.

66. Urgent business and chair's announcements

The meeting noted the evacuation arrangements in case of an emergency.

The Chair reported that Councillor Debra Dewhurst has resigned from the Cabinet; the chair thanked Councillor Dewhurst for her work as a Cabinet member.

67. Public participation

Three members of the public and three district councillors had registered to address 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 take their points into consideration.

- (3) Mr Chris Henderson asked a question on behalf of Radley Parish Council regarding the council's Community Infrastructure Levy spending strategy. He asked why the council's policy excluded funding for village halls and whether this could be reversed, and if the village hall were to separate out its projects would this allow the council to award funding?

(N.B. An answer to this question was given in writing after the meeting.)

- (4) Councillor Sally Povolotsky made a statement on the future of The Beacon, believing that it needed re-vamping, and more community engagement to allow it to foster community spirit, culture and the arts, and to retain this asset to the town.
- (5) Councillor Kiera Bentley made a statement on the future of The Beacon, believing that it was crucial to retain the facility and provide a service to local residents. The council should do all it could to make it viable. Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funding should be considered to support The Beacon.
- (6) Councillor Jenny Hannaby spoke as a local resident in support of retaining and improving The Beacon. Local public engagement was needed to find out what local people wanted from The Beacon and to improve it and the service provided by the council.

The chair thanked all speakers for their input to the meeting.

68. 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.

Scrutiny Committee chair, Councillor Katherine Foxhall, spoke in support of the committee's recommendations.

69. Motion referred by Council

Cabinet received a motion that had been passed by Council on 13 December 2023, asking Cabinet to take several actions on climate change and nature recovery.

RESOLVED to note the motion referred to Cabinet by Council on 13 December 2023, and note that officers are working on implementing the actions and will report back in due course.

70. Climate Action Fund - Policy and Guidance

Cabinet considered the head of policy and programmes' report on proposed changes to the council's climate action fund policy and guidance. The report sought approval of the changes to take effect in the 2024/25 financial year.

The Cabinet member for climate action welcomed the changes and reported that these had been supported by the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee. The main change was to increase the amount that could be granted from £5,000 to £10,000 per application, thereby helping communities to undertake climate action, nature recovery and energy saving projects in their neighbourhoods.

Cabinet welcomed this also. It not only supported local climate action projects but also assisted in getting local people together to take action, thereby helping build communities and increase learning.

This would be a test year; consideration would be given at a later date to whether a second grant round could be offered in 2024/25, or whether to carry forward any unspent grant budget to 2025/26 to extend the scheme to future years.

RESOLVED: to approve the changes to the Vale Climate Action Fund Policy and Guidance, as set out in Appendix A to the head of policy and programmes' report to Cabinet on 16 February 2024, and agree to implement these changes for the 2024/25 round.

71. 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 and administered by introducing a permit scheme from 1 April 2025.

The Cabinet member for environmental services and waste 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 keep updated on the changes;
- gave future consideration to an initial fee to join the service, and to introducing bin microchipping.

Cabinet thanked the committee for its suggestions.

Officers had considered the implications of the committee's suggestions and had discussed them with the Cabinet member.

The Cabinet member welcomed the proposal, believing that the council needed a better system to administer its garden waste service. The proposed permit scheme would provide a more efficient payment system and allow the council to retrieve bins where payments had not been made. After initial set up costs, the scheme would be self-financing.

Regarding Scrutiny Committee's suggestion to retain direct debit payment as an option, this would mean the project would have to be paused and reviewed. The Cabinet member rejected this as it was the management of direct debit payments that was causing administrative issues, and was one of the main reasons to transform the service. 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 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 bring efficiencies with a more automated and customer-friendly permit-based approach. This had been tried and tested at other councils and had become best practice. However, Cabinet considered that the communications plan was key to ensuring success. Implementation of the scheme should be monitored carefully, and a review should take place during the first year of its operation.

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.

72. Future Direction of The Beacon, Wantage

Councillor Andy Crawford declared an interest in this item as he was a member of Wantage Town Council. He left the meeting during the consideration of this item and did not take part in the debate or decision.

Cabinet considered the report of the head of development and corporate landlord. This proposed a future direction for The Beacon in Wantage. Officers had considered options for the ongoing development of the facility to offer best value to the council, while maximising community benefit and financial efficiency, thereby establishing The Beacon's long-term sustainability. 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 Beacon through an external organisation, an outsourced operator model, and retaining the operation in-house. Cabinet noted the appendices, including those that were marked as exempt.

The Scrutiny Committee had asked Cabinet to consider the following:

- accelerating work on the action plan, particularly focussing on fundraising efforts, future commercial options, revisiting decarbonisation timescales, and discussions with Wantage Town Council, with clear time parameters for the whole action plan;
- revisiting engagement with local ward members to meet, share ideas and contacts, and involving community groups in the Beacon's future;
- providing an update to Scrutiny Committee in quarter three.

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

The Cabinet member for community health and wellbeing thanked Scrutiny Committee for its suggestions. It was one of the council's priorities to review the operation of The Beacon, maximise its benefits to the community and reduce costs. This had been discussed with other members, and specialist advice had been sought. It was unlikely that the council would be able to recover all of its costs, but it must reduce them. The council should do all it could to ensure The Beacon was operating to its best potential in-house. Therefore, the Cabinet member supported the adoption of the development action plan and had asked for regular progress updates. In terms of local engagement, the Cabinet member reported that it was intended to establish a community engagement board to define and measure the communities' aspirations for The Beacon.

The Cabinet member proposed amendments to the recommendations to authorise officers to agree the prioritised actions, and to progress further investigations into potential future alternative operating models for The Beacon whilst the action plan was implemented, to enable comparison with an optimised in-house operating model, and ensure best value could be achieved.

Cabinet welcomed the action plan, and thanked Scrutiny Committee for its suggestions. Cabinet recognised that there were improvements the council could implement to improve The Beacon's service delivery. Key to this was the outcome of discussions with Wantage Town Council, which had an agreement to use The Beacon. The adoption of the development action plan should have a positive impact on its financial viability and benefit the community. Before the council considered longer-term options, the council should do all it could to ensure The Beacon was operating to its best potential in-house. Therefore, Cabinet supported the adoption of the development action plan.

The Cabinet member and officers were thanked for their work on this.

RESOLVED to:

- (a) endorse the Beacon Development Action Plan, as set out in Appendix 1 to the head of development and corporate landlord's report to Cabinet on 16 February 2024, to optimise operation of the in-house delivery model, and authorise the relevant head of service, in consultation with the Cabinet member for communities and wellbeing, to agree the prioritised actions;
- (b) note that progression of further investigations into potential future alternative operating models for The Beacon whilst the action plan is implemented will enable comparison with an optimised in-house operating model, to ensure best value is achieved, as set out in Appendix 2 to the report;
- (c) acknowledge that the currently unbudgeted implementation costs outlined within the Development Action Plan, are subject to agreement of Council at its meeting on 21 February 2024;
- (d) request officers to enter into formal discussions with Wantage Town Council in respect of its occupancy arrangements, as set out in Appendix 4 to the report;
- (e) note that the strategic direction for the Beacon and the arts more widely will be met within the council's new corporate plan 2024-2028; and
- (f) receive a formal progress review of the actions above, and future options, during quarter three of 2024/25.

73. 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 due to higher than expected interest rates, bringing greater returns. The council was also operating with the prudential indicators, and there had been no need for the council to borrow funds during that period.

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.

74. 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. It included the 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 also welcomed the addition of the new environmental, social and governance policy, which would be used to assess potential investment options.

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 and thanked the Cabinet member for finance and officers for producing the new environmental, social and governance policy, which would help the council assess investment options.

The head of finance reported when assessing investment options, the council had to prioritise security, liquidity, and yield. If after that assessment, two or more options were of equal standard, the new environmental, social and governance policy could then be used to further refine the assessment of investment options.

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 16 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 advisers Link and, in line with the Constitution, and will report to the 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 16 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.

75. 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; and
- a capital expenditure de-minimis level note added to section 4.

The Cabinet member reported that during the 2024/25 financial year, officers would revisit the depreciation rates of the council's assets.

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 16 February 2024;
- (b) agree the strategy for flexible use of capital receipts, as set out in Annex 1 of the capital strategy; and
- (c) authorise the head of finance, in consultation with the Cabinet member for finance, to make minor changes to the capital strategy.

76. 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 the information required to enable Cabinet to recommend the budget to Council. In addition, the report recommended the Prudential Indicators to be set by Council in accordance with

the Prudential Code, it contained the chief finance officer's opinion on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the council's financial reserves, and included the medium term financial plan for the years 2024/25 to 2028/29.

Scrutiny Committee had considered the report and had asked Cabinet to consider the following:

- include gross amounts in reporting, to help with understanding the base budget; a fuller explanation of the base budget was requested;
- in Appendix D1 on the capital programme, the links between expenditure and corporate plan themes were welcomed. These should be continued and matched to new themes when the new corporate plan was approved;
- add sensitivity analysis for the Medium Term Financial Plan, where possible, to model the impact of variables;
- ask that the Cabinet members for finance and communications review how to make budget information more accessible to residents and contextually link the budget more clearly to corporate plan priorities.

Cabinet thanked Scrutiny Committee for its comments. The head of finance had reported that he would reflect these points in discussion with the Cabinet member for finance, and as far as he was able, he would include these points in future budget setting reports.

The Cabinet member for finance reported that the draft budget had been prepared following a budgetary review and challenge by both officers and members. The review had covered both revenue and capital expenditure. 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. The council had received an increase in its core spending power government grant, but the level of grant was uncertain in future years. There were no cuts to services in this year's budget, and there had been a lower draw upon reserves than previously expected. These factors had allowed the council to set a balanced budget. However, it was important to keep within the budget envelope to ensure the council's finances were sustainable over the medium term.

Council tax would be increased by £5 for Band D properties, the maximum before a referendum was required. The district council's element of the council tax for a Band D property would be £156.69 for 2024/25, an increase of less than 10 pence per week.

Cabinet welcomed the proposed budget. A key factor in achieving this balanced budget was the review of revenue and capital expenditure by members and officers. It allowed the council to deliver its corporate plan priorities while avoiding any service cuts. Members were proud of the way the council had stabilised its finances and produced so much with so little. Cabinet 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 16 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 council's medium-term financial plan to 2028/29, as set out in Appendix F to the report.

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 21 February 2024.

77. 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 asked Cabinet to consider the following:

- in Corporate Plan quarterly reporting, measures and milestones should be presented; headline graphics had more impact and might be more useful for the public;
- transparency, openness and fiscal responsibility should be embedded but need to be explicit in the document. Even if no longer a main theme, these should be explained in the document in relevant places;
- renaming the Corporate Plan; internally, 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;
- active risk management should be taken on by the project board proactively in their meetings.

Members noted that 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 would be included in the draft plan engagement. He recommended that Cabinet endorsed the approach to develop the new corporate plan.

Cabinet concurred, believing that widespread engagement was important. Cabinet liked the three themes, a simpler approach to that taken in the current corporate plan. Cabinet members looked forward to the outcome of the public engagement.

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

The meeting closed at 12.45 pm

Chair:

Date: