

Note: Changes were made to these minutes at the meeting of the Committee held on 24 November 2021

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 6 OCTOBER 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.30 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Sam Akhtar, Shirley Boyt, Anne Chadwick, Phil Cunnington, Paul Fishwick and Clive Jones

Committee Members in Attendance

Councillors: Alison Swaddle

Executive Members Present

Councillors: Parry Batth, John Kaiser and Bill Soane

Officers Present

Susan Bentley (Prevention Manager), Stephen Brown (Interim Assistant Director - Place), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive (Director of Resources and Assets)), Joseph Howorth (Commercial Activity Manager), Beverley Thompson (Sport & Leisure Manager), David Thrale (Interim Public Protection Consultant) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

32. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

Alison Swaddle attended the meeting virtually and was therefore marked as in attendance, and was unable to propose, second or vote on items.

33. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 1 September 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

34. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

35. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

36. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

37. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (MTFP) 2022-2025

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 15 to 38, which gave a strategic overview of the draft Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2022-2025.

John Kaiser (Executive Member for Finance and Housing) and Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive (Director of Resources and Assets)) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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It was stated that this was the third year of the budget scrutiny process, of which the previous years had helped the overall budget setting process. This was a challenging time for local authority finances, with issues including inflation and social care costs providing increasing pressures on budgets. It was likely that the upcoming Local Government finance settlement would be a three year settlement, which would add an element of certainty with regards to funding. The potential impact of social care reforms could see severe pressures placed on Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) finances, as Wokingham had self-funding and partial self-funding social care users contribute around £8.5m per annum. Children's Services were still on their journey to a 'Good' OFSTED rating, whilst the increases to building costs and materials had meant that some capital projects were being reviewed with regards to a temporary hold whilst costs stabilised.

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

- What were the concerns in relation to CIL and S106 contributions? Deputy Chief Executive response – WBC's approach was to provide the funding upfront to unlock future development. S106 and CIL contributions were then received later from developers. Where a developer was struggling, or there was a significant time gap between the upfront funding and receipt of contributions, WBC could see pressures on its finances. The general reserve was there to cushion any impact, however if several large developers all started struggling simultaneously then reserves may not be enough.
- What was the worst case scenario financially for WBC with regards to the adult social care reforms? Deputy Chief Executive response – In very crude terms, the better the NHS was funded the better their throughput of patients would be, which would mean more clients entering the social care sector. If there was no forthcoming funding whatsoever, these reforms could place a £20m burden on WBC in several years' time.
- It was noted that Members were appreciative of taking both capital and revenue proposals together this year.
- Were WBC being penalised for having a good collection rate of Council Tax, how confident were WBC that a 3 year Local Government settlement would be forthcoming, and should a three year settlement be agreed what could be done mid-settlement to improve the terms for WBC? Executive Member and Deputy Chief Executive response – When looking at grants, WBC were good in many areas and subsequently received smaller grants. The only way that central Government could improve struggling Councils was by providing them with additional funding. WBC needed to be very alive to the levelling up agenda and the impact that this might have on the Borough. Officers were more confident than not with regards to a three year settlement, and it was not unheard of for representations to be heard and changes to be made mid-settlement, for example negative revenue support grants.
- Which staff were included within calculations relating to contractual inflation? Deputy Chief Executive response – This would include all directly employed staff with a best estimate for the level of contractual inflation. Currently, budget had not been assigned for a pay award, however there were indications that it could be around a 1.75% award.

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- Why was the assumed additional council tax base increase 2.25% for year one and 1.5% for year 2? Deputy Chief Executive response – This was a statutory calculation which included forecasts and officers tended to be fairly cautious. The further on officers looked, the more speculative they had to be and there was no confidence that there would be an increase above 1.5%, however this would be reviewed.
- Who exactly were WBC engaging with within Central Government with regards to receiving a fair funding settlement? Executive Member response – John Redwood had been spoken to publically with regards to this, and this would be done with all of the Borough's MPs in a simple and logical way. It was then hoped that the Borough's MPs would lobby Ministers on WBC's behalf. The second stage would involve writing to Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations) to try and persuade him to provide a fair funding settlement. It was important that the levelling up policy was not at the detriment of the Wokingham Borough.
- It was noted that draft bid sheets would be provided to the Committee earlier than the publishing dates of future agendas where possible and practicable.
- How realistic was it to balance the capital funding gap? Executive Member and Deputy Chief Executive response – WBC would have to set a balanced budget, and therefore it was a definite realistic prospect to balance the budget. The real issue would be how many 'pinch points' would be involved, and identifying source income and when schemes would be delivered. The budget for year 1 would have to be balanced, and preferably year 2 and year 3 in addition. The capital programme had already been reduced by approximately £9m in the past three weeks, and the funding gap would be achieved however there may be some pain in doing so.
- Had any further impacts of Brexit been budgeted for? Executive Member and Deputy Chief Executive response – This had been flagged up as there were a number of potential issues including interest rates, staff shortages, and supply chain issues. Best estimates were always used for the budget setting process, regardless of where those pressures came from.
- Had any percentage increases been included within the capital programme with regards to the increased costs of materials, inflation, or labour issues? Executive Member and Deputy Chief Executive response – A very modest amount had been budgeted in for the moment, and it was a work in progress with regards to uplifting figures.
- Were the significant savings targets achievable? Deputy Chief Executive response – Many of the savings proposals were efficiency savings, whereby a simultaneous service improvement and service cost reduction could be achieved. Some savings goals were more complicated going forwards, for example using the Public Loans Board to invest and receive a return. New regulations had reduced the ability of Local Authorities to borrow to invest, which had been laid out in a recent Executive paper.
- What was the current Council Tax collection rate, and how far would it have to fall for a significant or catastrophic impact on WBC's finances? Executive Member and Deputy Chief Executive response – The current Council Tax collection rate was around 99%,

with a similar rate for business rates collection. A similar trajectory was developing and was expected for collection rates this year. Each 1% of Council Tax not collected would cost WBC approximately £1.2m, which would be significant in and of itself and therefore there was not a lot of leeway. The Council Tax reduction scheme had been extended this year, and WBC was working positively with residents to help them avoid getting into debt in general.

- What could the national levelling up agenda mean for WBC? Executive Member response – Everybody should be entitled to a decent wage and opportunities. As Wokingham was seen to be at the top of the pile in terms of Local Authorities, it would be hard for the Government to level it up further. Levelling up appeared to be a good idea, but not at the expense of Local Authorities such as WBC. It was a great ambition, but it was yet to be seen what this would mean for WBC.
- How much of the split of services delivered by WBC was moving from discretionary to statutory? Executive Member and Deputy Chief Executive response – WBC tried to make discretionary services self-funding so that they did not impinge on the budget as much. For example, the town centre regeneration would provide funding for other services.
- The Committee gave their thanks to officers and Executive Members for their hard work in already being in a better position with regards to a budgetary gap than this time last year. The Deputy Chief Executive commented that WBC compared much better than a lot of Local Authorities in terms of a budgetary funding gap, however it was important that WBC were not penalised for having a strong Council Tax collection rate in terms of future settlement deals.
- Would there be any delays to the capital programme as a result of increasing building material costs? Executive Member and Deputy Chief Executive response – It was wise to pause or change some projects where savings could currently be made and where it was palatable to do so. WBC was robust enough to be able to challenge and review projects where it made sense to do so. An example of this was the change of focus on WBC's investment strategy to instead focus on affordable housing, which would take time including waiting for construction costs to fall.
- Members commented that it was fantastic to see that the Citizens Advice Council Tax protocol had been adopted. The Deputy Chief Executive commented that the Council Tax team had done fantastic work to achieve a high collection rate whilst working positively with residents.
- Would the capital templates be brought up to the same high standard of the revenue bid templates this year? Deputy Chief Executive response – It had been stressed to Directors and officers that it was important for the scrutiny process that each template was correctly filled out.
- It was suggested that a section of Equalities obligations might be placed on bid sheets to remind officers and Executive Members at an early stage of potential full equality impact assessments that might later be required.

RESOLVED That:

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- 1) John Kaiser and Graham Ebers be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Revenue and capital bids be presented at future meetings of the Committee by each Directorate;
- 3) Officers endeavour to circulate bids to Committee Members via email prior to agenda publication where possible.

38. LEISURE SERVICE PROVISION UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 39 to 72, which gave an update on Leisure Service provision within the Borough.

The report outlined the investment that had been made to a variety of facilities within the Borough, including the Cantely Park enhancements and the new outdoor activity centre at Dinton Pastures. A variety of specialised programmes were in place, including the SHINE programme for over 60's and Wokingham active holiday camps for children. A draft revised Leisure Strategy had been developed, and the associated action plan was appended to the report for consideration.

Parry Batth (Executive Member for Environment and Leisure), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive (Director of Resources and Assets)), Susan Bentley (Prevention Manager), Joseph Howorth (Commercial Activity Manager), and Beverley Thompson (Sport & Leisure Manager) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- Were the 1.3 million fitness attendances for the 2019/20 year, and was the 1700 figure for the walking for health programme the total number of walkers or attendances? Officer response – The 1.3 million fitness attendances were for the 2019/20 year, and there were 1700 walkers for the walking for health programme in that year.
- How were the views of residents who were not currently using leisure facilities being captured? Officer response – A consultation had been undertaken and publicised online, and a number of wants had taken place in a variety of locations across the Borough.
- How was the free membership for children in receipt of free school meals being advertised? Officer response – These passes were given directly to schools within the Borough to distribute to eligible children. These children could then attend as many sessions as they wished to attend.
- The SHINE programme had seen the unlimited sessions pass rise from £180 to £780 per annum, which could be very off-putting for a number of residents. Had officers noticed any fall off in attendances of SHINE sessions as a result of these changes? Officer response – This programme had been reduced as a result of Covid-19, and in order to maintain the original programme and offer more variety the price was increased. Splitting the fee into monthly instalments had been investigated, and officers were working hard to procure a new booking system. There had been a slight decrease in member take-up, however there had not been much of a decrease in

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attendance of sessions. Approximately 76% of the total offering was being taken up by members.

- There was some concern that the increase in the unlimited session SHINE fees was very large and could be at the detriment of many residents within the Borough. Officers noted that this offering was still cheaper than that offered by other Local Authorities via benchmarking.
- Would spending be split up in future to show where Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) had invested in services rather than where third parties or grants had been used, for example the Loddon Valley Leisure Centre upgrade? Deputy Chief Executive response – WBC were still paying for the Loddon Valley Leisure Centre upgrade as the contract with Places Leisure required them to invest in WBC facilities. Grants were only awarded via the effort and commitment of officers in winning bids to enable projects to be delivered.
- How much did the new boxing studio cost to develop? Officer response – The boxing studio costed £630k in total.
- The Committee commented that the Sports and Leisure Service did a fantastic job and delivered a diverse range of services for residents to enjoy.
- How was the boxing studio going to be advertised to appeal to a variety of demographics? Officer response – This had been identified as a hole within the overall sports and leisure offering within the borough, and there was a desire for boxing, kickboxing, and combat sports sessions. A variety of classes would be on offer including a young offender offering. The goal was to get a diverse range of people signing up to sessions, and there had already been a good signup rate from women and whole families for a variety of different sessions and classes on offer. A variety of different membership and pay as you go options were available. The Executive Member added that this was a demand driven service which would be welcomed by a wide variety of people as this was the only such offering within the Borough.
- Why was there a difference in expenditure between the Bulmershe and Carnival Pool leisure centre redevelopments? Executive Member and officer response – Carnival pool was a larger overall facility, whilst Bulmershe was physically restricted due to the overall space and footprint of the site. Carnival Pool was also being used as a cultural hub for the Borough, which would cater for aspects other than sports and fitness.
- What was being done to improve bus travel availability to and from leisure centres, and were more cycle routes planned to avoid the need for as many car journeys? Officer response – Officers were aware of the need for improved bus provision and cycle route provision as a result of the consultation responses. Officers were working with My Journey and the Cleaner and Greener team to try and improve upon these areas.
- It was noted that whilst the provision of additional car parking spaces at leisure centres went against the Climate Emergency Action Plan, this was a key piece of feedback from the consultation which officers were working to address.

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- How were the views of Town and Parish Council's being incorporated into the draft Strategy and action plan? Officer response – Town and Parish Councils would be represented in the ongoing working group, and an addition could be made to the action plan to highlight this. It was noted that this issue could also be raised at the Borough Parish Liaison Forum.
- Were there any plans to broker a deal with the bus service operators to offer a discount on entry to leisure centres including the Bulmershe leisure centre? Officer response – Places Leisure could be liaised with regards to exploring options for all facilities.
- Could a specific section be added to the action tracker specifically for over 60's? Officer response – A section could be added to action tracker with regards to this.
- Was there a good take-up for cardiac rehabilitation classes, and were there sessions on offer for those diagnosed with diabetes? Officer response – There was still a good take-up for the cardiac rehabilitation sessions, and sessions were offered for those diagnosed with diabetes via GP referrals.
- Were swimming lessons receiving a good take-up? Officer response – Swimming lessons were very popular within the Borough, and there were waiting lists for sessions. These lessons were paid for by the parent or guardian of the child. Officers were looking to work with leisure centres and swim centres to help attract more teachers in order to reduce any waiting lists.
- Were the holiday classes run by WBC? Officer response – Yes, these offerings were run by WBC and were used by approximately 4000 children.
- How much pupil premium funding was spent on sports and leisure? Officer response – This was decided by each school on a case by case basis.
- Had Town and Parish Council's been consulted regarding any potential outdoor gyms? Officer response – This was in the process of final designs, after which Town and Parish Council's would be consulted on the designs and proposals.
- What was done to help attract hard to reach groups into health and fitness environments? Officer response – There were a number of programmes for people with disabilities, and outreach to a wide variety of potential users would be linked in with the Health and Wellbeing Board Action Group.
- The Committee wished to thank the Service for continuing to do a fantastic job, whilst offering a diverse range of classes, activities, and sessions.
- How was the low uptake of swimming lessons by people within the BAME community being addressed? Officer response – This was being worked on by the Health and Wellbeing Action Group.
- Had local religious centres been contacted to help advertise the Service's offering to a variety of potential users? Officer response – This could be added to the action tracker alongside additional marketing opportunities.

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- The Executive Member commented that the credit for the fantastic service offering went to the officers and staff who went out of their way to meet residents' needs. The Committee commended this sentiment.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Parry Batth, Graham Ebers, Susan Bentley, Joseph Howorth, and Beverly Thompson be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Suggestions relating to a specific section on over 60's and marketing opportunities be added to the action tracker;
- 3) Officers and staff be thanked for delivering a diverse, well-used, and much appreciated service.

39. BRINGING THE PUBLIC PROTECTION SERVICE BACK IN-HOUSE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 73 to 78, which gave an update on the process of bringing the Public Protection Service back in-house.

The report outlined that the majority of associated regulatory services would be brought back in-house, with a minority of services with more regional significance being provide by West Berkshire Council. Examples of services to be provided by West Berkshire Council included Trading Standards, air quality, and farm animal welfare. The exit plan was likely to be signed off via delegated decision after 8 October 2021.

Bill Soane (Executive Member for Neighbourhood and Communities), Stephen Brown (Interim Assistant Director – Place), and David Thrale (Interim Public Protection Consultant) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- It was noted that the PowerPoint slide pack would be circulated to the Committee.
- Was the exit plan on target? Officer response – Yes, this was on track and the goal was to enhance the overall service provision. Staff were doing a fantastic job to enable the transition back in-house to run smoothly.
- Were any costs in relation to bring the service back in house being kept as low as possible? Officer response – Costs were being kept as low as possible for all parties during negotiations. Negotiations were difficult as the partnership feel that they were losing out by Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) leaving, however officers were working as hard as possible to get a fair deal for both WBC and the partnership.
- Were there any concerns that critical milestones may not be met on time? Officer response – There had been concerns earlier on in the process with regards to some deadlines, however officers were now more confident as the process moved forwards.

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- Were issues relating to the pension scheme for staff on target to be addressed? Officer response – Parity would be assured for all staff, and allowances would be made for staff who were expected to work antisocial hours.
- Were negotiations relating to jointly owned partner assets going smoothly? Officer response – The key assets were vehicles, and WBC were looking to take a number from the partnership to eliminate the liability aspect for vehicles. The remainder of joint assets were fairly low level.
- Had meaningful discussions taken place with the police with regards to antisocial behaviour, and the move on this aspect of the service back in-house? Officer response – Discussion had been had with the police since the beginning of this process, and discussions had also taken place with the Community Safety Partnership. The aim of the service was to build better partnerships, and it was expected that this would be beneficial for the police service, the Community Safety Partnership, and WBC.
- Who would produce the report in relation to air quality for DEFRA? Officer response – This would be provided by the partnership for WBC, as it was felt better value to pay towards the cost of the expert that was writing this report rather than paying solely for an expert.
- The Executive Member commented that this was driven by a desire to offer residents a better service. Antisocial behaviour was just one aspect where benefits would be seen, for example by working closely within communities to address issues early and use less police resources. Ward Members and Town and Parish Councils would be a great help in feeding in local knowledge to assist with antisocial behaviour, food hygiene, and licensing issues. Officers were working very hard on very difficult and complicated tasks, for the purposes of providing residents with a better service.
- It was noted that there were project costs associated with this area, and it was accepted that West Berkshire would be reimbursed for associated project costs. £250k had been allocated to cover costs associated with bringing the service back in-house.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Bill Soane, Stephen Brown, and David Thrale be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) A further verbal update be considered by the Committee in January 2022.

40. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their work programme, which was set out in agenda pages 79 to 82.

It was noted that whilst Council owned companies were not currently scheduled for an upcoming Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, these were still on the wider work programme and could be looked at in the next municipal year.

Officers commented that the provisional plan was to receive an interim update on the BME forum at the extraordinary meeting of the Committee on 3rd November, with a more substantive update then planned for March 2022.

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It was noted that the item on overgrown pavements would be widened to include how the Council managed a range of contracts including street cleansing and highways issues.

It was commented that the Council's strategy for lowering transport emissions alongside the electric vehicle strategy would be out for consultation after Christmas 2021. It was suggested that these issues be taken to either the 5th January 2022 meeting or a further extraordinary meeting.

Officers noted that an update on the Domestic Abuse Strategy would be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 18 October, and the intention was to invite Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Members to listen to the presentation and ask questions.

Members asked that an update report be produced with regards to any updates relating to the proposed in-Borough Crematorium.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Callum Wernham be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Items relating to scrutiny of Council owned companies be provisionally scheduled for the next municipal year;
- 3) The item on overgrown pavements be widened to include how the Council managed a range of contracts including street cleansing and highways issues;
- 4) The provisional plan be to receive an interim update on the BME forum at the extraordinary meeting of the Committee on 3rd November, with a more substantive update then scheduled for March 2022;
- 5) Officers explore the options regarding scheduling an item relating to the consultations on the Council's strategy for lowering transport emissions alongside the electric vehicle strategy;
- 6) The Domestic Abuse Strategy be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 18 October, with the intention to invite Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Members to listen to the presentation and ask questions;
- 7) An update report be produced with regards to any updates relating to the proposed in-Borough Crematorium.