

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 26 OCTOBER 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.00 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Stephen Conway (Chair), Prue Bray (Vice-Chair), Rachel Bishop-Firth, Paul Fishwick, David Hare, Sarah Kerr, Clive Jones, Ian Shenton and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Chris Johnson

56. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Lindsay Ferris.

57. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 28 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

58. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were non declarations made on this occasion.

59. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER

'I have spoken many times now about the serious financial challenges facing the council. Inflation, high interest rates, and increasing demand, especially for Children's and Adult Services, are putting our finances under unprecedented pressure. Our historical underfunding by central government, we receive less core funding than any other comparable council, per head of population, in England, only makes a difficult situation more challenging still.

The government's funding formula, based primarily on assessment of levels of deprivation, takes totally inadequate account of the costs of meeting our statutory obligations, especially in Children's and Adult services.

Extremely challenging though the situation undoubtedly is, we have good reasons to distinguish ourselves from those councils, the list of them grows, that have had to declare effective insolvency. Our situation is not the same as theirs.

Thanks to the excellent work of our very experienced Chief Finance Officer and his colleagues, the council has a much higher level of reserves of all types to tide us over in these difficult times than is the case with most councils. Our level of net indebtedness is lower than others. Our internal audit processes are robust. We have a strong working relationship between senior officers and executive members here in Wokingham, based on honesty and mutual respect; in most of those councils that have found themselves unable to cope, a breakdown in the relationship between senior councillors and officers has been a contributory cause. The current Executive has shown its willingness to take tough decisions to balance the books - tough decisions that have been shied away from in other local authorities. And, perhaps most importantly of all, we are fortunate to have at all levels of the organisation, impressive and dedicated officers, whose hard work and sense of public service makes Wokingham such a strong council.

We will continue to face considerable challenges, but we should draw both comfort and confidence from what we have been able to achieve together.'

60. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

61. PETER WHITE HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT, SPORT, AND LEISURE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

The Berkshire Nature Recovery Strategy is made up of many "stakeholders", including the university of reading, Crown Estate, Environment Agency and others. We have delegated our future ecology to this group, something that affects us all. What is the democratic process here? How is the steering group accountable to the residents and what recourse is there if the process is seen to be unfairly apportioning biodiversity remediation to some areas of the county at the expense of others.

Answer:

The key aim of the Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy is to enhance biodiversity in the county, recognising that more can be achieved through focused action and a collaborative approach across the wider geographical area.

The Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy is being developed in line with the regulations and guidelines issued by national government. The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead have been appointed as the responsible authority for its completion and Wokingham Borough Council is a statutory supporting authority. The regulations set out specific review points where supporting authorities can object to elements of the developing Local Nature Recovery Strategy, should they consider them to be unfair or wrong.

The responsible authority has created a steering group listing its members on the Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy website, and the Wokingham Borough Council Ecology Officer is a member of the steering group. The steering group are tasked with advising throughout the process on how to make it fair and representative of the priorities for the whole of Berkshire.

The responsible authority has created working groups on different aspects of the strategy development and is seeking participation from a wide range of stakeholders. It will be consulting across Berkshire to understand residents' priorities and check that it is mapping these appropriately. It is tasked by the guidance to consult as broadly as possible and to seek to engage with hard to reach communities. The process is expected to be as inclusive as possible.

I would like to encourage as many people as possible to get involved in the strategy's development by engaging with the project officer for the responsible authority and having their priorities for nature recovery fully included.

Supplementary Question:

A community delivered process around climate define the borough's ideal future state. A relevant section states, our community would breathe clean air and enjoy clean and green biodiverse spaces. The reality for many of us, is an environment constantly being built on. Continual urbanisation is our reality. Can Wokingham Borough Council describe how the

Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Wokingham Borough Council's presence on the steering group, helps take us from our current state to this ideal.

Supplementary Answer:

The sound quality is poor in this room my apologies, what I would say is that I have an open offer from the senior officer to have a discussion with you and go through all the details of the strategy if you would like me to arrange that. Mr White confirmed that he would welcome this.

62. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited Members to submit questions to the appropriate Members

63. COUNCILLOR GARY COWAN HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Wokingham Borough Council claims it is facing an extremely challenging time and I agree with this.

The Borough Council maintains that as many councils have effectively gone bankrupt it is important that residents understand the need for savings and to achieve this the borough council must find savings or generate extra income of more than £12 million.

To date increasing car parking charges that is damaging local businesses while consulting on closing leisure facility outlets without any business appear to be phase I of the intended savings.

Phase II would appear to consist of cutting services such as Litter bins. Weed spraying. Bottle banks storage area cleaning. Town centre cleaning. Non-town centre cleaning. Road sweeping. Footpath cleaning. A329M and A33 cleaning and grass cutting? All without any business cases to date.

My question is how much of the £12 million savings needed will come from the above cuts on a one by one business case.

Answer

I am pleased your question recognises that the council's financial situation is challenging and that we do need to make millions of pounds in savings. In order to make those savings we are looking at every aspect of the council's budget, at innovation and at transformation. We believe we are in better shape than many councils to weather this storm.

When it comes to the specific areas mentioned in your question, I must dispute some of your assumptions.

Car parking usage has increased month on month since the charges were revised and there is no indication that the change is having any negative affect on the footfall in our towns or any direct impact on local businesses. I am afraid that for some is too easy to try and blame Wokingham Borough Council if they have a problem. I accept times are tough on the high street, but the blame for our economic problems, all round, needs to be laid squarely on this current government.

You also mention litter bins, leisure centres and various related services. All of these items are still under review and you must wait for the outcome of the review processes we have in place, before you make any judgements.

A much more complete picture on where savings will be made will appear when the detailed budget goes to Overview & Scrutiny over the next few months. Those meetings can be watched online and I would encourage you and other councillors, and indeed, members of the public to view them if you want to get the fullest possible picture about the budget.

Supplementary Question:

I believe that to manage the scenario we are in, residents should be told exactly what all the non-statutory services that are provided by the council, are and their running costs. The reason I say that is residents should be consulted on all these services and not just the ones that the Executive think should be consulted on. For example, should residents have a say in whether they reduce other non-statutory services which could be libraries or waste measures and other ones that we don't know, or keep the borough clean and tidy. Will the administration provide a simple public list of all the non-statutory services the council administers and the costs of running these services? So, residents can see what real options they could have and not just the ones that have been selected.

Supplementary Answer:

I have a list of all the statutory services but it's very much on a high level, we deliver statutory services and deliver extra things on top of statutory services. For example, litter picking. We are required to keep the roads and area tidy but it doesn't specify what that involves, how often we pick litter and things like that. So, there is some flexibility, I can certainly give you a list of statutory services.

63.1 Councillor Phil Cunnington has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport, and Leisure the following question:

What reassurances can you give squash players about their future at St Crispin's Leisure Centre?

Answer:

The consultation on the future use of St Crispin's was completed in September. Analysis of the findings, together with further analysis of the demand for future school usage of the centre is now being finalised.

The Executive at its meeting in November will be presented with a report of those findings, setting out recommendations for the future use of St Crispin's.

At this stage, no specific assurance can be provided regarding future use of the site as that would predetermine the November Executive decision. However, I can reassure the squash players that their submissions to the consultation will be fully taken into account alongside all other submissions.

Putting that into perspective, I would stress that we place at least as much emphasis on comments within submissions as on numerical indications because our consultations are neither referenda nor market research studies with balanced samples. The qualitative responses are therefore at least as important as the quantitative results.

Supplementary question:

I take it from your answer, Ian, that the consultation will be one of the lead drivers in the decision making process. The Executive will undertake with regards to this now I understand already as you've said on a number of occasions before that finance is not at the core of these questions.

So, can we be assured that, no matter how you decide, that it will be going forward, a public facility and will remain available for the breadth of users that it has at the moment?

Answer:

As I said, Phil, I can't predetermine the outcome of the Executive decision, because the report has not been completed yet.

The asset will be used for the for the benefit of the community and it will continue to be used for the benefit of the community.

64. PROPOSED APPROACH FOR THE STREET SCENE AND GROUNDS MAINTENANCE SERVICE REVIEW

The Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure stated that the report set out the proposed changes to the Street Scene and Grounds Maintenance service. These changes stemmed from the pressing need for the Council to make savings.

The Chair welcomed the Chair of the Community and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee to the meeting and invited him to feedback on the views and recommendations made by this Committee following their consideration of this item on 2 October.

The Chair of the Community & Corporate Services O&S Committee reported that the Committee had discussed all elements of the report and had reached agreement on a set of recommendations for the Executive to consider.

It was anticipated that a task and finish group would begin work shortly and take between 8-10 months to complete. It was important that key stakeholders were engaged and a full range of options were explored. The outcome would be to produce a report for the Executive to further consider with a list of options of various efficiencies and cost savings within the different options set out.

The Chair thanked the Chair of the O&S Committee for all his work and the work of the Committee. It was evident that careful consideration had been given by the O&S Committee to offer a way forward for the Council. The Chair welcomed and valued the contributions from O&S and stated that he was keen to see a constructive partnership between O&S and the Executive. There had been some excellent examples recently where O&S had worked very well to increase engagement and scrutinise the detail of decisions due to be taken by the Executive.

The importance of consultation was highlighted and the need to engage residents and other key stakeholders and this would be a key consideration for the task and finish group.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

1) approved the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee's recommendations:

- a) that the reduction of litter bins and frequency of emptying some bins not be implemented,
- b) that the proposed service reductions on Pages 8 - 11 of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee report be approved.

2) Noted that the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to establish a Task & Finish Group later in 2023/24, to scrutinise the provision and emptying of litter bins across the Borough and submit its recommendations to the Executive in due course.

3) Approved all necessary contract and financial adjustments with all necessary public information amended and appropriate proactive communications to all necessary stakeholders.

4) Approved the reduction of the service base budget to achieve the required savings subject to approval.

5) Noted the results of the public consultation (Appendix 1 of the report attached to the agenda).

65. CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

The Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services reported that this was the first customer experience strategy that had been produced by the Council. The strategy provided a vision and ambition to support strategic outcomes of the Council plan in this area. The Executive Member thanked officers for all their work, in particular Jackie Whitney who had led this work.

The strategy presented an excellent example of best practice as to how strategies should look, it was jargon free and used customer facing language. The strategy had been developed in conjunction with CLASP (Caring Listening & Supporting Partnership).

The ambition behind the strategy was to get the basics right and improve the experience customers have when they interacted with the Council. The strategy had been developed based on a huge amount of consultation and work with residents, businesses, community groups. It was clear that there were pockets of excellence in the Council, but this needed to be consistent across the Council and owned not just by the customer service team, but across the entire organisation.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member and officers for all their work particularly Jackie Whitney for her work and for championing this work.

The Executive noted that work relating to the Council's website played a significant role in this strategy. The new website had been launched in the summer. The digital experience of customers was important and provided an important route of engagement. If customers faced a poor digital experience, they would be forced to contact the Council in other ways, increasing the costs to the Council.

The feedback received on the website had been excellent, with visual impairment users commenting that it was one of the best sites that they had used. It was known that there were some groups of residents within communities who may have additional barriers to accessing information and accessing services, those with English as a second language, for example, people who had limited literacy, and the considerable number of residents who were not Internet users.

The Executive welcomed the strategy and were pleased with the success achieved in terms of it being an easy read, user friendly and accessible.

RESOLVED that the Executive approved the Customer Experience Strategy, following public consultation.

66. AFFORDABLE HOUSING RENT SETTING POLICY

The Leader and Executive Member for Housing stated that this report sought the agreement of Executive for the policy for setting rent, not to set rent levels.

The Executive noted that this report did not need to be considered by the Executive annually, if no changes to the Rent Setting Policy were being proposed.

The Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty stated that if residents couldn't secure affordable housing, they could not keep themselves out of poverty. This week there had been some quite concerning figures published nationally. One in five UK households with children was now in serious financial difficulties. One million children lived in families which couldn't afford to keep themselves adequately fed, housed, warm and clean.

These numbers have doubled during the last five years.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for her comments and highlighted that on page 91, there was a commitment to look at opportunities to minimise rent increases and this commitment had been made to residents.

Ensuring that there was enough social housing available, was a challenge that the Council would do its best to meet, but this needed to be balanced against keeping the (HRA) housing revenue account in a healthy state to support not only current residents of social properties, but also future generations.

RESOLVED that the Executive approved the Rent Setting Policy as set out in Appendix 1 to the report attached to the agenda, for which the 'Rent Setting Policy' primarily relates to the Housing Revenue Account (2573 properties) plus includes a small number (18 properties) of General Fund properties.

67. REVENUE MONITORING 2023-24 Q2

The Executive Member for Finance reported that the Council continued to face significant financial challenges from rising inflation, interest rates and demand for statutory services. The underlying spending pressures in excess of budget facing the Council were circa £10m however there was significant levels of mitigating actions supporting to deliver the current projected overspend position of circa £3.6m. This would continue to be closely

monitored and further options would be explored as the Council moved through the financial year to manage this position.

Significant financial pressures continued to be experienced, particularly in Children's Services and home to school transport. Much of this had been driven by long term failures to provide enough places for children with special educational needs and children, who were forced to attend schools that were a long distance from their home and outside of the borough. This was being tackled in the longer term by building more schools locally. However, currently across all of the Council's school transport, rising fuel and wage costs were affecting overall transport costs.

In addition, unplanned support for care leavers and the cost to cover the increasing demands of adult social care services were also creating significant pressure.

The Executive noted that a wide range of measures and steps were being taken to mitigate the difficult budget position as far as possible.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- 1) noted the overall forecast of the current position of the General Fund revenue budget, Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) illustrated in the Executive Summary and appendices attached to the report attached to the agenda.
- 2) noted the update on the update on the Energy Procurement Contract
- 3) approved the supplementary estimate of £86k in 2023/24 to support the procurement of the Waste Collection, Highways and Street Cleaning contracts.

68. CAPITAL MONITORING 2023/24 - Q2

The Executive Member for Finance reported that this report informed the Executive of the progress of the Council in delivering its capital programme for the financial year 2023/24. This report was essentially a good news report as the Council were able to take £2.3 million out of predicted spend. Many of these savings were from road and building projects.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member, the Director of Finance and the Finance team for all of their hard work to balance the budget as far as possible against such a challenging financial background.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- 1) noted the position of the capital programme at the end of Quarter 2 (to 30 September 2023) as summarised in the report below and set out in detail in Appendix A to the report;
- 2) approved and noted the proposed carry forwards in the capital programme as set out in Appendix B of the report attached to the agenda;

- 3) approved a supplementary budget of £175,000 for the delivery of the pedestrian and cycleway at Hazebrouck Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG). This is funded in full, from ringfenced S106 monies that can only be used for these purposes.

69. RUSCOMBE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

In the absence of the Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan, the Leader of the Council reported that Ruscombe parish was the third parish to submit its Neighbourhood Plan to a referendum vote. These neighbourhood plans ensured that community views were properly taken into account in any future development in the parish. The Leader expressed his thanks on behalf of the Executive to Ruscombe parish councillors and Ruscombe residents for the work they put in on their neighbourhood plan.

It was noted that those parish councils who adopted local plans, allowed the parish to receive an uplift in its Community infrastructure levy payment from 15% to 25% of the levy money paid in relation to development within the parish boundaries, providing a strong incentive for parishes to develop neighbourhood plans.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- 1) Accepted the modifications recommended by the Independent Examination into the Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan (as set out in Enclosure 1 of the agenda papers) and for the modified plan to proceed to referendum.
- 2) Agreed that the Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan, as modified in accordance with the recommendations of the Independent Examiner, meets the basic conditions and complies with the provisions of Paragraph 8 (1) (a) (2) of Schedule 4B to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (inserted by the Localism Act 2011).
- 3) Agreed to publish the 'Decision Statement' as set out at Enclosure 2 of the agenda papers.
- 4) Authorised the Director of Place and Growth, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan, to agree minor factual and consequential modifications necessary to the Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan, the Decision Statement, and other supporting documents prior to the referendum.