

**Minutes of a meeting of the
Finance and Performance Panel (Panel of the
Scrutiny Committee)
on Wednesday 4 December 2024**

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Committee members present:

Councillor Fry (Chair)

Councillor Jarvis

Councillor Smowton

Councillor Yeatman

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor

Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services

Bill Lewis, Financial Accounting Manager

Laura Bessell, Benefits Manager

Paul Concannon, ODS Chief Operating Officer

Simon Howick, Managing Director, Direct Services Companies

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

Also present:

Councillor Ed Turner, Deputy Leader (Statutory) - Finance and Asset Management,
Deputy Leader - Finance and Asset Management

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council
Companies, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies

Apologies:

No apologies were received

25. Apologies

None.

26. Declarations of Interest

None.

27. Chair's Announcements

Councillor Fry reminded Panel members the budget papers were published as part of a supplementary agenda for the meeting.

28. Finance and Performance Panel Work Plan

The Panel noted the workplan.

29. Report back on recommendations

The Panel noted the report.

30. Notes of the previous meeting

The Panel agreed the notes from the previous meeting.

31. Integrated Performance Report Q2 2024/25

Councillor Ed Turner, Deputy Leader (Statutory) and Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management, Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services, Bill Lewis, Financial Accounting Manager and Richard Woods, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager were in attendance to answer questions.

The Head of Financial Services introduced the report, noting the forecast update on the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

Councillor Jarvis asked about car parking income regarding the General Fund and if the Council was charging appropriately. The Head of Financial Services commented on the increase in income from Council's Park and Ride and further figures were expected by February.

Councillor Jarvis then commented in relation to temporary accommodation, the two figures presented on variance of 1.8m as opposed to 3m as initially predicted.

Councillor Smowton asked about staffing for the temporary accommodation and if there were challenges to recruiting Officers to posts. The Head of Financial Services responded there had been a reduction in performance within the service area and an increase in agency staff to cover busy periods. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager also noted that there was a push to move residents out of temporary accommodation to permanent accommodation within a two-year window.

Councillor Fry asked about the overspends in terms of evaluation fees and bank charges. The Head of Financial Services noted the increase in electronic payments, further audits and an increase in moving software to the cloud, which has a higher implementation fee.

Councillor Fry then asked about car park charges, with the Head of Financial Services that further details would be reviewed closer to Cabinet and Council in February 2025.

Councillor Jarvis asked about the variance within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for repairs. The Head of Financial Services responded that Officers were working with Oxford Direct Services to reduce the overspend in that area.

Councillor Snowton asked about the slippage column within the report. The Head of Financial Services responded that this was reverse slippage, where budget was brought forward to the following financial year.

Councillor Fry asked if there were any financial implications in contractors pulling out over the next 12 months. The Head of Financial Services that contracts were still going ahead but would have to be retendered if contractors pulled out, but budgets could be slipped.

Councillor Jarvis asked about the risk register, including the retention of lawyers. The Head of Financial Services responded that turnover within the legal team was a sector wide issue.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

Cllr Jarvis left the meeting.

32. Business Rates Non-Payment and Systems Management

Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services Bill Lewis, Financial Accounting Manager, and Laura Bessel, Benefits Service Delivery Manager were in attendance to introduce the report and answer questions.

The Head of Financial Services noted the addendum of the agenda, with the business rates across the city. The Benefits Service Delivery Manager commented on the process for collecting business rates each year.

Councillor Snowton asked about the substantial amount of debt that was collected in the previous year. The Benefits Service Delivery Manager commented on the process and the ongoing contracts with the enforcement agency.

Councillor Yeatman requested clarity on the empty premises and pop-up shops across the city. The Benefits Service Delivery Manager responded that occupation of the property is not always transparent, but the names on the property are liable to pay. It was also noted the charity shops have to be registered with the Charity Commission to apply for an exempt status.

Councillor Fry commented on the percentage of allocation within the report, and if there would be a change of policy. The Head of Financial Services responded that the figures are inflated each year based on the previous year's figures. The Financial Accounting Manager added that assumptions are made regarding future trends a calculation methodology and an allowance within the business rates calculation for cost of collection.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

33. Supported Accommodation cost to City Council Finances

Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services, Bill Lewis, Financial Accounting Manager Laura Bessel, Benefits Service Delivery Manager and Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager were in attendance to introduce the report and answer questions.

The Benefits Service Delivery Manager noted the increase and demand for independent living, which would be at the expense of the Council, and the number of residents that discharge from the NHS to supported accommodation. It was also commented that this was a similar issue within Cambridge and was working with local charities and organisations to address the type of accommodation that is rented.

Cllr Smowton: asked if this was an issue across the county and was there a correlation with non-unitary authorities. The Financial Accounting Manager responded that the issue within cities and similar to Cambridge, Oxford doesn't have enough appropriate landlords. It was also noted there would be legislation changes in the next 18 months regarding the licensing of support accommodation. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager also commented the further grants to support this and further conversations with the local NHS trusts.

Councillor Fry asked about the different housing providers. The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager responded that further conversations had taken place and further details would be shared with the panel in due course.

Councillor Smowton asked about coordination between district and county Councils. The Benefits Service Delivery Manager commented that the City Council had worked with 10 other local authorities and had positive discussions with the Department of Work and Pensions to review the expenditure of local authorities.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

34. Treasury Management Mid-Year Review - April to September 2024

The Financial Accounting Manager introduced the report, noting the variances going into the Monitoring Report.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

35. Budget 2025/26

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

36. Matters exempt or part exempt from publication and exclusion of the public

The Committee resolved that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the 'ODS – ODSTL Business Plan Refresh' on the grounds that their presence would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

37. ODS - ODSTL Business Plan Refresh

The Committee discussed matters relating to information contained in the exempt report.

38. Budget 2025/26 - exempt appendix

The Panel noted the exempt appendix of the 2025/2026 Budget.

39. Dates of future meetings

The Panel noted the dates of the future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 9.00 pm

**Chair
January 2025**

Date: Wednesday 15

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Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired
Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal decision notice is issued
All other committees: immediately.
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