

**MINUTES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 29 NOVEMBER 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.16 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Peter Dennis (Chair), David Cornish (Vice-Chair), Laura Blumenthal, Chris Johnson, Gregor Murray and Alistair Neal

Executive Members Present

Councillors: Prue Bray (Executive Member for Childrens Services), Paul Fishwick (Executive Member for Active Travel, Highways and Transport), David Hare (Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services) and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey (Executive Member for Finance)

Officers Present

Rebecca Brooks (Community Transport Manager), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Robert Curtis (Transport Planning Team Manager), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive (Director of Resources and Assets)), Matt Pope (Director of Adult's Services), Helen Watson (Director of Children's Services) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

59. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillors Pauline Jorgensen and Norman Jorgensen.

Councillors Michael Firmager and Chris Bowring attended the meeting as substitutes.

Councillor Shirley Boyt attended the meeting virtually, meaning she could participate in the debate but not cast any votes.

60. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

61. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

62. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

63. BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 5 to 90, which set out the draft bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) for the Borough.

The report outlined the key objectives of the plan, including to grow passenger numbers to pre-pandemic levels, improvement of bus journey times, and making fares affordable and simpler. A delivery action plan was provided, which gave practical examples of how key objectives might be achieved.

Paul Fishwick (Executive Member for Active Travel, Highways and Transport), Chris Easton (Assistant Director – Highways), and Rebecca Brooks (Community Transport Manager) attended the meeting to answer member queries.

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

- Was there a particular timeline for Government funding to be received? Officer response – Very vague timelines were given by Government, with no promise of additional funding. Some Local Authorities had not been able to spend all of their money from the initial rounds of funding, however this did not guarantee any additional funding for Wokingham Borough Council (WBC). The final documented was expected to be presented at the end of January 2023, whilst there was no timeline for an expected announcement from Government;
- In view of increasing fuel costs and other costs, how were fares proposed to be kept competitive? Executive Member response – Reading Buses purchased their fuel at one point in time for the remainder of the year. Overall, local fares were competitive compared to the rest of England and therefore WBC was in a relatively good position;
- It was commented that there was a considerable amount of data for members to consider in a relatively short amount of time, which should be a learning point for the future;
- How were current non-users being attracted to use bus services, and was research being undertaken to understand why people were not taking buses? Executive Member response – Marketing was key, and services were being actively advertised. There was a possible 'flat fare' from January to March 2023 which could attract new users onto services. The point of additional longer term research could be taken away and broached with Reading Buses;
- In relation to agenda page 16, were the MRT and third Reading bridge aspirations of WBC? Executive Member response – The third Reading bridge was included within the strategic improvement plan for the southeast, however it was still to be determined what would be delivered. The MRT was not thought to be going ahead, however Reading Borough Council were proposing a bus lane from the Reading boundary of the M4 to cemetery junction;
- A lot of people found crossing busy roads to reach bus stops tricky and off-putting. Could this be factored into surveys? Executive Member and officer response – The survey in the report was undertaken by a third party and was standardised for all authorities. A separate consultation or focus group would be required if this issue was to be further understood. Accessibility was considered, and some issues may be historic which could be reported to the highways team to be looked at separately;
- Who was responsible for bus shelters in the Borough, some of which provided useful historic timetables, however paper timetables were often damaged or missing. Executive Member response – Some shelters were operated by WBC, others by Town and Parish Councils, and some by advertising companies. Bus companies were responsible for putting timetables in shelters, and specific issues and concerns could be raised with the highways team to be passed on to the operating companies;
- Were there set timeframes for Local Authorities to apply for Government funding and to receive a response? Executive Member and officer response – There were no timetables available, and this impacted all Local Authorities. Some Local Authorities from the previous funding round had yet to receive their allocated funding, whilst timetables had been set and missed several times by Government. Reading Borough

Council had met several times with the Department for Transport, including undertaking site visits, and had still yet to receive their funding;

- It was noted that concessionary travel had recovered the least from the pandemic, which could partly be due to a fear of returning to buses or people in this group just generally travelling less. Fare paying passengers were key, as they helped fund services;
- Was this strategy for profit or cost neutral? Executive Member response – Ideally all services would run commercially successfully as this would require no subsidy from WBC. It was noted that WBC currently subsidised a number of services operating in the Borough;
- It was noted that a commitment to greener buses was proposed, whilst Reading Buses already operated a very green service. One hundred percent of buses were targeted to be electric by 2040. The majority of buses operating in the Borough were either Reading Buses or Thames Valley Buses, both owned by Reading Borough Council;
- With bus usage currently at 81 percent of pre-pandemic levels, was this expected to change given that more people were now working from home? Executive Member response – It was likely that this was the new baseline level. It was a priority to encourage users for leisure, retail and commuting purposes to use the services;
- Was it proposed to work with business parks to run services to them with suitable contributions? Executive Member and office response – Officers had engaged in conversations with Winnersh Triangle, Thames Valley Business Park and the Royal Berkshire Foundation. Officers were open to work with businesses and were looking to partner up with larger businesses operating from within the Borough;
- It was noted that My Journey specifically promoted bus services at new developments;
- Was secure bicycle storage planned in town centres, near to bus stops? Executive Member response – This was linked to the LCWIP, and it could well be that these services were provided for at certain bus stops;
- Were bus vouchers or cycle equipment vouchers being explored for residents of new developments? Officer response – This was part of the My Journey personalised travel plan, which worked with new developments;
- Had connectivity issues been considered, for example travelling from Woodley to Shinfield without having to go via Reading? Executive Member response – It was very difficult to connect everywhere up to tie into where people worked. The main focus was on key travel corridors, and to build on aspirational targets;
- Had ‘hopper’ services been considered? Executive Member and officer response – The issue with these types of services were that they were high frequency but used smaller vehicles, with less customers, resulting in increased costs. In addition, these services could take passengers away from existing services, whilst requiring additional drivers to operate the services.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Paul Fishwick, Chris Easton and Rebecca Brooks be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Officers consider how large documents with considerable amounts of data might best be presented to members to make the most efficient use of the Committee's time;
- 3) Officers consider discussions with Reading Buses on understanding why people chose not to use buses, which was possibly worthy of a longer-term investigation.

64. LOCAL CYCLING AND WALKING INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN (LCWIP)

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 91 to 114, which set out the draft Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP).

The report outlined that the development of a LCWIP would best place Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) to secure any government funding that became available through a series of bid ready projects prepared for submission in addition to ensuring that necessary funding can be secured via developers and other funding sources.

Paul Fishwick (Executive Member for Active Travel, Highways and Transport), Chris Easton (Assistant Director – Highways), and Robert Curtis (Transport Planning Team Manager) attended the meeting to answer member queries.

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

- It was noted that the consultants commissioned to support the consultation stated that this was a good level of response for an initial consultation, whilst detailed consultation would be undertaken for each scheme as and when they came forwards;
- There was a concern that the complexity of the consultation and its associated documents had led to additional negative comments for schemes that were otherwise in demand by the community. How would this be improved in future consultations? Executive Member and officer response – A real effort was made to inform residents that these were high level ideas and further consultation on the specifics would be forthcoming. This would be a live document which would be updated on a regular basis;
- Had allowances been made for people with mobility issues who would require vehicular transport? Executive Member response – There would always be people who needed to travel by private vehicle, and transferring other journeys to modes of travel such as walking and cycling would free up the road for those who needed to use it;
- With regards to the proposal to remove the roundabouts on nightingale Road, when would the public know a final decision? Executive Member response – These were purely high-level ideas, and the consultation included a free text box which allowed respondents to identify particular issues and concerns. If, after assessment by officers, comments indicated a particular issue for example the removal of the roundabouts, this could be considered in greater detail. The final document would be produced and adopted in February 2023, which would enable bidding to Active Travel England to commence. Detailing of particular priority routes could then be commenced, followed by lesser priority schemes. Routes which were prioritised would have design work undertaken, and those designs would go out for consultation;

- How might schemes which arose outside of the LCWIP be considered? Executive Member response – If a scheme arose which had not been included currently, this could be considered as part of the ongoing review of the live LCWIP document;
- Were the proposals ambitious enough, and should more potential schemes have been included within the consultation? Executive Member response – An assessment tool would outline the schemes of most benefit to the community;
- With regards to the scheme in Earley, it was noted that all of the schemes within Earley had been included in this category. Specific comments for individual schemes could now be analysed and assessed;
- How much money from bids was expected to cover the costs of these schemes? Executive member response – The goal was to secure one hundred percent of funding via bids, with supporting money from developer contributions alongside some capital funding. Funding from Active Travel England needed to be the primary funding source, whilst other Local Authorities had secured nearly one hundred percent of their funding from bids with small top-ups from developer contributions;
- Were ideas including mapping out local points of interest and walking and cycling times being considered? Executive Member response – Cycle routes were calculated in minutes at a speed of 9MPH, with walking routes calculated at 3MPH. A strategic approach was required to facilitate distribution of such information across the Borough;
- How were the next tranche of works being prioritised? Executive Member response – Specific categories were set out on agenda page 108, whilst agenda page 107 gave a snapshot of prioritised schemes;
- What were the best ways to identify unfinished rights of way and get them actioned? Executive member response – Concerns with unfinished rights of way could be raised directly with the highways team to ascertain who was responsible and to ensure that they were being linked to the correct locations;
- Were future provisions being made for E-Scooters should they become legal within the Borough? Executive Member response – Officers would need to take direction from Government on this issue. Data from the University of Bristol had found that for every 2 bicycle journeys undertaken 1 E-Scooter journey was also undertaken. This was a very popular mode of transport especially amongst younger people, whilst active travel routes with segregated cycle ways would be ideal rather than use of the pavement;
- Did the LCWIP include cycle routes to school which would promote safe cycling to schools? Executive Member response – Safe routes to school was part of the route prioritisation process, whilst some schemes within the LCWIP included routes to schools;
- It was commented that secure bike lockers in key locations would be appreciated;
- The Committee resolved to establish a Task and Finish Group, to meet in late January and early February of 2023, to consider the final draft of the LCWIP.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Paul Fishwick, Chris Easton, and Robert Curtis be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The Executive Member and officers consider comments raised by the Committee when developing the final draft of the LCWIP;
- 3) A Task and Finish Group be established, to meet in late January and early February of 2023, to consider the final draft of the LCWIP.

65. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN - CHILDREN'S AND ADULT'S SERVICES BIDS

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 115 to 142 and supplementary agenda pages 3 to 52, which set out the proposed revenue and capital bids for the Adult's Services and Children's Services Directorates.

Imogen Shepherd-DuBey (Executive Member for Finance), David Hare (Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services), Prue Bray (Executive Member for Children's Services), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive (Director of Resources and Assets), Matt Pope (Director of Adult's Services, and Helen Watson (Interim Director of Children's Services) attended the meeting to answer member queries.

The Executive Member for Finance stated that there was a predicted revenue shortfall of £4m for the next financial year, and a predicted shortfall of £14m in the capital budget.

The Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services stated that there was uncertainty as to whether the service could deliver on proposed bids at predicted spending levels taking into account inflationary pressures, however every effort was being made to help address Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) overall financial situation. Forty percent of WBC's revenue budget was spent on adult social care, whilst a two percent increase in adult social care led to an approximate one percent increase in council tax. Growth within the service was continuing, however every effort was being made to keep this under three percent, which was half of the Local Government Association's inflationary pressure guide. It was excellent that we could pay the living wage to staff as this would reduce loss of staff to other sectors and industries including supermarkets, however this too placed additional financial pressures on the service. Additional pressures had been realised since the pandemic, and people who were not eligible for support were being signposted to appropriate organisations. Some bids would require to be revisited as a result of the recently announced Autumn Budget.

The Executive Member for Children's Services stated that there were two halves to the overall service, education and children's social care. There was unprecedented demand for special educational needs (SEN) related services, whilst issues including the war in Ukraine and new arrivals from Hong Kong were placing pressures on school places, which had contributed to 500 in year admissions. Budgeting for Children's Services had not already been realistic, with regular overspends for example in home to school transport (HTST). There had been an increasing number of applications for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), which had previously trended at low levels within the borough. There were not enough SEN places within the Borough, which contributed to increased costs in provision of HTST. There were a rising number of complex cases being presented in addition to rising levels of unaccompanied asylum seekers, which was set at 0.7% of the Borough's child population, which for Wokingham was 28 children. Some school years had no available places within the Borough, and there were 327 more children than there were

places for next year. Whilst some children would move out of the Borough or attend independent schools, this was usually expected to be around 120 children. The service was struggling to find drivers to transport children to school, whilst agencies were now trying to sell teams of social workers which was very expensive. Absolutely every effort was being made to avoid a reduction in early intervention and early help services. There were two bids relating to SEND sufficiency, however it was uncertain if either would be achieved. Addington School were scheduled to run Farley Hill School as an early years settlement. There had been 115 children in care during the last financial year, whereas there were now 145. Unaccompanied asylum seekers had risen from 12 to 37, whilst agency rates had risen from 14.7 percent to 23 percent, including educational psychologists.

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

- Was the £2.3B national investment to schools' capital or revenue money, and would this be paid out by WBC? Officer response – This was believed to be revenue support though this had not been specified, and if so it would sit in the DSG and be passed on directly to schools;
- Were WBC in a better or worse position as a result of the Autumn Statement? Officer response – Early estimates suggested that the position was about neutral, with the ability to increase Council Tax and increases Adult Social Care Grant being positives and increased living wages being a financial negative for WBC. At this stage, it was difficult to ascertain how much of these pressures would be passed on to WBC;
- In relation to bid ASC 1, Demand Management, would this be primarily investing to save or additional use of the voluntary sector? Officer response – This would be a combination of the two methods. It was key to know the growing needs of the Borough and to invest in the voluntary sector to help pick up some of the work. This would lead to less growth via provision of earlier support to enable people to be independent for longer at a lesser total cost;
- In relation to bid ASC R2, Learning Disability Review, what was the reason for Wokingham being such an outlier in this area? Officer response – There was no one clear answer to this issue, and a number of interrelated factors were likely to contribute towards this;
- This year's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) detailed a total budget of approximately £43.76m, whilst bid ASC R1 stated a total budget of approximately £44.9m. Where had the £1.2m come from, how was it spent, and how confident was the service of achieving the proposed £1.2m saving for next year? Officer response - £1m had been saved during this financial year, and if these savings had not been made then £1m would have to be added to the total budget. Any savings identified would be placed against growth bids to reduce the overall growth, in an attempt to 'flatten' the demand curve. There were still some concerns regarding the recent Autumn Statement, which could impact on the service sticking to the agreed budget. The budget setting process for next year had been unprecedented in terms of budget movement;
- Had the number of agency staff within Adult Social Care reduced over the past 4 years? Executive Member and officer response – The service had managed quite well against a national backdrop of a shortage of social workers and occupational

therapists. This was partly a national workforce issue and partly an issue of 'stop-gap' funding which meant that workers could only be recruited temporarily as the funding associated with them was on a temporary basis. There were many more jobs than there were qualified workers, and filling posts often came down to rates of pay. Wokingham was doing quite well in terms of use of agency staff and retention rates compared to some of our neighbouring authorities. In addition, a relocation offer was also available in addition to car parking, however the bottom line was that the service could not afford to offer ever increasing rates of pay;

- Could some of the efficiency savings being proposed have been implemented earlier? Officer response – Efficiency saving had already been implemented, and the savings being proposed were the savings against new people using the service;
- Could more detail be provided in relation to bid ASC R7, Optalis Review? Executive Member and officer response – This was about carrying out backroom tasks efficiently and effectively. Optalis had introduced a system of making sure that workers were in the right place at the right time via an electronic registering system, which would lead to future savings;
- In relation to bid ASC C3, Mosaic Modernisation, why were implementation costs being proposed when the system had been in use for 7 years? Officer response – This was about ensuring that our systems were up to date, utilising the latest addons to ensure compliance. The implementation costs were the project costs to facilitate installation of these addons. There were only a limited amount of systems available to ensure statutory compliance, none of which were perfect, and it was therefore a necessity to purchase addons to keep up to date. Part of the implementation would be to prepare for future charging reforms, whilst the providers were very aware of attempts by Local Authorities to group together to seek reduced costs which could lead to increased charges;
- It was noted that most Covid-19 restrictions had been removed from care homes in the Borough, and the focus was now on good infection control procedures for which there was some funding available;
- In relation to bid CS R7, Placements – LAC Charging Policy, would this be a standard charge? Executive Member and officer response – The £50k saving was a notional figure, and it was hoped that this could be avoided. Any charge would be on a case-by-case basis, whilst pressures across the service were necessitating any possible back office efficiencies;
- Members had received comments from a number of headteachers regarding increases in behavioural difficulties since the Covid-19 pandemic. How was any support for these increases being reflected in the budget? Executive Member and officer response – Schools were trying to prevent escalation, with additional support offered from SENCOs. Colleagues in health were key partners, and work was underway to look at how additional therapies could be offered to deal with some big challenges post-pandemic;
- In relation to the corporate transformation programme, it was noted that proposed savings included the policy process, travel training, route optimisation, and contract tenders and suppliers. The policy was tightened last year, which had made a

difference but there was still a significant overspend. If there were enough SEND places in the Borough then the overall cost of transport would be significantly reduced;

- How would the repeating trend of increasing overspend in the home to school transport budget be reversed? Executive Member response – Where eligible, some parents were offered direct payments in place of taxi provision, whilst travel training was key in reducing spending requirements. Travel training was sometimes resisted by parents who felt that their child needed protecting and therefore needed to be picked up, but it was important to encourage children to be as independent as possible. Route optimisation was also underway, whilst being careful that changes to routes did not upset other children. Options could be explored to sell spare seats on commissioned services, whilst looking at ticket costs compared to neighbouring Local Authorities;
- Were WBC responsible for unaccompanied asylum seekers who left care to go to University? Officer response – This was an interesting point, and a written answer would be provided;
- Was the service confident that new SEND schools would be fully utilised, as many pupils may already be settled at other schools. Executive Member and officer response – The new SEND school in Winnersh has had no issue in being fully allocated. Some parents would prefer their child not having to travel as far to school, whilst others may be attracted by a new build school. Any placement had to be bespoke for each child, and the absence of a long journey may balance off the need to settle in at a new school for some children. Conversations would be undertaken with individual families regarding potential placements at new schools;
- Was there potential of staff reductions to address budget concerns? Executive Member response – The issue of the budget had not been ‘bottomed out’, and there was no desire to reduce staff numbers, especially as it was not in the best interest of the service. Vacancies were being held where possible, whilst the impacts of other factors were yet to be fully understood. Many vacancies on the WBC website were related to schools which did not come out of the WBC budget, whilst other posts were service critical;
- How were we ensuring that budgets spent in collaboration with trusts were fair and equitable? Executive Member response – School’s Forum had scrutinised these budgets very closely, whilst the primary and secondary federation were also involved in the budget setting process. Work with trusts had to be done on a partnership basis.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, David Hare, Prue Bray, Graham Ebers Matt Pope, and Helen Watson be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) A written answer be provided as to whether WBC was responsible for unaccompanied asylum seekers who left care to go to University;
- 3) Changes to bids, know as lockdown 2, be presented to the Committee at a future meeting.

66. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their work programme, set out in agenda pages 143 to 146.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Callum Wernham be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Officers consider if the Violence Against Women and Girl's strategy would be ready for the March 2023 meeting of the Committee;
- 3) A Task and Finish Group be set up to consider the final draft of the LCWIP, with an extraordinary meeting of the Committee to be organised in February 2023 to confirm any recommendations of the Task and Finish Group ahead of submission to the Executive.