

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 18 MARCH 2021 FROM 5.30 PM TO 6.05 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, UllaKarin Clark, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray and Wayne Smith

Other Councillors Present

Lindsay Ferris

100. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Charlotte Haitham-Taylor.

101. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

102. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER

This is going to be a long evening with the penultimate Executive of the year and the last Full Council of the Municipal Year. To complete the business in the allotted time Members will need to be efficient in their interventions.

The pandemic started a year ago. The first lockdown started on 23rd March 2020. It has been a long hard road. The weekly rate to 11th March in Wokingham is 35.1 today, which is well below the peak of 606 on the 4th January but still compares very badly to below five in August. We suspect that it will be adversely affected by the schools going back and conversely favourably by the rollout of the vaccinations. Happily, both hospitalisations and deaths are declining. Our lives have changed, unrecognisably for some, and many lives have so sadly been lost. I can only restate my condolences for those that have suffered so much.

Deaths within the UK for those who have been diagnosed with Covid within 28 days have now risen to above 125,000.

Please join me in a moment's silence for those who have died of this dreadful pandemic in Wokingham, the UK, and all around the world, and those who have suffered not just the effect of the virus itself, but the problems which have accompanied it.

Please also remember in your thoughts the very sad death of Sarah Everard.

Thank you.

Our GPs continue to be magnificent. All the over-50s in England are now able to get an appointment. It means the final group in phase one of the inoculation programme can get a vaccine and just confirmed by the Prime Minister, just 5 minutes ago. So, the light at the end of the tunnel is getting ever brighter. We must, however, nervously look across the Channel at what seems to be a third wave, which is bedding in with ever increasing lockdowns. We are grateful to our Government who has had the foresight and acumen to establish the research into the vaccination programme and the unequalled roll-out.

It has never been more vital that we play our role and continue to observe the rules.

Again, a big thank again to all the carers, doctors, health staff, social care staff, health, police, fire, rescue, ambulance, teachers, school staff, charities, volunteers, our staff, and in particular our staff. In short everybody who has stepped up to the plate and made it possible for life to continue during these appalling times.

Many of our critical proactive measures 'going over and above' would not have been possible if we did not have a stable and strong financial foundation on which to fund our numerous measures intended to assist our community.

Despite, new responsibilities that needed funding, losing vital income sources such as car parking and leisure, and cost reduction programmes on hold, we had the financial resources to go well above the bare minimum. It is with this that illustrates the true strength of our financial management; CIPFA has rated WBC in the top 20 of upper tier councils for financial sustainability. Our current borrowings are very far short of the £750m irresponsibly quoted in some election literature.

Our response in many ways has been astonishing and has been being widely held up as an exemplar of good practise. It is being considered by the Council tonight. It is worth reiterating some of the essential measures employed during the pandemic, which have touched every resident and enterprise:

- the emergency planning processes;
- the protected residents in care homes;
- supported care homes by supplying PPP, critical advice, and staff;
- resisted national policy to discharge early from hospital to care homes;
- reduced homelessness to a single rough sleeper, and I haven't given up on him yet;
- widely introduced lateral flow testing;
- set up a Community Hub with our voluntary sector partners;
- created the concept of the one-front door;
- provided extended care support for vulnerable children;
- worked closely with GPs to enable vaccinations to be rolled out;
- maintained critical services for the most vulnerable residents;
- maintained universal services;
- financial support to local businesses;
- redeployed staff;
- we started our local democracy speedily;
- communicated regularly and clearly;
- considered the impacts on particular groups;
- positively impacted on Climate Emergency Action;
- managed the financial impacts of Covid-19;
- developed a risk-based approach to decision-making;
- planned ahead for the "Restart" and "Recovery"; and
- advanced the highways programme.

As I have previously said, the Council will not be found wanting to support residents; be it child hunger, poverty, or homelessness. Next week we are proposing a supplementary estimate to the winter grant fund.

It has never been of such profound importance that local government plays its role for their local community. With a steady hand, we are now navigating to recovery and business as

usual, changing the way we work, supporting all our residents, and ensuring that services run as normally as possible. The Medium Term Financial Plan enshrines recovery and enumerates our twenty-five-point published Council Plan providing a clear pathway for the future.

Britain is halfway to its goal of being carbon neutral by 2050. Greenhouse gases have fallen by 51% against the Government's baseline for measuring progress towards net zero, an analysis of official data reveals. Carbon dioxide emissions fell by 13% last year to the lowest level in nearly 150 years. I am delighted that your Council received a huge grant, with this week announcing a Woodland Trust's grant of £300,000 to plant 250,000 trees.

The roll out of the waterproof recycling bags together with green bags for food waste and blue bags for non-recyclables is now happening. Sadly, this was delayed due to the call-in, but we believe that we have been able to mitigate the adverse cost. Minimising wet waste and persuading more to actively use food waste should improve our recycling from a currently remarkable 50% and above should help further to achieve our climate change goal.

We are delighted that we have been designated the healthiest place to live in addition to one of the most desirable, which is a true complement to this Conservative led Council.

Having fiercely and successfully opposed central Government's plans for considerably more houses in our Borough and having maintained our infrastructure payments from those which are built, we will be pleased to lay before the Council our revised local plan shortly, which will include an even higher number of affordable houses. The housing policy will come to the Executive next week.

The rollout of MIND in the Borough generously funded by a local resident will provide a service for adults, youngsters and children for mental health.

Nobody understands the importance of tackling violence against women better than the Prime Minister's fiancée. At the age of 19 she was a victim of the black cab rapist John Worboys, who picked her up while she was waiting for a night bus after an evening with friends. "I will never truly know what happened after he drugged me." Carrie said. Carrie was one of the fourteen women who gave evidence at Worboys' trial and later campaigned against his early release.

The public outpouring of grief and, increasingly, anger after the death of Sarah Everard has been profound; all women recognise that fear. The lurch in your stomach as you hear footsteps that little bit too close behind you, the keys gripped in your hand as you walk down a badly lit street, the heart pounding in your chest as you cross a dark park: these experiences are, to an appalling extent, an integral part of being female. Even a future queen is not exempt from the anxiety, as the Duchess joined the tribute at Clapham Common.

We should not stray into what are national interest, but this is a Wokingham issue and underwrites much of what we are discussing tonight. The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation; all of them and they are equally important.

The Council is the golden thread that runs through our Borough, the indispensable partner for our residents and businesses. Diversity, equality, anti-racism and addressing need must be at the heart of everything we do and of the example we set. No rational person would take a different point of view. Every one of our residents must be able to lead the life that he or she wishes without fear from harm and without harming others. The Equality Policy that we put in front of you today is the first step in this continuous journey in which every day we must strive to do better.

Taking responsibility for what has been delegated to others provides some of the essential means to achieve these goals and keep our residents safe, secure and happy. Combined with the work we are doing with the health sector, the voluntary sector and the police we should be able to make a material difference to our residents' lives. The increase in violent crime in Wokingham Town, reported by the Wokingham paper, underwrites this need.

It is that cultural and social change in attitudes which is required to ensure women and all our residents are heard and protected. It will not happen quickly but step by step over a long period of time ingraining work practises, culture and attitudes into life in Wokingham Borough. When I am not even a memory in this Council, I would like that architecture to continue to flourish and keep giving.

On Saturday the Prime Minister and his partner lit a candle in Downing Street in memory of Sarah. Carrie's trauma underlining an understanding of the significance of her death at the heart of our society. It is a survivor talking to her partner about a horrific experience that shaped her. On this issue at least, she is tapping into the public mood.

But it is we at Wokingham Borough Council who need to act and by agreeing the two papers tonight we take a significant step in that direction.

103. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions submitted.

104. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

104.1 Lindsay Ferris asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Can the Leader of the Council confirm that in addition to setting up a cross-party working group to look at the formation of a standalone service, will that working group also be looking at whether:

- (a) it would be possible to improve the current PPP arrangement to better meet the needs of local residents in Wokingham Borough; and
- (b) will look at whether there are parts of the current PPP service which could be retained/used by Wokingham Borough Council in the future?

The Liberal Democrat Group believe that the Council needs to have a backup position should the move to a standalone service encounter problems, which prevents, or delays the establishment of such an arrangement.

Answer

The institutions which govern this proposal will be appropriate to ensure that the project can be successfully delivered. Suitable cross party and multi-layered committees will ensure that for each legislative obligation WBC has a policy coupled with an appeals procedure if appropriate.

The PPP has delegated authority for over one hundred pieces of legislation. Notwithstanding this, our residents hold us responsible when issues are not tackled to their satisfaction. To provide the wrap around service that we aspire to for our residents, we need to repatriate the control of that legislation. Our residents are bemused that we do not have the control they would expect. The PPP works at our request, but we do not have full authority to set priorities important to our residents in our different localities. It is therefore not possible within the current Inter Authority Agreement to achieve this level of control.

Depending upon the agreement we reach with Bracknell and West Berkshire, there are opportunities to subcontract parts of the service to Bracknell/West Berks ie the PPP. This will be decided on during the period of negotiation.

I would hope that this would be an endeavour to which all the Council responds and invite the Opposition to second the motion. However, the Administration is equally happy to spearhead this alone if the Opposition feels unable to support a step change improvement in customer service.

105. TRADING STANDARDS, ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND LICENSING

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposal to authorise the services delivered by the Public Protection Partnership (PPP) to be brought back in-house to Wokingham Borough Council as from 1 April 2022.

During his introduction of the report the Leader of Council advised that the Council had to continually analyse its limited resources to ensure that they were focussed to the greatest benefit of residents. The Council's ambition was to provide a wraparound service for residents to keep them safe, secure and happy.

One way of providing that wrap around service, was to repatriate the control of the more than one hundred pieces of legislation, which had previously been delegated to West Berkshire Council, and then subsequently to the PPP. Whilst residents held the Council responsible for these duties the Council did not, however, have the power to set the priorities of the PPP to ensure that residents were provided with the service they expected and that which the Council would wish to give.

Councillor Halsall advised that the aim of the proposal therefore was to tailor service delivery at a locality level which would provide a clearer cohesive response to issues that arise in the community eg anti-social behaviour, fly tipping, unauthorised encampments, noise, bonfires, neighbourhood disputes. The intention was for delivery of these services to be integrated into other Council services, such as Localities, Community Safety, Legal, Children's and Adults. This would make better use of the capacity of existing locality officers offering earlier incisive intervention and prevention. It was also anticipated that this would engender effective joined up professional responses across the Council's service specialisms i.e. safety, enforcement and environmental health, with swift responses, resulting in increased resident satisfaction and potentially efficiencies.

Councillor Halsall set out the benefits and advantages to the Council and residents of bringing the control of the service back in-house which included:

- Greater control, in one organisation with direct influence over policy, implementation, and accountability;
- More visible ownership and flexibility to focus on residents' priorities;
- An integrated single Council approach to delivery in localities, which crosses specialisms, with the efficiencies, in respect to time and outcomes, by tackling issues holistically that this approach brings. That is, "do it once" with joined up and combined responses to issues that consider the range of enforcement powers that the Council possesses. For example, consideration of anti-social behaviour alongside neighbour disputes, planning enforcement, noise and bonfires;
- An improved resident perception and experience due to a less complex customer journey, with a greater emphasis upon prevention and proactivity than reactivity;
- A service that delivers valued and visible interventions with timely support at the time when residents most need it;
- Potential efficiencies and economies of scale (within a wider locality team) can increase accessible hours and reduce response times;
- Greater influence and control over preferred suppliers and associated costs;
- It will allow, if the PPP is willing, to retain the services of the PPP when appropriate.

The meeting was advised that the Inter Authority Agreement (IAA), which governs the PPP, states that should any partner wish to exit the partnership, the following conditions apply:

- A minimum twelve-month notice period to terminate the agreement;
- The notice must therefore be given before the 31st March 2021 to exit the partnership on 31st March 2022 which was the earliest opportunity for termination;
- Within 6 months, the Councils sign off an exit plan and the Joint Management Team shall cooperate in good faith to agree this;
- If Wokingham elects to serve notice, it would still be possible to negotiate that some services remain within PPP as part of the Exit Plan.

It was noted that the IAA precluded any discussion on service delivery until notice has been given and the PPP retains control of the legislative framework until notice has been exercised.

Councillor Halsall advised that initially it was intended to replicate what currently exists but no doubt in time the service would dynamically respond to resident demands on a real time basis. It was also expected that outside agencies would be used for the delivery of some of the services; which may include the PPP but did not exclude other authorities or the private sector should they be more willing or more capable.

Councillor Jorgensen provided her support to the proposal as she felt that getting better control over public services was the right thing to do however she queried whether any consideration had been given to the provision of specialist services eg trading standards? The Leader of Council responded that the discussions that would take place after notice had been served would not exclude asking the PPP, should they be willing to do so, to continue providing any of the services that the Council wished them to provide. This would still enable the Council to have control of the service.

Councillor Kaiser felt that the proposal would provide a closer relationship with the police as very often the work carried out by the PPP led to prosecutions and having the current arm's length approach did not enhance the Council's relationship with the police. The Leader of Council reiterated that with the current arrangement the Council had all the blame without the authority to do anything about it.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) the Council serves formal notice on the Public Protection Partnership before 31st March 2021, which if effected would take place on 31st March 2022;
- 2) the delegation to PPP in respect to the Executive and Council functions and duties (including environmental health, licensing and trading standards) will end and will be exercised by the Council directly from 1st April 2022;
- 3) The Director of Place and Growth and Deputy Chief Executive (and Section 151 Officer), in consultation with the Lead Member for Environment and Lead Member for Finance and Housing, are authorised to commence design of the new services structure and any resulting negotiations on an Exit Plan and to address timeframe (including earlier dates than stated in recommendation 1 and 2 if agreed by the Councils), mitigation of risks and costs, key milestones, ongoing resources and staffing implications for a successful departure from the partnership;
- 4) The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Place and Growth create and work with a task force of Officers and Members to create the new in-house service;
- 5) it be noted that a special item of £500k, spread over financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23, was included in the Medium Term Financial Plan to fund a safe and effective transition.

106. EQUALITY PLAN

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposed Equality Plan covering 2021-2025 and an associated action plan covering 2021-2022 which were being recommended to Council for approval.

The Leader of Council highlighted the protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act and advised that the Equality Plan had been developed in line with the Council's vision and Corporate Delivery Plan. The Equality Plan sets out how the Council intends to enrich the lives of all residents in safe and strong communities and outlines the ambition to tackle inequality.

Councillor Halsall outlined the consultation that had been carried out on the Equality Plan, which included an online survey and a number of focus sessions with community groups, staff and Members. The qualitative feedback received from the consultation had provided a valuable insight into understanding what the Council could do better as well as what it could do to ensure that it delivered more inclusive services that would lead to improved outcomes for communities.

It was noted that the priorities proposed for the coming four years were:

- Listen to and learn from communities and use this to deliver services that worked well for everyone;

- Act on the Council's commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion in the way we plan, deliver and shape our services;
- Build a diverse and engaged workforce, where everyone was respected.

The action plan, which sets out how the Council would seek to ensure that there was progress against each of the priorities through the first year of the plan period for highlighted. It was noted that the Local Government Association Equality Framework had been adopted. This was an established, credible and objective performance framework which would be used to measure the Council's performance and results. Progress and delivery would be monitored to ensure that the Council progress to the highest levels possible for each element of the Framework. Councillor Halsall advised that at a future point, the Council would be able to invite peer challenge and support to ensure that its assessments of its performance and progress were credible and robust.

RECOMMENDATION: That Council be recommended to approve the Equality Plan (2021-2025) and associated Action Plan (2021-2022).