

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 19 JANUARY 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.50 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Paul Fishwick, Graham Howe, Clive Jones, Abdul Loyes and Alison Swaddle

Officers Present

Nigel Bailey (Interim Assistant Director - Housing & Place Commissioning), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Andrew Moulton (Assistant Director - Governance) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

63. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Emma Hobbs.

64. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 November 2020 and the Minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 22 December 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following amendments:

22 December 2020, agenda page 26 – “Relating to the housing and regeneration bids, the bid sheets contained a lack of detail.” These be amended to the following; “Relating to the housing and regeneration bids, the bid sheets **were devoid of detail**”.

22 December 2020, agenda page 26 – The following text be added; “It was noted that **both the Committee and** Service were very proud of all workers who had maintained services such as weekly waste collection during the pandemic.”

A number of Members commented that they wanted more positive comments to be included within the Minutes. It was suggested that Members verbally ask within the meeting for specific comments or queries to be included within the minutes.

65. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

66. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

67. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

68. BURIAL CAPACITY - UPDATE JANUARY 2021

The Committee received a report, set out in agenda pages 29 to 32, which gave an updated position with regards to burial ground capacity within the Wokingham Borough, and details related to the proposed crematorium.

The report outlined that when the previous update had come to the Committee there had been concern over the provision of burial plots within the Borough. Since then, further research had been undertaken which identified approximately 1000 vacant plots, spread between both Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) and other sites. The current provision of vacant burial plots should provide for between 17 and 20 years of capacity based on

current demands. The report added that a trend of increasing number of cremations had been seen within the Borough. There were a number of potential burial ground expansions planned, including the site owned by Earley Town Council at May's Lane. Relating to the proposed crematorium, a market appraisal would be undertaken in February 2021, and this would include the unique selling point that the site would offer. The report outlined that the proposed crematorium would look to offer environmentally friendly service, including possible woodland burials.

Nigel Bailey, Interim Assistant Director - Housing & Place Commissioning, attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- What was the approximate amount of current vacant plots at WBC owned sites? Officer response – Approximately 500 plots were vacant across WBC sites.
- How would the proposed crematorium promote environmentally friendly services when harmful emissions were released from coffins when cremated? Officer response – This was part of the unique selling point that was to be determined for this site. The site would look to operate as environmentally friendly as possible. Different ways of achieving this could include having no gas fires on site, and promoting coffins which did not release harmful pollutants into the environment when burnt. It was crucial that if this site was to be developed, then it needed to be done properly which necessitated thorough research and planning. Members asked that an update relating to the proposed crematorium return to the Committee when further research had been completed.
- It was noted that approximately 400 new burial plots and 1400 new cremation plots would be provided in the Earley Town Council site, with work hopefully starting in the next couple of months.
- Where were woodland burials proposed to take place? Officer response – The intention was to link a woodland burial site to the proposed crematorium. The location of either site was yet to be determined, however the sites needed to be well located and accessible.
- Where was there provision for Jewish burials within Berkshire? Officer response – At present, there was no specific demand for this service within Wokingham. Officers would investigate where there was provision within Berkshire and provide an answer.
- The Committee welcomed that when WBC was approached by a family whose father was of the Baha'i faith, a special area was provided within the St Sebastian's site for burials of the Baha'i faith to take place.
- The Committee noted that with approximately 5% of people who have passed away within the Borough in the last year choosing a burial, it was looking likely that there may be demand for the proposed crematorium. Officer commented that significantly increased death rates had thankfully not yet been realised within the Borough as a result of Covid-19, and this was the general trend across Berkshire. There did appear to be an ongoing trend of increased cremations, and more information relating to this would be available in February.

- Members noted that livestreaming capabilities for cremations could account for some of the increases seen this past year. Officers agreed that this could be one possible reason for the increases seen.
- The Committee thanked WBC officers, and staff across all burial sites within the Borough for their assistance in providing a clearer picture relating to burial provision across the Borough. Many, if not all, of the concerns originally raised by the Committee had been mitigated, and the Committee praised all involved for doing a sterling job. The Committee identified this as an example of Overview & Scrutiny working particularly well.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Nigel Bailey be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) Information be provided to the Committee regarding where Jewish burial provision was located within Berkshire;
- 3) Updated information relating to the proposed crematorium return to the Committee when further investigatory works had been carried out;
- 4) WBC officers and staff across all burial sites within the Borough be thanked for their assistance in providing a clearer picture relating to burial provision across the Borough.

69. UPDATE ON SHARED INTERNAL AUDIT & INVESTIGATION SERVICE

The committee received a report, set out in agenda pages 33 to 66, which provided background to the Shared Internal Audit & Investigation Service.

The report outlined that this was the first shared service that Overview & Scrutiny had considered. The service had been operational for 7 years since 2014, and was a shared service between Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM). At the time of the service's inception, both Authorities had internal Audit & Investigation services. Both services had suffered from being small and hard to recruit to due to the specialised nature of their work. Moving towards a shared service model had provided resilience for both Authorities, in addition to a wider pool of resources. It had been hoped to bring in other Authorities into the shared service, however the immediate drive was to provide resilience and other operational benefits. The Shared Service has undertaken regular contracted work for neighbouring Authorities.

Andrew Moulton, Assistant Director – Governance, attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- Was there a particular reason as to why other Local Authorities had not joined the Shared Service? Officer response - A number of lengthy discussions had taken place with our Berkshire neighbours over time, and there had been a variety of reasons as to why no other Authorities had joined the Shared Service to date. Opportunities were still being explored, and officers had not counted out the prospect of further Authorities joining the Shared Service.

- Did WBC make money from contracted work? Officer response – Yes, these works generated an income stream for WBC.
- Did the Shared Service work efficiently? Officer response – The team as a whole was very focussed on delivering a great service with good value for the Borough. This was a Council run service, however there was a commercial mind-set within the work that was carried out. In addition, the service was accountable to both WBC and RBWM Audit Committees, and any efficiency concerns would be considered by Members via these forums.
- There were some concerns relating to how costs of other Shared Services were distributed amongst partners. Was this a concern for this particular Shared Service? Officer response – Officers were aware of these concerns, however in this case all costs and distributions were fairly transparent, and the Shared Service had met its core principles of providing operational efficiencies and resilience within the service.
- It was noted that at the time of inception of the Shared Service, the responsibilities of the service were different. For example, the service was no longer responsible for benefit fraud.
- The Committee thanked officers for providing the original business case, as this was useful background information for the Committee to consider.
- Which Local Authorities had Wokingham carried out contracted works for? Officer response – WBC had provided support for the Bracknell Audit team for a number of years to ensure that they could complete their project plan. Support was also given to Rushmoor Council for a smaller number of days, however the total number of days was steadily growing. The unique selling point for the Shared Service was that it was run by a Local Authority, and could therefore relate to day to day issues.
- Had the Shared Service looked at attracting other non-Berkshire authorities into the Shared Service? Officer response – Yes, any leads were pursued relating to this. A lot of thinking had to be undertaken as to how to best use the service's pool of resources. The Covid-19 pandemic had shown that internal audit could be carried out virtually, and this had therefore opened up possible options within a wider geographical area.
- Did the service actively look for business or wait for contact to be made? Officer response – Both avenues were used in this regard. Initially, more active methods were pursued, whereas now a slightly more passive and opportunistic approach was taken. There were no staff dedicated to marketing or business development within the Shared Service.
- Relating to agenda page 35, what did LGAN refer to? Officer response – This information sought would be circulated to Members after the meeting.
- The Committee stated that the risk register would be useful for the Committee to consider, as an example of the work carried out by the service. In addition, it would be useful for the Committee to see some examples of the external work carried out, which provided both an income stream for WBC and exposing the service and its staff to new tasks and skillsets. It was requested that the Head of Audit attend a future Committee meeting to provide some real life examples of different works carried out, in addition to

explaining some of the differences between how the Shared Service operates compared to having a solely in-house service.

- The Committee was of the opinion that the Shared Internal Audit & Investigation Service had always been a good example of good practice.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Andrew Moulton be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) The acronym LGAN be expanded and circulated to the Committee;
- 3) The Head of Audit be invited to a future meeting of the Committee to provide some real life examples of different types of works carried out by the service, in addition to explaining some of the differences between how the Shared Service operates compared to having a solely in-house service.

70. COSC REPORT ON THE DRAFT MTFP

The Committee received a report, set out in agenda pages 67 to 78, which sought suggestions to be included within the Committee's annual report on their overview of the draft Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). For reference, the report from the previous municipal year was also included.

Callum Wernham, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist, attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- The Committee felt that the process of overviewing and scrutinising the draft MTFP had gone well this year, and much had been learnt from the first year of this process which was carried out during the 2019/20 municipal year. Officers had answered Member questions and queries in a professional manner, and where answers could not be provided on the evening they had then been circulated as agreed in due course.
- The Committee were of the opinion that Executive Members and Directors had been very helpful and approachable during Committee meetings.
- The Committee felt that a substantial amount of work had been conducted over this municipal year, and thanked all those who made this happen.
- A number of Members were of the opinion that holding the meetings virtually this municipal year had assisted the Committee. Presentations were easier to follow, and documentation was available in one place which was easy to reference.
- Members were of the opinion that it was very useful to be able to have these discussions in a public forum.
- It was noted that there had been some formatting errors and consistency changes of templates from last year's review. Members hoped that these issues would be addressed and improved going forwards.

- Members were of the opinion that the overall process had come a long way in just 12 months, and thanked all of those who had helped to bring forward these improvements.
- The Chairman commented that so long as he was Chairman of the Committee, he would continue to pursue an annual overview of the draft MTFP.
- The Committee commented that it had been very impressed that a full overview of the draft MTFP had been carried out despite huge pressures on Council services and staff.
- The Committee noted that the financial position of the Council was now far more certain than it had been at the start of this year's review, and that this was a testament to all those involved within both the budget setting process and the overview and scrutiny of it.
- The Committee wished to extend their specific thanks to Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive) and John Kaiser (Executive Member for Finance and Housing) for their hard work and attendance both behind the scenes and at every Committee session relating to the draft MTFP.
- The Committee wished to thank all Members and officers who had made this year's overview of the draft MTFP possible, including all improvements made from the inaugural budget review during the 2019/20 municipal year.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Callum Wernham be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) Comments made by Committee Members be included within the Committee's report;
- 3) Officers be delegated to draft the Committee's report, which is to be agreed in conjunction with the Chairman;
- 4) Members contact officers with any additional points for inclusion within their report;
- 5) Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive) and John Kaiser (Executive Member for Finance and Housing) be thanked for their hard work and attendance both behind the scenes and at every Committee session relating to the draft MTFP;
- 6) All Members and officers who had made this year's overview of the draft MTFP possible be thanked, including for all improvements made from the inaugural budget review during the 2019/20 municipal year.

71. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their work programme for upcoming meetings, set out in agenda pages 79 to 80.

The Committee confirmed an extraordinary meeting to be scheduled on 22 February 2021.

Members asked whether the emerging Arts & Culture Strategy could come to Committee in March. It was confirmed that as things stood, the March meeting would fall into Purdah.

Officers would investigate options to take this strategy to an appropriate meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The work programme be noted;
- 2) The extraordinary meeting due to be held on 22 February 2021 be confirmed;
- 3) Officers investigate options to take the emerging Arts & Culture Strategy to an appropriate meeting of the Committee.

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