

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 3 JULY 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.45 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Peter Dennis (Vice-Chair), Laura Blumenthal, David Cornish, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen and Marie-Louise Weighill

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Catherine Glover, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Sarah Kerr, Ian Shenton and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

Officers Present

Narinder Brar (Head of Enforcement & Safety), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive and Director, Resources & Assets) and Giorgio Framaliccio (Director, Place & Growth)

12. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Chris Johnson, Charles Margetts and Alistair Neal.

Catherine Glover and Rachelle Shepherd-Dubey attended the meeting as a substitutes.

13. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee, held on 22 May 2023, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

14. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was submitted from Rachelle Shepherd-Dubey in relation to item 17 – Directorate Priorities – Resources and Assets – on the grounds that Imogen Shepherd-Dubey, her spouse, was involved in presenting the report and responding to Member questions.

15. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

16. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

17. DRAFT WOKINGHAM VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG) STRATEGY

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 49 to 72, which provided a follow-up to the briefing given to the Committee in November 2022 and detailed progress in the development of the draft Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2023/26.

Sarah Kerr (Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions, supported by Narinder Brar (Head of Enforcement and Safety).

The report stated that the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership had taken significant steps to improve its response to tackling and ending VAWG. This included strategies

covering domestic abuse, serious violence and exploitation and radicalisation (within the PREVENT agenda). In addition, a local Wokingham VAWG Strategy was seen as essential in coordinating a robust approach.

The draft VAWG Strategy was nearing completion having been considered by a number of key stakeholder groups. It was aimed to achieve final approval of the strategy by the Council's Executive in the autumn of 2023. Alongside the strategy, the Council was seeking White Ribbon Accreditation which would help the organisation to tackle VAWG.

The following priorities were included in the draft VAWG Strategy. They reflected priorities set out in the national VAWG Strategy and the strategy produced by Thames Valley Police:

- Putting the victim/survivor at the centre of service design and delivery;
- Taking a strategic, system-wide approach to commissioning;
- Having a clear focus on perpetrators and holding them to account;
- Safeguarding and supporting individuals and victims at every point with a strong emphasis on early identification and help;
- Raising local awareness of the issues and involving, engaging and empowering communities to seek, design and deliver solutions;
- Changing inappropriate attitudes and behaviours of men and boys.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

What progress had the Council made in achieving White Ribbon accreditation? It was confirmed that meetings with White Ribbon had taken place. This included an introductory meeting with Members followed by two informal meetings with officers. This was a three year process, following the Executive decision to seek accreditation in November 2022. Work was ongoing to develop the accreditation work programme.

The VAWG Strategy include a detailed action plan. Was there a risk that this could generate additional demand from other parts of the local community? If so, would WBC have adequate resources to respond? It was confirmed that the action plan was in line with the VAWG Strategy developed by Thames Valley Police. This was a long-term process, so it would be difficult to measure progress in the short term. Implementation of specific measures such as safer by design, improved street lighting and parking could be monitored.

What were the top 3 deliverable arising out of the VAWG Strategy? It was confirmed that the voice of survivors/victims would be embedded within the strategy and action plan. There would also be a focus on feelings of safety – where to find help if an incident occurred. This fitted into wider targets around crime reduction in the Borough.

Once the VAWG Strategy was approved, how will WBC ensure sufficient resources are available for implementation? It was confirmed that a key element would be to work with survivors/victims to identify gaps and weaknesses in current procedures. Resourcing gaps had not been identified yet, but it was accepted that this work would progress within the financial challenges facing the Council. It was important that potential avenues for communication are explored to ensure that the key messages in the strategy hit home.

Was the Council talking to neighbouring authorities about their experiences and strategies? It was confirmed that such discussions were taking place, for example with Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Sarah Kerr and Narinder Brar be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) Comments and feedback from the Committee be fed into the development of the VAWG Strategy;
- 3) The Committee receive a further update on the VAWG Strategy and Action Plan in due course.

18. DIRECTORATE PRIORITIES - RESOURCES AND ASSETS

The Committee considered a presentation from Graham Ebers, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources & Assets, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 26. The presentation gave details of the Resources & Assets Service Delivery Plan for 2023/24. The plan gave details of service priorities, opportunities, risks and challenges for 2023/24.

Imogen Shepherd-Dubey, Executive Member for Finance, attended the meeting to provide a Member perspective on the Service Delivery Plan and the broader challenges facing the Council.

The presentation provided an analysis of key issues facing the different services within Resources and Assets, viz:

- Finance – providing a strategic financial function and an enabling role to support service delivery across the organisation.
- Governance Services – custodian of the Council's constitutional, legal and governance arrangements.
- Commercial Property – managing the Council's property assets to meet strategic objectives and the needs of services and residents.
- Sport and Leisure – creating physical active communities, reducing isolation and narrowing the health inequality gap.

Graham Ebers stated that value for money was at the centre of everything the Council did. Officers used data and insight to identify needs which were then ranked into priorities. Decisions were then taken with Members on the most cost-effective way to meet those priority needs.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

What steps were being taken to improve business-case evaluation? It was confirmed that bid templates were being enhanced and managers had been informed that bids must be well developed before submission. Some business cases were good. It was a matter of bringing all bids to that level. Overview & Scrutiny had an important role to play in scrutinising business cases before final decisions were taken.

Members suggested setting up a small informal group to work with Graham Ebers on ways to improve the quality of business cases. This would focus on an improved template for business cases which would be reported back to the Committee in due course. David Cornish, Peter Dennis, Norman Jorgensen and Pauline Jorgensen volunteered to join this group.

The Governance Services section included an opportunity relating to fraud identification and recovery – was anything specific planned? It was confirmed that the Council had strong counter fraud policies. The data showed that this was a relatively small issue for the Council.

One of the risks for Governance Services was “Member/officer relationships leading to complaints and reputational damage. How big was this risk? Could the Council charge for handling complaints relating to Town and Parish Councils? It was confirmed that Code of Conduct complaints were handled by the Standards Committee. The majority of complaints were made by Members against other Members. Further consideration could be given to the point about charging for handling complaints relating to Town/Parish Councillors.

The Governance Services Opportunities included revisiting all-out elections. Council had made a clear decision on this matter, so why was it listed as an opportunity? It was confirmed that officers felt that the question of all-out elections should be reviewed again in a few years.

The timeframe for developing a new strategy appeared to be 6-9 months. This appeared to be a long time bearing in mind the pace of change in local government. A similar point was made about the decision making process for key decisions via the Executive and Council. It was confirmed that the Council Constitution was being reviewed with one aim being the streamlining of decision making. 2024 may provide an opportunity to review the way the Council operates following the all-out election.

Did the Council measure value for money delivered through partnerships with private companies? It was confirmed that officers maintained a strong focus on procurement and contract management in order to ensure that value for money was being delivered.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Graham Ebers and Imogen Shepherd-Dubey be thanked for attending the meeting to answer Member questions;
- 2) The priorities, challenges and opportunities for Resources and Assets in 2023/24 be noted;
- 3) An informal working group be set up to develop a model business case template, with a report back to the Committee in due course;
- 4) the working group comprise Councillors David Cornish, Peter Dennis, Norman Jorgensen and Pauline Jorgensen, supported by Graham Ebers and Sally Watkins.

19. DIRECTORATE PRIORITIES - PLACE AND GROWTH

The Committee considered a presentation (Supplementary Agenda) which gave details of the priorities, opportunities and challenges facing the department for Place and Growth in 2023/24.

Giorgio Framallicco, Director, Place and Growth, attended the meeting to give the presentation and answer Member questions.

The presentation highlighted the opportunities and challenges for each of the key service areas within Place and Growth, as follows:

- Planning – delivery of a new Local Plan and a robust land supply; delivery of Strategic Development Locations; review of Community Infrastructure Levy; Planning links to key corporate strategies;
- Environment & Safety – new arrangements for collection of waste and recycling; Biodiversity Net Gain; Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance accreditation;
- Economic Development and Growth – homelessness and management of the Council's housing assets; Climate Emergency; economic development and skills; arts and culture;
- Highways and Transport – Local Transport Plan 4; maintaining a safe highways network; sustainable transport, active travel and reducing emissions from transport (climate emergency).

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

The presentation highlighted a large number of priority areas. Were there key short term priorities? It was confirmed that the department's remit was a balance between the development of key plans/strategies and the day to delivery of services. The latter included a focus on customer service and responding to Member queries.

What was the current timeframe for publication of the new Local Plan? It was confirmed that a timeline for development and agreement of the plan would be submitted to the Executive in July.

It was noted that some residents took up a disproportionate amount of officer time. These contacts often moved into the corporate complaints process. It was noted that long running issues needed to be handled within a framework in order to ensure that staff resources were not tied up.

Peter Dennis raised an issue relating to Seaford Court. Officers confirmed that a written response would be provided.

Economic Development and Arts and Culture – how far up the priority list were these activities? It was confirmed that these areas received a light touch for the Director. However, they were important issues in relation to the local economy and the health and wellbeing of the Borough. It was noted that the Arts and Culture Strategy would be submitted to the Committee's meeting in September 2023.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Giorgio Framallicco be thanked for attending the meeting to answer Member questions on Place & Growth priorities for 2023/24.
- 2) the Place & Growth priorities, opportunities and challenges for 2023/24 be noted.

20. COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 27 to 48, which provided an update on the work of the Community Safety Partnership.

Narinder Brar, Head of Enforcement and Safety, attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that in 2022/23, the Community Safety Partnership Board had been chaired by the Council's Chief Executive, Susan Parsonage. During the year, the partnership made progress on its key workstreams, including domestic abuse, Prevent and Channel, substance misuse, anti-social behaviour, serious violence and exploitation and violence against women and girls.

The Wokingham Community Safety Strategy (adopted in June 2021) focussed on three strategic priorities underpinned by five specific aims, as follows:

Strategic Priorities:

- Listening to the needs and concerns of local residents;
- Intervening early and preventing issues from escalating;
- Working together to protect vulnerable residents.

Specific Aims:

- Working with communities to deal with crime and anti-social behaviour hot-spots;
- Reducing the harm caused by domestic abuse;
- Reducing incidents of serious violence and knife crime;
- Tackling the exploitation of children, young people and vulnerable adults;
- Reducing incidents of residential burglary and theft from vehicles.

The report stated that all crime had seen an increase of 11.4% (841 offences) in the year ending 31 March 2023 when compared to the same period in 2021/22. Increases had been seen largely in categories relating to theft including shoplifting, bike theft and theft from and of vehicles. There were 83 more harassment incidents and 72 more domestic abuse incidents. Crimes that had decreased included drugs possession, trafficking, possession of weapons and public order offences.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

Some of the figures in the Crime Performance Summary (page 40) appeared high – what geographic area did the figures relate to? It was confirmed that the data in the tables on page 40 related to the Wokingham Borough.

Members had received positive feedback on the work of the ASB team. The team had been in place for 12 months and continued to work closely with the Community Safety

team, Thames Valley Police, Town and Parish Councils and other local stakeholders. 40 fixed penalty notices had been issued for fly tipping/littering.

Was there data on the amount of fly tipping cleared as well as the number of prosecutions? It was confirmed that this information could be collected and shared with Members. The process was education, engagement, then prosecution.

Shoplifting had increased by 114% over the year. Could more be done in terms of prevention? It was confirmed that there was a national increase in levels of shoplifting. Initiatives included the sharing of data on incidents in real time and improved CCTV coverage. It was likely that the current economic situation and the cost of living crisis were having an impact on the increasing level of shoplifting.

There were ongoing problems relating to nuisance from car meets. A recent event took place at the Mere oak Park and Ride. What additional steps could be taken to tackle car meets? It was confirmed that a Public Space Protection Order had been issued to tackle issues in Wokingham. Officers were working with Thames Valley Police with a view to the police using their powers at Mere oak. Officers tried to take proportionate action – repeat offenders received fixed penalty notices. It was suggested that further Member/officer discussions take place outside the meeting.

In relation to CCTV, etc., did officers have access to sufficient technology to support their work? It was confirmed that there was always a demand for technology, including mobile CCTV. This issue was kept under review.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Narinder Brar be thanked for presenting the report and answering Member questions;
- 2) Member comments on the report be fed back to the Community Safety Partnership;
- 3) further information be provided to Members on specific issues raised at the meeting;
- 4) the Council's ASB team be congratulated on their achievements over the past year.

21. WOKINGHAM ANTI-ABUSE CHARTER UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 73 to 76, which provided an update on the Wokingham Anti Abuse Charter.

The report stated that the Anti Abuse Charter had been approved in January 2021. It made a commitment to prevent any form of violence or abuse against anyone in the Borough. Since then a lot of activity had taken place in separate but connected workstreams, including hate crime, domestic abuse, violence against women and girls (VAWG), anti-social behaviour and criminal exploitation. Because of these linkages, the report recommended that the update on the Anti Abuse Charter form part of the annual Community Safety Partnership update report.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

Was the Anti Abuse Charter update report being referred to the Equality Forum for consideration and comment? It was confirmed that the report was being shared with the Equality Forum – it would also feed into the Council’s Equalities Action Plan.

Members agreed that the Anti Abuse Charter should be incorporated into the annual Community Safety Partnership update. However, it was important that the Charter was not diminished as part of the process. Appropriate publicity should be provided to ensure that the Charter’s profile was retained.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the update on the Wokingham Anti Abuse Charter be noted;
- 2) progress relating to the Anti Abuse Charter be reported to Members in conjunction with the annual Community Safety Partnership update report.

22. ACTION TRACKER

The Committee considered the regular Action Tracker report, as set out at Agenda pages 77 to 78.

RESOLVED: That the Action Tracker report be noted.

23. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its work programme for 2023/24.

Members noted the number of items on tonight’s Agenda and questioned whether additional meetings may be necessary in order to allow effective scrutiny of items.

It was noted that a report on the Local Transport Plan 4 would be submitted to the Committee at its meeting in September. Members also requested updates on customer service in highways and transport services, communication on issues such as potholes and the process for approving small projects such as amended speed limits.

It was requested that a further update on the VAWG Strategy be submitted to the Committee at one of its October meetings.

It was also requested that an update on the new waste and recycling arrangements be submitted to the relevant O&S Committee in 2024.

The Chair provided an update on the Committee’s submission to Thames Valley Police in relation to its proposed reorganisation.

RESOLVED: That:

- 1) the Committee’s work programme be amended to reflect the points raised by Members;
- 2) the Chair and Vice-Chair discuss the possibility of additional meetings in order to ensure effective scrutiny of items on the work programme.