

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 30 JUNE 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.44 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Clive Jones (Chairman), Rachel Bishop-Firth, Prue Bray, Lindsay Ferris, Paul Fishwick, David Hare, Sarah Kerr, Ian Shenton and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

Other Councillors Present

Laura Blumenthal
Norman Jorgensen

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Stephen Conway.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 31 March 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER

Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the Executive meeting on 30 June 2022. This is certainly a very historic occasion, as it is the first time that the Liberal Democrats have led an Executive meeting for over 20 years. We are very committed to working with other political parties, and that is why we are working in partnership with the Labour Group and the Independent Councillors, and I am very pleased that Labour Members and Independent Members have been able to take up the roles of Chair of Audit and an Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Conservatives were offered the Vice-Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee but they declined, and they were offered the role of Chair of Health Overview and Scrutiny but they declined. It is very sad that they declined those two offers of Chair and Vice-Chair of powerful Committees within the Council.

There is much for the new Liberal Democrat administration to do. From day one, we were advised that there were serious budget issues which needed to be addressed, and within minutes of taking over the Council we were advised that there had been a hole left of £1.2 million in bus service budgets. Eighteen bus services were under threat because there were no budgets to support them – that is what the Conservative administration left behind. And for the avoidance of doubt, this is a copy (*the Leader held up a copy*) of the slide that we were presented with just after nine-o'clock the day we took over, and it said 'not budgeted for', so very clearly not budgeted for and not really a nice way to be taking over the running of the Council.

I am very pleased that we have a commitment from the Secretary of State Michael Gove, that he will come to visit Wokingham. I saw him on Tuesday, and I am looking forward to working with him with our officers and with people from his department so that we can try to reduce the housing numbers here in Wokingham.

My final comment is on the Conservatives declared intention to disrupt Council meetings. Is this a responsible opposition – I don't think so. Is this the correct way to behave – definitely not. I hope that they will consider their attitude in future Council meetings.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

5.1 Jan Heard has asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan the following question:

Question

Following comments made by Coalition members on BBC radio Berkshire before the Local Election, will they please take Hall Farm off of the Local Plan Update and also ensure that relevant policies and voices are given full weight in planning matters? If I can draw attention in particular to the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan, plus all Policies concerned with Views Valued by Residents, those relating to Landscape and Heritage, and the advice of Wokingham Council's Landscape Officer.

Answer

The last administration approved consultation on the Local Plan Update Revised Growth Strategy Consultation. Through this consultation everyone had the opportunity to express their opinion on those proposals, and if they disagree to say what they would do instead.

Clearly it would be wrong of me to pre-determine the local plan process. I can assure you, however, that we will carefully review what has been said in response to the consultation before deciding on how to move forward.

Since the election the new administration had written to Mr Gove MP highlighting our concerns about the how high housing numbers currently expected on Wokingham Borough are calculated. We have also engaged with our local MPs, and we have received strong support from them on this topic. More recently the new Leader of the Council met with Mr Gove at the recent LGA conference in Harrogate, and he has agreed to come to Wokingham. Returning to the previous consultation, comments were received towards all of the proposed allocations and on other matters such as included in the consultation and on other matters such as infrastructure provision, the need for new homes, the need for new jobs and the need, as far as possible, to protect our environment and Green Belt. This includes the specific issues of landscape, heritage and other matters you've raised, and the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan.

Experience within the borough and elsewhere across the country show that we must have a new local plan. Not having an effective plan would mean loss of control or less control over where development happens. It is also much harder to invest in improvements to infrastructure such as roads and schools where the timing and location of development is driven by developers in an ad-hoc and dispersed pattern.

Supplementary Question

I'm very pleased to hear that Mr Gove is going to come to Wokingham, that is good news. However, I notice that the University of Reading is now promoting the garden village on its online website, and I am rather concerned on the northern wards rather dominating the planning section of the Council again, which doesn't give a lot of confidence that Hall Farm will be taken out of the Local Plan Update. I would like to make the point that fewer than 4,500 houses at Hall farm would be uneconomic, so there is really no justification for not

removing it. I would like to make the point that before the local election, Clive Jones made the protest about Hall Farm his own by photobombing the group photograph, and I would just like to make the point that both residents and voters will be expecting results.

Supplementary Answer

Thank you. My view is that it is totally irrelevant that I happen to be a northern Parish Councillor, I will be doing this role strictly in line with the planning rules and what we do. One of the reasons that we have been approaching Mr Gove is that we want to be able to explain to him where here in Wokingham, and there are other Councils as well who are affected, we have a good case to be able to present to him to see whether we can get a new calculation done regarding this area. One area in particular that we feel needs to be taken into account is the fact that this Council area has overprovided the number of houses for at least 6 or 7 years, as we estimate that that is at least 3,000 above what would have been needed if we were to do either the either 661 or the current 781 homes per year, and we averaged somewhere between 1,200 over that period. That will be one of the issues, and the reason for that is if we can get the recalculation then there becomes greater opportunity for us to look at the type of issues that you have raised. I do confirm that we have gone through the consultation responses and Hall Farm was in the top 6 having the greatest level of objection.

6. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

6.1 Laura Blumenthal has asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:

Question

The Council has been provided with over £500,000 in funding from Central Government to help local residents that need support paying for essentials such as food and utility bills. The previous Conservative administration had drawn up plans for how to allocate it, and I'm pleased that the Council is continuing with this. The fallout from the pandemic continues to hit people hard, and the Council must ensure that it's doing everything it can to help residents. Can the Executive Member provide me with the reassurance that the Council will be able to successfully communicate with families and individuals in need to take up this money – and ensure that there is no money left in September, which is when the Fund needs to all be spent?

Answer

Thank you for your question Laura. The Council provides many grants to people who are in need of financial help. How to access these grants is currently advertised on our website along with other options for residents who need help. Our partner charities are aware of these grants for when they are providing support to our customers, and our customer service teams are all trained to recognise someone who might need funding help. I'm going to ask Councillor Bishop-Firth to talk a little bit about the work that she has done to promote these grants that we receive and how they have been communicated to those who need it.

My understanding is that this question relates to latest grant of Household Support Funding which is £525,000. As you say, this must be spent by 30th September or it reverts to the government. Clearly, we need this money to be spent on residents living in hardship in the Borough.

To ensure that we achieve this, Wokingham Borough Council is working closely with our voluntary and community sector partners in the Hardship Alliance. Together we have developed a plan for ensuring that the grant is spent on those most in need in our community, within the guidelines set by central government.

This includes a robust communication plan, using both online and other channels, to ensure that those in the greatest need are both aware of and encouraged to come forward for help. We will closely monitor take up and take action if there is any concern that the money will not be allocated to help residents in need by the deadline.

Wokingham Borough Council acted fast to ensure that the first £40,000 of the grant was spent on providing vouchers to ensure that all children attending borough schools and who get free school meals in term time, had money to replace these meals during the spring half term holiday.

During the last few weeks, we have reviewed the existing plans, taking into account feedback from the voluntary and community sector. For example, we ensured that family size was taken into account in allocating payments to families with children, and we strengthened the support given to families who are living in hardship but are not eligible for free school meals.

As a councillor, I'm committed to transparent and collaborative cross party working to support this very important task. We will continue with the working group, and Laura, you of course have been invited to join this group.

Supplementary Question

Thank you for the answers. The Council was given the household support fund by mid-May but communications to residents on how they could access the fund did not go out until 17 June. Please can you explain why there was a delay of over one-month.

Supplementary Answer

Thank you for your supplementary, Laura. As stated, Wokingham Borough Council worked very hard to ensure that the first £40,000 of the grant went to children for the spring half term holiday in May. We then reviewed the existing plans so that we could take better account of the needs of people, and the bulk of the money will go out to help families during the summer holidays and should be with them for the start of the summer holidays.

6.2 Norman Jorgensen has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question

Will the Executive Member commit to keeping weekly bin collection in Wokingham Borough?

Answer

Thank you, Councillor. You are probably aware that the existing waste collection contract stipulates weekly collections, and that is due for retendering in 2026.

In preparation for that, last year, a cross party group was setup through your previous administration to develop a sustainable waste strategy in conjunction with the wider climate change agenda. As part of the ongoing work, an initial consultation to residents has been undertaken and feedback shows that the protection of environment is a high priority for them.

It was agreed to undertake further community consultation in late autumn of this year, on options to improve the environmental benefits of waste collection in the Borough, and we will listen to responses and then decide what is the best path to follow once all work has been completed.

It would therefore be quite wrong to pre-empt the outcome of the jointly agreed process until further consultation with residents has taken place.

Supplementary Question

I am a little bit surprised that you are planning another consultation given that at last week's Council meeting you ignored the residents desire for all out elections which was expressed through a consultation. So, if the waste strategy consultation shows local people want weekly bin collections, how can residents have confidence that this coalition will take note of their wishes?

Supplementary Answer

As I said, we will listen to the responses of the consultation and then will will make a decision.

7. REVENUE MONITORING 2021/22 - OUTTURN

The Executive considered a report relating to the revenue outturn position for 2021/2022 which highlighted the effective management of the Council's finances to ensure value for money for Council tax payers, housing tenants and schools.

The Executive Member for Finance reminder Members that many of the actions had been carried over from the previous administration and could not be changed. This included the cost of living pay award for staff of 1.75 percent.

Councillor Jones sought clarity as to whether then General Fund Balance stood at £10m at the end of March as detailed by some on social media, or nearer the value of £9m.

Councillor Shepherd-DuBey confirmed that the General Fund Balance stood at £9m at the end of March 2022.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the outturn position of the revenue budget and the level of balances in respect of the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account and Dedicated Schools Grant be noted;
- 2) the General Fund carry forward requests of £667,000 as set out in Appendix B to the report be agreed, and that it be noted that the request was significantly less than in the previous year where carry forwards were £7.5m;
- 3) a supplementary estimate of £1.002m for the 1.75% cost of living pay award for 2021/22 be approved, factoring in arrival at a budgeted General Fund balance for March 23 in excess of £8m.

8. CAPITAL MONITORING 2021/22 - OUTTURN

The Executive considered a report relating to the capital programme outturn for 2021/22, which sought approval for the relevant budget carry forwards whilst demonstrating the safe use of resources to deliver service improvements and service continuity through capital investments.

The Executive Member for Finance noted that this was a retrospective report that covered topics from the previous administration, whilst there were a number of projects being carried forwards as they were at a work in progress stage. The report covered the reduction of the capital programme budget as some money was not being spent, whilst some affordable housing and Section 106 receipts were being used to fund learning disabled accommodation projects within this year's capital programme.

With regard to recommendation 4e, Councillor Bray commented that money needed to be moved as soon as possible to create additional secondary school places within the Borough. Councillor Bray noted that recommendation 5 should refer to the 745 DFG aids policy, rather than 754. In addition, Councillor Bray stated that the report was not the final wording for the policy as it was a set of recommendations. Councillor Bray proposed that recommendation 5 be amended to refer to the 745 DFG aids policy, and approved subject to the wording of the policy as amended being delegated to the Director of Resources and Assets and the Director of Adult's Services in consultation with the Lead members for Finance, Housing, and Health and Wellbeing and Adults Services. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Hare and subsequently carried.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the outturn position of the capital programme for 2021/22, as summarised in the report and set out in detail in Appendix A of the report, be noted;
- 2) the proposed fourth quarter carry forwards into the 2022/23 Capital Programme, as set out in Appendix B of the report, be noted and approved;
- 3) the Quarter 4 budget adjustments to the 2021/22 capital programme be noted and approved, which included:
 - a) reduction in the capital programme budget of £128.3k for Emmbrook Secondary Schools, devolved capital programme, as the budget was transferred to the school which had become an academy.
 - b) use of affordable housing S106 receipts to fund learning disabled accommodation projects in the current year's capital programme;
- 4) the following changes to the 2022/23 capital programme be noted and approved, which included:
 - a) An additional £600k budget for supporting the building of a new Special Education Needs (SEN) School at Winnersh Farm, (being built by the Department of Education). This is funded in full from a ring fenced grant for this project from DLUHC.
 - b) An additional £700k budget for urgent improvements to Clements Close (part of the HRA stock) project. This is funded by ring fenced receipts from the sale of previous individual vacant council houses.
 - c) A reduction in the capital programme budget of £141k across schools devolved programme. This will reduce the budget allocation to match the now confirmed grant funding from the DfE.

- d) An additional £50k budget for fit out costs for Ryeish Green Learning Disability Accommodation. This is funded in full by a ring-fenced contribution from NHS Berkshire.
 - e) A budget virement of £2.165m from the 'primary basic needs' budget into the 'secondary basic needs' budget, as part of the new programme to increase the number of secondary school places in the borough;
- 5) the amendments to the '745 DFG aids and adaptations policy' as set out in the report be approved, subject to the wording of the policy as amended being delegated to the Director of Resources and Assets and the Director of Adult's Services in consultation with the Lead members for Finance, Housing, and Health and Wellbeing and Adults Services;
- 6) authorisation be granted to all uncommitted unringfenced capital schemes being paused pending a review that will be reported back to July Executive, whereby the Deputy Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Lead Member of Finance will have delegated authority to proceed specific schemes by exception.

9. TACKLING POVERTY STRATEGY

The Executive considered a report relating to the Tackling Poverty Strategy and the high-level action plan to support residents who were living in poverty across the Borough and to prevent further people falling into poverty.

The Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty noted that this was the first time that Wokingham Borough Council had a strategy aimed specifically towards preventing and ending poverty within the Borough. The strategy had been developed in conjunction with the voluntary and community sector, the Hardship Alliance, and a cross party working group. Special thanks were given to Councillor Laura Blumenthal who had led on this exercise. Whilst Wokingham was generally an affluent Borough, this could make things even harder for those who were on the lowest incomes including many essential key workers, carers and retired residents. The Covid-19 pandemic had pushed additional residents into poverty, and the situation was only likely to worsen in the short term with interest rates, fuel, and food prices continuing to rise. There was a recognition that Wokingham Borough Council needed to do all it could to support and empower residents with dignity during these difficult times. Councillor Bishop-Firth added that this was the first step in a long-term plan to combat poverty, and noted that the Borough was welcoming a number of refugees who were fleeing from conflict – particularly from Ukraine. The cross-party working group would continue to pick up the work involved in reviewing the strategy and making its implementation a success.

Councillor Jones commented that it was the policy of both the previous administration and the current administration to tackle poverty within the Borough and to improve the lives of residents. Councillor Jones added that whilst Wokingham Borough Council was prepared to do all it could to lead the way locally, intervention was needed from central Government to reduce the cost of fuel, food and a cut in VAT.

RESOLVED: That the Tackling Poverty Strategy 2022-26 and the accompanying high level action plan be approved.

10. COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER REVIEW

The Executive considered a report relating to the extension of the term for Community Asset Transfer Leases granted to Towns, Parishes and Community Groups. The longer lease term would enable greater investment by Towns, Parishes and Community Groups as part of their management of Community assets at a local level.

Councillor Ferris queried whether this item covered the Pinewood Centre, and sought clarity as to whether Wokingham Without Parish Council had been invited to discussions. Councillor Jones confirmed that this did not cover the Pinewood Centre at present, and he was not aware of any discussions taking place with Wokingham Without Parish Council, however Wokingham Borough Council was open to talks with them to discuss how they might benefit from this lease extension.

A number of members commented that they were members, or leaders, of Town and Parish Councils within the Borough. It was confirmed that this did not constitute a declaration of interest.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) an increase in the length of the Community Asset Transfer lease term from 30 to 60 years be approved;
- 2) delegation be granted to the Director of Resources and Assets in consultation with the Lead Member for Business and Economic Development in relation to decisions regarding further lettings and detail, aligned with the agreed CAT Strategy.

11. BARKHAM SOLAR FARM - PROCUREMENT BUSINESS CASE

The Executive considered a report relating to the Procurement Business Case for the build contractor for the Barkham Solar Farm, and to be recommended to Full Council for approval.

The Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services thanked Councillor Gregor Murray for taking this project forward to this stage. Renewable energy generation was more crucial than ever with the move away from fossil fuels and the rising cost of energy. In the interest of transparency, the updated business case including full cash flow would be considered by Overview and Scrutiny, to ensure fiscal responsibility.

Councillor Shepherd-DuBey commented that whilst the business case needed to be thoroughly examined, this project should make financial sense in the backdrop of increasing energy prices.

Councillor Jones queried whether a suitable explanation had been given as to why this project was now predicted to cost £20m, when originally four solar farms were proposed for the same total cost. Councillor Kerr stated that the project was now likely to cost in excess of £20m, and it was not for this administration to answer what happened in the previous administration. Looking forwards, an updated business case with full cash flow was now requested whilst high level briefings were also underway. Councillor Murray had been invited to briefings with officers, and it was crucial that the Council as a whole was happy with this project whilst not delaying the procurement process.

Councillor Bray commented that much of the process information was now included within the 'part 1' papers, which provided more transparency.

Councillor Kerr noted that the business case was now very different to the one approved at full Council last year, and the full range of options including the power purchase agreement needed to be thoroughly considered going forwards.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the procurement strategy set out in the Procurement Business case for the contractor required for the construction of the Barkham Solar Farm be approved, and the business case be recommended to Council for approval;
- 2) delegated authority be granted to the Director of Resources and Assets in consultation with the Executive Member for Finance and the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services, to implement the procurement strategy;
- 3) it be noted that an updated business case and progress report will be reported back to the Executive following the conclusion of the procurement process.