

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 28 JANUARY 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.55 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, UllaKarin Clark, Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray and Wayne Smith

Other Councillors Present

Rachel Bishop-Firth
Prue Bray
Lindsay Ferris
Michael Firmager
Paul Fishwick
Sarah Kerr
Imogen Shepherd-DuBey
Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey
Caroline Smith

66. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence received.

67. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 26 November 2020 and the Extraordinary Executive Meetings held on 2 December and 17 December 2020 were confirmed as correct records and would be signed by the Leader of Council at a later date.

68. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillor UllaKarin Clark declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 77 – Delivering the Gorse Ride Regeneration Project – Confirmation of Compulsory Purchase Order due to the fact that she was a non-Executive Director and Chairman of Loddon Homes Ltd. Councillor Clark remained in the meeting during discussion of the item but stated that she did not intend to vote on the matter.

69. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader of Council made the following statement.

We had a milestone this week where deaths within the UK for those who have been diagnosed with Covid within 28 days have risen to above 100,000. Please join me in a minute's silence for those who have died during this dreadful pandemic in the UK, Wokingham and the hundreds of thousands of people who have died around the world.

The weekly rate to 22nd January in Wokingham is 266.5 today, which is well below the peak of 606 on the 4th January, but still compares very badly to below 5 in August. Sadly, deaths and hospitalisations will continue to rise for some time.

We can only reduce this significantly if all our residents take full advantage of the lockdown to minimise social contact. Minimisation means only absolutely necessary social contact. If we do, coupled with the roll out of the vaccine, we can look forward to returning to normal around about Easter.

I would like to thank again all those, who have played a part in helping those who have suffered not just the effect of the virus itself but all the problems which have accompanied it. This includes all carers, doctors, health staff, social care staff, health, police, fire, rescue, ambulance, teachers, school staff, charities and volunteers. In short everybody who has stepped up to the plate and made it possible for life to continue during these appalling times. So, to all of you, a very big thank you.

The 'golden thread' within this Borough is the Council; this Administration has sought to knit all its institutions together including health, the voluntary sector, and the blue light services, which have served us well in this emergency. Our GPs have told us that a provision for mental health is much needed. We have appointed Oxfordshire Mind; the pilot for the next eighteen months has generously been funded by Tatiana and Andrey Borodin of Park Place, to whom I am extremely grateful.

Coronavirus has now been with us for a long time. However, there is light at the end of the tunnel, with the vaccine, developed here in the UK in record time. Thanks to our brilliant scientists.

We in WBC are navigating with a steady hand through the emergency, changing the way we work, supporting all our residents, and ensuring that services run as normally as possible. Whilst this has been expensive financially, it has been possible in the short term.

Much of that which has been done during the height of the crisis, we shall need to do for some time together with all the new requirements. The biggest and most important of which is the roll out of the vaccination across the Borough at the same time ensuring continuity in all our services.

I can only express my huge admiration for the doctors and staff in Wokingham Borough. They have been at the forefront of vaccination delivery in the country. Your doctors are vaccinating almost as soon as they receive deliveries.

This Executive tonight is to approve an additional £1.2 m to be made available during this financial year. This investment is only possible because of the well run and excellent control this Conservative Administration has exerted over the Council finances for many years.

These funds will be made available not only to help the roll out of the vaccination programme but to support a boost to our anti fly tipping initiative, assisting pre-schools, keeping the homeless and rough sleepers off the streets, and supporting charities with whom, along with the pre-schools, are very much part of the vital support structure of our community.

Tonight, you will hear my Executive talk about how this money will be channelled to the areas needed in the community, how it is designed to help get the Borough back on its feet, repair the damage done during the past ten months and ensure those things which have been on hold during the pandemic can start to fully function again as quickly as possible.

This Conservative controlled Council will not be found wanting to support residents be it child hunger, poverty, homelessness or any other need.

70. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

70.1 Helen Palmer asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

In the Topic Paper Local Green Space January 2020, prepared by Council Officers to accompany the Draft Local Plan Update consultation, the site LGS09, Site name, Land between Thames Valley Business Park and Napier Road, known locally as Kennet Mouth is recommended not to be designated as Local Green Space. In justification for this recommendation the following statement is made:

“The presence of overhead electricity cables and pylons has led to some visual intrusion in the open landscape, which is not considered to be local in character, and therefore does not warrant further consideration as a Local Green Space designation.”

Does the Member agree that, as the photographs I have provided to you show, any visual intrusion is insignificant, and is not a sufficient reason to refuse the designation of Local Green Space?

Personally, walking in this pleasant area, I never notice the cables. What I notice is trees, bushes, flowers, grasses, the river, water fowl, other birds, insects, fungi, lichen, people on the water and the land, dogs, boats, fresh air and the weather. It is both restful and interesting.

Will the Council ask the Officers to strike out this statement on the basis of its lack of accuracy?

Answer

As mentioned previously, the consultation on the Draft Plan undertaken earlier this year provided an opportunity for everyone to express their views, including identifying things that could be improved.

The Draft Plan considered only a handful of areas that were put forward at the time. As a further step in this process, we invited the Town and Parish Councils, together with other community groups and organisations, last year to identify other areas of green spaces that they considered important to their community. As a result of that we received suggestions for a further 100 additional Local Green Spaces.

Different views have been put forward to extend the area that might merit designation as well as differing reasons. In addition to the original promotion, you refer to as the *‘Land between Thames Valley Business Park and Napier Road’*, a wider area has now been promoted and encompasses the larger area of open green space at the Thames Valley Park. The promotion includes further supporting information to explain its suitability for designation.

As you are aware, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the merits of an individual proposal at this time. However, I can assure you that the view of all respondents, even where the information is provided in a different format (i.e. photographs as you mentioned earlier), will be considered as a way forward and how we make our

assessment. Where necessary and justified, our proposals will be amended and recommendations on the merits of areas across the Borough will be reported back to Executive as part of a future report on the Local Plan.

As an assessment of each promoted area of green space this will be documented in a future update to the Topic Paper. The document will be available to view and comment on as part of the future consultation on the Local Plan later this year. I would estimate that should be around the Summer.

Supplementary Question

I understand that but in order, in the meanwhile, to remove doubt would Councillor Smith ask the Planning Officers to issue a revision of the Topic Paper on Local Green Space that corrects the errors highlighted by SOAR to avoid the possibility that it remains on file with the potential to mislead future consideration of this area by Councillors?

Supplementary Answer

What you need to consider, and do not take this as me being blunt, but whoever put forward the first proposal they put forward a very small area and the way I can describe it, it was almost the landing base to the MRT. What has now been put forward is a much stronger assessment that carries much more weight and as I said it would be inappropriate for me to tell you whether that is going to go forward or not. But what I would say is it is a much stronger paper than what you put forward originally because I think what you were trying to do on your original piece was to try to almost avoid the MRT happening but not encompassing the whole riverbank, which would have been a far better way of doing things.

70.2 Morag Malvern asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question:

Question

How is the Borough Council planning to fully inform all EU residents here, in a timely way, of their rights to vote, and to stand as candidates, in local elections?

Answer

The Borough Council continues to monitor any changes to the voting franchise and makes the latest information available on its website for both voters and potential candidates.

The current position is as follows:

Until domestic law is changed, EU citizens will retain their voting rights in local elections in England. This was confirmed by the Government in advance of the May 2020 elections that had been due to take place; the rights of EU citizens to vote and stand in local elections will not immediately change on exit from the EU.

This remains the case with local elections delayed from May 2020 to May 2021, as noted in a written statement from the Government: "The May local elections were postponed until 2021 due to Covid-19. In that context, the UK Government can confirm that resident EU citizens will remain able to vote and stand in the rescheduled May 2021 local elections in England (including the London Assembly elections) and the May 2021 Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales. Those elected to office will be able to serve their full term and this will also apply to those elected before 2021."

The UK Government had wanted to make reciprocal voting rights part of the negotiations for the UK's exit from the EU. However, they did not form part of the negotiations and instead the UK Government is negotiating reciprocal voting rights with individual EU countries.

Supplementary Question

I am just keen to establish that the way you suggested will actually reach all the EU residents here, not all of whom have the sort of IT capability; and I am not expert in that by any means. I do just worry that people might fall through the net. So, can you reassure me that you will make every effort to reach all EU citizens, even if they are not already on the electoral roll as some of them might not be. In the right language if need be. Also how do we get around the problem of not everybody having access to a website. Perhaps it is because they do not have top notch broadband; there is always that.

Supplementary Answer

We do our very best to ensure that all residents in the Borough whatever their provenance, who are entitled to vote, are on the electoral roll and we will continue to do so.

70.3 Philip Meadowcroft has asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Did the breaches of the Borough Constitution I identified at the January 11 Standards Meeting result from unintended or mistaken conduct or were they indicative of a wider disregard of the stipulations of the Borough's Constitution?

Answer

As you are aware, I provided a statement last week to full Council in which I set out the Council's position and apologised for what was an honest mistake.

Once again, I would like to thank you for raising this important issue.

At the Standards Committee meeting, you enquired whether the composition of its members was in conformance with 9.1.1 of the Constitution. You were correct; there was an inconsistency between the decisions made by full Council and this clause. The composition of the Committee was lawful, the Committee was lawfully established and its decisions and any decisions of a sub-committee of the Committee are lawful. It was lawful for the Council to change it in the way that it did.

However genuinely, it was a surprise as the Committee had been so constituted for twenty-one months spanning two Annual Council meetings. Neither had any member of the Committee, nor Officers, nor Members, nor the press raised this issue previously; if there is a fault it is jointly and several of all. Had I been aware of this clause I would not have proposed our appointments.

Indeed, immediately on being aware I corrected the membership to the rule. I apologise to Members and Officers for the inconsistency and again thank you for raising it. The Chief Executive has assured Members that, although an inconsistency existed, the appointments were made by full Council and therefore were constitutional. The Chief Executive has also pointed out that the composition and operation of the Standards Board are not statutory but local preference.

Supplementary Question

You have been breaching three requirements of the Constitution at 9.1.1a since May 2019 when you became Leader of the Council. You have repeatedly made the excuse that this was an honest and genuine mistake which nobody recognised until I raised it. Your honest and genuine plea is destroyed by the fact that you chose to pack the Standards Committee with three very senior Members of the Executive; yourself, the Deputy Leader and the Executive Member for Planning. Quite a formidable trio, I think.

This can only be regarded as your determination to bulldoze your authority and control on the Standards Committee to ensure your decisions would always be in favour of the ruling group of the majority party. Such hubris and arrogance prompts this supplementary question. Do you agree with me please that your conduct on this issue requires you to consider your position as Leader of the Council because what you have done has fatally undermined the respect and authority of your leadership and the overdue need of our Council to be seen to be conducted in a lawful manner at all times?

Supplementary Answer

No, I do not Philip for the reasons I have given.

70.4 Dani Esposito asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

The Topic Paper Local Green Space, accompanying the Draft Local Plan Update, the site, "*Land between Thames Valley Business Park and Napier Road*" it states, "*the site is not considered to be of particular local significance.*" Successive attempts to build roads over this land adjacent to the River Thames have been frustrated by residents, who, like myself (having taken up wild swimming) recognise the value of this space.

In the 1980s, "*Boot the Route*" and in response to the MRT proposals, SOAR was formed. Thousands of people signed petitions objecting to the construction of the MRT. A public meeting was attended by hundreds of people, who voted against the road in an exit poll by a majority of 90%. Earley Town Council, The Whitegates Residents Association, ACER and the Berkshire Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust submitted objections. It was commented on that the number of objections received to these plans was unprecedented. At the public consultations held, the overwhelming majority of comments were against the MRT.

The description in the Topic Paper as, "*the site is not considered to be of particular local significance*" is incorrect. Will they ask the Officers to substitute a statement that reflects the local significance of this site?

Answer

As previously mentioned, the Draft Local Plan consultation undertaken early last year provided an opportunity for everyone to express their views on what we got right, what we did not get right and things that we could improve on.

Through the consultation various views were expressed regarding the assessment of the areas promoted for consideration as Local Green Spaces. We have received a significant number of additional promotions as I mentioned earlier to Helen of over 100.

With regard to the Kennet Mouth area some responses provided additional information and some now have promoted a much wider area which incorporates the river frontage and the area north of Thames Valley Park. These will be considered as we move forward in updating our assessments and producing the next version of the local plan for consultation later this year.

As previously mentioned it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the merits of any additional proposal outside of the formal process but I can assure you, as I did Helen in my explanation earlier, that all respondents will be considered and all the information will be taken into consideration when we form our views.

Supplementary Question

Thank you for explaining again about the proposal of the larger area from Sonning to Kennet Mouth which creates a stronger case. Would you personally support protection within the planning framework for the area proposed by Earley Environmental Group, that covers the existing and much valued green space from Sonning to Kennet Mouth? This joining with the riverside within the Reading boundaries creates a 3-mile green corridor, stretching from Sonning to Reading that is so important for people and wildlife alike. If the Councillor feels that it would be inappropriate to reveal his position on the subject at the moment can he say when he will be able to do so?

Supplementary Answer

I do not know if you have reviewed my credentials on the MRT, Dani? I think if you would go back and look at the Planning Committee meetings, I led the march on not allowing the MRT. So, I think that says a huge amount about my personal view, but I obviously cannot say one way or the other, but I think I have given you a good lead into where I stand.

71. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

71.1 Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport the following question:

Question

Why was the need for a consultation for the Traffic Regulation Order for Woodward Close right turn prohibition ignored for several years and only done less than two weeks before it was due to be implemented?

Answer

The Council did consult on alternative routes for the North Wokingham Distributor Road in September and October 2013 and received 1,500 responses. This was one of the Council's largest ever consultation responses and there was a clear public preference for the alignment currently under construction, which includes a permanent No Right Turn arrangement to and from Woodward Close. Following further technical studies, the recommended route was agreed at Executive in September 2015.

A request to advertise the Permanent TRO was made to the Council in October 2020 and given the passage of time since the scheme was last consulted upon Officers decided that, as part of the statutory consultation, it was appropriate to advertise the Order and inform residents likely to be affected by the banned turns again. The statutory consultation ran

until 14th January 2021 and subject to approval will enable the restriction to be put in place prior to the scheme opening in July 2021.

In December 2020, which I think caused part of the problem, a Temporary TRO was separately granted by the Council to ensure the safety of road users and construction workers whilst the temporary diversion of traffic was put in place, in order to enable connecting construction work for the NWDR and the A329 Reading Road. I think many people got the Temporary TRO understandably, I am not criticising them, confused with the Permanent TRO and thought basically that the Temporary TRO was going to be the permanent one.

It was very confusing and it was regrettable that we put both out at the same time. It was different arms of the organisation and I think it probably did not help the confusion.

Supplementary Question

This left turn is only required because of the new roundabout on Woodward Close and I have been waiting for the traffic modelling on this now for three months and still have not got it. It is all due to the Tory Local Plan Update which is adding 350 houses; quadrupling the number of cars coming through the roundabout now. So, I can I please have the traffic modelling?

Supplementary Answer

I am afraid I am going to duck that one as that is a question for Planning who approved the access that you are talking about not for Highways.

71.2 Rachel Bishop-Firth asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

Even before the Coronavirus pandemic, the hidden costs of sending children to school was a significant source of strain for many Wokingham families. Parents on lower incomes struggle to give their children the expensive blazers, jumpers with logos, sports kit with logo, and dress shoes which schools require. While one local supermarket could provide a full generic school uniform for £4.50 last September, parents at some of our schools are paying multiple times that amount for just one item of uniform because it has a colour and logo which is unique to that school. Parents may be lucky enough to pick up some second hand items in the right size, but that is less likely for shoes or reliable IT equipment, let alone school trips.

The pandemic is causing financial hardship to an increasing number of families and the effects may last for years. What action will the Council be taking to encourage maintained and other local schools to ensure that uniforms and other school costs are kept genuinely affordable for parents?

Answer

It is the governing body of a school that sets the uniform policy and where to source the uniform. The cost and the value should always be considered, and the Council is always reminding the schools about this. The uniform should also be easily available to buy, preferably from a local supermarket, so nobody has to travel anywhere.

Any savings negotiated by the school should be passed on to the parents. We ask the schools regularly to remind the parents that if they do have a problem, they will get help from the schools.

On our website you may have seen the Parents' Guides for starting Primary, Junior and Secondary Schools where we actually say that we do not have any assisted purchase scheme so they will have to turn to the school. I know many, many schools have a selection of used uniforms so there is the possibility of going down that way for them.

Supplementary Question

I agree that the governing body is responsible for setting the uniform policy and I am really pleased to see that you are in favour of those governing bodies setting a uniform policy which means that people can buy uniform from supermarkets. Unfortunately, I do know from talking to local parents that many of them are still struggling because there are still a lot of very unique branded items which are very expensive. The Childrens' Society is calling for councils and for schools to look at needlessly high uniform costs and other councils around the UK are actually supporting and influencing schools to look at what they can do to tackle this.

So, to give one very quick example allowing children to wear items in standard colours which can be bought from a supermarket with sew on school logos.

Will Wokingham commit to look urgently at what we can do to ensure that uniforms and other school costs for the state schools in our area are as affordable as possible and to use the Covid Winter Grant Scheme where this is needed to ensure that all children have the essential tools and supplies for learning in these difficult times?

Supplementary Answer

The Covid Winter Grant Scheme is meant to be used for food and for fuel. It cannot be used for buying clothes or shoes. But as I said it is the governing body of each school that makes these decisions so I would suggest that parents get together and they speak to the governing body. Nobody should have to suffer because they have to buy a school uniform.

71.3 Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for Business and Economic Development the following question:

Question

Has Wokingham Borough Council done all it could to support businesses during the pandemic effect of Covid-19 and the lockdowns?

Answer

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the devastating impact that this pandemic has had on our national economy including very many of our local businesses who have my heartfelt sympathy at this extremely challenging time.

In these unprecedented circumstances I believe that the Council has really gone the extra mile to try and support businesses as much as possible in a myriad of different ways.

In terms of direct financial support the Council has to date disbursed around £42.5million of grants and are currently administering eight separate grant streams. In the fortnight up

to 22nd January alone we have paid out a further 365 grants totalling £2.5m with a further 380 applications in the process of being assessed.

I recognise the number of grants can be confusing and so have asked that the website and application process is made as simple as possible for businesses. That means that if a business is not eligible for a mandatory grant it will automatically be considered for a discretionary grant and, if it is still not eligible, details will be passed through to our Economic Development Team to contact the business direct to understand their situation and what other support could be offered; perhaps through the Berkshire Business Growth Hub or similar.

I have also been keen to ensure that we publicise the grants as much as possible and are also pro-active in contacting businesses who may be eligible and encouraging them to apply. However, there are no doubt some businesses who may not be aware or for whom the current grants are not suitable, and I would urge them to check the Grants page on our website or get in touch with our Economic Development Team or the Growth Hub to discuss that situation.

An extensive survey of businesses was also carried out to better understand need and the issues faced, especially with regard to our small businesses which are the mainstay of our local economy. Issues raised were followed up with 1:1 conversations and additional advice and support wherever possible. This has included close links with and signposting businesses to the Growth Hub for specialist advice and access to a range of other national financial help packages. A follow up survey will hopefully go out in the next couple of weeks to ensure that we have an accurate and up to date picture.

With changing restrictions across different tiers and timescales the Council has also sought to assist businesses to deal with the complexity of regulations so that they can trade safely and give confidence to their clients and customers.

The work of the PPP, the Public Protection Partnership, has been supplemented by our deployment of Covid support marshals to assist not only with the compliance but also to signpost to further advice and provide a reassuring presence to encourage customers back into our main town centres when it was appropriate to do so. Indeed, ensuring our town centres could re-open safely has been a major focus of our efforts to support as conducive a business environment as possible whilst ensuring that this could be done safely.

With the Christmas period being particularly important to many small traders I am also really pleased that we created the virtual Christmas market which ran for 38 days. This was a huge success and provided a platform for traders to continue to trade and their customers to access some 'Christmas cheer' in tough times. Feedback from both the 'stallholders' and customers has been overwhelmingly positive, so much so that we are looking at options of running a similar event over the Easter period and also for building on our 'Shop Local' message used throughout the pandemic.

Of course, the current national lockdown has further challenged our business community and as well as continuing to distribute grants as widely and as quickly as we can we need to keep working on identifying and targeting where support, monetary or otherwise, is most needed. We have built a strong partnership with business representatives from Wokingham, Woodley and Twyford etc who have been very effective in spreading communications and providing important feedback. In addition, the newly refocused

Wokingham Business Taskforce has brought together representatives from across the business community to help shape and monitor our response and recovery plans and actions.

With infection rates in Wokingham starting to fall and vaccination numbers increasing we can hopefully see a light at the end of the tunnel and can begin to look forward to recovery. However, our hard working businesses still need and deserve all the help we can give them and I can assure you we will continue to do what we can to support them.

Supplementary Question

Can you just confirm to me that Wokingham Borough Council is continuing to give support to businesses?

Supplementary Answer

We are putting more staff in and hopefully we will get a much closer relationship with these businesses and also we have a task and recovery group which is chaired by local businesses so we are doing, I think, a pretty good job with what we have got.

71.4 Caroline Smith asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

I am a member of the Earley Town Council Planning Committee and we are quite often receiving complaints from residents that they have not been informed by Wokingham Borough Council Development Control about any planning application near to their property. This matter has been ongoing for some time and the Chair of Earley Town Planning Committee has written in the past on this matter, but this is still happening.

Please can the Executive Member look into this matter and resolve it for all our residents so they are informed and therefore able to raise their concerns on a planning application affecting them?

Answer

I will just give you a preamble and then I will explain where we are given the information I have got within the last few hours.

Government regulations set out the Council's requirement for public consultation when a planning application is received and states that the Council must either: place a site notice on either the application site or write to adjoining owners or occupiers.

The Council consults in line with the regulations and its own Statement of Community Involvement which is available on the Council's website. Residents are provided with 21 days for comments. We are working on a new "Information for Neighbours Guide" because there have been a lot of changes, especially around Certificate of Lawfulness, prior approval and PE rights and we are currently working on that. Once that is available it will be going out to all towns and parishes and Members and it will be updated on our website.

In addition, while site notices are only required by law for major applications for development and a number of small applications, the Council sends out to the applicant a site notice and requests that this is displayed, but that is voluntarily and we cannot insist on this. Notification is also sent to Ward Members and the relevant town or parish council,

as you know, and all relevant documentation is displayed on the Council's website. The Council also publishes an updated list of applications which are validated every week and this is on our website.

Even where a resident has not been directly consulted by the Council about an application, they are able to respond and update their comments on our website to determine the application.

We sent out last year over 10,000 neighbour notifications and in my conversation with Officers today they have spoken to Royal Mail and we are going to do some spot checks. I have asked them to start in Earley just to check whether there seems to be an issue with these going out and if we can track them so that we can look at where we think these may be going wrong. A lot of times when we get people saying that they have not had it; it is because they live too far away from the application site. But rest assured we are looking into and this and if necessary we will produce some necessary videos etc so that people can understand what is available.

71.5 Imogen Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question:

Question

Looking at Item 70 - the Treasury Management Report 2020-21, there are some marked differences between this report and what has been approved and recommended to Executive by the Audit Committee. This appears to be in Appendix A. There appears to have been an extra £1.06 million added from Commercial Properties and £0 from the Town Centre Regeneration. These items do not appear in previous reports and were not part of the review by Audit.

As the Audit Committee constitutionally has the responsibility for monitoring Treasury Management decisions to ensure compliance with the approved Treasury Management Strategy, when is this updated report being brought before the Audit Committee for review and approval?

Answer

The report reviewed by the Audit Committee is at Appendix A and has been passed on to the Executive as required in the Constitution to the covering report. Audit Committee is required to review progress against the treasury management indicators, which they did, and note further information in the report.

The Executive is required to:

*"note Appendix A, **the Treasury Management Mid-Year report** which was agreed at Audit Committee on 23rd November 2020".*

This states quite clearly in the covering report recommendations and furthermore is covered in more detail in the second paragraph of the executive summary.

Therefore, the report that the Audit Committee debated and agreed democratically is the one being presented to the Council and does not need to be presented back to the Audit Committee.

However, it is certainly prudent to update the Council and residents of the broader position, particularly given the recent media debate around the cost of debt to the local taxpayer of the Council's treasury portfolio. So, wherever the Treasury Mid-Year report quite rightly demonstrates the level of supported debt that is funded from its regeneration, investment and self-financing schemes, it did not give the wider picture as to how much additional income is generated from its regeneration and investment programmes for the Council to be used in support of its revenue budgets, allowing it to continue to support the delivery of services for its residents.

That is why the covering report contains this information, not to replace or contradict the report agreed at Audit, but to provide more completeness and transparency for the residents of the Borough. I would also like to add that this income stream will not only continue but will increase as debt is repaid.

This enhanced information showing a more rounded position will, however, be reported to the future Audit Committee in line with our six-monthly reporting.

Supplementary Question

It has never appeared in any of the Treasury Management reports before and it has suddenly appeared now and this is after the Audit Committee approved this report. I do not understand why it was not brought to the Audit Committee at that particular time and why it has suddenly been added because it is something new. So my question then becomes who has the authority to add this information after the report has been approved by the Audit Committee because I think there is something very wrong going on here?

Supplementary Answer

As I said this was actually to complete, to actually add more transparency to the report and enhance the information showing a more rounded position. It will however be reported to the future Audit Committees in line with our six monthly reporting. The reason it is there is to add to transparency so people can actually see the transparency of that information. I regret that it has never been there before, it should have been, and it is there now.

71.6 Lindsay Ferris asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

With reference to the Revenue Budget Monitoring Report, can you advise whether there is any allowance within either the Children's Services budget, or within the Government funds to WBC for Covid-19 to cover additional facilities for IT/I-pads or laptops to our local children, who do not have these facilities and are therefore not able to learn effectively from home and whether WBC has provided any such facilities?

Answer

When the pandemic first started, and during the first lockdown, the Government announced the 'Get Help with Technology' scheme. Through that the Department for Education allocated about 700 laptops to Wokingham schools and most of these have now been delivered. There is an estimated shortfall of about 500 but on 12th January the Government announced that nationwide a further 300,000 laptops were going to be distributed. So, we are hoping that we will fill this gap. We are also working with the voluntary and community sector to get recycled IT equipment.

In addition to that since March 2020, 235 laptops have been provided to children with a social worker and 50 to children in care or care leavers who are leaving education and that is the Council's own laptops scheme which has been going for some time.

Supplementary Question

There is also a need to ensure that these facilities are able to be connected to schools, (i.e. the provision of a laptop on its own may only be half of the answer). Has this been included in the above figures or not and how many children has the Council assisted in this way?

Answer

Well obviously it is important otherwise you cannot use your laptop and we are relying on the schools to tell us when somebody needs these. There are however a number of mobile providers schools can tap into and so far it has not been an issue. We are using the Department for Education Covid related scheme to support children so they can access 4G and they are getting routers from us. But I want to stress that we are relying on the schools to tell us if anything is necessary in that area.

You could also help to spread the word that if somebody has any laptops at home they are not using it would be very useful if they could contact us and we could help to distribute those to the schools.

71.7 Prue Bray had asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question. However due to time constraints the question was not asked at the meeting and the written response below was provided.

Question

In relation to agenda item 75, the current contract for provision of services to counter domestic abuse expires later this year. I am pleased to see the retendering includes widening the scope of the service and additional money, which recognises the importance of this issue and the impact it has. However, I am slightly surprised that the decision on the contract rests with the Director of Community Insight and Change, in consultation with the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure. I fail to understand what domestic abuse has got to do with either Environment or Leisure. Surely the Executive Members and Directors covering adult and children's social care should be the people who should control the awarding of the contract, as they are the people most likely to understand what is required?

Answer

I can confirm this work is in the portfolio of the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure, Parry Bath and the Director of Community Insight and Change. The Domestic Abuse Strategy and associated procurement is managed by the Community Safety Team which is part of the Directorate of Community Insight and Change. I am sure you agree that Domestic Abuse and Community Safety work hand in glove and can further reassure you that other directorates have been consulted regarding the procurement of this crucial contract.

71.8 Sarah Kerr had asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question. However due to time constraints the question was not asked at the meeting and the written response below was provided.

Question

The Wokingham Community Energy report states that WBC will be setting up WCE and undertaking publicity which would incur a cost. It also implies that WBC will be investing in the scheme itself by outlining the benefits such an investment might bring. However, the report also states that there are no financial implications for the Council for the next 3 years. Is this a mistake, or does the Council have no intention of investing in the scheme?

Answer

Thank you for the question, as this is an important point to clarify.

There are two types of 'finance' be referred too here. One which is direct investment into the Community energy fund, and the other, which is direct cost for the ongoing administrating, marketing and support of the scheme.

The Wokingham Community Energy (WCE) scheme will not incur significant financial expenditure for the Council for its set up or its running ongoing.

The Council may choose to invest and if we do this will be an investment which can be withdrawn at a point in time and therefore does not count as expenditure from an accounting perspective.

Running WCE scheme will not incur capital costs. The Energy Team within Commercial Property will be assigned as the 'Representative Council Officer' (as a member of WCE board) and will undertake additional tasks related to the project as an extension of their substantive role.

The initial council's support for promoting the scheme might be needed. However, WCE will fund its marketing and commercialisation material. WCE will take responsibility to organise publicity, advertising, leaflets and public meetings or other promotion of the share offer in the Wokingham Borough area.

Through this scheme, the Council can further develop on its tangible commitment to the Climate Emergency agenda within our limited financial resources and at virtually no risk to the Council.

So, to directly answer your question, Yes, we will be looking to invest into the scheme, but in terms of our ongoing financial exposure to fund the administration, compliance and marketing of the scheme, other than some officer time, is negligible.

71.9 Paul Fishwick had asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question. However due to time constraints the question was not asked at the meeting and the written response below was provided.

Question

There is a skills shortage of renewable engineers. Why is this not in the list of risks associated with this scheme and how does WBC plan to mitigate this risk?

Answer

Thank you for your question. This is another important point to clarify.

The Wokingham Community Energy fund will not be administered directly by the Council.

Services will be provided by our partner, Energy4All. Energy4All, who have experience in delivering renewable energy schemes across the country, is confident that they can resource implementation adequately. Being a national organisation they are also able to mitigate risks of skills shortages by redeploying resources should the need arise.

To provide a comparison, since 2016, Reading Community Energy Society, also supported by Energy4All, have supported the installation of 22 solar photovoltaic (PV) systems in total. Looking at their experience it is fair to suggest that capacity to deliver has not be affected by a gap in technical expertise.

More generally, as some of us learned last night, because of the focus on 'green recovery', and the Government's aspiration for a green industrial revolution, it is anticipated that there will be an increase demand in accessing skills for green jobs that will in time bolster the available workforce. However, this is expected to be gradual and scalable.

The Council is working closely with organisations such as The Thames Valley Berkshire LEP to both increase skills levels in the area and to match these with business needs and emergent sectors that will be key to future sustainable growth.

Recently, for example, a renewable energy Training Centre was launched in East Berkshire College. The Council is looking to promote green skills as part of this initiative and encourage training organisations to provide more technical skills training. We are also working with our local schools to engage young people with climate emergency issues and to offer insight into the skills needed for future.

The Council also works closely with businesses and developers to understand the skills needed linked to current and future developments. This includes negotiating employment and skills plans on major developments as part of the process of securing planning permission. Through these plans we are able to identify and fill in skills gaps, including those linked to more green methods of construction, and provide employment opportunities for local people.

72. CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER'S REPORT

The Executive considered a report setting out the major financial issues facing the Council which were required to be taken into account when setting the level of Council Tax.

During the introduction of the report the Executive Member for Finance and Housing highlighted that the Local Government Act 2003 required the Chief Finance Officer to report to Members, when setting the level of Council Tax, on the robustness of the budget presented and adequacy of reserves. Councillor Kaiser highlighted the letter that the Council had written to the Local Government Finance Settlement Team as its consultation response to the Local Government Finance Settlement, as set out in Appendix 2.

In response to a query from the Leader, Councillor Kaiser advised that due to operational issues usually only around 60% of the capital budget was spent per annum therefore the borrowing requirements may not be as high as stated. However, the Council needed to

ensure that sufficient borrowings were available in the event that all projects were completed.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the Chief Finance Officer's (CFO) report and the issues contained within, including the local government finance settlement and the sections on key risks be noted, and that these be considered when setting the council tax for 2021/22 and agreeing the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP);
- 2) the Council's response to the local government finance settlement, as set out in Appendix Two to the report, be noted;
- 3) the Council's ongoing representations for fairer funding for the residents of Wokingham Borough Council be supported.

73. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT FY 2020/21 - QUARTER 3

The Executive considered a report setting out the Revenue Budget monitoring position as at 31 December 2020 including the forecast outturn positions for 2020/21 for the Council's net revenue expenditure, its General Fund Balance, the Housing Revenue Account and the Schools' Block funding.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Finance and Housing drew Members' attention to a number of issues including the recommended carry forwards of £2,113m into the next financial year and an in-year supplementary estimate of £1.2m to fund priority Covid related activities as set out in report. In addition Councillor Kaiser identified other issues which were coming forward including increases in domestic abuse and fly-tipping which were requiring additional support from the Council.

Councillor Clark highlighted the underspend in Children's Services which had been achieved by closer control on spending as well as focussing on the service's strategic priorities. It was noted that the figures within the report were those predicted before the last lockdown so additional costs, as a result of the Council meeting its statutory duties, may come forward. Councillor Clark advised that she wished to thank all teachers and other school staff for the additional work they were having to carry out in very difficult times and for the fantastic job they were all doing.

In relation to the increase in fly-tipping Councillor Batth was pleased that additional funding was being made available which would enable additional CCTV cameras, extra signage etc to be purchased. It was also noted that zero tolerance was being adopted towards fly-tipping.

Councillor Margetts advised that the additional funds would help three areas in Adult Social Care. These included supporting the expansion of track and trace and the recently launched lateral flow test programme and would also provide support to GPs by assisting with buildings, staff and resources.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the significant financial impact of the Covid-19 crisis, as illustrated in the Executive Summary, be noted;

- 2) the overall forecast of the current position of the General Fund revenue budget, Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), illustrated in the Executive Summary and appendices attached to the report, be noted;
- 3) the potential General Fund carry forward requests of £2.113m as set out in Appendix B to the report be noted;
- 4) an in year supplementary estimate for £1.2m for Priority Covid-19 related issues, to be allocated by the Deputy Chief Executive (CFO) in consultation with the Lead Member of Finance and Housing, be approved;
- 5) an in year supplementary estimate for £16,000, for a review and refresh of the Council's Corporate Plan, be approved.

74. CAPITAL MONITORING 20/21 - END OF DECEMBER 2020

The Executive considered a report setting out the Capital Budget monitoring position up to 31 December 2020.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing introduced the report and reiterated that historically only 60% of the capital budget was spent and this figure was likely to be less this year due to a number of reasons including the rephrasing of projects.

Councillor Halsall pointed out that the expected capital outturn forecast for the current financial year was showing at around 50%, which would have a significant impact on the Council's end of year borrowings.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) it be noted that the Council's Capital Programme has been reviewed and will continue to be throughout the year in the context of the impact of Covid-19 on funding sources and service requirements, and that any changes will be presented to Executive for approval;
- 2) the proposed rephrasing to the Capital Programme, following the 'in-year' review including the impact of Covid 19, as set out in paragraph 3 and Appendix B be noted and approved. There is no financial / service impact from the reprofiling of budgets into 2021/2022;
- 3) the position of the capital programme at the end of Quarter 3 (to 31 December 2020) as summarised in the report below and set out in detail in Appendix A be noted;
- 4) Appendix C, which highlights capital performance by key activities, be noted. This is part of the Council's enhanced financial management focusing on the key capital projects, monitoring performance against budget and impact on funding levels (including borrowing);
- 5) £6.8m of ringfenced funded capital budget, provisionally programmed for 2021/2022, be brought forward into the current year (2020/2021), for the acceleration of the delivery of the SCAPE – Road Infrastructure project;

- 6) the addition to the 2020/21 capital programme of the development project for flats for vulnerable adults at Ryeish Green (Hyde End Lane, Spencer's Wood), funded from a ring - fenced grant of £647,627 from the National Health Service be noted and approved;
- 7) additional capital budget of £2.756m for Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride into the 2020/21 capital programme, funded by ring fenced grant (from LEP), third- party contributions and S106 contributions be noted and approved;
- 8) the contractual commitment of 2021/22 capital programme budget for the Carnival Pool Redevelopment for the value of £4m be noted and approved.

75. TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REPORT 2020-21

The Executive considered a report setting out a summary of the Treasury Management operations during the first six months of 2020/2021.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing drew Members' attention to the table within the report which showed a net benefit per council tax payer, from the income generated less the financing costs on all borrowing to date of £7.20, which was 0.47% of the average Band D council tax charge. Councillor Kaiser advised that this was achieved because the Council had assets which generated income which was not only used to pay interest on borrowings for those assets but borrowings for other projects eg forward funding infrastructure etc.

In addition, Councillor Kaiser mentioned the schemes that were being delivered using these borrowings which included, delivery of affordable homes and the regeneration of Wokingham town centre.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) Appendix A, the Treasury Management Mid-Year report, which was agreed at Audit Committee on 23rd November 2020, be noted;
- 2) it be noted that all approved indicators set out in the Treasury Management Strategy have been adhered to and that prudent and safe management has been maintained;
- 3) the table in the report which shows the net benefit per council tax payer, from the income generated less the financing costs on all borrowing to date equates to £7.20 which is 0.47% of the average band D council tax charge, be noted. This credit provides income to the Council to invest in its priority services;
- 4) the report be noted and recommended to Council.

76. WOKINGHAM COMMUNITY ENERGY (WCE)

The Executive considered a report relating to the Wokingham Community Energy (WCE) the aim of which was to create investment opportunities through a community share offering to encourage and facilitate a widespread uptake of the renewable energy installations within the Borough.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions advised that the intention was to work with Energy4All to establish the

Wokingham Community Energy fund. Councillor Murray clarified that the Council was not setting up an energy company and the partner it was looking to work with had been undertaking such schemes since 2002 and had set up such schemes for 28 other councils and numerous other organisations.

Councillor Murray explained that the purpose of a Community Energy fund was to set up and provide funding for buildings and structures, charities and other organisations eg scout huts, libraries, charity offices, community centres, churches etc who would not ordinarily be able to get funding to instal alternative energy generating methods on to their buildings.

It was noted during Councillor Murray's further explanation of the scheme that it did not require the Council to put up any significant investment in order to be able to establish the fund however the Council did have the opportunity to become an investor in the Community Energy fund if it wished in the future.

RESOLVED: That Wokingham Borough Council partner with the Wokingham Community Energy (WCE) Scheme.

77. THE HEALTHY CHILD PROGRAMME

The Executive considered a report relating to the procurement of the Healthy Child Programme for Wokingham alongside West Berkshire and Reading councils.

The Executive Member for Children's Services advised the meeting that the Council had a statutory duty to provide a Healthy Child Programme which consists of health visiting of children between 0-5, anti-natal and post-natal support and school nursing.

The current contract was due to expire in March 2022 therefore the Council were looking to start a new contract in April 2022, running for three years with an opportunity to cancel the contract or extend for another year. Councillor Clark advised that the preferred option was to procure the new contract in collaboration with Berkshire and Reading Councils as this would provide combined purchase power and therefore likely to attract a larger provider. The intention was that Wokingham would still have its own service level agreement and would set its own KPIs.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) procurement of the healthy child programme in collaboration with West Berkshire and Reading local authorities be agreed;
- 2) authority to proceed with necessary governance and process decisions to enable the award of contract be delegated to the Director of Children's Services, the Chief Executive and the Head of Public Health, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Services.

78. THE COUNCIL'S PROPOSED APPROACH TO POVERTY

The Executive considered a report setting out the Council's proposed approach to addressing poverty and deprivation in line with the strategic aims of the Community Vision to develop safe and strong communities and enrich lives.

The Leader of Council went through the report, which set out the Council's approach to poverty, and highlighted the five core blocks of work as detailed in the report.

RESOLVED: That the Council's approach to addressing poverty as set out in the report be endorsed.

79. TEMPORARY CLOSURE REMENHAM FOOTPATH NO. 4 HENLEY FESTIVAL

The Executive considered a report setting out a request for the temporary closure of Remenham Footpath No 4 in order to allow the Henley Festival to be organised and run in a safe manner whilst enabling residents and visitors to continue to use the footpath via a short detour.

The Executive Member for Environment and Leisure introduced the report and advised that the application, for the temporary closure of the footpath in order that a stage could be built for the event, was one that was received annually from the Festival Trust.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the making of an order for the closure of Footpath Remenham No 4, for a closure of an 80m section of the footpath for the set up and de rig of the Festival stage from Monday 5th to Wednesday 7th July 2021 inclusive and from Monday 12th July to Tuesday 13th July 2021 inclusive be approved;
- 2) within the closure a 620m section for evening performances from Wednesday 7th July to Sunday 11th July 2021 inclusive and day time performances on Saturday 10th July and Sunday 11th July 2021, under Section 16A of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 be included, subject to the receipt of the requisite consent of the Secretary of State for Transport.

80. DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICES

The Executive considered a report which sought agreement to procure a new domestic abuse support services contract and set out the timetable to ensure that a new contract would be in place when the current contract expires at the end of June 2021.

The Executive Member for Environment and Leisure introduced the report and advised that the Council was responsible for commissioning domestic abuse support for individuals who were identified as being at high or medium risk from harm. The services provided would include a helpline, access to independent domestic abuse advocates, outreach children and young people support, group-based programmes and refuge support.

Councillor Batth advised that the demand on domestic abuse services had increased substantially since 2018 which had led to additional short-term funding of £35,000 being required to ensure service quality and safe caseloads within the commissioned service. Additional funding, based on the increased demand for services and additional statutory duties that were expected to be placed on local authorities, of £150,000 had been requested for the 21/22 financial year increasing by a further £35,000 in 22/23.

Councillor Haitham Taylor informed the meeting that since 2018-19, 2.4m people aged between 16-74 were victims of domestic abuse, with two thirds of those being female. It was highlighted that domestic abuse was not limited to physical violence and the new Bill, which had been taken through Parliament last year, recognised other forms of abuse including emotional, controlling and economic abuse. Councillor Haitham Taylor was therefore pleased that the Council was raising awareness of domestic abuse and investing more in the services to support victims and survivors and also help perpetrators change their behaviours.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) a new domestic abuse support contract, of an initial period of 5 years with an option to add a further two years to the contract period with a total contract value of £1,554,000, be procured;
- 2) authority be delegated to the Director of Community Insight and Change, in consultation with the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure, to award the contract(s) to the successful bidder(s) following completion of the evaluation process;
- 3) it be noted that following a review of the local demand levels and service performance additional growth has been requested through the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

81. PROPOSED NEW RESOURCE BASE FOR SECONDARY AGED CHILDREN

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposal to deliver an appropriate resource based provision for secondary aged children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder and social emotional and mental health needs in Wokingham.

The Executive Member for Children's Services went through the report and advised the meeting that having such a resource base would enable children to stay in mainstream school with the ability to use the resource base when required.

Councillor Clark clarified that the proposed resource was a replacement for the previous resource base that existed at St Crispin's Secondary School but due to the cost of places being unsustainably high the service level agreement had been terminated in April 2019. It was confirmed that children who were currently present at St Crispin's would continue to stay there until their compulsory education was completed.

It was noted that the intention was that the new resource base would admit five children in year 7 every year from September 2021 until there were 25 children in years 7-11 by 2025.

RESOLVED: That the proposal to commission a new secondary resource base in Wokingham, including revenue and capital costs, be approved.

82. DELIVERING THE GORSE RIDE REGENERATION PROJECT - CONFIRMATION OF COMPULSORY PURCHASE ORDER

(Councillor UllaKarin Clark declared a personal interest in this item)

The Executive considered a report which provided an update on the progress made to deliver the Gorse Ride Regeneration Project, including the use of compulsory purchase powers to enable all necessary land interests to be acquired to secure the delivery of the regeneration of Gorse Ride and the consequential benefits to the local community.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing advised the meeting that this was the most ambitious housing project that the Council had ever embarked upon and would improve the existing Gorse Ride estate through the demolition of the poor quality housing which were not economically viable to repair and which were not fit for purpose. The intention therefore was to replace these dwellings with 200 well designed houses which would be constructed to current standards. In addition, the scheme would be integrated

within the existing landscape, improve the area by the planting 200 new trees on the site. as well as the creation of a new village green.

Councillor Kaiser advised that the Council had been in constant dialogue and consultation had been carried out with residents, the Tenants' Association, the local parish council, and Ward Members. CPO measures would only be used in very extreme circumstances once all other means of negotiation had been exhausted. It was noted that the Council had given a commitment to the current residents that if they were moved out of their homes and wished to return to Gorse Ride once the development has been completed, they would be provided with one of the new properties.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) agrees that the Council should make a compulsory purchase order ("CPO") to acquire the land as shown indicatively edged red and shaded pink on the draft plan at Appendix 1 of the report ("the Land") required to deliver the proposed regeneration of land known as land at Gorse Ride South, Finchampstead, Wokingham ("the Site") pursuant to section 226(1)(a) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) ("the 1990 Act") because it considers that:
 - a. the acquisition of the Land will facilitate the carrying out of the development, redevelopment or improvement of the Site;
 - b. the development, redevelopment or improvement of the Site is likely to contribute to the achievement of any one or more of the promotion or improvement of the economic, social and environmental well-being of the Borough of Wokingham; and
 - c. there is a compelling case in the public interest for the CPO.
- 2) the Deputy Chief Executive be authorised, in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing and Finance, to:
 - a. take all necessary steps in relation to the Land to secure the making, the confirmation and the implementation of the CPO including publication and service of all relative notices and the presentation of the Council's case at any Public Inquiry; and
 - b. approve terms for the acquisition of legal interests (including rights if required) by agreement including for the purposes of resolving any objections to the CPO.
- 3) if the CPO is confirmed, to the extent that it is not already held for such purposes, that that part of the Site already within the Council's ownership shown shaded green on the plan, at Appendix 2 of the report, be appropriated for planning purposes as described in section 226 of the 1990 Act on the date immediately before the Council implements the confirmed CPO by the making of a vesting declaration or service of notice to treat/notice of entry, such land being then no longer required for the purpose for which it is currently held.

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