

**MINUTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE  
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
HELD ON 22 SEPTEMBER 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.10 PM**

**Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Paul Fishwick, Graham Howe, Clive Jones and Abdul Loyes. Pauline Helliar-Symons attended the meeting as a substitute.

**Executive and Deputy Executive Members Present**

Councillors: John Kaiser (Executive Member for Finance and Housing) and Michael Firmager (Deputy Executive Member for Environment and Leisure)

**Officers Present**

Dave Allen (Communications, Engagement & Marketing Manager), Nick Austin (Interim Assistant Director – Customer and Localities), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Joelle Cooper (Senior Specialist, HR), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive), Damon Emes (Head of Investments), Bernie Pich (Assistant Director – Strategic Property and Commercial Assets), Martin Sloan (Head of Service – Community Care Services), Sarah Swindley (Lead Specialist, HR) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

**28. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were submitted from Oliver Whittle and Keith Baker.

Pauline Helliar-Symons attended the meeting as a substitute for Keith Baker.

**29. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

Declarations of interest were submitted from Abdul Loyes and Clive Jones for agenda items 33 and 36, on the grounds that they had volunteered for aspects of the community response. Both would engage in discussions relating to these items.

A declaration of interest was submitted from Paul Fishwick for agenda items 33 and 36 on the grounds that his wife had volunteered for aspects of the community response. Paul added that he would engage in discussions relating to these items.

**30. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

**31. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

**32. PROPERTY INVESTMENT GROUP - COVID 19 IMPACT**

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 5 to 14, which outlined the initial impacts to Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) property investment group as a result of the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic.

The report outlined the basis for the Property Investment Group (PIG), including the origins of the group and decision making process. The report stated that the commercial investment fund represented about half of the Council's overall property business. Historically the Council's property exposure had been relatively modest compared to many

other local authorities but it had grown significantly in the last 5 years through delivery of our Regeneration and Commercialisation agendas. The Commercial Property Team was currently responsible for managing approximately £8.0m p.a. rental income split across the three key portfolios: Regeneration, Operational and Investment.

Around 75% of investments (approximately £3.3m per annum) were secured against institutional calibre tenants who were thriving at present. With all debt taken into account, WBC would see approximately a £400k per annum profit based only on institutional calibre tenants when secure debt was subtracted from the overall figures. Any surplus was used to fund other Council services. WBC's approach was validated by reputable external agencies who looked at assets and performance. WBC only invested for the long term, and the situation as presented within the report would only get better with the current holdings, as debt would reduce towards 0 over a 40 year investment period.

The PIG focussed on prudent investments, with tenants such as supermarkets. There was a targeted return of 5% on 1000 homes built by WBC over a 5 year period. This was an example of how the PIG could be used to regenerate parts of the Borough in a positive way, whilst allowing for a financial return to fund other Council services.

John Kaiser (Executive Member for Finance and Housing), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive), Bernie Pich (Assistant Director – Strategic Property and Commercial Assets), and Damon Emes (Head of Investments) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- Were smaller, independent units within the Wokingham Town centre covering the interest on the investment debt with their rents? In addition, how many units had to become vacant for the loan interest to no longer be covered by rental income? Officer response – At present, the rental income was covering the interest on the loans. It was felt that Wokingham deserved to be different with a variety of smaller firms within the town centre. Many other areas had an abundance of units, and Wokingham was currently bucking the trend in terms of vacant units. Specific information regarding vacancy rates and rental returns would be circulated to the Committee after the meeting.
- What was balance of the Council's rental income from the three different portfolios? Officer response received after the meeting –

WBC Commercial Property rental income (£p.a.) by portfolio, September 2020

Investment	£4.6m	50%
Regeneration	£2.9m	32%
Estates	£1.7m	18%
TOTAL	£9.2m	100%

Note: the report to O&S Committee included a figure of approx. £8.0m taken from the Council's Covid Rent policy document published March 2020. Since then the Investment portfolio has added one new asset with 6 new income streams, the Regen team has completed a number of new agreements/leases and the Estates team has continued to actively manage multiple income streams across four trading estates. The picture is constantly moving, in the right direction.

- Had WBC purchased, or were in the process of trying to purchase, any additional commercial units? Officer response – This was a commercially sensitive area, however officers were always looking to discharge the work of the policy.
- Was the food store property referred to on agenda page 8 classed as an institutional level client? Officer response – Careful covenant checks had been carried out, and in this instance the client had sold a variety of properties and leased them back to inject liquidity into the business.
- £85m had been invested to date, when would the remaining money likely be invested? Officer response – Officers were not under compulsion to commit further funds at any particular time, and the underlying Council policy was to enhance the Council's income stream.
- Was there any concern with regards to the uncertainty of the property market? Officer response – This was a complex area, and the circumstance of each business was taken into account on an individual basis.
- Were there any concerns regarding turnover based businesses providing rent? Officer response – Only one turnover based business was within the scheme, and this was the WBC owned Denmark Street car park. Although this was performing poorly at the moment, it was hoped that this would pick up in future.
- How many leases were at risk at present? Officer response – There were a number of portions of income streams of tenants under leases. The focus was on supporting tenants throughout this difficult period through to the other side.
- Was the scheme formed of investments that could withstand these difficult times? Officer response – In the context of the wider economy, the PIG and its investments were in a solid position, and officers were currently pleased and in a position to keep making positive forward steps.
- To what extent were retail units expected to sustain rents of pre C-29 levels? Officer response – High street units were key areas of concern, however people still wanted physical interaction with certain products and there was a place for these retailers post C-19.
- To what extent was increased Government interest in Local Authority investments a concern for WBC? Officer response – It was fair to say that the Government had a heightened interest in Local Authorities commercial investment schemes, as some Local Authorities had practiced a more extreme approach towards their investments. WBC practiced a safe and prudent approach towards our investments, and WBC were most certainly at the prudent end of all Local Authorities who were commercially investing. Most recently the Government had stipulated that you could not borrow outside of your boundaries. WBC were already borrowing using our own money, and there was not an intention to invest outside of the Borough in future. Investing within the Borough boundaries allowed WBC more control, and allowed development of schemes such as affordable housing for our residents.
- What was the debt recovery strategy for tenants who were not currently paying? Officer response – During the pandemic, it became unlawful for landlords to use conventional recourses to get tenants to pay their rent. This had severely reduced the

powers WBC had to encourage tenants to pay rent. The current approach involved creating and maintaining positive relationships with our tenants, whilst constantly assessing the risks. Currently, over 80% of rental collection was still being maintained.

- Could more detail be provided regarding the term “flight to quality”? Officer response – This term referred to investors moving towards food stores and logistics companies as very popular investments. These industries were at the core of WBC’s portfolio and this could be seen as a positive benefit at present.
- Should loan interest rates be increased, what effect would this have on WBC? Officer response – The public works loan board had increased rates by 1% overnight, however it was probable that in the long term the interest rates would go down. WBC were in a flexible position by having access to multiple sources of funding, in addition to our own internal funds.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) John Kaiser, Graham Ebers, Bernie Pich, and Damon Emes be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) Information regarding the balance of the Council’s rental income from the three different portfolios, and information regarding the regeneration income to debt query be included in the minutes;
- 3) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee’s overall report on WBC’s initial response to the C-19 pandemic.

**33. COVID-19 RESPONSE - STAFF REDEPLOYMENT**

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 15 to 24, which outlined the staff redeployment process put in place as part of Wokingham Borough Council’s (WBC’s) initial response to the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic.

The report stated that a cross directorate approach was taken, by quantifying and identifying the key needs within the organisation. A framework document was created, and the project was supported by the corporate leadership team. The key to the whole process was all directorates working together, whilst understanding the needs of each specific service and redeploying staff from service areas who had capacity. Training support was provided to staff prior to redeployment where required. At the peak, 107 members of staff were redeployed across the organisation, and going forwards WBC now had a framework and skills tracker in place should the need arise once more.

Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive), Sarah Swindley (Lead Specialist, HR) and Joelle Cooper (Senior Specialist, HR) attended the meeting to answer any Member queries.

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

- The Committee wished to thank all members of staff who had been redeployed, thereby ensuring service continuity for WBC and its partners;
- Were there any plans to continue collaboration with third party organisations post C-19? Officer response – This was an area which officers were looking in to. During the

pandemic, WBC had fostered some really strong positive relationships, and this would be continued as part of WBC's continuous improvement programme;

- Were there any redeployed staff who may not return to their original role for some time? Officer response – There were currently 4 redeployed staff within the organisation, and officers were working closely to assess whether there was a longer term need, and how to resource that need. These areas would be looked at under the continuous improvement programme, and some permanent changes may be a positive outcome in the long term;
- How were the funds found for additional payments to staff operating in a role with a higher grade than that of their original role? Officer response – The budgetary areas were complex, and answers to issues such as this would be better answered during the Committee's annual review of the medium term financial plan;
- The more WBC could do to hold onto collaborative working, both internally and with our partners, the better the service that could be provided for our residents.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Graham Ebers, Sarah Swindley and Joelle Cooper be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee's overall report on WBC's initial response to the C-19 pandemic.

#### **34. COVID-19 - COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT RESPONSE**

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 25 to 32, which outlined Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) initial response with regards to communications and engagement to the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic.

This report summarised how WBC sought to support the community through the pandemic with timely and targeted communications, including a focus on particular groups such as the elderly, the BAME community, and people with underlying health conditions. Methods of communication included social media, printed flyers, and direct contact with voluntary and community organisations.

David Allen (Communications, Engagement & Marketing Manager) attended the meeting to answer any Member queries.

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

- Why was the offer of printed flyer distribution via political parties discounted? Officer response – There was an issue with getting full delivery coverage of the Borough via these means. WBC were very grateful for all volunteers who helped out with delivery of the printed flyers. If possible, Royal Mail would be used in future as they were more consistent and had coverage of the entire Borough.
- What was the feedback from the communications placed in the local papers? Officer response – Local papers allowed for particular demographics to be targeted, who may otherwise be missed using other means such as social media and online

communications. All communications placed within local papers were also published online, to allow as many people as possible to receive the same information.

- Were there any potential changes to future communications based on lessons learned from the first wave of C-19? Officer response – In future, officers would endeavour to target particular groups of people. This could be achieved by working with specific organisations such as universities.
- It was noted that the Leader and Deputy Leader held regular briefings with opposition Group Leaders throughout the first wave. This was very useful and much appreciated, and was a different experience that seen in some other Local Authorities.
- It was noted that going forwards, WBC needed to be able to target younger demographics, perhaps by engaging with 6<sup>th</sup> forms and inform students why restrictions were being put in place and how people should be acting. Should a second wave fully take hold, it was noted that further efforts should be made to locally reach out to the elderly, BAME groups and vulnerable groups. Officer response – Throughout the national lockdown, improvements were made to the way WBC communicated with BAME and vulnerable groups of people. WBC had direct contacts within the BAME communities, and more written communications would be put in place moving forwards. Officers would look to improve communications with the elderly, and hope that the community would continue to look out for each other via a fostered community spirit.
- It was noted that WBC now had a list of approximately 4,500 clinically vulnerable individuals whom could be contacted when required.
- How many individuals from the BAME communities were within the 4,500 clinically vulnerable individuals? Officer response – Officers did not have ethnicity data on hand, however this would be looked into.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) David Allen be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee's overall report on WBC's initial response to the C-19 pandemic.

**35. COVID-19 RESPONSE - COMMUNITY SAFETY**

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 33 to 40, which outlined Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) initial response with regards to the community safety response to the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic.

The report outlined a range of issues, including domestic abuse, parks and open spaces, play areas, fly tipping, and bonfires in addition to a range of other issues and topics.

The report concluded that the national lockdown had presented a range of new and unexpected challenges, in addition to exacerbated issues traditionally seen within holiday periods. WBC would therefore continue to work with its partners on a range of challenges in order to deliver key services to residents.

There had been some frustrations regarding the understanding of what powers a Local Authority had to deal with some of the issues outlined within the report, and there needed to be expectation management with regards to these issues as many of them had to be dealt with by the police service.

Michael Firmager (Deputy Executive Member for Environment and Leisure) and Nicholas Austin (Interim Assistant Director – Customer and Localities) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- How effective were dispersal orders? Officer response – A number of these orders had been made during lockdown. The main goal was to engage with repeat underage offenders in order that positive changes could be made.
- There had been a large increase in the amount of bonfires throughout lockdown, which had generated a number of complaints. Were there any additional powers available to WBC to help enforce this? Officer response – Should black smoke be present at a bonfire, then an environmental notice could be served should the appropriate officer attend the scene. A communications release did ask residents to be considerate with their usage of bonfires throughout lockdown, however in the absence of black smoke or continual bonfires then only advisory communications could be made, and there was not a blanket solution. With regards to commercial bonfires, these could often release toxic fumes into the environment. WBC were in the process of being very strict with commercial sites using bonfires to get rid of their waste, and fines of up to £5,000 could be issued on the second offence.
- What could be done to assist with the increasing numbers of domestic abuse victims? Officer response – A home refuge service was available which allowed for individuals to get away from their abusers, and WBC worked closely with Berkshire Women's Aid to reach out to victims. The key was about getting individuals to feel confident about referring themselves and getting the appropriate support.
- Were antisocial behaviour problems being dealt with effectively? Officer response – There were a number of particular 'trouble' areas within the Borough, which therefore had more support to deal with any issues. Antisocial behaviour was an acute problem which was difficult to deal with due to the sporadic nature of the incidents.
- It was noted that the management of play areas was handled very well throughout the closure and reopening phases, and thanks went out to the police and WBC officers for their support.
- Was the illegal encampment that settled within the Borough during lockdown dealt with? Officer response – Yes, the encampment was moved on and clean-up costs were issued to those responsible.
- It was noted that a good effort had been made to reduce incidences of fly tipping within the Borough. Officer comment – Members and residents should report phone numbers seen on flyers for suspicious waste removal services to help fill in the information gap.
- It was noted that the 'Prevent' training leaflet associated with the 'Channel Panel' would be circulated outside of the meeting.

- It was requested that WBC had both a Member and officer presence on the Wokingham Independent Advisory Group forum.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Michael Firmager and Nicholas Austin be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) The 'Prevent' training leaflet associated with the 'Channel Panel' be circulated outside of the meeting;
- 3) Officers investigate options so that WBC had both a Member and officer presence on the Wokingham Independent Advisory Group forum;
- 4) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee's overall report on WBC's initial response to the C-19 pandemic.

### **36. COVID 19 - COMMUNITY RESPONSE**

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 41 to 66, which outlined Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) initial response with regards to the community response to the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic.

The report outlined that the ambition was to support vital community services and deliver public health advice for a consistent response. Communications were critical in enabling an effective response throughout the lockdown, whilst supporting the Borough's vulnerable residents. WBC proactively phone called the most vulnerable residents within the Borough as a welfare check, to make sure they had access to vital services and resources.

WBC ran the community hub to provide access to food for residents that were in need. Personal protective equipment (PPE) was also provided to the voluntary sector as and when required. A mobility programme was undertaken in order to allow shielded residents to regain any lost mobility as a result of lockdown shielding. All aspects of the community response were regularly reviewed and adjusted.

Regarding the Wokingham Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), it was stated that a large part of the response was down to assistance from WBC officers, and the CAB was very thankful to Martin Sloan and a range of other WBC officers for their support. The 'one front door' system helped over 3200 clients' access a range of services and support. The CAB had received a 180% increase in employment related inquiries throughout the lockdown period. Calls were received for help with food and prescriptions, and other needs such as housing were identified during these calls. Feedback on the support offered via the CAB was received and monitored throughout lockdown.

Martin Sloan (Head of Service – Community Care Services) and Jake Morrison (Chief Executive – Wokingham CAB) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- It was noted that the overall community response had been fantastic, and a job well done. The 'one front door' system worked very well as it allowed residents needs to be

picked up in a central place. Members were keen to make sure that the CAB was properly funded to allow for the same level of service to be delivered going forwards.

- How long would it take to set up the food hub again if required? Officer response – The plan was that the food hub would not be required to be set up again, as there were now better avenues to distribute food to those in need. If a food hub was required, the Borough leisure centres would need to be closed and volunteers would need to be sought. If necessary, the hub could be opened within days, however it was likely that other avenues would provide better options.
- Would WBC be reimbursed for PPE given out to voluntary organisations? Officer response – The Government has told Local Authorities to provide PPE to suitable organisations for the time being, and hopefully grant funding would be forthcoming.
- It was noted that the national food parcel scheme was not particularly effective, and this would be better delivered on a local level. WBC was prepared to deliver this within the Borough if required.
- Was the voluntary sector mental health contact funded by WBC? Officer response – Mental health issues were identified and signposted and approved via the integration board through the ring-fenced better care fund. This filled the gap in the service that WBC offered, and allowed for other parts of the voluntary sector to receive the appropriate training.
- It was noted by Jake Morrison that the CAB wanted to see if the ‘one front door’ system could offer additional help, by tracing whether wellbeing of service users was better after 3 to 4 weeks from the first point of contact. This would allow the CAB to view the bigger picture and thereby achieve better outcomes for clients. There were studies which showed plenty of links between other issues and mental health, and this was therefore a priority.
- It was noted that WBC had been ahead of the curve in several areas, including requiring those entering care homes from hospital to have had a negative C-19 test, and providing PPE to those organisations in need before the Government made this a policy. In addition, WBC managed to find housing for all those homeless individuals who wished to have housing provided. WBC would continue to bid for additional funding to cover services where available.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Martin Sloan and Jake Morrison be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee’s overall report on WBC’s initial response to the C-19 pandemic.

### **37. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS RELATED TO THE COMMITTEE'S REVIEW OF THE INITIAL COVID-19 RESPONSE**

The Committee discussed the range of items they had considered related to the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic. After deliberation, it was agreed that officers and the Chairman use the agenda reports, questions and minutes to feed into the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee’s overall report on WBC’s initial response to the C-19 pandemic.

**RESOLVED** That that officers and the Chairman use the agenda reports, questions and minutes to feed into the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee's overall report on WBC's initial response to the C-19 pandemic.