

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
HELD ON 23 FEBRUARY 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.56 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Pauline Helliard-Symons (Chairman), Alison Swaddle (Vice-Chairman), Sam Akhtar, Rachel Burgess, Paul Fishwick, Jim Frewin, Guy Grandison, Norman Jorgensen, Sarah Kerr, Rebecca Margetts, Jackie Rance and Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Gregor Murray and Laura Blumenthal

Officers Present

Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Mark Gwynne, Interim Head of Insight, Strategy and Inclusion
Jackie Whitney, Head of Customer Delivery

31. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

32. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 January 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

33. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The following Members made general personal declarations of interest:

- Rachel Burgess - as a member of the Anti-Poverty Working Group.
- Paul Fishwick - as his wife worked as a volunteer for Citizens' Advice.
- Jim Frewin – as a member of the Customer Excellence Programme Working Group.
- Sarah Kerr - as a volunteer at the Wokingham Foodbank.
- Alison Swaddle - as a member of the Anti-Poverty Working Group.

34. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

35. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

36. ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY 2022-26

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 17 to 44, which gave details of the Council's Anti-Poverty Strategy 2022/26. The report stated that the Anti-Poverty Strategy aimed to prevent people falling in to poverty, offer support to those already in poverty and help those in poverty to get out of it. Through working in partnership it aimed to develop an early intervention approach.

Councillor Laura Blumenthal, Deputy Executive Member for Equalities, Poverty, the Arts and Climate Emergency and Mark Gwynne, Interim Head of Insight, Strategy and Inclusion, attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that the objectives of the Strategy over the next four years were to:

- Support people in poverty;
- Strengthen communities in their resilience to poverty;
- Improve life opportunities for residents who are living in poverty.

The draft Anti-Poverty Strategy was appended to the report. It was being developed in partnership with the voluntary and community sector (VCS). In December 2021 a Hardship Alliance was created engaging four key VCS partners. Amy Garstang, Chair of the Hardship Alliance, attended the meeting to give a VCS perspective on the development of the Strategy.

The report stated that the draft Strategy had been subject to public consultation in January and February 2022 and would be updated to build in responses. Further development with the Hardship Alliance would take place in the coming months. The revised Strategy was due to be presented to the Executive for approval on 26 May 2022.

During the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

The overarching strategy did not say much about preventing poverty in the Borough. Possible wording could be “doing all that we can to ensure that no one lives in poverty in the Borough”. Councillor Blumenthal commented that she was happy to look at wording which strengthened this aspect of the Strategy.

There were a number of issues currently which had an impact on poverty in the Borough. These included the effects of the pandemic, the energy crisis, house prices, changes to National Insurance and the rise in inflation. The Council and its partners should be lobbying on a range of issues. The introduction to the Strategy should be amended to reflect the range of challenges facing residents in the Borough. Councillor Blumenthal welcomed ideas for lobbying and exploring the steps that the Council could take to publicise the impact of these challenges.

Rachel Burgess raised the issues around in-work poverty and put forward a proposed recommendation to the cross party Anti-Poverty Working Group:

“Wokingham Borough Council will work towards becoming an accredited Real Living Wage Employer and will encourage local employers and supply chains to do the same”.

The proposal was seconded by Sarah Kerr.

Upon being put to the vote, the proposed recommendation was approved. Councillor Blumenthal stated that the cross-party working group would be happy to consider the recommendation.

Was there any additional funding to support delivery of the Anti-Poverty Strategy? Councillor Blumenthal confirmed that the Government had provided grant funding of £500k to support the development and delivery of initiatives being created as part of the Strategy. The Council was developing a strong team to implement the Strategy and work closely with the VCS. Amy Garstang confirmed the strong working relationship between the Council and the Hardship Alliance.

It was noted that there had been 140 responses to the consultation on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy. Did Officers know how many of these respondents were in the

vulnerable groups? Mark Gwynne confirmed that the consultation did not specifically seek information on different categories. However, it appeared that 40/50% were in the Just About Managing group. There was an ongoing issue relating to the availability of recent data to inform the development of the Strategy.

Had any briefings been provided for the Town and Parish Councils? Mark Gwynne confirmed that Officers had met with the Town and Parish Councils in January 2022. Officers were happy to have further discussions following the consultation exercise.

As already mentioned, a number of ongoing national issues were likely to significantly increase the number of people in debt over the short term. Did the Strategy factor this in? Councillor Blumenthal confirmed the Strategy would include short and longer term measures.

The report referred to the growing number of children in the Borough who were eligible for free school meals. It was important to maximise the number of children eligible for free school meals whilst, at the same time, minimising any potential stigma attached. There was a concern that some parents did not wish to come forwards even though their child was eligible. It should be seen as a helping hand rather than a handout. Members with experience in local schools felt that the existing system did make the process anonymous.

Whilst the closer working relationship with the VCS was welcomed, it was still important to be clear about accountability in delivering the action points in the Strategy. Could the relevant Members or Officers be highlighted in the Action Plan? Councillor Blumenthal confirmed that this suggestion would be considered.

One way to increase the uptake of free school meals would be to extend the eligible age group. The Council could lobby the Government on this issue. Items such as uniforms and technology also needed to be more accessible and inclusive.

Could the next update to the Committee include the specific actions underpinning the Anti-Poverty Strategy together with the relevant costings and funding sources? Councillor Blumenthal confirmed that this information could be included in future reports.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Laura Blumenthal and Mark Gwynne be thanked for attending the meeting to answer Member questions on the Anti-Poverty Strategy;
- 2) the cross-party Anti-Poverty Working Group consider the Committee's recommendation that: "Wokingham Borough Council will work towards becoming an accredited Real Living Wage Employer and will encourage local employers and supply chains to do the same".
- 3) the Chairman write to Councillor Blumenthal with a summary of the Committee's ideas and suggestions relating to the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

37. EQUALITY PLAN UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 45 to 58, which gave details of progress of the year 1 action plan which underpinned the Council's Equality Plan 2021/25. The Equality Plan aimed to deliver a programme of improvements against the

Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG). The report also set out the action plan for year 2.

Laura Blumenthal, Deputy Executive Member for Equalities, Poverty, the Arts and Climate Emergency and Mark Gwynne, Interim Head of Insight, Strategy and inclusion attended the meeting to introduce the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that the year 1 action plan had set out 29 actions which would progress towards the “Developing” level of the EFLG. The EFLG comprised four themes around which the action plan was structured and on which progress would be monitored. The themes were:

- Understanding and working with your communities;
- Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment;
- Responsive services and customer care;
- Diverse and engaged workforce.

Mark Gwynne highlighted progress in the Year 1 action plan in areas such as procurement, communications, customer experience and data collection. A cross-party Member working group had been established together with a Member learning and development programme. Externally, a Residents Equality Forum had been set up and work was ongoing to support a refresh of the BME Forum.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

In relation to Action 18 in Appendix 1 – what training had been provided on Equality Impact Assessments? Mark Gwynne confirmed that more details on training provision could be circulated to Members.

How did pay gaps fit into the Equality Plan? Councillor Blumenthal stated that she would discuss this issue with the Officers.

In relation to Action 17 – could some examples of Role Model behaviour be included, e.g. the calling out of hate speech? Councillor Blumenthal stated that this suggestion would be considered.

Could the list of protected characteristics be extended, e.g. to include socio- economic factors. Mark Gwynne stated that this could be considered.

In relation to the EFLG, was the assessment free of charge? Mark Gwynne confirmed that this was the case as a result of the Council signing up to the framework.

In relation to Action 2 – was the Plan co-produced? Councillor Blumenthal stated that the potential for more co-production could be explored in future.

In relation to Action 15 – Celebrate successes – where was the first case study published? Councillor Blumenthal confirmed that details of the first case study could be shared with Members.

Could RAG ratings be attached to the actions to give a clearer picture on which actions were progressing well and could the data be broke down into wards? Councillor Blumenthal stated that these ideas could be investigated further.

In relation to Action 11 – could a deeper dive take place into modern-day slavery within supply chains? Councillor Blumenthal confirmed that this suggestion could be pursued.

It was confirmed that the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service was doing good work on equalities. Was there potential for sharing ideas and training? Councillor Blumenthal stated that she would be happy to contact the service to discuss the potential for joining up.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) progress against the Equality Plan Year 1 Action Plan be noted;
- 2) the Equality Plan Year 2 Action Plan be noted;
- 3) the ideas and suggestions from Members be incorporated into the future development of the Equality Plan;
- 4) the Committee receive an annual update on progress against the actions in the Equality Plan.

38. CUSTOMER EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 59 to 64, which provided an update on the Council's Customer Excellence Programme. The report gave details of the existing Council access points and the overall aims of the programme which were to move to:

- Standardised customer service across departments and ownership of customer experience to be organisation-wide;
- A new website centred on the needs of our residents;
- Customer insight used proactively as part of a customer-centric strategy which drives continuous improvement across the Council;
- Easy to use, streamlined customer journeys, focussed on customer need.

Gregor Murray (Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions) and Jackie Whitney (Head of Customer Delivery) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report gave details of the five year change programme, highlighting the key projects and workstreams and the expected benefits to be delivered for residents. The programme would be informed by data and customer feedback.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

How would Member feedback be incorporated into the programme? It was confirmed that a cross party Member working group would meet to consider progress and would act as a conduit for Member views. Members on the working group included Gregor Murray (Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Stephen Conway, Jim Frewin and Pauline Jorgensen.

As part of the data gathering exercise, would real life case studies be used? Jackie Whitney confirmed that real life situations would be used. The aim was to get to the root

cause of any problems and to understand any unintended consequences from service changes.

What was the level of engagement with key services? Jackie Whitney confirmed that there was strong engagement with services. Customer delivery officers acted in a business partner role.

Some Members found contacting specific Officers challenging. Could Members be provided with a list of key Officers together with their contact details? Jackie Whitney confirmed that a list could be put together and circulated to Members.

A key issue was the use of jargon and Council speak. What steps were being taken to ensure that plain English was used as much as possible in Council communications? Jackie Whitney confirmed that the Council was working with a specialist company to review the content and tone of Council documents and forms. This would extend to the improvement plan for the Council website.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Gregor Murray and Jackie Whitney be thanked for attending the meeting to answer Member questions on the Customer Excellence Programme;
- 2) the update on the Customer Excellence Programme be noted;
- 3) Member comments and suggestions be used to inform the development of the programme.

39. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORTS

The Committee considered the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual reports for 2021/22, set out at Agenda pages 65 to 84. The reports gave details of the issues considered by each of the Committees and the impact of their work during the year. The reports would be submitted to the March Council meeting.

Alison Swaddle commented that the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee report should be updated to include reference to discussions held at the recent meeting.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Reports for 2021/22, as amended, be approved;
- 2) the Annual Reports be submitted to the Council meeting in March 2022.

40. CONSIDERATION OF THE CURRENT EXECUTIVE FORWARD PROGRAMME

The committee considered a copy of the Executive Forward Programme as set out on Agenda pages 85 to 92.

RESOLVED: That the Executive Forward Programme be noted.

41. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered its forward work programme and that of the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees, as set out on Agenda pages 93 to 102.

RESOLVED: That the Overview and Scrutiny Forward Work Programmes be noted.

42. ACTION TRACKER REPORT

The Committee considered the latest Action Tracker report, set out at Agenda pages 103 to 106.

The Chairman confirmed that she would be meeting with the Leader and Chief Executive on 6 March 2022 to discuss ways of developing the working relationship between the Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the Executive.

RESOLVED: That the Action Tracker report be noted.