

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet on Wednesday 13 November 2024



Committee members present:

Councillor Brown	Councillor Turner
Councillor Arshad	Councillor Chapman
Councillor Munkonge	Councillor Railton
Councillor Linda Smith	Councillor Upton

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Caroline Green, Chief Executive
Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services
Emma Jackman, Head of Law and Governance
Tom Hook, Executive Director for Corporate Resources
Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy
Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager
Stephen Cohen, Refugee and Resettlement Manager
Kieran Edmunds, Rapid Rehousing Manager
Carolyn Devenney, Senior Furnished Tenancy Officer
Philip McGaskill, Revenues Service Delivery Manager
Dr Brenda McCollum, Committee and Member Services

Also present:

Councillor Katherine Miles, Chair of Scrutiny

Apologies:

Councillor Hollingsworth sent apologies.

63. Declarations of Interest

None.

64. Addresses and Questions by Members of the Public

None received.

65. Councillor Addresses on any item for decision on the Cabinet agenda

None received.

66. Councillor Addresses on Neighbourhood Issues

None received.

67. Items raised by Cabinet Members

None.

68. Scrutiny Reports

Councillor Miles presented the reports from Scrutiny. She referred to two Scrutiny meetings, one on the 4th of November which looked at an update on the city's river charter, the Council's engagement with Thames Water, and a leisure update. There were six recommendations presented to Cabinet relating to those. The second meeting that she referred to took place on the 7th of November. Councillor Miles said that in the meeting, they discussed the responsibilities of different agencies, legislative gaps at a national level regarding environmental protection, and the impact of deregulation on water companies.

Councillor Miles said that they discussed the topic of domestic misconnections, as an area that falls under the Council's responsibility. Issues were also raised about storm water run off and river pollution. Across all of these topics, was the need for meaningful engagement with stakeholders and work to ensure that residents' concerns are adequately addressed. Councillor Miles said that there were three recommendations from the first item. They were:

- That the Council formally requests a structured meeting with Thames Water, for Council Members to put forward resident concerns about water issues in the city, and for officers to provide support in proposing the structuring of the meeting.
- That Officers develop a proposal for council to convene multi-stakeholder dialogue event between Members, local Members of Parliament, industry, and other water quality stakeholders to inform the content of a future Oxford City River Action Plan, to identify coordinated efforts to safeguard Oxford's water resources for the future.
- That the Council commissions a review by Officers to clarify its powers, obligations and the potential actions based on good practice to: identify and enforce existing domestic misconnections in residential properties that the council has control or influence over; and to prevent future misconnections, in order to safeguard against water contamination.

Councillor Railton responded to these reports from Scrutiny. The main thrust of their work is that they are trying to sort out the sewage capacity matter first, before working on other matters downstream. With respect to the missed connections, she said that this matter comes under building control. Councillor Railton said that they have since clarified what the Council's responsibilities are in this realm. Councillor Railton said that with regard to the second recommendation, doing nothing on this issue was also possible, as they have made the necessary clarifications.

Councillor Miles then presented the leisure update report from Scrutiny. She said that committee had asked questions about the new contract's progression and received reassurance regarding improvements made by the new leisure supplier. They also explored the topic of accountability for facility conditions, and how the new supplier is working to address inherited issues. Councillor Miles said they received reassurances and were happy with the outcome of their meeting. From this report they recommended:

- That the Council requests Officers to explore a business case for the availability and year-round access to the lido, utilising the existing water source heat pump to support sustainable operations.
- That the Council ensures enhanced ventilation is included in any retrofitting or renovations of the leisure centre changing facilities, with a specific focus on health and safety.
- That the Council establishes a process for a six-monthly review of the leisure supplier's finances, with update reports provided to the Finance and Performance Panel for ongoing review and oversight.

Councillor Munkonge thanked Councillor Miles for the discussion they had at Scrutiny. He stated that they have accepted the first recommendation. They are talking with the new provider, to see if there is a viable business case for this to go forward. Councillor Munkonge said that they did not accept the second recommendation from Scrutiny, because this matter is already taken into account in the work they are undertaking. He said that the Council has already approved a budget for these updates to the Council's leisure centres. The third recommendation, they have accepted, but only partly. At this moment, they believe the new leisure provider has financially sound accounts.

Councillor Munkonge said that it is their view that a yearly review would be appropriate for this matter.

Councillor Miles presented the third report from Scrutiny. She said that the panel discussed a number of items, including the schemes uptake in Oxford as compared to the national average, its' flexibility to meet rising demand, and how the scheme provides financial relief to tenants. She said they explored these issues, as well as how the scheme maintains a cost neutral status for the Council. Councillor Miles said that Scrutiny also discussed tenancy transfer to other properties and opportunities to reduce furniture waste. The recommendation from this discussion was that:

- the Council further explores opportunities to establish more formalised relationships with local charities and organisations to enhance the reuse and recycling of used furniture under the Furnished Tenancy Scheme, with the goal of reducing waste by extending life of furniture items that may still hold value for temporary housing or community projects.

Councillor Brown responded on behalf of Councillor Smith because she was delayed in getting to the meeting. Councillor Brown said that they have accepted the recommendation from Scrutiny on this paper and there will work be done prior to the contract being put into place to allow this recommendation to go forward. Councillor Brown said that they would change the order of the agenda, due to Councillor Smith's delayed arrival to the meeting. Agenda item 10 was taken next.

Councillor Chapman entered the meeting during this item.

69. Furnished Tenancy Scheme

The Head of Housing Services had submitted a report to seek authority to procure and delegation to award a contract to deliver the Council's Furnished Tenancy Scheme.

Councillor Linda Smith said that the recommendations from Scrutiny were very helpful, and she was glad to accept them. She added that the scheme does go to great lengths to reuse items, wherever possible. She welcomes the recommendation from Scrutiny, as it will allow them to see how they can further develop the reuse and recycling of goods in this scheme.

Councillor Linda Smith presented the report and said that she is pleased that the council is providing this area of support to citizens. She said that over a quarter of their tenancies involve the furnished tenancy scheme, which demonstrates the reach of this scheme and how crucial it is to help tenants make properties into a home. She thanked the OCC Officers for their work on this report and for their effective running of the scheme.

Councillor Brown said that she remembers when the scheme was first set up and she believes it is a very important scheme for the Council. She added that it was set up because people were facing significant difficulties as they came into a new tenancy and tried to afford furnishings for their homes. She stated that this is a great scheme, and she is happy that they are still able to keep it going.

Councillor Arshad agreed with Councillor Brown. She also thanked the OCC team for their hard work on the scheme and this report. She asked if the furniture in the scheme is broken, is it replaced, or if there is an opportunity to do so.

Carolyn Devenney, Senior Furnished Tenancy Officer, responded that if things break in a tenant's five years, then at no cost to them, the items would be repaired or replaced. That would be done using already recycled stock within their compound. The majority of the furniture is under a warranty of some form, so we can send it back to the contractor and replace the item if it is still under warranty. The Senior Furnished Tenancy Officer said that by recouping pre used stock, they try to get that back out to clients, or they will replace as new within the five-year period. After that five-year period, there are some items they would not want to replace. However, they take every case, on a case-by-case basis and in most instances, they would replace everything that needed to be.

Councillor Upton commented on the life changing nature of this scheme. She said that this scheme can make the difference between a space being just four walls, to being a cozy home that people enjoy. She added that she was happy to see this report come forward and thanked the OCC Officers for their work in this area.

Cabinet agreed to:

1. **Approve** the procurement of a contract at a value of £4,300,000 over a 5-year period for a supplier or suppliers to provide household furniture, white goods, and carpets as part of a Furnished Tenancy Scheme.
2. **Delegate** to the Interim Executive Director for Communities and People in consultation with the Section 151 Officer, authority to award a Furnished

Tenancy Scheme contract to a supplier or suppliers, selected by an evaluation panel, following a fully compliant procurement process.

70. Local Authority Housing Fund Round 3

The Executive Director (Communities and People) had submitted a report to make available the required budget provision and the necessary project approval and delegations to enable the Council to proceed with entering into the national Local Authority Housing Fund Round 3.

Councillor Smith presented the report. She said that this involves a government grant which will help to finance the properties they will be purchasing. In this particular round, they have been allocated funding which will cover the cost of five properties. The grant rate attached to 4 out of 5 properties is equivalent to 40% of property costs and 1 out of 5 will be 50% of property costs. Three of these will be allocated to Afghan families, who are part of the UK government's resettlement scheme. Two of these will be available for us to use as temporary accommodation, which is an acute need in the city. Councillor Smith said that the properties will belong to the Council and will be regular Council homes. When the tenancy ends of the previously stated Afghan families, whenever that may be,

Councillor Smith stated that the Council will have full allocation rights to those properties. She said that this report is important for Oxford, as a city of sanctuary and is beneficial for the Council's HRA.

Councillor Brown said that this has been important work for the Council. It helps the Council to provide sanctuary to people in need and helps the city in the long run by adding additional properties to the HRA. Councillor Brown said that this program is a win for Oxford's other residents as well as those directly benefiting.

Cabinet agreed to:

1. **Approve** the Council becoming part of the Local Authority Housing Fund Round 3, in order to deliver 5 new affordable homes.
2. **Recommend** to Council, the approval of an allocation of £1,910,000 capital budget from the Housing Revenue Account, for the Council's investment to purchase the properties as part of Local Authority Housing Fund Round 3, with up to £1,061,000 being funded from HRA borrowing, and the rest covered by grant of up to £849,000.
3. **Delegate** authority to the Interim Executive Director (Communities and People) in consultation with; the Cabinet Member for Housing; the Head of Financial Services/Section 151 Officer; and the Head of Law and Governance/Monitoring Officer, to enter into agreements and contracts to facilitate the purchase by the Council of housing (to be held in the HRA) within the identified budget and within the project approval.

71. Corporate Debt Policy

The Head of Financial Services had submitted a report to seek the approval and formal adoption of the revised Oxford City Corporate Debt Management Policy.

Councillor Chapman presented the report and stated that this was a refresh of the Council's corporate debt policy. He said that as the Council is a large organization which interacts with a wide range of companies and people, they need to have a clear policy on debt. Councillor Chapman said that his view of this matter is that their team is very thoughtful and careful about how they pursue debt. He stated that during his time in this portfolio, the number of evictions from council housing has been extremely small. He added that they work very carefully to try and bring into place a debt repayment plan that is suitable for the individual. In these situations, they have to distinguish between two scenarios, those who have got into debt and can't pay and those people who could pay but do not want to. There is a need to work thoughtfully with people who can't pay to help them pay back their debt over time. In the other scenario, there is a need to pursue those individuals more forcefully.

Councillor Chapman added that the way they collect debt is generally quite successful and he commended this policy for approval.

Councillor Turner thanked the officers for their hard work on this matter. He said that it is his impression that the team work diligently to assist people. He said that when the team is approached, they strive to have the right balance between protecting scarce public funds, while also showing empathy to people's individual circumstances. Councillor Turner also discussed the categories of debt discussed in this report and said that some things in this realm have dipped with the cost-of-living crisis, as would be expected. Given the current financial circumstances, it is important for the Council to collect money. He asked people to keep in mind that during the COVID period, a number of forms of debt enforcement were put on hold and because some debts were not collected, that led to some longer arrangements being put together. The report shows that there is outstanding commercial debt, and they are expecting that to be repaid.

Councillor Turner also noted that as a Council, Oxford is unusual with respect to their network of advice centres which do excellent work supporting people in difficult situations. He said that he was glad to see that referrals for advice are a part of this policy.

Philip McGaskill, Revenues Service Delivery Manager, added that people in Oxford have found this to be a challenging time and they have statutory regulations regarding how they recover debt from our citizens. Additionally, he stated that they support that with a series of text messages and before their action gets to a level of seriousness, for example including court action, members of their team will contact people to offer them repayment programs. The Revenues Service Delivery Manager stated that their team understands that once people start to incur fees, it becomes far more difficult to pay their bill. Thus, they have a structure that gives people every opportunity to talk to them before matters become serious. He added that their teams are aware of the impacts on families if they face eviction. He said that their team takes extra care to ensure that people have every opportunity to talk to them and make an arrangement with them. The Revenues Service Delivery Manager said that they work to install an ethic of repayment, and with that in mind, they are quite prepared to take longer arrangements, so that they can establish a suitable payment plan for those facing difficult circumstances.

Councillor Chapman thanked the officers for their support in putting together this policy. He stated that this is a well put together policy, in theory and in practice. He

commended the team for their work and said that they are extremely careful about not putting people into impossible positions. He commended the officers for their work and the balance that they have struck.

Councillor Brown agreed that this is an important piece of work. She stated that they have a duty to taxpayers and other tenants to collect money where possible, but to do that in a way that recognizes peoples' circumstances and does not put them in a more difficult position. She added that this policy gets that balance right.

Councillor Munkonge emphasized the positive attributes of the policy and agreed with Councillors Brown and Chapman that this is an important piece of work.

Cabinet agreed to:

1. **Approve** the Debt Management Policy, as set out in Appendix A of the report.

Councillor Linda Smith entered the meeting during this item.

72. Minutes

Councillor Upton said that the membership of Cabinet in the agenda frontpage needs to be updated, it is only nine now, not ten. This is an amendment for the agenda, not the minutes.

With that change to the agenda, Cabinet **approved** the minutes of the meeting held on **16 October 2024** as a true and accurate record.

73. Dates of Future Meetings

11 December 2024

22 January 2025

05 February 2025

Matters Exempt from Publication

If Cabinet wishes to exclude the press and the public from the meeting during consideration of any of the items on the exempt from publication part of the agenda, it will be necessary for Cabinet to pass a resolution in accordance with the provisions of Paragraph 4(2)(b) of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 on the grounds that their presence could involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in specific paragraphs of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Cabinet may maintain the exemption if and so long as, in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

74. Furnished Tenancy Scheme

75. Local Authority Housing Fund Round 3

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 6.32 pm

Chair
2024

Date: Wednesday 11 December

When decisions take effect:

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.

Details are in the Council's Constitution.