

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 21 JUNE 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.45 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Alison Swaddle (Vice-Chairman), Sam Akhtar, Shirley Boyt, Anne Chadwick, Phil Cunington, Paul Fishwick and Clive Jones

Executive and Deputy-Executive Members in Attendance

Councillors: Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane and Shahid Younis

Officers Present

Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist), Narinder Brar (Community Safety Manager), Felicity Parker (Superintendent, Bracknell and Wokingham Local Police Area), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Keeley Clements (Director - Communities, Insight, and Change), Rhian Hayes (Interim Assistant Director Housing and Place), Marcia Head (Service Manager - Place and Growth) and Simon Price (Assistant Director Neighbourhoods and Communities)

7. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

8. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 24 March 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following minor amendments.

Agenda page 9: “2) **It be recommended that** the Low Carbon transport Strategy revert to be named the Low Emissions Transport Strategy”

Agenda page 10: “8) An update regarding the Borough Wide Parking Management Plan be considered by the Committee in March 2022.”

Agenda page 10: “9) An update regarding Flood Risk Management and an update from the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service be considered in March 2022.”

9. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A pecuniary and prejudicial declaration of interest was submitted from Paul Fishwick relating to agenda item 15, on the grounds that he was the owner of a business which had received a grant from the Council in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Paul added that he would leave the room for this item, and take no part in any discussions or votes related to the item.

10. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

11. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

12. COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 11 to 36, which provided an annual update on the work of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP).

The report outlined an overall reduction in crime offences of 9.9% across the Wokingham Borough in the last 12 months. Incidents which had seen an overall reduction included burglary, vehicle crime, and drugs possession offences. As a result of the pandemic, there were a number of areas of concern including car meets in Council car parks and open spaces, and domestic abuse. The community safety team have lead a tri-Borough operational based response with local service providers and key stakeholders to adapt services for victims of domestic abuse. The CSP had 4 key priorities which came to an end on 1st June 2021, which included addressing violence against women and girls, tackling anti-social behaviour; harmful behaviour and organised crime, reduction and prevention of exploitation and and address the needs of vulnerable victims and offenders, and empowering and enabling the resilience of local communities.

Bill Soane (Executive Member for Neighbourhood and Communities), Narinder Brah (CSP Manager) and Felicity Parker (Superintendent, Bracknell and Wokingham Local Police Area) attended the meeting to answer Member questions.

During the ensuing discussions, Members raised the following points and queries:

- Were there any specific statistics relating to cybercrime within the Borough? Officer response – Cybercrime was a key area which had been highlighted within the strategic assessment. There had not been any local increase in this area, and Action Fraud was an agency which helped victims deal with cybercrime. The CSP was also supported through colleagues within the Public Protection Partnership, who had noticed personal protection equipment and vaccination fraud offences. In the future, additional details relating to cybercrime within the Borough would be added to the annual update report.
- The data on agenda page 14 related to anti-social behaviour was absent from the report, and it was believed that this was previously provided by the Thames Valley Police (TVP). What were the current figures and how did they impact on the overall crime figures? Police response – The data was available, but not to hand, and would be circulated to the Committee.
- There had been decrease in areas such as burglary incidents and domestic abuse. There was a concern that less instances of domestic abuse may have been reported because of victims being in lockdown with their abusers. What could be done to ensure the safety of those at risk? Police response – There had been a significant decrease in burglary incidents, which was something that the CSP was proud of and they were awaiting to see if this trend continued post Covid-19 (C-19). During the first lockdown, visits were made to medium and repeat risk victims of domestic abuse to ensure that they were being provided the best service possible.
- Agenda page 27 had indicated an overall reduction of CSP funding of around £1000. What effect would this have on service delivery? Officer response - This funding was based on a historical formula. This issue had been flagged internally and would be picked up, and conversations would occur with the newly elected Police and Crime Commissioner.
- What did the MARAC team consider? Officer response – The MARAC team only dealt with cases which had been professionally risk assessed as being high risk.

- Agenda page 23 indicated a reduction in attendance of Kicks sessions from 25 attendees last year to just 5.5 this year. Could this be clarified? Officer response – Clarification would be provided to the Committee.
- The precept for the PCC had increased for the current financial year, yet the funding for the CSP had reduced. What was the rationale behind this? Police response – The PCC precept went some way towards the CSP, however it also funded other services such as Victims First.
- What were the details of the new five-year domestic abuse contract? Office response – The CSP would continue to work closely with Berkshire Women’s Aid, however the new contract had been awarded to Cranstoun who would provide a 24/7 victims helpline, close working with victims to reduce risks to them and their family, in addition to offering refuge provision. The contract also provided for work with schools for young people who were victims of domestic abuse or who had witnessed domestic abuse. An update could be provided for the March Committee to update on the progress of the contract in its first six months.
- Did the substance misuse service work with those who had misused in the past and had changed their ways? Officer response – The CSP worked with a number of agencies and contract providers, and it was recognised that an experienced person was beneficial and could help others with recovery. There was a new contract in place which attracted additional funding, and had allowed for a specific young people service (Here 4 You) to be created.
- How effectively was the local Prevent service working? Officer response – There were good and robust local processes in place to safeguard individuals. This was about partners communicating with each other clearly and flagging up concerns. Concerns were then flagged up to the “Channel Panel”. Locally, Prevent heard of a lot of cases of concerns and acted accordingly.
- Were operations still carried out to target shops who were selling alcohol to underage persons? Police response – This process was still carried out, however it required cadets to carry out the process. Due to C-19, cadets were unable to come on-board, however as soon as they returned then spot checks would be carried out. Trading standards and the police took “secret shopper” exercises very seriously.
- Were food delivery firms checking the age of recipients on delivery of alcohol? Executive member response – Delivery drivers were required to check the age of the person opening the door if the order included alcohol, and were instructed to remove items of alcohol and refund if the person could not prove that they were over 21 years old. Some firm’s drivers were not checking however.
- What work was being done to promote preventative measures against antisocial behaviour? Police response – There was a joint piece of work with the CSP which was looking how young people could be prevented at the earliest possible stage from engaging in serious violence.
- How was engagement with housing associations being improved? Police response – There was a strategic group set up to work with housing associations, which had a similar stock to that of WBC. Members could raise concerns where they knew of examples of housing associations not dealing with instances of anti-social behaviour.

The CSP worked with a number of housing associations on a strategic level on a number of issues including anti-social behaviour.

- The domestic abuse bill broadened the definition of domestic abuse, what strategy was in place to deal with any increase in service requests? Officer response – Officers were in the process of ensuring that the service was compliant with the new domestic abuse bill, including bringing website content up to date, including information about safe spaces.
- Would the healthy relationship course be opened to all schools? Officer response – The CSP was working with children in all schools, and various pathways were being looked at to provide the best support for children within the Borough. There was a very detailed piece of work taking place under housing needs assessments to work with the victims of domestic abuse, both children's and adults, to ensure that their housing needs were met.
- The Committee were keen to hear from the "voice of a child", and to have a report sent back to Committee.
- What were the CSP and EMRAC doing in relation to county lines? Police response – There were a number of operations underway to combat county lines, however the rates in the Wokingham Borough were much lower than in other areas.
- What were the thoughts on how the Borough worked with the CSP? Police response – It had been an interesting year which was hard to qualify, however the police had been hugely impressed by the work of the Narinder Brah and Simon Price. There were a number of sub-groups which needed sufficient levels of response, and the CSP needed to see how they could make the services provided as best as possible.
- Effective data sharing was key between different organisations, was this being carried out effectively and in a timely fashion? Officer and Police response – Thames Valley police had a considerable amount of data, and shared what they felt was useful with the CSP on a quarterly basis. Additional data could be provided upon request. The creation of the violence reduction dashboard would use Thames Valley Police data and data from Local Authorities, and in future data from Health Services would be added. Data ensured that projects and funding were being put in the right places, whilst looking at new and existing trends.
- Was there an opportunity to send a police officer into schools to talk about substance misuse? Officer and police response – Each school had a liaison officer assigned to them. When a drug incident happened at a school, the police were often led by the school to make contact prior to the police responding. There had been a national increase in cannabis use, not just locally. The new contract would allow for additional offers for children and young people, including increased education around substance misuse.
- How was knife crime reduction being targeted and achieved? Police response – There was a new strategic partnership which looked at serious crime including knife crime. The partnership was looking at identifying pupils at risk, and where a high risk individual was identified then this would be escalated to the multi-agency team.

- Were there any areas of the Borough which would benefit from a neighbourhood action group? Police response – If there were any gaps which the community would like filled, the police would be happy to facilitate this process. This could involve setting up a new group, or involving the nearest group and expanding it.
- The Committee thanked the police and the CSP for keeping crime levels low despite cuts to their budget from Central Government over a period of time.
- Was there any data relating to prosecutions of race related crimes? Police response – There were small but still unacceptable numbers of race crime within the Borough, which were increasing. This was a difficult crime to detect as it could happen in the street, with the perpetrators moving on very quickly. The police and CSP wanted more people to feel confident about coming forward and reporting these crimes, and as such if reported crime figures went up then this would be a good thing.
- Had there been increased engagement between the community and PCSOs? Police response – Neighbourhood policing was difficult last year due to keeping the community safe from C-19. There would be two neighbourhood teams from August, including one problem solving team, which would provide effective engagement and give people confidence.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Bill Soane, Felicity Parker, and Narinder Brah be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) Additional details relating to cybercrime statistics be added to future update reports;
- 3) Data relating to anti-social behaviour be circulated to the Committee;
- 4) Clarification regarding attendance at Kicks sessions be provided to the Committee;
- 5) An update on the first 6-months of the new domestic abuse contract be provided to the Committee at their March 2022 meeting;
- 6) An update report relating to the “voice of a child” be provided to the Committee;
- 7) An annual update on the work of CSP return to the Committee in twelve months’ time.

13. COMMUNITIES, INSIGHT, AND CHANGE DIRECTORATE PRIORITIES

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 37 to 42, which outlined the directorate priorities for the Communities, Insight, and Change Directorate.

The report outlined a number of areas of work for the year ahead, including providing IT capabilities and resilience, launching the business change strategy and embedding the change framework methodology into the organisation, tracking of customer satisfaction through various channels, ensuring that services were open to everyone by minimising any barriers or equality issues, maintenance of Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) housing stock in addition to increasing customer satisfaction to 90%, and supporting communities to be clean and safe.

Gregor Murray (Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions), Shahid Younis (Deputy Executive Member for Corporate Strategy, Insight &

Change), Keeley Clements (Director – Communities, Insight, and Change), and Simon Price (Assistant Director – Neighbourhood and Communities), attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

During the ensuing discussions, Members raised the following points and queries:

- What was the satisfaction rate of Council tenants currently? Director response – At a low point, satisfaction reached 76%. Currently, satisfaction levels were around 88%, and the service was looking to improve this level further.
- What preparation had been done in anticipation of the eviction ban coming to an end? Director and officer response – The Council’s “all in” policy had been very successful at keeping people off of the street during the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic. WBC was expecting landlords to look to sell some properties due to changes in their circumstances, and WBC would need to review the overall position in the coming months. Due to the court backlog and a possible extension to the eviction ban, evictions may not take place for three to four months.
- Could some clarity be provided relating to the proposed strategic use of the HRA? Director and officer response – Officers were looking at unlocking the HRA to understand the borrowing capacity to be able to contribute to strategic projects. The aim was to buy some of the newly developed S106 properties, in addition to redeveloping and buying speculatively where appropriate.
- What was being done to improve the customer experience, including action tracking? Director response – Workflow tracking was planned in the medium term, and the service already knew of 5 to 6 areas where customers were more engaged. Where customers had queries, WBC needed to respond appropriately and in a timely fashion. A website UX UI Specialist had been hired to streamline the WBC website and reduce “clicks” needed to reach useful information.
- What was the strategy for taking graduates on board at WBC? Director response – A cohort of graduates had been taken in under change management for rotation around the organisation, to build their depth and breadth of knowledge and skills.
- What was the Insight Strategy? Director response – There was a difference between data and insight, as insight was about contextualising and understanding what the data was telling us. As a Council, we needed to build up and connect our datasets to allow us to understand what the insight was telling us, which would allow better customer interactions and enable us to progress as an organisation.
- Were there any developments relating to investigating fly tipping in the Borough? Director response – A lot of work had been done in this area and the overall situation had improved as a result of additional cameras and communications efforts. C-19 had definitely had an impact on fly tipping, and plans were in place to continue enforcement efforts going forwards. Communications relating to Christmas waste had helped over the festive period. Recently, some officers had been redeployed to help with surge testing and surge vaccinations. There was a working group which was looking at this overall issue, and WBC was working with the police to check vehicle licence plates when transporting and dropping of waste, to ensure that they were registered waste disposal businesses. Where breaches were found, fixed penalty notices were being issued.

- How were equality assessments being made a key priority in everything we do? Director response – An equalities impact assessment was required for any change in service or proposition, and it was the responsibility of each directorate to carry this out for each change within their area. The equalities plan sat within the Communities, Insight, and Change Directorate, and this was about how an overall strategy could be developed for the Borough, whilst being a dynamic policy.
- The 21st Century reorganisation strove for all customer contacts to be done digitally wherever possible. After the C-19 pandemic, was it possible that a surge of people would want face to face interactions, and if so was WBC prepared? Director response – This reorganisation was carried out before this Directorate, or Director, formed part of WBC. Every customer should be able to engage in the best way for them personally, and if there was an uptake in demand for face to face interactions, then customer services would support this.
- When was the poverty strategy expected to come forward? Director response – This was hoped to come forward as soon as possible, however the manager of the strategy and planning area had recently left WBC, who needed replacing. There were five blocks of work which needed actions, one of which was the voice of the customer which had recently been carried out, and had provided some very useful insight for the organisation.
- Did the Directorate have enough staff to fulfil its ambitious programme? Director response – A number of inherited areas of the Directorate had been looked at, with a number of areas such as accounts payable being moved to a more appropriate Directorate to increase response times. There were some vacant posts which did cause strains on existing staff who had to fill in the gaps, and there was some work to do to fill some of the key roles within the Directorate.
- What was WBC doing to protect itself from cyberware and ransomware attacks? Director response – This could be picked up with Members separately.
- Could highways issues tracking be prioritised, as Members were pushing residents to report directly to WBC rather than having to go through their local ward member. Director response – There was a piece of work looking at priority areas where residents engaged most with the organisation, which would allow resources to be targeted in streamlining the customer experience in these high contact areas initially.
- The report made mention of 1000 planned library events due to take place, in a normal year would 1000 events take place? Officer response – The libraries team was continually engaging with younger communities, including online book clubs and other online events. Details could be shared with the Committee at a future meeting.
- How was customer feedback captured, including conversational feedback? Director response – “Gov Metrics” had been deployed across the WBC website, and options were being explored to expand this to phone and email interactions. There was a cultural change required to log any comment of dissatisfaction as a complaint, which would enable the voice of the customer to feed into the organisation’s central thinking.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Gregor Murray, Shahid Younis, Keeley Clements and Simon Price be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Information related to the Council's strategy to protect against cyberware and ransomware attacks be provided to Members confidentially where requested;
- 3) Additional information relating to library services return to a future meeting of the Committee;
- 4) A number of key priorities from the Communities, Insight, and Change Directorate return to the Committee during the current municipal year, after discussion between the Chairman and the Director.

14. PLANNING APPLICATION CONSULTATION - COMMITTEE REQUEST

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 43 to 46, which gave an update on how Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) consulted on planning applications.

The report outlined that WBC followed the statutory obligation to either display a notice on the site for no less than 21 days, or by serving a notice to any adjoining owner or occupier. WBC chose to serve notices to neighbours, and also ask that applicants voluntarily display a site notice which was provided to them. This approach was set out within the statement of community involvement. There were additional requirements for major applications within the Borough.

Wayne Smith (Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement) and Marcia Head (Service Manager – Place and Growth) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

During the ensuing discussions, Members raised the following points and queries:

- Some residents had reported that they had not received notices of nearby planning applications. Whilst most objections to applications did not lead to refusals, residents wanted to be consulted and ward members wanted to ensure that residents were engaged and consulted. What exactly was sent out to residents? Officer response – An A5 postcard was sent out with the WBC crest printed on the top of the card. The postcard was not sent in an envelope, and had the planning application details written on it. If there was a sensitive application, then more houses would usually be informed. Residents did not have to be consulted to comment on an application, and many residents spoke to each other about applications which usually led to a comments being left via the WBC planning section on the website for that specific application.
- The Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement commented that in addition to neighbours being consulted, Town and Parish Councils and local ward members were informed of every planning application in their area. 26,000 postcards had been sent out over the past year, and Covid-19 (C-19) had not slowed the planning process.
- Had there been a change in the average number of postcards sent out for each application? Officer response – The average was 6 as a usual residential property consulted with three properties, adjoining neighbours and the property to the rear, however larger or more sensitive applications attracted far more postcards which took the average to 6.

- Was 26,000 postcards per year sufficient to ensure that residents were aware of local planning applications? Officer response – WBC received tens of thousands of comments on planning applications per year. Planning was a balance, where objections had to be weighed up against planning law. Even where an application received no objections, officers still weighed up the impact of the development on the local community.
- Could the notification system be modernised, via sending consultations digitally? Officer response – This had been looked at in the past via an account system where you could opt-in to receiving digital notifications, however if the homeowner moved then WBC would not be fulfilling their duty to notify immediate neighbours about a planning application. A two-tiered system would be required, which would be a big IT change.
- Had consultations always been sent out as a postcard? Officer response – Some years ago, letters were sent out within an envelope which was addressed to “The Occupier”. Some people were confused why the letter was not addressed to them, and the letter was then changed to a postcard. Members and Town and parish Councils could ask local applicants to voluntarily place notices on their sites to increase engagement.
- It was noted that there was a general reluctance for residents to send in comments directly, rather than through a ward member or a Town or Parish Council.
- Was their scope for a communications exercise, such as within the Borough News, outlining different types of planning applications and what grounds objections could be raised on? Executive Member response – Training had occurred over the past couple of years, and was also planned for this year, around planning and enforcement. Information had also been provided within the Borough news in the past, as well as at Borough events. A piece was planned in the borough news regarding development of one and two bedroom properties within the Borough, and further pieces could also be included, for example relating to HMOs or permitted development rights.
- As more people were at home over the last year, could this have accounted for more people noticing development and planning applications? Executive Member and officer response – WBC had seen an increase of 89% increase in householder planning applications in the first 5 months of this year compared to last year, and there had also been a significant increase in requests to the planning enforcement teams. Fifty percent of contacts with the planning enforcement teams were not a breach of planning control, but still required a member of the team to visit the site and interact with the landowner. Many residents were seeing buildings being developed and fences being erected, thinking that they all required planning permission. A piece regarding what does and does not require planning permission could be included within WBC’s communications approach.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Wayne Smith and Marcia Head be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) This issue be raised with the Borough Parish Liaison Forum, with the Chairman of the Committee being invited to the Forum meeting where the issue was to be discussed. This item could then return to the Committee at a later date if required.

15. COVID-19 - BUSINESS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT RECOVERY UPDATE

Guy Grandison proposed an extension to the meeting by a maximum of 30 minutes. This was seconded by Alison Swaddle and subsequently carried.

The Committee considered a report, set out in supplementary agenda pages 3 to 12, which gave an overview of the Council's ongoing business and economic development recovery from the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic.

The report stated that whilst most of the work to date has been reactive, there was now a transition into the recovery phase for the Borough's economy and businesses. Over the coming year, the plan was to speak to all of Wokingham's businesses to develop a strong lasting relationship with the business community.

Stuart Munro (Executive Member for Business and Economic Development) and Rhian Hayes (Interim Assistant Director Housing and Place) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

During the ensuing discussion, Member raised the following points and queries:

- Members commented that Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) had gone above and beyond in being a supportive organisation throughout the pandemic for businesses across the Borough.
- Were there any statistics on the numbers of new businesses that had popped up during the pandemic, and how WBC might be able to support them going forwards? Officer response – This was typically a statistic which had a large time lag, however this information would be available in the future, and WBC was keen to support emerging businesses.
- The Committee wished to extend their thanks to all those who enabled such a thorough response in such a difficult period of time.
- What was the key to the successful deployment of business grants? Officer response – WBC staff delivered for our residents, and in particular Andrew Kupusarevic and the business rates team worked incredibly hard to ensure smooth delivery of business grant payments on or before time.
- How long would the Covid Marshals be kept on for? Officer response – The opening up fund would enable the tenure of the marshals to be extended for another couple of months.
- How was WBC planning to engage with all of the businesses across the Borough, and identify their needs properly? Officer response – Businesses had a wide range of varying needs. WBC was planning to speak to each business to understand their specific needs.
- It was noted that there was still a strong demand for commercial space within the Borough.

- Were companies letting us know if they planned on letting staff go after the furlough scheme ended? Officer response – Whilst there was no requirement for businesses to do so, WBC would seek to capture this information wherever possible.
- Was there any update on the claimant count within the Borough? Officer response – The current rate was 3.3%, down from 3.5%, and officers were watching this rate to see which direction it would go.
- How many Borough residents had been furloughed in the Borough? Officer response – 10,900 people, or 13 percent of total jobs, had been furloughed within the Borough.
- The business change survey had identified a number of businesses that were struggling and were not likely to continue trading. Was there an update on these businesses? Officer response – All responding businesses would be called, which had not occurred yet due to officers being involved in surge testing. Officers would be looking to see whether there was anything that WBC or another agency could do to support these businesses.
- How had the £300,000 grant related to the public realm been spent? Officer response – This grant had been used to purchase signage around social distancing, providing information leaflets regarding legislation and advice, and to employ some of the Covid marshals.
- What could be done to achieve a better response from future surveys to businesses? Officer response – This was difficult at businesses received a large amount of surveys. The next survey was planned for about six months' time, and more face to face contact was planned.
- Were the Covid marshals being considered for different roles within WBC once their contracts expired? Officer response – These staff had done an excellent job, and WBC always looked to retain skilled staff where possible and appropriate.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Stuart Munro and Rhian Hayes be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) All staff and Members involved in the business response to the pandemic be thanked for their hard work during a difficult time.

16. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME/MEETING SCHEDULE

The Committee considered the provisional list of items scheduled for upcoming meetings, including the extraordinary meeting scheduled for 21 July. Officers commented that further items would be scheduled for future meetings once discussions with the appropriate Executive members, Directors, and officers had been achieved.

RESOLVED That the work programme be noted.