

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 14 MARCH 2024 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.45 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Prue Bray (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Rachel Bishop-Firth, David Cornish, Lindsay Ferris, Paul Fishwick, David Hare, Ian Shenton and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

Apologies

Councillor Stephen Conway

107. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 22 February were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

108. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The following declarations of personal interest were made by Executive Members in relation to agenda item 116: Shareholders Committee. These Members did not participate or vote on this item.

- Councillor Prue Bray as a Chair and a Non-Executive Director of Berry Brook Homes, a Non-Executive Director at WBC Holdings Ltd and Chair of Wokingham Homes Limited.
- Councillor David Cornish as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

109. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER

“This is the last Executive meeting of the Municipal year, we wanted to thank all the officers of the Council, all the Members of the Executive and all councillors for their hard work and commitment to the Borough over the last 10 months.

We see it as a period of considerable achievement especially when viewed in the context of the financial challenges that all councils are facing at the moment.

The Leader has asked me to highlight a few examples, one of the most important but probably not the most prominent is the work on the Community Vision, which will shape the Council’s strategy and new Council Plan. It’s unusual because its created by the community rather than the Council and it’s a new participatory way of setting the Council’s priorities at a strategic level.

We’ve also forged a new strategic partnership with the University of Reading, which will bring considerable benefit to people and businesses in the borough, not least helping us with our climate emergency action plan, our economic development strategy and our employment, training and skills agenda.

We’ve also been prominent in the formation of the new Berkshire Prosperity Board, which is a way of all the six unitaries in Berkshire coming together to bid for external funding for key infrastructure projects. It will give us a better chance of success, than doing it by ourselves and it will give us a stronger voice.

We've developed a much greater sense of corporate ownership of challenges, working corporately as a council has been important to helping us meet some of those challenges and we are now much less siloed and with much more joined up thinking. To help with some of the challenges in adults social care and in housing we are converting some of our own estate and accommodation for young people in danger of homelessness and care leavers and we're thinking about how different areas of the Council work together to achieve objectives.

We've broadened our range of external partnerships and made some of those which already exist, stronger. This is an effective way to pool resources, intelligence and data, when resources are limited in the most efficient way for everybody and will make the borough a better place to live and work in.

The final thing I want to say is that we are focussing very much on prevention, early intervention and investing now to save later. Looking to the long term and not make short term expedience, our basis of decision making. A good example of that is our purchase of a new care home, which increases the provision in the borough and will help us to control the future costs of the Council. There's a lot more I can talk about, the Covid Memorial Wood, the new SEND schools that are coming, environmental sustainability, energy conservations going into the Local Plan and something we are delighted with the new contract with SSEN, the solar farm which we will deal with later on.

An awful lot of achievements since last May, which I think we should all be proud of. We would like to thank everybody involved with these achievements and particularly Members of the Executive who will be standing down from the Council in May, councillors Ian Shenton and Lindsay Ferris.

Lindsay has been a councillor on and off for many years – 16 and Ian for a shorter period. Both have made their mark as members of the Executive. We are extremely grateful to them for the last two years work that they have done. They will be missed, thank you both and I'm sure more will be said at next week's Council meeting."

110. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

111. PETER MUST HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ACTIVE TRAVEL, TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question:

At the meeting of Council on 19 January 2023 I asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways what was happening with the draft Borough-wide Parking Management Action Plan.

He told me that a pilot consultation on parking management had been conducted in December 2022 and that similar pilots and consultations were being rolled out elsewhere in the Borough.

He concluded by saying that this approach was a better way of understanding parking needs in different parts of the Borough before moving on to a Borough wide approach and that these would be developed in the course of the year.

Could the Executive Member say how these pilots have progressed and how near the Council is to integrating the findings into a Borough-wide Parking Management Action Plan.

Answer:

Thank you for your questions.

Covid as you know has changed travel patterns across the borough and with more people working from home parking pressures in residential areas have increased.

We are aware of the need to change our resident parking schemes and how we manage parking in areas with high demand for on-street parking. Residents have informed us that they would like on-street residents parking to work better for them, including by allowing them to park near their homes, and allow provision for visitors.

We are therefore working on a review of on-street parking and resident parking arrangements in those high-demand areas, with the objective of making parking fairer for those who live in our towns.

As a result, the council has switched focus from producing a Borough-wide Parking Management Action Plan at this time, to reviewing residential parking schemes, in high demand areas across the borough.

The Twyford pilot was the first area-wide approach to gathering information on parking issues. The outcomes from this demonstrated no one solution would resolve all the issues identified, different roads and areas have different solutions. However, we will also continue to respond to residents' requests and issues on a location-by-location basis and have introduced three scheduled legal Traffic Order Amendments each year.

I'm pleased to inform you that progress has been made with the Twyford, and Hilltop areas as well as many individual streets, which have been all advanced into Amendment No. 1 of the Traffic Regulation Order which was signed off early this year with implementation during the spring.

Supplementary question:

What is happening about off-street car parking in car parks, is this going to be covered in any borough wide way at all?

Supplementary answer:

We are currently monitoring off-street parking, on a month by month basis. It is not covered in any borough wide parking management strategy at the moment, we're focussing on the on-street in those high demand areas. That's where the pressure is at the moment.

112. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

There were no Member questions on this occasion.

113. AFFORDABLE HOUSING STRATEGY 2024 - 2028

The Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan reported that despite the Council having a 35% affordable home policy for new developments, only 23% of houses built over that period were affordable homes. It was important that in future that this gap was closed and an increased number of affordable homes were built in the borough.

He further raised that the Affordable Housing Strategy needed to offer targeted support for single people and particularly those who were in the 25 to 50 age bracket, who often struggled to secure accommodation locally of a type that suited their needs, i.e. the correct size of housing and/or flats.

The Chair agreed that housing was becoming increasingly unaffordable for people and within that particular groups were more acutely affected. It was important that this strategy addressed this issue as far as possible. This included single people in a particular age bracket as well as armed forces veterans.

The Chair reported that proposals to place Care Leavers in a prioritised banding were also in train, these proposals would need to be consulted upon before being brought to the Executive and Council meeting for a decision.

RESOLVED that the Executive approved;

- (i) support of the Affordable Housing Strategy 2024-2028 and a recommendation to Full Council for approval and implementation of the strategy;
- (ii) supported removal of the requirement for key workers to have lived within the Borough for the previous 5 years within the Council's allocations policy;
- (iii) supported consultation on proposals to place care leavers into band 1 of the Council's allocation policy.

114. YOUNG PEOPLE'S HOUSING STRATEGY 2024-2028: TO PROVIDE SAFE, SECURE, AND AFFORDABLE ACCOMMODATION FOR OUR CARE LEAVERS, 16/17-YEAR-OLDS AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS AND UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN

The Chair and Executive Member for Children's Services acknowledged that this strategy had a very long subtitle. This was essentially to ensure that the strategy prioritised those who had the most acute need.

RESOLVED to recommend that Full Council approve the adoption of Wokingham Borough Council's Young People's Housing Strategy.

115. BUILDING CONTROL PARTNERSHIP

The Chair advised that a slight revision had been proposed to the first part of the recommendation in the following terms:

'That the Executive approve the Council entering into new shared service agreement for a five year period (with an option to extend) for building control services under Sections 9EA and 9EB of the Local Government Act 2000 with West Berkshire Council to come into effect from 1st April 2024.'

The Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan expressed that he was very pleased to see this report come forward. The current partnership relationship with West Berkshire which had been in place for five years was working very successfully.

He was pleased to advise that the five permanent surveyors employed by Wokingham all had the increased qualifications now being sought by the government. The Council had also received written confirmation of the building regulator's RBI registration, all of these elements ensured a robust service was delivered.

The Executive noted that a very comprehensive business case had also been undertaken for this service, given it was a complex area.

RESOLVED that;

- i) That the Executive approved the Council entering into new shared service agreement for a five year period (with an option to extend) for building control services under Sections 9EA and 9EB of the Local Government Act 2000 with West Berkshire Council to come into effect from 1st April 2024.
- ii) delegated authority to the Director of Place & Growth to finalise and sign the new agreement in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan.

116. STRATEGIC ASSET REVIEW

The Executive Member for Finance reported that the report set out the extent of the Council's various assets in land and buildings and considered how they could contribute to meeting the Council's strategic objectives. She commended officers for bringing together a complex set of arrangements.

She advised that a balance would need to be struck between the need to generate income and with meeting other corporate objectives, such as supporting retail centres and helping voluntary and charitable sector partners, as well as overall cost reductions.

It was also important to ensure that this review worked for residents and provided value to the community.

It was noted that the Council's commercial property portfolio was paying for itself and generating a small income. Regularly reviewing this portfolio and examining the properties within it and their viability was therefore an important process.

In terms of retail properties, these were mainly based in Wokingham town centre, but also in Woodley, Twyford and Earley. The Executive Member for Finance was pleased to report that 97% of these properties were successfully leased.

The current administration had also invested in Invest to Save Schemes, this included the new Bluebell House care home that had been purchased and was now run by Optalis, and had been successful in reducing care costs to the Council. This enabled the Council to be less dependent on private care providers and to feel greater confidence that staff and residents were being well looked after.

It was noted that the current administration had inherited several buildings that were losing the Council money. Some of these buildings had been prevented from sitting empty, by being utilised by local charity partners who were providing services and support to those most in need in the borough.

The Executive Member for Finance reported that the report showed an expected saving of £570,000 from the Council's property budget during this year and through rationalisation and disposal of some assets there was room to further improve on this.

It was reported that the Community & Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee had reviewed the report and had made some recommendations on page 225 of the agenda papers, which centred mainly on how progress was reported and fed back to them.

The Executive Member for Finance reported that this was the beginning of the process, there would be further work over the coming years to make sure that this work continued to be robust.

RESOLVED that the Executive;

- i) noted the extent of the Council's property portfolio;
- ii) noted the ongoing work under the Borough Assets Programme, considering and identifying opportunities for the rationalisation and consolidation of the property portfolio,
- iii) noted that the outputs of the Borough Assets Programme will be reported back to Executive in due course,
- iv) considered the recommendations from Community & Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 28 February 2024.

117. STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT (ADOPTION)

The Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan reported that this document needed to be updated every five years. He advised that there was one major change and this was the extension of the consultation period for major planning applications from the statutory requirement of 21 days up to 28 days.

This was an important change that would be welcomed by parish councils as well as residents as it would provide a greater opportunity for them to provide comments on major development in their local areas.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- i) noted the outcome of the consultation on the draft Statement of Community Involvement as set out in the Consultation Statement,
- ii) adopted the Statement of Community Involvement (March 2024),

- iii) published the Consultation and Adoption Statement in order to give effect to the above recommendation.
- iv) delegated to the Director of Place & Growth, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan, to make any spelling or grammatical, typological or factual correction to the SCI and supporting documents.

118. RESPONSIBLE BODY STATUS (BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN)

The Executive Member for the Environment, Sport and Leisure reported that the government had mandated developers to accompany their developments with a biodiversity net gain. It was envisaged that this would be achieved by a market being created in biodiversity net gain units.

The purpose of the report was to seek Executive approval to apply to the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) to become a Responsible Body (RB) and to enact the Council to be an RB should the application be successful.

Becoming an RB would allow Wokingham Borough Council to agree conservation covenants with landowners who wish to sell biodiversity units to developers. This approach would support the Council in ensuring a local market for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) units and that BNG opportunities were maximised within the borough as opposed to developers needing to purchase units outside of the borough or from Natural England through the statutory biodiversity credit scheme.

With Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) as an RB, this would offer more options to landowners in the Borough to secure their land for long term conservation purposes, providing more opportunities for privately owned land in the borough to achieve beneficial habitat and environmental enhancements that will deliver wider public benefits. It was noted that Bracknell Forest had already submitted their application.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- i) authorised the Director of Place and Growth to apply to the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) for Wokingham Borough Council to become a Responsible Body,
- ii) authorised the Director of Place and Growth to enact being a Responsible Body should the application be successful.

119. BARKHAM SOLAR FARM UPDATE

The Chair expressed that she was delighted to report that this report set out plans to bring the solar farm on stream.

Full planning permission for the project has now been secured and, following extensive and positive engagement with SSEN and National Grid, the Council were now in contract with SSEN for connection to the grid in Summer 2026.

The Chair stated that this ran counter to some regrettable comments from one of the local MPs recently suggesting that the Council should give up on this project.

The Executive Member for Business and Economic Development reported that a contractor had been appointed and the project was now progressing through detailed design. The main construction of the solar farm was expected in Spring/Summer 2025, for first operation in 2026.

The current forecasts identified a capital expenditure of £25.18m, and a net income (after running costs and capital financing costs) of £68.52m over the 25 year life of the development.

It was noted that whilst this work had began under the previous administration, it was being brought to fruition under the current administration. The Chair thanked the Chief Executive who had put in an incredible amount of work to persuade SSEN to make the Council one of the very few projects that got a start date earlier than 2037.

The Executive Member for Business and Economic Development reported that the solar farm would be built on council land and this would be a very valuable asset and a huge success story for the borough.

The income generated from the solar farm would help fund essential services and tackle the ongoing financial pressures that the Council faced.

Further, whilst members were very proud and pleased for the impact on Wokingham, it was also another step towards contributing to making the whole country more self-sufficient in terms of energy.

The Chair reported that after years of struggling with government underfunding, securing a long term income stream like this was critical to the borough's future.

The Chair stated that it had been raised that there were a number of other construction projects happening in the same area at the same time that the solar farm construction would begin. The Leader of the Council had already indicated that the Council would set up a project board to oversee all of the activity in that area. This included housing developments, SEND schools and the COVID wood.

The overriding objective would be to minimise the inconvenience to residents and maximise communication. It was hoped to achieve a whole series of very positive developments in this area.

It was noted that the previous administration had planned 270 houses for this site.

RESOLVED that the Executive;

- i) noted the update to the Barkham Solar Farm business case and progress report as detailed herein,
- ii) considered the recommendations from the Climate Emergency Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 29 February 2024.

120. SHAREHOLDERS COMMITTEE

The following declarations of personal interest were made by Executive Members in relation to this agenda item. These Members did not participate or vote on this item.

- Councillor Prue Bray as a Chair and a Non-Executive Director of Berry Brook Homes, a Non-Executive Director at WBC Holdings Ltd and Chair of Wokingham Homes Limited.
- Councillor David Cornish as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

The Executive Member for Finance (in the Chair) reported that she was pleased to see this report come forward. It was important that wholly owned housing companies had effective management systems in place.

In 2023, the Wokingham Housing Commission, undertook an independent review of its governance arrangements and made many recommendations in its review of the Council's local housing companies and assessed their overall governance arrangements.

The recent bankruptcy of Woking Council had presented a number of learning points for other councils. There were many reasons for Woking's troubles, not to mention excessive amounts of borrowing. A particular lesson to be learned from Woking's experience was that councillors and the council's officers should not sit on the boards of wholly owned companies.

These board positions needed to be retained for experts in that business and should only act in the interests of that company. One of the best practice recommendations from the report was to set up a shareholder's committee, with a memorandum of agreement between these companies and the Council.

The report set out the details of these agreements in Section 4.

This presents best practice in terms of openness and good governance. This committee of councillors will be accountable to the public, given these companies are funded using public money. It would standardise, strengthen and consolidate their financial monitoring, with a regular update to the Shareholders Committee being provided, allowing councillors to maintain oversight.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- i) approved the creation of Shareholder Committee as detailed in this report to ensure that its housing companies act in the interests of the Council as shareholder and /or lender and contribute to the Council's objectives.
- ii) noted the draft Terms of Reference as set out at Appendix 1 and delegated approval of final terms to the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources & Assets in consultation with the Leader of the Council.
- iii) delegated authority to the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources & Assets to agree final terms and enter into each Memorandum of Agreement with each relevant company.

- iv) noted the feedback from the 4 March 2024 meeting of the Community and Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee which have been incorporated into this report.