

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 22 FEBRUARY 2024 FROM 5.30 PM TO 6.05 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Stephen Conway (Chair), Prue Bray (Vice-Chair), Rachel Bishop-Firth, David Cornish, Lindsay Ferris, Paul Fishwick, David Hare, Ian Shenton and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

Other Councillors Present

Rebecca Margetts

95. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence submitted.

96. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 24 January 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

97. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest received.

98. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER

This evening's Executive will be followed by the Council meeting at which we will be approving the budget for 2024/25. The budget papers presented to the Executive and then to Council are the culmination of many months of hard work, which started very soon after the last budget was set.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Chief Finance Office, the Chief Executive, the directors, and all Council staff; my Executive colleagues; and the cross-party Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which examined the budget in detail. Rarely, if ever, can there have been a more transparent budget process. I'm pleased to say that Chris Johnson, the Chair of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, has joined us this evening and he will be presenting his committee's report on that process before we consider the budget papers in this evening's agenda.

99. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

99.1 Peter Humphreys asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

The Council is continually stating that it is in financial difficulties so one wonders why it is not capitalising on the current high price of scrap metal. Council officers and councillors can hardly fail to notice the amount of WBC owned scrap metal littering our streets. I'm referring in particular to the number of posts erected at residents' expense to which signs

have **never** been attached, likewise where signs have long since fallen off or become unreadable.

This is not just a current problem - it goes back many decades. Some of you with long memories may remember when David Lee was leader of the Council. At my prompting he had fifteen redundant posts removed from a short stretch of London Road. Things haven't changed and a new generation has appeared.

There is a particularly large cluster of abandoned posts in the vicinity of Dying Trees roundabout at the junction of the NWDR and Warren House Road. They've been there for circa five years. I've attached photographs below of the eyesores to refresh your memory. Are the Council planning to ask the public for suggestions of what to hang on the posts, are they going to sell them, or are they going to do nothing and let the posts rust gracefully?

Answer:

Thank you, Peter, for your question.

We are aware of several poles on our network which currently have no signs on them. Many, if not all the ones you have highlighted are related to development works undertaken by developers.

A change in road layout and speed limit will change the requirement for signs on the network, for example the North Wokingham Distribution Road junction with Binfield Road roundabout. The introduction of the roundabout has seen the speed limit amended. In these instances, the officer team are working with the developers to ensure such poles are removed.

Others which you have highlighted further along on the North Wokingham Distribution Road were installed with directional signs by the developer's contractor. The directional signs were not correct and so were removed.

The Borough Council is progressing a signage strategy and once complete, will see the installation of new signs utilising these poles wherever possible as this saves money and prevents abortive works and costs.

Supplementary Question:

It does take 5 years lead in to do those sort of things but fair enough. I would say that in most normal organisations there is a hierarchy structure that ensures that decisions are checked by more senior personnel to prevent cock ups such as these that I have mentioned, and there are many, many more that I have not mentioned. Why does this type of checking not exist at the Council, and if it does why do so many errors keep happening? Have any staff been disciplined or contractors, or fired as a result of these costly blunders?

Supplementary Answer:

Thank you, Peter. Most of these are changes required by the developers and staff are currently working with those developers to ensure that these poles are either removed or the signage is corrected on them where they exist. As I said, also we are doing a signage strategy, and that signage strategy will utilise the likes of the North Wokingham Distribution Road, with new signage through there, and that will extend beyond the North Wokingham

Distribution Road as well. Once that signage strategy is completed then there will be a new array of signs throughout Wokingham, which connects all of our new roads as well.

99.2 Guy Grandison asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:

Question:

Upon review of this year's Treasury Management Strategy, I can find no reference to approval of the strategy by the Audit Committee, why is this?

Answer:

Thank you for your question.

The simple answer is that approving the Treasury Management Strategy is no longer part of the Audit Committee's terms of reference.

In February 2023, the Audit Committee reviewed its terms of reference in line with Chartered Institute of Public Finance (CIPFA) best practice as set out in their position statement on local authority audit committees. One of the changes recommended by CIPFA was that an audit committee should have no explicit decision-making role.

The Audit Committee therefore recommended to Council amendments to its terms of reference which included no longer approving the Treasury Management Strategy. This was agreed at full Council on 23 March 2023 to come into effect from the 2023/24 municipal year.

Supplementary Question:

I must admit that, that is exceedingly disappointing, simply because even if it is a recommendation from an outside body as it were, even if it is government, it means now, if I am remembering the Constitution correctly, that the only oversight of the Treasury Management Strategy is the SFO and the Executive Member. That means that democratic oversight is being removed. I am sorry I do not find that acceptable. My question now is what is being hidden away from everyone else?

Supplementary Answer:

It is not quite as simple as that. I agree that, to me, the people with the skills are on Audit, and are possibly the right people to contribute on this, but we are going with the CIPFA recommendations. The Treasury Management Strategy comes to Council, and is in fact coming to our meeting next. Any councillor who wants to comment on it, that would be an opportune moment to look at it and possibly vote against it if they did not like it. Hopefully, that answers your question.

100. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

100.1 Rebecca Margetts asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

Over the last 2 years I have been supporting residents on Longwater Lane Finchampstead who have been experiencing localised flooding and breakdown of the surface on this right of way. Despite my efforts, we are no further forward and after any heavy spell of rain this

section of the lane floods again. It is currently in a very poor condition and barely passable in places.

Would the lead Member commit to meet with me, residents and officers to discuss a long term solution to try and resolve this issue.

Answer

Both the Executive Member for Active Travel, Highways and Transport and myself are aware that there have been some issues with localised flooding on the section of Longwater Lane that is a Public Right of Way and also that officers have a site meeting arranged with the Parish Council to discuss possible solutions. However, it is worth noting that the Council is only responsible for maintaining this section of Longwater Lane in a suitable condition for its public use as a footpath for pedestrians. Once officers have met with the Parish Council, we would be more than happy to meet with you discuss potential ways forward on this matter whilst balancing our service demands and priorities against the available investment.

Supplementary Question:

It is good to hear that you have spoken with the Parish Council. As the local Member for the area, and I know that David is a local Member for the area as well, and he is on the Parish Council, would I be able to attend that meeting as well, because I have been working closely with the residents and supporting them, and working with the officers, over the last two years, the drainage team, to try and get somewhere. Would I be able to attend that meeting too please?

Supplementary Answer:

I am not sure when it is, but I can certainly raise that tomorrow with the appropriate officers.

101. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET 2024/25

Prior to the consideration of the budget papers, Councillor Johnson presented the budget scrutiny report produced by the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Leader of the Council introduced the Housing Revenue Account 2024/25. He indicated that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was a ring fenced part of the budget, funded by rents paid by Council tenants. Money raised was spent on repairs and maintenance and helped to support the HRA borrowing to pursue schemes such as the Gorse Ride regeneration.

The previous year a rent increase below the government cap had been agreed. At the time it had been explained that in order to maintain the long-term viability of the HRA, this could not be repeated. As such tenants were being asked to pay up to the government cap. Tenant representatives on the Tenant and Landlord Improvement Panel had been consulted on and supported the need for the increase. Whilst the increase for two thirds of tenants would be covered by an increase in benefits, an extra sum had been set aside to help sustain tenancies should financial hardship arise, in the case of self funders.

RESOLVED: That the Executive endorses and recommends to Council for approval:

- 1) The Housing Revenue Account budget for 2024/25 (Appendix A);

- 2) Council house dwelling rents be increased by up to 7.7% effective from 1st April 2024 in line with the Council's Rent Setting Policy that was approved by Executive on 26th October 2023;
- 3) Garage rents to be increased by 8.33% effective from April 2024;
- 4) Shared Equity Rents to be increased by 7.7% effective from April 2024;
- 5) Tenant Service Charges to be increased over the next three year to achieve full cost recovery effective from April 2024;
- 6) The Housing Major Repairs (capital) programme for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix B;
- 7) Sheltered room guest charges for 2024/25 remain unchanged at £9.50 per night per room.

102. CAPITAL PROGRAMME AND STRATEGY 2024-2027

The Executive Member for Finance introduced the Capital Programme and Strategy 2024-2027.

The document provided a high-level plan for the strategy and the spending of capital finances, approximately £520million for the next three years. The Executive Member highlighted the importance of continued investment in infrastructure and services.

The Executive Member for Finance emphasised that the Council had been able to control its capital financing and reduce external borrowing. There was an approximate £8.5million shortfall in the funding of the capital programme over the next three years, but it was anticipated that this would be balanced via reprofiling and income from developers. She commented that the capital financing levels were favourable against that forecasted in the 2021/22 strategy. The Executive Member went on to highlight some of the key projects.

RESOLVED: That the Executive endorses and recommends to Council for approval:

- 1) the Capital Strategy for 2024 - 2027 - Appendix A;
- 2) the three-year capital programme for 2024 - 2027 – Appendix B noting that approval was sought for 2024/25 schemes only;
- 3) the draft vision for capital investment over the next five years - Appendix C;
- 4) the use of developer contribution funding (s106 and CIL) for capital projects as set out in Appendix D. Approval was sought up to the project budget;
- 5) the Deputy Chief Executive (S151 Officer) will exercise, where possible the flexible use of capital receipts policy, as issued by the Secretary of State under section 15(1)(a) of the Local Government Act 2003;
- 6) approve delegation for the delivery (including awarding and signing of the contract) of the South Wokingham Distributor Road to the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Place & Growth in agreement with Lead Member for Finance and Lead Member for Highways subject to the scheme being fully funded from Homes England Grant and Developer Contributions.

103. TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2024-2027

The Executive Member for Finance reported that the Treasury Management Strategy set out the objectives and procedures and limits for managing the Council's finances.

RESOLVED: That the Executive endorses and recommends to Council for approval:

- 1) The Treasury Management Strategy as set out in Appendix A including the following additional appendices;

- Prudential Indicators (Appendix B)
- Annual Investment Strategy 2024/25 (Appendix C)
- Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy (Appendix D)

104. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2024-2027 INCLUDING REVENUE BUDGET SUBMISSION 2024/25

The Executive Member for Finance introduced the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2024-27, including Revenue Budget Submission 2024/25. It was noted that the relevant recommendations were contained within the supplementary agenda.

The MTFP outlined the proposed budget for 2024/25 and draft plans for the following two years. This covered both the revenue and capital budgets for the next three years. Members were advised that the net revenue budget for 2024/25 was currently set at £272million and that over £16million worth of savings were required to be made over the year, which would be a challenge.

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the Summary of Budget Movements (Appendix A) be recommended to Council;
- 2) the report of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee relating to Scrutiny of the Budget Setting Process 2024-25 and the Medium Term Financial Plan 2024-2027 (as set out in Appendix B to the report), be noted;
- 3) the schedule of fees and charges, as set out in Appendix C to the report, to be effective from the dates listed on the schedule, and the schedule of fees and charges as set out in Appendix E in relation to the decision at Licensing and Appeals Committee, be approved.

105. HOUSING RESPONSIVE REPAIRS & MAINTENANCE CONTRACT

The Leader of the Council indicated that the report sought approval for a process for a competitive procurement exercise for the repairs and maintenance contract for properties owned by the Council in the HRA and by the Council's wholly-owned housing companies. The existing contract with Reading Borough Council was due to expire in a year's time. The procurement process would allow the exploration of other options but did not preclude a new contract with the existing contract holders. Tenants' satisfaction with the current service had been consistently high.

RESOLVED: That the recommendation to conduct a competitive procurement exercise to enable the Council to procure a service contract for Housing Responsive Repairs and Maintenance, the objective of which is to provide the best outcomes for the delivery of the service requirements and achieve best value for money for the Council and LHC's, be approved.

106. ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT COMMITTEE - THE BERKSHIRE PROSPERITY BOARD

The Leader of the Council reported that the Berkshire Leaders had agreed to establish a Berkshire Prosperity Board to enable the six Berkshire councils to continue to benefit from the expertise of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) when pursuing particular strategic objectives.

The Berkshire Prosperity Board would enable the six Berkshire unitaries to have a stronger voice and to bid with a greater chance of success for significant external funding for key projects that affected all or much of the county. The Leader of the Council drew the Executive's attention to the likely rewards versus the small cost of servicing the board, which would be met largely from the reallocation of the government funding for the LEP to the councils. He highlighted that the Prosperity Board would make decisions on the basis of unanimity, and that the decision-making powers, and sovereign authority, of each of the six unitaries would remain unaffected.

RESOLVED: That the Executive recommends to Council for approval:

- 1) the establishment of a fully constituted Joint Committee (to be known as the Berkshire Prosperity Board) from May 2024 to deliver a Berkshire-wide vision for inclusive green and sustainable economic prosperity.
- 2) that the proposed constitution for the Joint Committee as set out in Appendix A - Functions and Procedure Rules for a Joint Committee, Appendix B - Responsibilities of the accountable body and Appendix C - Governance structure be approved subject to review by each member Council within 6 months.
- 3) that the Chief Executive be delegated to reach a legally binding Agreement between the member Authorities setting out the supporting arrangements and responsibilities between the Authorities, particularly that between the Lead Authority, known as the Accountable Body and the other member Authorities and go through the relevant democratic process if required. Such Agreement also to be approved by the s151 Officer.