

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 25 NOVEMBER 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.40 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Graham Howe, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro, Wayne Smith and Bill Soane

Other Councillors Present

Pauline Jorgensen, Highways and Transport
Rachel Bishop-Firth
Laura Blumenthal
Gary Cowan
Jim Frewin
Morag Malvern

65. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Gregor Murray.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen was unable to attend the meeting in person but took part virtually.

Councillor Laura Blumenthal, Deputy Executive Member for Equalities, Poverty, the Arts and Climate Emergency, attended on behalf of Councillor Murray. In accordance with legislation Councillor Blumenthal could speak on any item but was not allowed to vote.

66. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meetings of the Executive held on 28 October 2021 and the Extraordinary Executive held on 12 November 2021 were confirmed as correct records and signed by the Leader.

67. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The following Executive Members declared general personal interests in the items on the agenda:

- Councillors John Halsall and John Kaiser on the grounds that they were Non-Executive Directors of Optalis Holdings Ltd;
- Councillors John Kaiser, Stuart Munro and Wayne Smith on the grounds that they were Non-Executive Directors of WBC Holdings Ltd.

68. LEADER'S STATEMENT

The Leader of Council made the following statement:

Covid is still prevalent amongst our community and although its serious impact on individuals has considerably been reduced because of vaccinations and boosters.

It is still life threatening to some, and illnesses from the virus compounds the severe pressures faced by our hospitals and care facilities particularly at this time of the year. I continue to urge you to take the usual careful measures to minimise the spread of the virus. Please take up your vaccinations and boosters and encourage others to do as well.

Whilst continuing to deal with the Covid response we are also working hard on our recovery, focusing on those things we need to build upon to be a better Council and enable a more thriving community. Two key themes of work in this regard are equalities and anti-poverty.

We already have an Equalities Strategy with a cross-party working group in place to drive this forward. We are developing a Residents' Equalities Forum as a key part of this ongoing work and want this Forum to represent all protected characteristics. This includes: gender, race and disability, amongst the others.

At Council last Thursday we were clear in our position that we fully support the principles and messages conveyed by the White Ribbon movement. We are, in fact, pursuing what could be called 'White Ribbon Plus' in that we are committed to creating a community where everybody is safe and to promoting equality, inclusion, and a safe community for all. So, whilst today's focus is about tackling violence against women and girls, and that is absolutely right, as the authority responsible for all community safety, our overarching focus must be wider.

Our work on anti-poverty is equally important and also driven by a cross-party working group. We have already established a Hardship Alliance and a broader Voluntary Community Sector Consultation Group led by our extremely capable Chief Executive at the Wokingham CAB, Jake Morrison.

In collaboration with the VCS, and in consultation more broadly with the public, we will create an initial Anti-Poverty Strategy for consideration by the Executive in March and we will seek to develop our actions following this.

We are not, of course, waiting for a strategy before acting as we know there are issues of financial hardship that require an urgent response.

We have enacted numerous schemes and interventions in this regard over the past 18 months, the most recent being the allocation of the Household Support Scheme. This will focus on the continued provision on free school meals as well as targeted contributions to those most in need, utilising the intelligence of our highly valued VCS.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the voluntary and community sector for the great work that you do and reinforce my commitment to keep working with you in a genuinely collaborative way.

Last week we brought forward the Local Plan Update Consultation. It will run until 24th January 2022. We would like as many of our residents to reply to the consultation as possible. Please use one of the accredited methods. Online at engage.wokingham.gov.uk, email LPU@wokingham.gov.uk or just send a letter to the Growth and Delivery Team at Shute End. Petitions and Facebook posts cannot be considered but every reply in one of the three channels will be taken into account and published.

Please respond to what is in the plan not what you read or hear elsewhere.

I would happily not build in Wokingham anywhere as I believe that Wokingham has taken its fair share. However, all the political parties nationally agree that 300,000 plus, in both the Lib Dem and Tory manifestos, should be built. There are very, very, few brownfield sites in this Borough.

Wokingham Borough is bounded by areas of natural beauty, green belt and royal lands. Practically the whole of the undeveloped Borough is optioned by some developer. If we do not have a Local Plan which has been subject to inspection, any developer can gain planning permission. The net result would be several times the development required by the housing numbers and the planning in the Borough would be directed by central Government. South Oxfordshire has found this to its cost.

The housing numbers were not “derived in February 2016 by a group of people none of us know who”. They are derived from the National Planning Policy framework and guidance from published statistics. We have taken advice from the best to ensure that these figures are at a minimum. Whilst we cannot justify “exceptional circumstances”, it is pleasing that the campaign I led to change the proposals, which would have taken our housing numbers to over 1,635, was successful.

We have the opportunity of knitting this Local Plan to our climate change and biodiversity agenda. It is dependent on central Government bringing building regulations into line with its climate change and biodiversity objectives.

The Council’s objective is to square the circle between development, climate change and biodiversity. It is a tough objective, but it must be doable.

There has been a lot of scaremongering regarding Pinewood. To be clear we are not proposing to remove any of the valued community groups from the site. The consultation does not plan any development in Pinewood, notwithstanding the claim that it plans to concrete it over. The consultation asks what the organisations within it would consider to fund these organisations’ stated need for considerable investment.

The winter is now upon us. Due to the old and poor state of repair of the utilities and the pressure placed upon them, we will unfortunately see more failures. This will bring more problems on the roads. The demand for broadband with people working from home has exacerbated the issues on the roads. The Council will do all in its power to ensure that the disruption is kept to a minimum, but we can’t have people without lights, gas, water and Internet connections. They are now all essential to our way of life. Utility companies must deal with emergencies. The Council cannot intervene. We can delay maintenance to ease problems. We all use the roads and understand the frustration and delays caused on the Borough roads. We will do all we can to keep them to the minimum.

69. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

70. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

70.1 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

As part of Wokingham’s planning process, statutory conditions are placed on approved development to plant trees and the usual intention of the condition is that should any trees that did not survive within, I believe five years must be replaced. Wokingham BC Planning

Department will have a full record of the numbers of trees approved by planning conditions.

Professional experts indicate that 25% of new trees planted die and those that survive need attention. As monitoring conditions is a statutory function, I assume the Planning Department have a record of how many of the new planted trees by condition did not survive.

My question is; can the Council provide a complete written record of how many new trees approved by planning conditions over the past five years that have not survived and have they all been replaced?

Answer

Planning enforcement is entirely a discretionary activity for local government. However, the Council's Compliance Team Officers and the landscape architects do carry out regular landscape audits of new developments to check the survival of the newly planted trees. Those that have not survived are referred to the developers whose responsibility it is to replace any failed trees as you indicate, and we will follow up on that request to ensure replacement planting is carried out.

The landscape audits are a useful activity to identify trees on new developments that require replacing. However, Officers are always grateful to the public where they can report any dead or dying trees that they notice, so that we can then report those back to the developer for replacement. Officers also work very closely with the Wokingham District Veteran Tree Association volunteers who are extremely helpful in reporting problems with trees on new developments. Whilst we do not maintain a record of the number of trees concerned the compliance activity is a discretionary activity which we recognise as extremely important from a placemaking and ecological perspective.

I hope that helps?

Supplementary Question

Not really. If the experts say 25% are lost, then we should have records that 25% have been replaced.

Research does show that hundreds of imposed planning conditions are not followed up which undermines the Planning Committee's best intentions and although it may not be a statutory role would the Executive Member agree with me that Wokingham Borough Council's Planning Department has serious problems in following up on conditions?

What I would ask is that the excellent work akin to that commissioned by Councillor John Kaiser on enforcement, which was a big success some years ago, could a similar one now not be carried out on the Planning Department?

Supplementary Answer

Gary, I do not agree with you because when I first took over the Executive role I increased the number of Enforcement Officers. I am also doing the same in Fran Hopson's area and I have brought an extra revenue bid forward for more staff. So, I think that is absolutely rubbish and I am absolutely committed to Planning and if you have got any examples, please let me have them and I will get the Compliance Team round to have a look.

70.2 Jim Frewin asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Over the past few years Shinfield has been subjected to significant development and a large number of associated planning conditions. Can you please provide a full list of these conditions for the past four years that shows signed off compliance status?

Answer

Shinfield Parish has received 805 planning applications over the past four years, all of which have been subject to numerous planning conditions, the decisions for which are recorded on the Council's website. We do not hold records in the form you request, however the information is available for you to access should you wish to check for yourself. Should you wish to discuss any particular cases please make these known to me and I will ensure, like I did a few weeks ago when I was out with Connor and Fran and we went round most of the sites in your Ward, that they come back with the information you need.

Supplementary Question

Most of the compliance issues I raise I go to Connor with anyway. It is just that it takes so long to actually find an answer that by the time we get there the compliance is not visible. The most annoying one for residents is the working hours compliance which seems to be abused until we give them a reminder. It is then adhered to for at least a week and then it goes back to being abused again. There seems to be no consistency with actually ensuring working hours.

Supplementary Answer

I did see some at the weekend where I know you were copied into some of the pictures that Jackie sent me. I would be quite happy with Connor and myself if you would come along with us and let us go along and see the developers and let us have a joint approach to it.

70.3 Rachel Bishop-Firth asked the Executive Member for Neighbourhood and Communities the following question:

Question

Residents are delighted to see that the building of the Carnival Hub is on track for opening in late summer 2022. Our understanding is that the Carnival Hub facilities will be open on Saturdays, Sundays and evenings, to fit in with the times that residents with weekday work or education commitments will be looking to use them. Can the Council confirm please that the new library will be open on Sundays and also on weekday evenings in line with the opening times for other facilities?

Answer

Usage and opening hours within the library service are reviewed regularly to ensure that services are focussed around the hours where there is most demand, whilst also ensuring we are mindful of adjusting service levels where there is less demand. Overall, this approach has ensured that the service has been in growth against a national back drop of decline, whilst also delivering the service in a financially sustainable way.

To ensure that the library service continues to deliver on its existing success it was reviewed at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in September 2021. This included a commitment to develop a new Library Strategy in 2022. Part of this process will be reviewing options to ensure that the service is delivered at places and times when there

is most need within the local community. This review is an important element in ensuring that the Council continues to meet its statutory obligation of providing a comprehensive and efficient library service.

In conclusion we will wait until the revised Strategy is complete before determining whether the Sunday and evening openings are required. But that is not to say that we are not open to any suggestions that would improve the service to our residents.

Supplementary Question

I do hope that it can be open evenings and weekends because there are a lot of young people living in flats around that area that could really do with that as a peaceful place to study.

My supplementary is: when the new hub opens there is great concern in the community that we are going to lose an asset in the old library building because that is going to be developed into flats. Are there any plans to replace that if it is going to be lost as an asset with, for example, youth clubs for young people in the community?

Supplementary Answer

You say we are losing an asset, in fact we are gaining an asset. The library service that we are going to be introducing into the Hub is far superior to the library service that we can offer where we are at the moment. So I do not think that to say we are reducing our facilities is true. I think it is far from it.

No decision has been made as yet as to what will happen with the existing library but I can assure you that the best possible use will be made of it.

70.4 Morag Malvern asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

There is a purpose-built youth centre in Wokingham, on Reading Road, which does not seem to offer any regular youth club sessions. Why not?

Answer

The building known as the Wokingham Youth Centre houses the Integrated Early Help Service, the Council's Early Help offer for children which goes up to the age of 18. This service is responsible for the delivery of a variety of targeted group and 1:1 direct work interventions, aimed at supporting children and families in need of additional help. The work and delivery takes place both on site and in the community and includes: 1:1 sessions with children and parents, parenting programmes and family and network meetings. The service is also responsible for the delivery of the Duke of Edinburgh and Explorers Extreme programmes, where there are groups of youths who undertake their gold, silver and bronze awards. Training sessions take place on site three nights per week.

The Integrated Early Help Service share the site with ARC, the Youth Counselling Service, which your colleague and our colleague Councillor David Hare is well aware of as he has attended the ARC Management Board meetings together with me. ARC is a Council commissioned service, SENDIASS and NEET, all of whom support vulnerable children and youths.

When the building is not being used for the above services, there are a variety of community groups that hire the place. This activity was significantly reduced, as you would

expect due to Covid, however has recently commenced again in line with the updated building risk assessment that is in place.

Given the current use of the site by the Integrated Early Help Service, Council partners and community groups, there is limited capacity to house additional services and activities.

Supplementary Question

How do you feel about providing some outdoor equipment for the older child so that they have got somewhere healthy to hang out and exercise? I do have in mind a recent refurbishment where the new play equipment, although lovely, would appear to be aimed at infant school children. I just wondered how you felt about the older child because some year 6s are really quite hefty?

Supplementary Answer

I don't know the answer to that question, but I am prepared to look at it and certainly happy to talk to you offline.

I have just been reminded that we expect the town councils to do much of that and actually I have to say that also reminds me that in my neck of the woods, in Wargrave, it is Wargrave Parish Council that has put that kit in on the Recreation Ground. Nevertheless, we will take a look at what provision there is and whose responsibility it is. I will do that together with you.

71. INSTALLATION OF ON-STREET RESIDENTIAL AND COUNCIL-OWNED CAR PARK CHARGEPOINTS

The Executive considered a report relating to the installation of EV chargepoints for on-street residential and Council-owned car parks.

The report was introduced by the Deputy Executive Member for Equalities, Poverty, the Arts and Climate Emergency who went through the recommendations as set out in the report. Councillor Blumenthal highlighted that information obtained from the Department for Transport stated that 80% of all EV charging happened at home. Following a survey of Wokingham residents it was found that 83% of residents, who responded, expressed their preference for charging their EVs most of the time at home where they park overnight. The proposal was all about increasing accessibility and being more inclusive, especially as not everyone had access to off street parking, by increasing the number of public chargepoints in the Borough. It was noted that 75% of the funding would be coming from central Government.

The Executive Member for Highways and Transport explained that there were some limitations as to where EV chargepoints could be positioned on streets as they were dependent on the location of streetlamps for power. If the project was successful it was hoped to instal more in the future.

Councillor Kaiser stated that there was often confusion around plug-in sites and therefore he wanted to ensure that the chargepoints would be easy to use with payment by credit card. Councillor Jorgensen confirmed that the Government had recently announced legislation that would make every EV chargepoint contact-less, force developers to put EV chargers in new homes and also force industrial sites, where major redevelopments had taken place with more than 10 parking spaces, to include EV chargepoints.

Councillor Margetts stated that it was often difficult to find where charging points were located and wanted to ensure that these new chargepoints would be widely publicised.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the initial small-scale rollout of approximately 36 on-street residential EV chargepoints be approved, subject to a local engagement exercise once preferred sites have been identified;
- 2) the provision of EV chargepoints in Council-owned car parks be approved;
- 3) £66,000 of capital borrowing be approved to fund the Council's 25% investment subject to securing the remaining 75% through Government funding; this borrowing will be recovered through revenues generated by the project;
- 4) it be noted that Wokingham Borough Council would be the owner and operator of the EV chargepoints but the maintenance would be undertaken by an external supplier with expertise in this sector. All costs related to maintenance and management will be covered by the external supplier following a procurement exercise;
- 5) it be noted that the award of the contract for supplier will be dependent on achieving the financial estimations detailed within this report, ensuring zero net cost to the Council;
- 6) it be noted that a further report will be presented to the Executive for approval following an initial 18-month period of operation of the on-street chargepoints to review effectiveness and summarise lessons learned to inform into the future EV strategy.

72. RENT SETTING POLICY

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposed Rent Setting Policy that would ensure that the current annual rent setting process was regularised.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing explained that the Rent Setting Policy will ensure that the Council regularises the current rent setting process and reconfirms that rent setting is part of the annual Housing Revenue Account budget setting process. It was noted that although this was a new policy, that was required in order to adhere to the Rent Standard 2020, it did not involve any changes to the Council's current approach to how rent was charged.

Councillor Kaiser confirmed that the Tenant and Landlord Improvement Panel had been consulted and they were in support of the policy.

RESOLVED: That the Rent Setting Policy, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report, for which the 'Rent Setting Policy' primarily relates to the Housing Revenue Account (2552 properties) plus includes a small number (18 properties) of General Fund properties be approved.

73. THERAPY SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The Executive considered a report setting out proposals for a joint procurement of an Integrated Children's Therapy Service for Wokingham, in partnership with West Berkshire and Reading local authorities.

The Executive Member for Children's Services highlighted that the Council currently commissioned Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy and Physiotherapy for children and young people with Education Care and Health Plans. In addition, the Council had been exploring opportunities to work collaboratively with Brighter Futures for Children, Reading and West Berkshire Councils to explore a joint commissioning approach for future provision of these services for their local populations. Councillor Howe confirmed that this strategic approach to planning and procuring services in a joined way was a means for local authority partners to deliver value for money, positive outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

Following a query by Councillor Kaiser it was confirmed that what was being proposed was not a joint service and Wokingham would be leading on the procurement of the service.

Councillor Blumenthal queried why the Council was going down the joint procurement route and not on its own? Councillor Howe explained that a large number of specialists were involved in the provision of these services, and it would be expensive for the Council to set up and manage the provision on its own. In addition, there was the chance that the Council would end up competing with neighbouring authorities for the services of those specialists. It therefore made sense to collaborate on these specialisms.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) a joint procurement exercise for an Integrated Children's Therapy Service for Wokingham be undertaken with West Berkshire and Reading local authorities;
- 2) the three local authorities jointly procure as a single lot resulting in a single contract signed by the supplier and the three local authorities;
- 3) the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Services, be delegated authority to award the contract to the successful bidder following completion of the evaluation process. The estimated WBC budget is £389,520 per annum.

74. FARLEY HILL PRIMARY SCHOOL ORGANISATION CHANGES

The Executive considered a report relating to proposed organisational changes to Farley Hill Primary School.

The Executive Member for Children's Services reminded Members that at the start of this academic year the school had been moved to a new site in Arborfield Green. Unfortunately, some parents living near the school had not been able to meet the school's catchment policy and gain a place for their child. The proposal was to expand the school to 420 places plus a nursery and expand the catchment area so that children living in homes in the immediate proximity of Arborfield Garrison SDL were included. Councillor Howe highlighted the map appended to the report which set out the new catchment area.

Councillor Howe confirmed that the plan was that the former school site in Farley Hill Village would be closed. He also confirmed that it was believed that The Coombes School would not be impacted by the change in the PAN number of Farley Hill Primary School.

Councillor Kaiser, in his role as Ward Member, welcomed this change as he had parents who could see the school but could not secure a place for their children.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) formal consultation be approved on the proposal that the proposals agreed by Executive on 30th January 2020 for the expansion of the Farley Hill Primary School in stages on two sites be replaced by a new proposal that Farley Hill Primary School expands to 420 places (plus a nursery) from September 2022, and that the former school site in Farley Hill Village be formally closed;
- 2) proposed changes to 2022/23 School Admission arrangements to ensure that all children living in homes on or in immediate proximity to the Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location are within the Farley Hill Primary School Designated Area be endorsed;
- 3) authority be delegated to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Executive Member for Children's Services, to determine the proposal.