

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 11 FEBRUARY 2019 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.45 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Mike Haines (Vice-Chairman), Rachel Burgess, Clive Jones, David Sleight and Shahid Younis

Substitutes Present: Malcolm Richards substituting for Bill Soane

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Andy Croy and Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey

Officers Present

Tom Beck (Highways & Transport Consultant), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Robert Curtis (Transport Planning Team Manager), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive), Matt Gould (Lead Specialist, Highways & Transport), Bob Watson (Finance Lead Specialist) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

44. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Dianne King and Bill Soane.

45. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

46. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

47.1 John Booth asked the Chairman of the Community and Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee the following question. The question was asked on his behalf by Jennifer Lissaman, and answered by Councillor David Sleight.

Question

Public Question from John Booth for Councillor Sleight with reference to Items 51 and 52 on the Agenda:

I recall a newspaper headline from my youth – “Plan for Buses to Feed Trains”.

Use of private cars to access the railway stations can aggravate congestion, air quality and climate changing emissions.

For the individual the cost of running a car that is primarily used for commuting and spends most of its time in a station car park or outside their home is very high if better options can be made available.

Using valuable land and public funds to provide car parking in urban areas near stations must offer questionable value when the environmental and financial costs of greater car use are taken into account.

There is a Friends of the Earth Briefing paper on transforming public transport on this link <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/files/policy/documents/2019-02/free-buses-under->

30s.pdf which advocates radical changes to provision of bus services including free buses for the under-30s.

Will the Council look again at improving bus services to improve access between homes and the railway stations as an alternative to expanding station car parks and park and ride schemes?

Answer

Thank you for your question. Railway stations in Wokingham Borough are already well served by buses with the exceptions of Twyford and Wargrave. In the latter case the village is arguably better served by its existing bus services rather than its station which is on the western edge of the village. The general question of access to Twyford Station following the changes to services on the Great Western Main Line will be considered by the Committee when formulating its recommendations on Item 51.

As I hope Mr Booth will acknowledge, Wokingham Borough Council has worked with the bus operators to provide an excellent bus/rail interchange in Wokingham. The A329 runs parallel to the railway and access to Winnersh, Winnersh Triangle and Earley Stations from the Nos 4 and X4 bus services is possible – if the customer wishes to interchange.

We note the suggestion for free bus travel for under 30s and, indeed, we are aware of plans in various European cities such as Luxembourg City to make public transport free to reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality. The extension of free transport is a choice for funders and this needs a wider debate than is appropriate to this Committee.

Finally Wokingham Borough Council sees the need to consider critically the expansion of Park & Ride provision to ensure that it offers both value for money and is the optimum solution to address the perceived problems. That is why a review of the Coppid Beech Park & Ride scheme has been included at Item 52 but it would be wrong to prejudge the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee on this Agenda item.

48. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

49. BUDGET SCRUTINY BRIEFING

The Committee received a briefing, set out in agenda pages 5 to 148, which gave an overview of the Council's budget setting process, timelines and figures from the 2018/19 financial year.

Bob Watson, Lead Finance Specialist, stated that the Council's budget was a financial representation of the Council's strategy and priorities. He added that the budget was the way that the Council could facilitate providing its services to residents. Bob explained the difference between revenue (day to day expenditure, for example Officer salaries) and capital (capital asset creation and enhancement etc.) expenditure, and added that revenue could be used to contribute to the capital budget, but not vice versa.

Bob stated that with revenue budget setting, it was important to work out what the Council could afford to provide, taking into account statutory services including refuse collection and providing a safe environment for adults and children. Graham Ebers, Deputy Chief Executive, highlighted that one of the key differences between a private company and a Local Authority was that a Local Authority has to provide a range of statutory services (from their revenue budget), which left them with much less flexibility within their revenue

budget. Graham added that there was, comparatively, much more room within a Local Authorities capital budget.

Bob Watson described the two forms of budget, incremental and zero based. Bob explained that an incremental budget adjusted the previous years' budget for costs such as inflation, growth and efficiencies as well as for one off payments. He added that a zero based budget rebased the budget to meet the specific service needs. Bob stated that Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC) planned approach was to use an incremental budget, of which 85% was used to provide statutory services. Bob stated that the service budgets belonged to service heads (for example, the Executive Member and Director of the relevant service) who delivered the frontline services to residents.

Bob outlined an approximate timetable for the budget setting process which read as follows:

May – Start to think about growth, efficiencies and income generation;

September - Staffing, fees & charges;

November – Non-staffing, finalise staffing and fees & charges;

December – Complete the medium term financial plan (MTFP), work out the Council Tax base and agree the draft settlement;

January – Finalise the MTFP, seek agreement from the relevant committees;

February – Final settlement, seek agreement at budget Council, Council tax set.

Bob outlined that fees and charges were set to:

- Recover costs where possible;
- Manage supply and demand;
- Cover inflationary increases;
- Cover some statutory/overrides.

Bob Watson explained the process for revenue monitoring was to send regular 'hot off the press' revenue monitoring updates to the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and the Joint Board for evaluation. Bob added that these meetings gave the opportunity to identify early warning signs within service budgets, such as overspend or underspend.

Rachel Burgess queried (with relation to agenda page 164) whether the general fund balance was indicative of issues within the overall sustainability of the Council's finances. In response, Graham Ebers stated that the priority was to reduce the service budget variance as much as possible (for example, adult social care had been reduced from £1.5M to £500K from year start), however services such as children's services were continuing to require more resources. He added that it was crucial to monitor in year variances so that these could be factored in to growth in the following years' budget.

Rachel Burgess queried the sustainability of the MTFP, and why no inflationary costs were applied to School Block funding (referring to agenda page 121). In response, Graham Ebers stated that the Council was making progress to become more self-sufficient via generating income where possible, and to make early interventions a priority to address issues before they became more problematic. He added that the Council was continuing to make representations to Central Government regarding funding. With regards to the schools block query, Bob Watson stated that as more schools chose to become academies, the Council's funding levels for schools would drop proportionately. Graham Ebers added that, on average, per pupil funding levels had increased 2.3% per year,

however this could have resulted in a small negative real growth in funding due to the tough settlement that schools had received in recent years.

Shahid Younis asked how much of the business rates were retained by WBC, and what experiences the Council had with involving the public in the budget setting process. Grahame Ebers stated that WBC were due to keep £13M (from a total £60M) in business rates, which could be reduced to £6M kept by WBC with a negative rates grant applied by Central Government. Graham stated that WBC had previously ran budget engagement events with some degree of success, however these events tended to only attract a small number of residents (300 to 400 people). Graham added that engagement via online means had also been trialled, again with limited success. Graham stated that the views from residents were fed into the budget setting process, and that it was important to engage with residents to help educate and inform them about Local Authority finance.

Clive Jones queried whether there was provision for an increase in the schools block budget (with reference to agenda page 153). Graham Ebers stated that there were growing financial pressures within maintained schools such as the provision of special educational needs. He added that WBC needed to continue making representations to Central Government to highlight the escalating costs in these areas.

Clive Jones asked whether the budget had been adjusted due to the increased costs of future planning appeals. Graham Ebers stated that known specific events would be covered either by an earmarked reserve or by the general reserve. Clive stated that some other Councils involved their scrutiny Committees in the budget process during the autumn, and asked for the Officer's views on this. Graham Ebers stated that different Local Authorities had different methods of preparing and reviewing their budget proposals. He added that there was a difference between sharing the process of budget setting and sharing the detail of the budget. Graham stated that WBC could look at how other Local Authorities involve their Committees in the budget setting process going forward.

Andy Croy queried why the budget estimates for the schools block budget (with reference to agenda page 121) was 'flat lined' beyond the next financial year. Bob Watson stated that the Department for Education (DFE) do not give forward notification beyond one year, and therefore WBC presumes no additional income from the DFE.

Rachel Burgess queried the lack of increase to council tax in 2012/13 and 2015/16, highlighting that there would be a loss in terms of compounding increases in future years. Graham Ebers stated that Central Government had implemented a Council Tax freeze grant in some previous years, which had allowed WBC not to increase Council Tax in those years.

Guy Grandison queried when the approximate values for the Council Tax base are prepared. Graham Ebers stated that the data (for example, the number of new builds) was collated in November or December and undergoes a statutory calculation.

The Committee discussed the process of budget scrutiny during the 2019/20 municipal year. These suggestions included:

- Asking the relevant Executive Members to attend the Committee to clarify budget areas and pressures;
- Checking in-year whether the assumptions made within the MTFP were being met;
- Evaluating the in-year process for budget setting.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Bob Watson and Graham Ebers be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) the Committee consider a timeline for conducting a review of the 2020/21 budget setting process;
- 3) Members of the Committee contact Democratic Services with any specific areas of the budget or budget setting process that they would be interested in scrutinising;
- 4) budget Scrutiny be placed on the 2019/20 Committee work programme.

50. REVENUE AND CAPITAL MONITORING

This item was agreed by the Committee to be combined with item 49, the previous agenda item, and as such the minutes and resolutions to item 49 apply to item 50.

51. IMPACT OF PLANNED RAIL CHANGES (COUNCILLOR SLEIGHT REPORT)

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 177 to 192, which gave an overview of the of the train services operating within the Borough.

The report outlined the following topics:

- The demand for rail had doubled in the past 20 years, and was due to double again in the next 10 to 15 years;
- The Borough has a total of 7 railway lines operated by 2 train companies;
- The Local Authority could part fund the regeneration or construction of train stations in a joint capacity with Network Rail;
- Engaging in consultations with the Department for Transport (DfT) was very important to input WBC's response into railway issues and to have an input on proposed timetable changes;
- Old Oak Common was the largest regeneration project in the UK, including a railway station with planned access to Twyford, High Speed 2 (HS2) in 2026 and a Western Rail link to Heathrow in approximately 2028;
- The Reading to Basingstoke line passes through the Borough for approximately 1km, with the possibility of a new station at Grazeley servicing this line;
- Wargrave was the Borough's quietest station (by capacity);
- The potential impacts (relating to the railway service) that the Borough faces include station access, level crossing viability, station facilities and bus service interface.

Robert Curtis, Transport Planning Team Manager, highlighted to the Committee the Officer responses to Cllr Sleight's report, as set out on agenda pages 178 and 179.

Shahid Younis asked what progress was being made with regards to parking at Twyford station. David Sleight stated that there was a conservation area nearby the station and that a solution to the parking situation was still in the process of being identified.

Members raised concern about the rising costs of rail fares. David Sleight stated that travelling to London via Twyford rather than via Reading/Paddington came at a significant saving to the commuter.

Members queried whether Reading buses could run a service to Twyford station. David Sleight stated that this would be a commercial decision to be made by Reading Buses.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) David Sleight and Rob Curtis be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) the report on the impact of planned rail changes (and Officer responses) be noted;
- 3) the Committee continue to support and encourage the Executive Member with responsibility for Highways and Transport to engage with the DfT, Network Rail and the operating companies on consultation opportunities.

52. COPPID BEECH PARK AND RIDE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 193 to 242, which outlined the strategic outline business case for the proposed Coppid Beech Park and Ride.

The report outlined the following key points:

- The park and ride had formed a part of WBC's core strategy since 2010;
- The land has been allocated for a park and ride scheme;
- The park and ride's main focus would be for the use of existing bus services, with an approximate 4 services per hour into Wokingham town centre;
- The current business case did not currently propose a route to Reading;
- The benefit cost ratio was 'over 2' on the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), which would allow a full business case to be developed and brought forward in future.

David Sleight queried why the cost per space of the proposed park and ride was less than the cost per space of the existing Thames Valley Park (TVP) and Ride. Tom Beck, Highways & Transport Consultant, stated that the TVP park and ride had undulating ground and therefore had additional costs in making the land fit for purpose.

David Sleight queried the viability of the proposed park and ride using only existing bus services. Tom Beck, Highways & Transport Consultant, stated that the main focus of the proposed park and ride was a transport service to the Wokingham town centre. He added that approximately four buses per hour would pass through the site, and WBC would cooperate with Reading Buses to explore other potential bus services using the proposed site. Tom stated that parking provision in the Wokingham town centre was constrained, and the proposed park and ride would residents another option to access the town centre.

Rachel Burgess asked what evidence was available that showed that people would switch to using a park and ride service. Tom Beck stated that evidence showed that approximately ten percent of people paying for parking (in the Wokingham town centre) would switch to use the proposed park and ride.

Members raised concerns over the viability of the proposed park and ride scheme should it only use existing bus services.

Matt Gould, Lead Specialist - Highways & Transport, stated that the business case would be scrutinised by 3rd parties and the LEP was committed to the scheme, dependant on the next business case. Matt added that the current indications were that the proposed

scheme was viable, and that it linked with the other major highways infrastructure projects proposed within the core strategy.

Mike Haines noted the structure of other local park and ride schemes, and queried whether the proposed scheme would provide the same level of infrastructure. Tom Beck stated that there were 'different tiers' of park and rides, and that the relatively small distance between the town centre and the proposed park and ride would therefore require less services than a comparatively larger park and ride.

The Committee were concerned with a variety of aspects of the current business case, and asked that the next business case came back to the Committee.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Matt Gould and Tom Beck be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) Democratic Services liaise with the Highways team to keep the Committee informed on the development of the next business case;
- 3) the next business case be brought back to the Committee in the next municipal year;
- 4) the report and associated strategic outline business case be noted.

53. WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 243 to 247, which gave details of the Committee's proposed work programme for future meetings.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) an update on the car parking strategy policy be taken to the March Committee;
- 2) Members notify Democratic Services of any potential scrutiny items to be included in the 2019/20 Committee work programme.

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