

**MINUTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 23 NOVEMBER 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.10 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Paul Fishwick, Graham Howe, Clive Jones, Abdul Loyes, Alison Swaddle, and Pauline Helliar-Symons (Substitute)

Officers Present

Carol Cammiss (Director of Children's Services), Neil Carr (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist), Keeley Clements (Director for Communities, Insight and Change), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive (Director for Resources & Assets)) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

Executive Members Present

Parry Batth, UllaKarin Clark, Charlotte Haitham Taylor and John Kaiser

49. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Emma Hobbs.

Pauline Helliar-Symons attended the meeting as a substitute.

50. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 2 September 2020 and the Minutes of the extraordinary meetings held on 22 September 2020, 13 October 2020 and 28 October 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman at a later date.

51. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was submitted from Graham Howe, as he was the Deputy Executive Member for Children's Services. Graham stated that he would take no part in the discussion or voting for any of the Children's Services related budget items.

52. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

53. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

54. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2021-24: REVENUE BUDGET

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 33 to 68, which set out the revenue growth and saving bids for the Directorates encompassing Children's Services; Communities, Insight & Change; and Resources & Assets.

John Kaiser (Executive Member for Finance and Housing), Ullakarin Clark (Executive Member for Children's Services), Charlotte Haitham Taylor (Executive Member for Regeneration), Parry Batth (Executive Member for Environment and Leisure), Carol Cammiss (Director for Children's Services), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive – Director for Resources & Assets), and Keeley Clements (Director for Communities, Insight & Change) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

Ullakarin Clark stated that the figures presented to the Committee were only predictions, as due to the nature of Children's Services a child with exceptional needs could come into the Borough at any time, and Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) were legally obliged to help. WBC had a statutory duty to help every child in the Borough who was in need of support, which made some financial predictions difficult. Ullakarin added that there were potential savings that could be realised within the Home to School Transport area, as a review had recently been carried out which officers were now working through.

During the ensuing discussions relating to Children's Services, Members raised the following points and queries:

- Where were Children's Services on their journey to achieving a "Good" OFSTED rating? Executive Member and officer response – WBC wanted to achieve a "Good" OFSTED rating, not only to provide a better service for residents across the Borough, but also because it costed the service significantly more to try and improve things on a reactionary basis. There were a number of special items, which would not be reviewed on the evening, which set out one off spends which would aid the service to move towards the goal of the "Good" OFSTED rating. Overall, progress towards this achievement was progressing well.
- Last year, there was a bid to help move more locum or agency staff towards being permanent, was this progressing? Officer response – This was a special item bid over three years, and progress was being made in line with expectations.
- Had the impact of Covid-19 (C-19), being that job losses or mental health issues, of parents been considered when compiling next year's projections? Officer response – 3 children were in the system who were not in place prior to C-19. Placement cost projections were based on a very stringent model, which was able to be based on factual information and inflationary costs of families within the Borough, or families known to be entering the Borough. It was not possible to accurately budget for those families with mental health issues, or those who may come into the Borough without prior notice, however this would be monitored through the "one front door" approach that WBC had developed with the voluntary sector.
- What would happen if a child was required to be placed in an independent residential school? Officer response – If it was a school provision, the funding would come out of the high needs block rather than the revenue budget. If it was a social care placement, this would be a pressure on the budget. WBC could only budget for what was known and what was expected, however if a child entered the Borough with a specific need, this would need to be met to the level required.
- What caused the jump between 2018/19 and 2019/20 budgetary differences within the social work legal costs? Officer response – Wokingham had three or four very complex cases which required court proceedings, which could take over and above the average of 26 weeks. Therefore, some of the children with the associated additional costs were from previous years. There were no outliers within the current projections. This was a demand led service, and it was modelled as best as could be expected, however there were always potential outliers.
- Was there a potential to move into a larger joint legal arrangement with other Local Authorities? Officer response – WBC was part of a group of 6 Local Authorities, which

was run by Reading Borough Council. WBC were exploring other methods of this service provision.

- Was the out of hours service contact meeting the needs of our residents? Executive Member and officer response – Based on data and feedback, the current provision was believed to be sufficient. The contract was based on usage, however costs were not fairly distributed and WBC had a proportionally low usage. The terms of the contract had been renegotiated, and the current terms were now much more favourable for WBC. The £65k cost was related to the renegotiation and the move towards the new terms.
- Would the creation of the planned SEND school in Winnersh transfer into reducing some of the costs of sending children out of Borough? Executive Member response – The provision of a new in-Borough SEND school would help to reduce placement and transport costs, as it was cheaper to send children to local schools within the Borough. It was a desire that every child should be able attend a school close to where they lived.
- Were the growth estimates for home to school transport a worst case scenario? Executive Member and officer response – Children were always entering the Borough, and some children with placements required home to school transport. This service was based on future demand, and the estimates had been based on the most realistic scenario. This was a statutory service, and whatever amount of money that was required to be spent to meet the needs of the service users would be spent, with costs minimised wherever possible.
- Was there a danger that other Local Authorities with Council houses within the Wokingham Borough could place families in said houses, meaning WBC cover the costs of their needs? Officer response – It was very unlikely that our neighbours would be underhanded. WBC worked with its neighbours on a range of issues including family placements, and therefore any placements from one Local Authority to another would be discussed and negotiated.
- Had there been any exploration for other ways to provide the out of hour's service? Officer response – This was a very expensive service to provide on a solo basis, and the current six Local Authority approach was meeting our resident's needs.
- Relating to bid number CS 5, home to school transport, was the reduction in growth in 2023/24 due to children finishing school? Officer response – This reduction was more so due to the proposed new school being built within the Borough. This would be staggered entry, however the needs of individual children must still be met, which could mean that some children would still have to be transported outside of the Borough for their needs to be appropriately met.
- Relating to bid number CS 16, savings within home to school transport, were these savings realistic? Officer response – The savings were twofold, primarily via route optimisation and a dynamic purchasing system. There were a number of changes that would come online around the 2022/23 time period which should lead to the predicted savings levels. The process was now managed more stringently, in addition to having more local provision for children. A dynamic purchasing system ensured that the staff procuring the transport were also bearing the costs.

- Relating to bid CS 15, placements review, would this effect service provision? Officer response – Absolutely not, this was a statutory service and the review was about doing a line by line review of each child to make efficiency saving in the long term where possible. Every child would still be placed in the appropriate setting for their needs.
- Relating to bid CS 17, reconfiguration of Children’s Services, were these savings realistic and achievable? Officer response – This would be the subject of a thorough research project, including looking at other service models. No service reduction would be realised as part of the proposed reconfiguration. It was believed that the service could be reconfigured to deliver efficiencies without any service reduction. All of this work was being conducted early on, so that if savings were realised to not be achievable then the appropriate persons could be alerted early on.
- Was the Local Government Finance Settlement likely to change any of the Children’s Service bids? Executive Member and officer response – As this was a statutory service, it was not a case of cutting service provision. Whilst service efficiencies and best estimates could be worked through, WBC would still have to provide the appropriate level of funding required to deliver this statutory service. There was now assurances from the Service that the existing budgets were built up to the level of where they needed to be, excluding anomalies and unknown placements.
- How had C-19 changed home to school transport assistance? Officer response – Special transport services had to be arranged to deal with this element of the pandemic. Some of these costs were covered by Government grants. There had been no reduction of the service delivery model, and there was now more individual transport in place to ensure class bubbles were maintained. Lessons had been learnt from the pandemic, which had been captured as a part of the recent review.
- Relating to bid CS 8, SEND legal costs, was growth of £100k sufficient given previous overspends? Officer response – Based on current cases and tribunals, the estimated growth was sufficient. The Service tracked children right through the system which gave a good indication of future legal costs. Legal costs had never been budgeted for before, and this was a best estimate based on the current evidence.
- Were the changes and efficiencies within home to school transport on track? Officer response – Yes, there had been a recent review and a consultation was underway, the results of which would be worked on by officers.
- Was there a potential opportunity for staff to be recruited from a larger area, if they could effectively work from home? Officer response – Many Children’s Services staff were on the front line, and therefore needed to live locally to effectively conduct visits. This was however an opportunity that could be realised on an organisational wide basis.

The Committee moved on to their overview of the savings and growth proposals for the Communities, Insight and Change Directorate.

Keeley Klements stated that the land charges were offered at a competitive price, however the marketplace was changing and the current figures were unobtainable, and had been so for the past couple of years. The budget to deal with cases and prevention of domestic abuse had moved from Children’s Services to this directorate. Children’s Services had

done lots of good work in this area, and had identified a budget gap. The growth bid was therefore present to fill this gap for effective service provision. The new Assistant Director role was moving from the Resources & Assets directorate to this directorate, and was therefore a net zero cost. There were some library efficiency savings that were being explored, whilst the focus was to provide a service for when it was most convenient for residents to make use of it.

During the ensuing discussions relating to Communities, Insight and Change, Members raised the following points and queries:

- Relating to bid CIC 33, library service efficiencies, could this be elaborated? Executive Member and officer response – The library service felt that they could purchase books in a more efficient manner, resulting in more optimised prices. C-19 had resulted in virtual libraries being used significantly by our customers, and this was something that could continue to be offered going forward. There were opportunities to use RFI book returns, which would allow for longer opening hours and staffing efficiencies. No opening times would be changed until all research had been completed, and the timings would be optimised for when most people wanted to use the service.
- Relating to bid CIC 1, IT security infrastructure, when was this important work likely to be completed? Officer response – WBC was receiving more and more emails about scams and schemes and other attacks. Officers were working on the new infrastructure right away, and the existing firewall was robust. This additional work was to sustain the firewall and secure WBC against ever more sophisticated attacks. Work would be completed as soon as possible.
- Relating to bid CIC 9, inflationary software licence increases, were there any other increase in the contracts? Officer response – WBC were very strict with our contracts, and many were based on national standards and frameworks. This increase was the only portion of the contract that was increasing.
- Why was the budget relating to allowing WBC to deal with cases and prevention of domestic abuse not sitting under Adult's and Children's Services? Officer response – One of the Lead Specialists was doing a lot of work to do with domestic abuse. The way it was seen in the new model was that there were safeguarding thresholds for Adults and Children, and everything below that is where this service fitted in. This move now brought the antisocial behaviour and community safety partnership agenda altogether, whilst bringing the localities team into the service to help with enforcement and understanding each individual community. This also helped to ease some of the pressures with Children's Services. This solution now allowed for a dedicated resource in this area, and the Service would still work closely with Berkshire Women's Aid.
- Could some rationale be explained related to the year on year growth numbers within the domestic abuse budget? Officer response – This Service was underfunded for some time, and required extra growth to bring the Service to where it needed to be. This was unfortunately an area of growth, and further pressures would be realised as a result of lockdowns due to C-19.
- Would the installation and provision of self-service library machines be explored further? Officer response – There were a number of changes and efficiencies that were being explored, including additional self-service library machines and RFI returnable books. The library app could be used to move towards an almost staff less

library. Any and all changes would only be made after the appropriate consultation had been undertaken to make sure that the service offered was what worked best for our residents.

- Was the funding for the domestic abuse service sufficient? Executive Member response – This service had not been specifically funded before, and strong funding had been provided for this initial change. A wait and see approach was being taken, and if additional funding was required then this could then be provided.

The Committee moved on to their overview of the savings and growth proposals for the Resources and Assets Directorate.

John Kaiser stated that the Youth Offending Service and Family Intervention Resources support team was being provisioned due to the construction of a new road. The additional funding for finance liaison officers would give WBC more control in some statutory areas. Some additional funding for case owners was being provided to ensure that support was available in the right places throughout the Council. There was more demand on the Shared Legal Service, which had been achieving very good results, and this service therefore required additional resource to meet demand. Income would be generated from WBCs commercial property portfolio, with income predicted to ramp up as the Borough and Nation continued to recover from the C-19 pandemic. A slightly more conservative estimate of income generation from Wokingham owned houses had been predicted for the next financial year due to the pandemic. The Council already had solar assets and was looking to expand upon them, and savings bids RA 15 & 16 were to be the result of additional investments and income generation therefrom.

Parry Bath stated that the provision of 3G pitches would provide income all year round, due to their artificial nature. There were a number of new offerings available, such as extra classes and programmes within leisure, which would also generate income for WBC. Some existing offerings within the Leisure portfolio were proposed to have their charges increased, though despite this WBC would still be offering the lowest charges when compared to other Local Authorities.

During the ensuing discussions relating to Resources and Assets, Members raised the following points and queries:

- When would the proposed solar farm be paid off make a financial return? Executive Member and officer response – There was an approximate four year recovery time based on the planned performance of the site. However, the income projections were over and above the capital costs.
- Would solar panels on the roofs of newly built Wokingham owned houses be a pre-requisite? Executive Member response – The absence of solar panels would not stop WBC from delivering affordable homes throughout the Borough, though measures such as this and other carbon offsetting measures would be prioritised wherever possible.
- Would the proposed new solar farms result in cheaper utility bills for residents? Executive Member and officer response – There were lots of ways that the solar farm could help, including powering whole estates. In general, the solar farm would be a credit for the Council Tax payer as a form of income generation.

- Relating to bid RA 2, additional finance liaison officers, could this be elaborated? Executive Member and officer response – This bid would allow for some administrative tasks to be completed more effectively, and there was no reason why these tasks could not be carried out by central WBC staff, leaving specialists in various Services to continue with their work. There had been two reductions in admin staff over two reshuffles in recent times, and this bid was there to help re-resource specific areas, allowing specialists to continue to do specialised work.
- How certain were we that the proposed solar farm and crematorium would be ready in time to meet the income generation projections? Executive Member and officer response – Land ownership relating to the proposed solar farm was not an issue, as WBC had already negotiated with the farmers who did not want to run the sites going forward. A pylon already ran through the middle of the proposed site, which would help significantly with infrastructure. A large number of trees would be planted to form an arboretum which would link up with the proposed crematorium, making both sites attractive in terms of appearance. The sites would also back onto a SANG, and delivery was expected in approximately three years. The figures would be refreshed next year based on updated information.
- Was there statutory provision for possible capital losses relating to WBC's commercial property portfolio? Officer response – This depended on a number of factors, as it was a minimum revenue provision. In the private sector, this could be described as depreciation which was effectively recognising loss of the value of assets, whereas in the public sector this was seen as the repayment of a debt. The debt has to be repaid over time, and therefore if there was an impairment of an asset then the debt would be reduced alongside this.
- Were we confident in achieving the £960k return from the commercial property portfolio? Officer response – Yes, the policy was to achieve a 2% target over and above the cost of borrowing, which would be achieved based on the current information. £200m was borrowed, as agreed by the Executive, and the income generation did not assume any additional borrowing above this figure.
- Relating to bid RA 16, the proposed solar farm, were these income generation predictions realistic? Executive Member and officer response – This project was led by the WBC energy specialist, and he had commissioned this work with experts who had carried out similar schemes across the country. Based on this, the figures as presented were achievable.
- Relating to bid RA 15, the proposed crematorium, were the projected income figures net after the cost of construction? Executive Member response – Yes, this was the operating profit after WBC had paid the interest on the funds and borrowing.
- Relating to RA 18, the early repayment programme, was this a programme for people who were paying WBC? Executive Member and officer response – This was about WBC making secure and streamlined payments across the organisation to our variety of suppliers, allowing better financial management arrangements. It will also enable WBC to make the best of our cash flow position, to negotiate better terms with suppliers who appreciated very quick cash payments. An action was taken for Graham Ebers to provide information as to how much the company providing this service would make out of this arrangement.

- Relating to savings bid RA 14, Cantley Park enhancement, how much would this cost over the following years? Executive Member and officer response – The figures shown were the net incomes, and the full details were laid out within the Executive report which was presented roughly a year ago. Approximately £700k was provided as a grant from the Football Association, and some ring-fenced S106 funding was also used. These figures were income over and above any financing costs of any residual borrowing.
- Regarding income from leisure services, when were we presuming that facilities would reopen? Officer response – Services were currently being offered in an online and virtual format, and WBC were predicting that a more substantial “normal” offering could be seen in April 2021.
- Relating to savings bid 24, review of fees and charges for leisure services outside of the main contract, was a thirty percent increase appropriate? Executive Member and officer response – WBC’s offerings were still lower than other Local Authorities, even after the proposed increases. The new prices would be approximately £4.42 a session compared to prices ranging from £5 to £6 at other Local Authorities. These services had been operating for a long time and were very popular. The increase of thirty percent was not ideal, however there came a time when prices had to rise for the service to be delivered effectively.
- Were any other grants expected from the Government related to closure of facilities as a result of C-19? Officer response – Officers were waiting to see if WBC would be reimbursed for closure of leisure facilities as a result of C-19.
- Had the potential loss of customers who could no longer afford sessions at a thirty percent increase been factored into income gains? Executive Member and officer response – This was a hugely popular service with a long waiting list, and the user base was largely resilient to the effects of C-19 as they were receiving pensions rather than salaries.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) John Kaiser, Ullakarin Clark ,Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Parry Batth, Carol Cammiss, Graham Ebers, and Keeley Clements be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Information as to how much the company providing the early repayment service would make out of this arrangement be provided to Committee Members;
- 3) Special items, updated revenue bids, and capital bids be considered by the Committee at a later date.

55. UPCOMING MEETINGS' WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the upcoming meetings’ work programme, set out in agenda pages 69 to 70.

The Committee were advised that returning items including the burial grounds review, and the BAME Forum would look to be scheduled for either the January or March Committee meeting, whichever was more appropriate.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The upcoming meetings' work programme be noted;
- 2) Returning items including the burial grounds review, and the BAME Forum would look to be scheduled for either the January or March Committee meeting, whichever was more appropriate.