

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 1 SEPTEMBER 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.05 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Anne Chadwick, Paul Fishwick, Clive Jones, Alison Swaddle (Vice-Chairman) and Norman Jorgensen (Substitute)

Executive Members Present

Councillors: Stuart Munro and Bill Soane

Audit Committee Members in Attendance

Councillors: Maria Gee and Ian Shenton

Officers Present

Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Rhian Hayes (Interim Assistant Director Housing and Place), Andrew Moulton (Assistant Director - Governance), Mark Redfearn (Head of Localities Service) and Grant Thornton (Category Manager Economic Prosperity & Place (Interim))

23. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Sam Akhtar and Phil Cunnington.

Norman Jorgensen attended the meeting as a substitute.

24. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 21 June, and the Minutes of the extraordinary meeting of the Committee held on 21 July 2021 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to the following minor amendments and comments, and signed by the Chairman.

21 June 2021:

The actions relating to the Community Safety Partnership item be chased, and subsequently circulated to the Committee.

An answer related to how Wokingham Borough Council protects itself from cyber ware and ransom attacks be provided to Committee Members.

21 July 2021:

Minute item 21, agenda page 17: "WBC had appreciated the partnership working over the years, however it was ~~not~~ felt that the residents of Wokingham would be better served by an in-house service."

Minute Item 21, agenda page 18: "The Interim Director (Place & growth) stated that there was ~~unilateral~~ **universal** thanks to the staff and the PPP as a whole for the work that they had done."

Correction to mark Councillor Alison Swaddle as present at the meeting.

25. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A personal declaration of interest was submitted from Councillor Alison Swaddle in relation to agenda item 28, on the grounds that she was a paid election agent for the recent local elections.

26. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

26.1 Keith Malvern asked the Chairman of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee the following question:

Question

It has been interesting to read the document on library enhancement and relocations as it states clearly the libraries added value.

The recent consultation about Wokingham Library (ended 29th August) states that "the new library will have everything that the current library in Denmark Street has" but doesn't specifically mention how those libraries added things will be delivered. As an example how to counteract social isolation and poor mental health by coffee mornings etc, without a cafe and comfortable seating.

Recognising that the new library is due to open next August will this list of library added value be looked at to see how they can be provided?

Answer

The relocation of Wokingham Library, as with the relocation of Twyford Library and the new micro library within the new Shinfield Community Centre, have the central objective of improving services for our residents. These improvements are both within the core statutory elements of the library service, and the additional value provided through the wide range of events and activities provided by the library service.

The relocation of Wokingham library does not restrict or diminish the ability of the library service to provide added value to our residents. The new library has more usable space that is also more flexible and adaptable so that it can respond more easily to the changing demands of a modern library service. This is the central reason behind the recent engagement survey for Wokingham Library so that residents and local community groups have a direct opportunity to communicate their ambitions for using the library.

In response to the specific question about a café, the new Carnival Hub includes space for a café for all visitors to use that is larger than the one currently available within Wokingham Library.

Supplementary Question

I do find it a bit disappointing because clearly the detail of the new library has not really been defined in any clarity. And clearly, what one would want to feel comfortable about is that everything that the existing library does is going to continue to be. I hear mention of efficiency, and we have this list on your agenda and more things as well, that is page 55 and 56. What I would want is to be confident, and I am not, that these things are actually going to be provided in the way that they currently are provided. I agree that yes there might be a café, but is it going to be a café that will suit casual visitors to satisfy the point that I raised I raised earlier on, let alone all of the other things. I do think that it needs to be looked at again.

Supplementary Answer

I think that what you are referring to, and the detail of the offer of the existing offer, is actually what we are going to be talking about later tonight. We are looking at what will happen in the future with our library service, because a library and the library service is much more than what we traditionally see as a library in regards to books, facilities etcetera, there is much more that it can offer Wokingham from that point of view. So, it is a case of what is being offered now we need to basically try and mirror and basically enhance it going forward. That is the purpose of a lot of documentation in the agenda tonight and how we are going forward, but this is only the first stage as it needs to go forward. Bill, am I incorrect in that assumption?

Yes you are correct. The whole point is here that the new facility in the Carnival phase two offers a greater area to start with. At the moment we have 133m² in the library (café) and this will be increased to 285m², so a considerably larger area is given to the library than currently available. And with that, I can say that the current services offered by the library will be transferred over to the new library and I hope that there will be additional services as well. I can't say for sure but that is what I would hope to see given that there is more space.

27. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

28. UPDATE ON LOCAL ELECTIONS

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 23 to 30, which gave an update on the running of local elections within the Borough.

The report outlined the delivery of the combined elections held in May 2021 within the context of a complex backdrop of significant public health restrictions which presented complex new challenges for all those involved in the electoral process. The report outlined a number of actions derived from the analysis of learning from the running of the May 2021 elections. These actions included the undertaking of an interim polling places review of selected polling places to be reported to Council in January 2022, and planning to hold the verification and count for the May 2022 elections during the daytime on Friday 6th May 2022.

Andrew Moulton (Assistant Director – Governance) attended the meeting to answer Member questions.

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

- The Committee were unanimous in their thanks for the elections team and wider staff network for the successful running of the May 2021 elections under difficult conditions.
- Whilst being effective for the purposes of delivering a Covid-secure polling day, the reduction of polling places available to the residents of Norreys Ward to a single polling place would not be ideal going forwards. Was this planned to revert to multiple polling places for future elections? Officer response – This change was planned as a one-off change for those set of elections, and the change was planned to revert back to multiple polling places all being well.

- A number of Members commented that the daytime verification and count worked well, and they hoped that this could continue going forwards.
- How likely was it that for the elections due to be held in May 2022 that none of the polling places due to be used would be a school? Officer response – There were only four schools within the Borough which were used as polling stations, and a considerable amount of work had been done over previous years to reduce the Borough's reliance on schools as polling places. The view was to speak with Ward Members and take a report to Council in early 2022. It had always been the intention to not disrupt the education of school children as a consequence of running elections wherever possible.
- Had marquees within the school grounds or playing fields been considered as an option instead of using the school building itself? Officer response – This had been an option considered for the May 2021 elections, however for a variety of reasons this did not work out on this occasion.
- It was commented that some school buildings were the most obvious public building within a Ward and therefore merited consideration for use as a polling place.
- There had been a large increase in the numbers of people choosing to vote by post for the elections held in May 2021, which was good to see. Some residents had become confused regarding the instructions for how to vote by post and it would be worthwhile to have a further look at the instructions issued.
- How many postal votes had arrived after polling day? Officer response – These figures would be circulated to Members of the Committee. On a related note, a significant number of people choose to hand deliver their postal vote to their polling station on polling day.
- What were the approximate percentage increases in the numbers of people choosing to vote by post, and how many of these were applications to permanently vote by post? Officer response – There had been an approximate increase of between thirty and forty percent of people choosing to vote by post. The numbers of people who registered to permanently vote by post would be sought and circulated to the Committee.
- Was there a significant percentage of spoilt ballot papers, or ballot papers that could not be counted, as they had not been correctly filled in as a result of the individual being confused by the postal vote instructions? Officer response – There had likely not been any marked increase, and the instructions were very prescribed which gave the returning officer very little room to edit the instructions. Most errors were likely due to an increase in people voting by post for the first time.
- With the Government proposing to require voters to produce identification documents at polling stations, what checks and balances were carried out for a postal voter? Officer response – All postal votes are subject to strict checks against their original postal vote application form.
- Relating to the final paragraph of agenda page 30, what was a digital imprint, what must be done with them, and what was organic material? Officer response – This was

centred around political campaigners specifically, but a more detailed written answer would be provided.

- It was agreed that the figures relating to the number of postal votes received after polling day would be sought and circulated to the Committee. In addition, the figures relating to the numbers of postal votes rejected would also be sought and circulated to the Committee.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Andrew Moulton be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The figures relating to the number of postal votes received after polling day for the May 2021 elections be circulated to the Committee;
- 3) The figures relating to the number of postal votes rejected for the May 2021 elections be circulated to the Committee;
- 4) The figures relating to the number of individuals who registered to permanently vote by post in the period leading up to the May 2021 elections be circulated to the Committee;
- 5) A written answer be provided relating to the query about digital imprints and organic material;
- 6) An item regarding the implications of the proposed Elections Bill return to the Committee when the Bill was further progressed.

29. BROADBAND PROVISION

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 31 to 44, which gave an update on broadband provision within the Borough.

The report outlined the current position with regard to the existing Superfast Berkshire Broadband project, which would give broadband coverage with speeds of over 24Mbps to 98.64% of households in the Borough. The report added that a strategy was in place to increase full-fibre coverage in Berkshire to 95% by the end of 2025 from the current baseline of 13.86%. Achievement of this target would require actions to try and ensure that both commercial and subsidised provision was expedited and that investment in Berkshire's digital infrastructure did not lag behind other parts of the country.

Stuart Munro (Executive Member for Business and Economic Development), Grant Thornton (Category Manager Economic Prosperity & Place (Interim)), Rhian Hayes (Interim Assistant Director Housing and Place), and Lynne Wilson (Project and Program Manager for Digital Projects across Berkshire) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- How was Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) actively advertising the Gigabit voucher scheme to our rural communities and businesses? Officer response – Some residents and Town and Parish Councils had been directly written to in the past. There was a plan to promote the scheme more widely, and there was an aspiration to work with

Connecting Communities Berkshire to see how they might outreach and promote this directly with the Borough's more rural communities.

- Was there a plan to provide the Gorse Ride regeneration homes with ultrafast broadband provision, as one of the aspirations of the overall plan was to provide social housing with ultrafast broadband. Officer response – There was an ongoing conversation taking place with the Gorse Ride steering group and local residents, as this was seen as a great opportunity to provide top class broadband to a redeveloped estate. Conversations were ongoing with the appropriate contacts about making this a trial project.
- How much of the rollout may require public subsidy, how much might this cost, and what provisions were being made? Officer response – The primary source of finance was the Gigabit initiative from central Government. It was a Government objective, and it was down to the Government to issue the contracts which should deal with the vast majority of those people and businesses not connected commercially. Based on Government figures, 85% of properties are expected to have full fibre provision by 2025, with the further 15% to be looked at later. Berkshire's objective is set slightly higher, at 95% coverage by 2025.
- Members requested that information be provided when available relating to the level of grants expected and how much of a potential funding gap might need to be filled relating to full fibre rollout.
- Recent full fibre rollout in the Winnersh area had seen an 18 month delay between laying the infrastructure and users being able to take-up the service. What would change in the future to prevent delays in take-up in other areas of the Borough? Officer response – It was accepted that there had been issues in the early years with rollout by some providers, and officers were awaiting to see who would be awarded future contracts. As the technology had developed, there was now more passive infrastructure access as well as a variety of different providers competing to carry out the work whilst using lessons learned from early rollout.
- Was there ample provision of companies and core infrastructure across the whole country to deliver the suggested rollout to schedule? Officer response – This was an issue on the risk register, however there were now a number of providers competing for this work. The rollout was continuing to progress, but there was a risk that this issue could occur in the future.
- What was being done to mitigate the risk of a lack of personnel to carry out the infrastructure rollout? Office response – There was an apprentice programme in place to entice people to get involved in this industry. In addition, more than one contract or sub-contract could be issued to allow a switch to a different provider if necessary. Weekly meetings were being undertaken with suppliers to highlight any potential issues.
- There could be limitations regarding the no-dig option in addition to the available road space to lay infrastructure. Had these factors been considered? Officer response – These factors were being looked at, and work was being undertaken to try and get suppliers to share infrastructure and space. It was a priority to lay infrastructure when major roadworks were already being carried out, to reduce disruption and to streamline delivery.

- How many houses would not have superfast broadband provision as a minimum under current delivery plans? Officer response – The specific stats would be sought and circulated to the Committee. Those properties which were not reached were likely due to wayleave refusals, and trying to setup provision for these properties in another way would cost a very considerable amount of money.
- Was 5G being considered to ‘fill the gap’ for some properties going forwards? Officer response – 5G was being considered and looked in to. This was very new and had just been picked up, and there were a number of competing priorities. A leader in 5G would be addressing the Board in September, and it was hoped that this would assist in moving projects related to 5G forward.
- Were suppliers aware of the demand from consumers for these services? Officer response – The Board had regular contacts with suppliers and the wider market, which allowed for feedback relating some of the issues that were occurring. Conversations were also occurring to ask suppliers what best practices that they would like to see to make Berkshire a more attractive place for them to invest.
- What was the Berkshire ‘LoraWan’? Officer response – This was part of the smart city project, and related to the ‘internet of things’. For example, one local authority was using it to place sensors in bins to understand which bins needed more regular emptying to increase efficiencies.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Stuart Munro, Grant Thornton, Rhian Hayes, and Lynne Wilson be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Information be provided when available relating to the level of grants expected and how much of a potential funding gap might need to be filled relating to full fibre rollout;
- 3) The specific statistics be provided relating to how many properties within the Borough would not be supplied with a minimum of superfast broadband.

30. LIBRARY SERVICE UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 45 to 62, which gave an update on the Library Service within the Borough.

The report outlined a number of topics including the statutory requirements for library provision, an overview of the nine libraries which Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) operated across the Borough, and library enhancements and library relocations.

Bill Soane (Executive Member for Neighbourhood and Communities) and Mark Redfearn (Head of Localities Service) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- It was agreed that the slides relating to the new library offer be circulated to the Committee.

- Would the Executive Member be happy to set up a cross party working group to look at the future library offer, including making use of Members on the Arts and Culture working group? Executive Member response – This was a good idea which would be looked into to see if it could be accommodated. An update would be provided to Members regarding this.
- Were there any plans to have additional opening hours on Sundays, and could any future consultation take place during school term time? Officer response – When the library offer was consulted on five years ago the main goal was to be as inclusive as possible, and the more input from library users including students the better. Officers were always looking at when library users most wanted the service to be open, which had included less evening offerings and additional Saturday offerings. It would cost an additional approximate £35k per year to facilitate Sunday openings.
- Was the micro library in Shinfield of sufficient functionality for the population that it served? Officer response – This was part of the amenities within the wider SDL, with space for approximately 1500 books, a self-serving kiosk and intelligent shelving. The Parish Council were involved in coming up with ideas as to how best use the space for sessions, such as story time sessions.
- How well used were the smaller libraries in the Borough? Officer response – Figures relating to usage statistics for the smaller libraries could be circulated to the Committee. The Earley library was less well used than Woodley or Wokingham, but still better used than others.
- Did people tend to congregate in the larger facilities, or were they dispersed amongst the smaller facilities as well? Officer response – The smaller libraries remain well used whilst the larger sites of Woodley, Wokingham and to a lesser extent Lower Earley attracted a significant number of users. The libraries themselves were spaces within communities which were used as community hubs for activities and groups. It was important to have provision outside of the main hubs of Wokingham, Woodley and Earley.
- It was really important to incorporate the Arts Strategy into our library provision. What was planned in this regard? Officer response – Officers wanted libraries to be gateways to other things including culture and learning opportunities. Artwork from local artists was often displayed, and local authors were encouraged to come along for reading sessions. The new Wokingham library would follow suit, and there would be space for artistic exhibitions.
- Residents living in areas with a smaller library would be happy to hear the support from officers regarding the important roles that these spaces provided.
- Would it be possible to work with Optalis to put an Alzheimer's café in the new Carnival Pool hub? Executive Member and officer response – This could be looked at by the potential future working group, and this was a worthwhile idea to explore alongside the voluntary sector. The café was due to be operated by a 3rd party, and additional details would have to be worked out with them. The plan was to make the library and café as accessible as possible for all users.

- It was noted that libraries were more than just buildings and books. Libraries were community focussed areas, with learning opportunities, educational facilities and arts and culture sessions and exhibitions.
- Had conversations been had with the University of Reading Library and the British Museum relating to outreach of the Borough's Library Service? Officer response – Detailed talks had not been had with the University of Reading, but the door was always open for future talks. Contact had been made with the archives, and prior to the pandemic discussions had been ongoing relating to how the archives outreach service could align with the work of the Library Service and also schools. These conversations were ongoing and it was a key aim for the Service. In addition to this, conversations were always ongoing with schools and with Children's Services colleagues. A key success of engagement with schools included the author's in schools projects, which had received a fantastic attendance.
- It was good to see all of the work being done to improve the Woodley library, including the works to make the building energy efficient. Were officers open to the idea of displaying the figures as to how much energy the building had generated, as well as information explain how a heat pump worked? Officer response – This was a good idea and officers would look to incorporate this.
- The Committee gave their universal praise for the team behind the Library Service, and hoped that the team would continue to innovate going forwards.
- The Executive Member commented that it was WBC's duty to continue to support the residents using these services and improve upon them. The possible future working group would look at potential improvements to support residents.
- It was noted that officers within the Library Service worked tirelessly to improve and innovate the service.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Bill Soane and Mark Redfearn be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The slides relating to the new library offer be circulated to the Committee;
- 3) It be recommended that the Executive Member explore the opportunity for the creation of a cross-party working group to look at the future offering of the Library Service, whilst looking to include Members from the Arts and Culture working group;
- 4) Figures relating to usage statistics for the smaller libraries be circulated to the Committee;
- 5) Officers consider the provision of an interactive sign in the Woodley library detailing how much energy the building had generated, how much carbon had been saved, and how other features such as a heat pumped worked;
- 6) The team behind the Library Service be thanked for their tireless work and innovations;

- 7) A future update regarding the new library offer return to the Committee when it has progressed.

31. UPCOMING MEETING SCHEDULE

The Committee considered their work programme, set out in agenda pages 63 to 68.

The Committee were advised that an extraordinary meeting had been scheduled for 3 November 2021 in order to accommodate a thorough overview of the draft 2022-2025 Medium Term Financial Plan.

During the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

- Relating to the item regarding overgrown pavements, Members wished to ensure that there was a follow-up process to pavements which had been attended to but required further works on a continual basis. In addition, Members wanted assurances that the public could report issues properly, and that footways were being cleared from the verge up to the boundary edge. Members added that they would like to know how pavements were categorised for clearance, to ensure a proactive strategy was in place. Members also wished to know whether highways inspectors were picking these issues up, and how footways were dealt with in autumn and winter when there was significant leaf fall.
- It was recommended that an additional update relating to the Council's exit from the Public Protection Partnership be scheduled for the Committee's January meeting;
- An update be sought regarding provision of a refuge for domestic abuse victims, with a briefing note to be circulated to Members.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Callum Wernham be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The extraordinary meeting scheduled for 3 November 2021 be agreed;
- 3) The point relating to the item regarding overgrown pavements be noted and passed on to officers;
- 4) An additional update relating to the Council's exit from the Public Protection Partnership be scheduled for the Committee's January 2022 meeting;
- 5) An update be sought regarding provision of a refuge for domestic abuse victims, with a briefing note to be circulated to Members.