

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

HELD ON 14 DECEMBER 2018 FROM 6.00 PM TO 7.00 PM

Members Present

Councillors: John Kaiser (Mayor), Alistair Auty, Keith Baker, Parry Batth, Chris Bowring, Prue Bray, Rachel Burgess, Jenny Cheng, David Chopping, UllaKarin Clark, Gary Cowan, Andy Croy, Richard Dolinski, Carl Doran, Lindsay Ferris, John Halsall, David Hare, Pauline Helliar-Symons, Tim Holton, Philip Houldsworth, Graham Howe, John Jarvis, Clive Jones, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, Dianne King, Abdul Loyes, Julian McGhee-Sumner, Stuart Munro, Ian Pittock, Malcolm Richards, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, David Sleight, Chris Smith and Simon Weeks

73. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Laura Blumenthal, Guy Grandison, Kate Haines, Mike Haines, Charlotte Haitham-Taylor, Emma Hobbs, Charles Margetts, Ken Miall, Philip Mirfin, Barrie Patman, Anthony Pollock, Helen Power, Angus Ross, Daniel Sargeant, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane, Oliver Whittle and Shahid Younis.

74. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

75. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

75.1 Rachel Bishop-Firth asked the Executive Member for Business, Economic Development and Strategic Planning the following question:

Where can I find the decision which gives the total overall scope and budget for the Wokingham regeneration project?

Answer

Rather than one decision the regeneration has been the subject of multiple decisions to ensure that the process has been followed correctly and that all deliverables, costs and risks have been fully understood before proceeding.

On completion of the Competitive Dialogue procurement process in October 2010 the Council's cross party Special Council Executive Committee unanimously approved the selection of Wilson Bowden as the Council's preferred regeneration partner.

This was then followed by further reviews of the decision by the Executive in March 2011, the cross-party Special Council Executive Committee in October 2011 and the Executive in June 2012 when the Council granted approval to enter into a Development Agreement with Wilson Bowden. This was then followed by the process of securing planning consent for the detailed schemes.

As you would expect each of these reports has included detailed and up-to-date information relating to the scope of works, deliverables, risks, costs and benefits – such as projected income or community elements of the scheme.

Information on project scope is easily available and can be found on the Council and regeneration websites and in the detailed planning consents for the different sites. However, due to the nature of the detailed financial information, this is generally within the

confidential Part 2 section of the report and is not public.

Whilst we recognise this can be frustrating for some, the requirement for confidentiality is important as the appraisals include a range of highly sensitive information such as maximum purchase prices for named properties, detailed cost breakdowns for evaluating build tenders, and minimum acceptable rental levels to name a few critical ones.

All of which, if made public, would prevent us from being able to achieve best value for the Borough and its residents. However we do try to share as much cost information as we can with budgets clearly set out and approved by Full Council each February within the annual Medium Term Financial Plan.

We also publish summarised figures on the Regeneration website showing the total costs of each element and the value of the completed asset

To ensure scrutiny, officers meet regularly with Members, both Conservative and Opposition Groups, to discuss the scheme and look at the detailed financial appraisals to update them on latest information. I'm pleased to report that the regeneration remains completely within the agreed budget and continues to represent an excellent investment that we hope to be able to replicate in the future.

Supplementary Question

What differences are there between the original scope and spend and now?

Supplementary Answer

That is a good question. I wasn't involved in the original scoping, so I can't tell you and I haven't done an analysis, but I do know that we are within the scope that we have agreed and was approved by this Council.

75.2 Lizzie Bishop asked the Executive Member for Business, Economic Development and Strategic Planning the following question:

Part of the regeneration includes providing a new library at Carnival Pool. What is going to happen to the current library building?

Answer

The decision to re-locate the library to the new Carnival development is based upon an improvement of the services being offered to residents.

The relocation of Wokingham Library to the Carnival site will provide the Library Service with greater flexibility and adaptability in providing high quality services to Wokingham residents, along with more usable floor space that is more efficient to manage.

Residents will be able to combine visits to the library with a range of other activities, and the site offers substantially better access and parking.

The timing of the re-location is based upon several factors:

- Substantial completion of the Elms Field scheme – so as not to overly impact upon the town's highways;
- Completion of the redevelopment of the Bulmershe Leisure Centre – we would not wish to have two leisure centres out of action at the same time;
- Completion of the Carnival build process.

All of the above leads to a commencement of the build process in mid-2020 and a completion in mid-2022. It is at this point that the library can re-locate.

This is three and a half years away and, therefore, no decision has been made in respect of the existing library site – this decision will be made nearer the time of re-location.

Supplementary Question

Is it usual to make multi-million pound decisions without producing a business case or having any firm proposals?

Supplementary Answer

Yes. We did both.

75.3 Adrian Mather asked the Executive Member for Business, Economic Development and Strategic Planning the following question:

With particular regard to the Wokingham Town Centre Regeneration, who makes the decisions on spending, in regard to these Council Projects?

Answer

The Executive make decisions in public in respect of expenditure of Wokingham Town Centre Regeneration projects. The detail of all such decisions is included in the response I gave to the question from Rachel Bishop-Firth earlier.

Supplementary Question

How have these decisions been made available for scrutiny and transparency to Councillors and other people?

Supplementary Answer

Regular Overview and Scrutiny reviews have occurred on this project with a further review happening in the New Year.

76. ELECTION OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Following the previous Leader of the Council's decision to step down from the role and, in accordance with the governance arrangements which were adopted by the Council at its meeting on 18 November 2010, the Council elected a new Leader. The new Leader would serve for four years (or until his/her term of office as a Councillor expired).

It was proposed by Alistair Auty and seconded by John Halsall that Julian McGhee-Sumner be elected as Leader of the Council.

On being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED that Julian McGhee-Sumner be elected as Leader of the Council.

Councillor McGhee-Sumner addressed the Council as follows:

"Every Councillor in this chamber tonight sits here with one common objective, to represent our residents. It is on this fundamental principle that I wish to address the Council this evening.

Over the past few weeks I have spoken to a number of our residents from across the Borough and a common message has emerged. They like a lot of what we do – building more affordable homes, building new schools, looking after our vulnerable residents. However, they have highlighted how we communicate and manage priorities, like cutting the grass, filling in potholes and collecting the rubbish, as less than adequate. It is clear that mistakes have been made, for which I apologise, and I therefore wish to outline for you this evening the changes I will be making to address these issues.

Shortly, each Executive Member will be set five key targets that impact on our residents in order to improve upon the services we offer. Each Executive Member will be aligned to a Director, so it will be abundantly clear to all our residents who is responsible for which area of Council policy.

Effective communication will be a core requirement for each Executive Member. With responsibility comes accountability and I want us to be a Council which listens to our residents, which tries to find solutions to problems and which residents can have trust in. All too often, we forget why we are here and that must change.

For some time now, residents have raised concerns about Executive Members receiving additional payments for the work they undertake in addition to their Executive roles. I have, therefore, decided to change that and, from the start of the New Year, no Executive Member will be able to claim any allowance in excess of the £10k set for each Executive role. Some will remain on the Fire Authority or a Housing Company, but will not claim the additional allowance regardless of the work undertaken. This is a big step change, but one readily accepted by those Executive Members impacted. I would like to thank them for their commitment to public service.

Another big area the Council is judged on is housing. At the present time we have various areas in the Council that deal with housing. We have Tenants Services, Wokingham Housing Ltd. and the development of Gorse Ride to name but three. But no single Director is tasked with bringing all these together in order to deliver our ambitions. We will, therefore, be recruiting a new Assistant Director in early 2019 to fulfil this role. I sincerely hope that this person can be found internally but, should that not be the case, we will look externally. Once this person is in place I will appoint a new Executive Member tasked with delivering on this agenda.

As we head into 2019 we still continue to face significant financial pressures and, although we have just received confirmation of our Government settlement, which is looking favourable, as always the devil is in the detail. However, what I can say is that we have won the argument against negative RSG which is encouraging and we will be able to report a clearer picture in the coming days.

As you are aware, we have been without an Executive Member for Finance for some time. I have asked Anthony Pollock to take on this role again. Councillor Pollock has spent many years carrying out this role under numerous Leaders and his knowledge in this area is second to none. With the financial uncertainty faced by all Councils, Councillor Pollock is ideally positioned to handle this situation. At the same time, I welcome Charles Margetts back as Councillor Pollock's Deputy and to his former responsibility for the 21st Century Council programme.

You will, no doubt, have read the communications sent out earlier this week announcing the appointment of a new CEO, Susan Parsonage, who will be joining us in mid-March

2019, or possibly a little earlier. This recruitment has taken time and the Personnel Board has been extremely demanding in their selection and interviewing of all six candidates. Although all the candidates brought different strengths, I am happy that we have selected a leader who is not only well regarded in local government but comes with a reputation as an inspirational leader who delivers against stringent objectives and does so in a manner that builds trust in her team and builds relationships with partners. I look forward to welcoming Susan to this authority next year.

With Councillor Pollock moving to Finance, I am extremely pleased to announce that Pauline Jorgensen will be moving to look after Highways and Transport and will continue in the role of Deputy Leader. Those who are active on social media know that Councillor Jorgensen is extremely active on highways matters and has built up an excellent reputation for sorting things out. When residents are asked about their priorities, highways is always in the top three. This area deserves a top class Executive Member and Councillor Jorgensen fulfils that. She will continue in the role of Deputy Leader and David Chopping will continue as her Deputy Executive Member.

Finally, the vacant position for Health and Wellbeing has been filled by Parry Batth, backed by his Deputy, UllaKarin Clark. The Executive Member for Environment will be John Halsall and his Deputy will be Graham Howe. Councillor Halsall has had much to say over recent years regarding grass cutting and has resolved to understand and prioritise this service for our residents. All the other Executive roles remain unchanged.”

Lindsay Ferris, Leader of the Opposition, addressed the Council as follows:

“At the last Council meeting I thanked Charlotte for her cooperation. At this meeting I would like to thank Richard Dolinski for his hard work in his former role as Executive Member for Adult Social Services. David Hare, from my team, has been working closely with Richard on a number of important issues. This is an area where we have shared concerns.

I do not know Julian very well, but I am encouraged that he has said that he would like to continue with regular meetings between the two leaders. I am also very pleased to hear “no negative RSG”. No “theft” as I call it. I am pleased to hear that.

Julian is the fourth Leader of the Council in a little over four years. This, to me, clearly shows that the ruling Conservative Group is badly divided, have lost their way and are just floundering about, hoping that someone will provide a way forward. It is rather like changing the Captain on the Titanic. The splits, lack of leadership and direction here simply mirrors what is going on with the Conservatives in Westminster.

The Council has all but stalled under the leadership of the Conservatives with the Local Plan delayed until 2022, borrowing out of control, escalating from £50m a few years ago to over £450m now and forecast to reach £600m by 2020. There are serious levels of overspend in Children’s Services and Adult Social Care. The number of interim and temporary staff has sky rocketed these past couple of years leading to a lack of leadership at the Council and to poor staff morale. Many of our best officers have left due to the uncertainty caused by the 21st Century Council project. A project that I feel has not been managed properly.

A recent Ofsted inspection considered Children's Services not good enough and, what is more, deteriorating. Adult Social Services has a significant overspend to rectify, whilst the way the Council carries out consultations is an utter disgrace. The recent decision to close down the School Crossing Patrol service is a case in point. Over 97% of residents who responded wanted to keep the service, but the arrogant dismissive way in which these responses were ignored beggared belief.

This administration has treated residents across the Borough in an increasingly arrogant manner. Under the Conservatives the Council has left local businesses in the centre of Wokingham to fend for themselves whilst leaving the town centre like a bomb site for 17 months. The standard of business cases, when they are provided, are simply not good enough. How can we control costs if we cannot even do this properly? This is one of the many reasons why I recently wrote to the Secretary of State, raising our concerns about the financial stability of the Council, a lack of leadership and the poor way in which it was being run. We may not be Northamptonshire yet but we are heading in that direction.

We, in the Opposition, will be directly challenging the ruling Group over the coming months. Many in the Borough feel it is time for a change. It is our role to provide that change.

77. CONFIRMATION OF PERMANENT APPOINTMENT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND HEAD OF PAID SERVICE

Following the recent recruitment exercise, the Council considered the recommendation of the Personnel Board regarding the appointment of the Council's Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service.

As Chairman of the Personnel Board, Alistair Auty confirmed that, following a rigorous recruitment process involving six strong candidates, Susan Parsonage was recommended for appointment. Susan had significant experience in senior local government leadership roles and was currently Chief Executive of Lancaster City Council.

It was proposed by Alistair Auty and seconded by Julian McGhee-Sumner that Susan Parsonage be appointed as the Council's Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service.

On being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED that Susan Parsonage be appointed as the Council's Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service.

78. COUNCIL TAX BASE 2019/20

The Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 7 to 11, which gave details of the proposed Council Tax Base (the number of properties liable for Council Tax) for 2019/20.

The report stated that every local authority must ensure that their Council Tax Base for the forthcoming financial year was approved by the Council by 31st January. This year's Tax Base calculations showed that with a total of 67,635 properties on the Council Tax register at 1st October 2018, after making all relevant adjustments the proposed Tax Base of Band D equivalents was 70,176.60 for 2019/20.

The report also recommended an allocation of £20,000 to Towns and Parishes to offset some of the reduction in the Council Tax Base for them arising from the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, which replaced Council Tax benefit in 2013.

Finally, the report recommended increasing the Empty Homes Premium on long-term empty properties (two years or more) from 50% to 100%. This would encourage owners of long-term empty homes to bring them back into use.

It was proposed by Julian McGhee-Sumner and seconded by Stuart Munro that the recommendations set out in the report be approved.

On being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the proposed Tax Base, for the whole of the area and by Parish, as set out in the report, be approved;
- 2) the proposed allocation of £20,000 grant to the Parishes in respect of Council Tax reduction, as set out in the Council Tax Base Table, be approved;
- 3) a premium payment of 100% (increased from 50%) on those homes that have been empty and unfurnished for a period of two years or more, be approved.

79. REDESIGNATION OF POLLING PLACES

The Council considered a report, set out at Agenda Pages 13 to 15, which set out proposals for two alternative Polling Places.

The report stated that a Member working group was currently preparing recommendations for Polling Places throughout the Borough for 2020 onwards. In the meantime it was necessary to consider proposals for Maiden Erlegh and Charvil wards for any elections to be held in 2019. Specifically:

- As Maiden Erlegh school no longer had the space to facilitate voting it was proposed that Aldryngton School be used instead;
- In Charvil ward, the designated polling place for polling district CAM1 was the Jubilee Hall, which was likely to be demolished. It was, therefore, proposed that Charvil Village Hall be designated as the Polling Place for the whole of the Charvil ward.

It was proposed by David Chopping and seconded by John Halsall that the recommendations set out in the report be approved.

On being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED that for any elections held in 2019:

- 1) Aldryngton School be designated as the Polling Place for Maiden Erlegh ward instead of Maiden Erlegh School;
- 2) Charvil Village Hall be designated as the polling place for the whole of the Charvil ward.

80. MOTIONS

80.1 Motion 414 submitted by Prue Bray

The Council considered the following Notice of Motion, submitted by Prue Bray and seconded by Imogen Shepherd-Dubey.

“The Constitution commits this Council to ensuring that “the principles of efficiency, transparency and accountability are demonstrated throughout the decision making process and the delivery of services.”

The Wokingham town centre regeneration project has now been running for some years. It is the largest single project being undertaken by the Council. No income and expenditure figures for the project as a whole have been published. Nor has any assessment of progress or variation from the original specification. This makes it extraordinarily difficult for both residents and Councillors to find out how the project is going, and means that the Council’s constitutional commitment to transparency and accountability is not being observed.

While ongoing spend and future commitments may be difficult to quantify, or may need to be kept confidential for commercial reasons, income and expenditure which has already happened in previous financial years must have been accounted for in the Council’s accounts, which have all been properly signed off. In addition, any contracts entered into are required to be published by the Transparency Regulations. This means that all the information relating to past spend on the Wokingham town centre regeneration project should be readily identifiable and available to be pulled together into one document covering the whole project.

Therefore, in order to ensure the transparency and accountability to which it has committed itself, this Council will by the end of December 2018 publish a report detailing:

- The total income and expenditure from 1st April 2012 to March 31st 2018 on all works associated with the regeneration of Wokingham town centre, including the Market Place joint project with Wokingham Town Council, broken down to show separately the figures for Peach Street phase 1, Peach Place, Elms Field, Carnival Pool, the Market Place and any other subprojects, and, for each project, broken down to the stages of the project, such as design, and construction;
- The original budget and timetable for each of those elements;
- An explanation of any variances between the original budget and actual income and expenditure and original timetable and actual progress;
- The sources of the funding, with the amounts obtained from each separate source.”

It was moved by Keith Baker and seconded by Stuart Munro that the Motion be amended as follows:

“The Constitution commits this Council to ensuring that “the principles of efficiency, transparency and accountability are demonstrated throughout the decision making process

and the delivery of services.”

The Wokingham town centre regeneration project has now been running for some years. It is the largest single project being undertaken by the Council. No income and expenditure figures for the project as a whole have been published. Nor has any assessment of progress or variation from the original specification. This makes it extraordinarily difficult for both residents and Councillors to find out how the project is going, and means that the council’s constitutional commitment to transparency and accountability is not being observed.

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Therefore, in order to ensure the transparency and accountability to which it has committed itself, this Council will **at the eventual conclusion of each individual project publish a full audit which will be reviewed by the relevant Scrutiny Committee detailing:**

- The total income and expenditure from 1st April 2012 to March 31st 2018 on all works associated with the regeneration of Wokingham town centre, including the Market Place joint project with Wokingham Town Council, broken down to show separately the figures for Peach Street phase 1, Peach Place, Elms Field, Carnival Pool, the Market Place and any other subprojects, and, for each project, broken down to the stages of the project, such as design, and construction;
- The original budget and timetable for each of those elements;
- An explanation of any variances between the original budget and actual income and expenditure and original timetable and actual progress;
- The sources of the funding, with the amounts obtained from each separate source.”

Subject to the normal restrictions due to commercial sensitivity.”

The proposer of the original Motion, Prue Bray stated that the proposed amendment was accepted.

The amended (substantive) Motion was then put to the vote and was declared by the Mayor to be carried.

RESOLVED: “That the Constitution commits this Council to ensuring that “the principles of efficiency, transparency and accountability are demonstrated throughout the decision making process and the delivery of services.

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- The sources of the funding, with the amounts obtained from each separate source.

Subject to the normal restrictions due to commercial sensitivity."