

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 28 OCTOBER 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.50 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, Graham Howe, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro, Wayne Smith and Bill Soane

Other Councillors Present

Paul Fishwick
Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

49. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Gregor Murray.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen was unable to attend the meeting in person but took part virtually.

Councillor Laura Blumenthal, Deputy Executive Member for Equalities, Poverty, the Arts and Climate Emergency, attended on behalf of Councillor Murray. In accordance with legislation Councillor Blumenthal could speak on any item but was not allowed to vote.

50. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the Executive meeting held on 30 September 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Leader of Council.

51. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The following Executive Members declared general personal interests in the items on the agenda:

- Councillors John Halsall and John Kaiser on the grounds that they were unpaid Non-Executive Directors of Optalis Holdings Ltd;
- Councillors John Kaiser, Stuart Munro and Wayne Smith on the grounds that they were Non-Executive Directors of WBC Holdings Ltd.

52. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader of Council made the following statement:

Since last we met, David Amess has been brutally murdered during a constituency surgery and James Brokenshire lost his battle with cancer. Our thoughts are with their families.

Our hearts also go out to our friend and colleague Gary Cowan in his time of sorrow at the sad loss of Katy, his closest friend, wife and long-time supporter of local democracy.

As the first Council Leader who declared a climate emergency, I am delighted that COP26 will this week address the most important issue facing our world. I am very proud of what we at Wokingham have achieved and will be achieving as our contribution. I hope and pray that there will be tangible outcomes in which we can participate, and which will accelerate our own ambitions.

Covid rates in Wokingham in conjunction with neighbouring Boroughs have steadily been increasing, above the national and southeast average. It seems now to be flattening off. The increasing rates have not affected hospital inpatient rates or death rates from Covid-19.

Most cases in England, Berkshire and Wokingham are in the 11- to 18-year-old group who haven't as yet all been vaccinated.

The Delta variant is circulating widely with national restrictions advisory for face coverings, twice weekly LFT testing for those who work or above primary school age, more testing if you are a contact and isolate if you are positive.

West Berkshire, Wokingham and Reading were all affected by the apparently high rates of false negatives at the Imensa Laboratory.

What can we do? Vaccination is the most important action to promote. Encourage anyone and everyone who is eligible to have all the vaccinations. Boosters are being offered for all those over 50 or clinically vulnerable, health and social care staff, when they reach six months post the second vaccination. If a resident is due for a vaccination and they have not heard from the GP they can either visit a walk-in site or book an appointment through the national booking site. NHS providers are arranging vaccination of their own staff with social care staff using the National Booking Service.

Young people aged 12 to 18 are being offered one dose of vaccination. These also can be booked via the national booking site. The school immunisation service is visiting all schools in turn to vaccinate 12 to 16-year-olds. There will be a significant number of children unable to attend these due to isolating at home with Covid-19. Catch up clinics are being arranged, and they can access the national booking service. This age group cannot visit a walk-in centre.

Wokingham has above national uptake rates of Covid vaccinations.

The only message is that please use face coverings where encouraged to do so and remain cautious in your contact with others.

We have been notified that we shall be subject to a Ward Boundary Review within Wokingham Borough for elections from 2024. Whilst there are options, what is clear is that our current system will have to change. All Councillors have now been briefed on the process and the Council has some work to do to agree a consensus on the way forward.

The extent to which poor financial management has crippled Slough Borough Council makes horrific reading but emphasises how robust controls and disciplines throughout our organisation are essential.

The administration cannot make spending commitments outside the MTFP without a supplementary estimate. Other Members and Officers need to be aware that any such commitments can only be recommendations to the Executive. We were assessing the budget yesterday and will not really know what it means for us for some time.

In common with many other local authorities, we are experiencing cost pressures arising from an over-heated economy and issues with the supply chain. We are experiencing the pressures most acutely within the construction industry in terms of both material costs and

labour. We will also become exposed to the well-publicised increase in utility costs, in particular gas and electricity.

The Council is largely protected from the increase in energy prices for this financial year as the price of supplies has been locked-in within the terms of the contract and the sustainability of the supplier is confirmed. However, there will be a significant impact on the MTFP which we are in the process of formulating following the annual review of charges in the gas and electricity supply. We estimate the impact to be in the region of £600k. Some of our revenue income lines are becoming increasingly challenging this year as they are dependent upon income from asset construction, and I expect we will have to remove the £700k pa additional income target we initially factored in for the next year. From a broader perspective we will need to keep a close eye on general inflationary pressures across the Council, pressures already alerted by the Bank of England Monetary Committee.

We have already conducted an initial review of our Capital Programme for this year and draft proposed Capital Programme for the next three years. It currently tells us that whilst many of the current works in progress are protected by fixed price contracts, it is highly likely that those not yet tendered will see an increase when future bids are received. We have already identified additional pressures on specific capital items of up to £10 million, and this assumes that where we have general work programmes we will have to stop once the budget has been exhausted. It also assumes that we will not be facing a similar demand-led cost increase in the highways sector, which will be another area to closely watch.

It therefore remains incumbent on us to factor these pressures into our financial planning assumptions and take the necessary measures needed to balance our ever-tightening budgets. Good financial management and rigour has been a hallmark of this Council over many, many years and the coming years will provide yet another test for our capable Officers and Councillors. Regrettably well-meaning spending desires arising from committees and working groups outside of the Executive will have to be considered by Executive in this challenging financial context.

The Oaktree School is suffering a delay in the provision which will impact on pupils and the MTFP.

I am particularly sensitive about the Twyford library project as I have initiated it, negotiated it, arranged for funding and planning permission. I am not surprised by others claiming credit, however concocted, as it is a fabulous project. However, as I have been intimately involved with it, it is necessary that it has the greatest scrutiny. In the meantime, I need to point out that there is still an existing library there which has recently been refurbished.

53. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions submitted.

54. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

54.1 Paul Fishwick asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport the following question:

Question

At the 17th September 2020 meeting of Council I asked a Member question, Item 65.3 refers, related to the Winter Maintenance Plan.

The Highways Winter Maintenance Plan indicates that it will be reviewed annually. On that basis, what additional walking and cycling routes will be included in the 2021/22 Plan to ensure that these routes are safe and usable throughout the winter period for pedestrians and cyclists?

Answer

The Highways Winter Maintenance Plan has been reviewed as it is each year and considers the following factors:

- Skidding accidents, where freezing conditions have been cited in Thames Valley Police Personal Injury accident reports
- The location of on-road, shared or dedicated cycle routes
- Bus routes
- Known wet spots
- Bridge-decks, viaducts etc.
- Partnership working with the Highways Maintenance Term Contractor, that is Volker Highways, other departments of the Council and other contractors etc.
- Previous snow events and their impact on the Borough and its residents.
- Comments from parish and town councils, Members and residents.
- Requests for additional salt bins from parish and town councils, Members and residents.
- Car parks; and
- Obviously we have looked at Coronavirus as well.

Based on the number of issues identified in relation to cycling and walking in the Borough during the review we have not identified a need to change our existing approach at the current time. The issue we have got is that the low volume of use and nature of cycle routes in the Borough means that salting dedicated routes would not be effective as re-freezing would be likely to occur shortly after application, because the number of cycles using them is not high enough. We will, of course, continue to monitor cycling levels and if routes are identified that would benefit from salting, they will be added to the secondary salting network.

It is worth noting that we have obtained ten small push along gritters which were purchased last year and have really helped to improve our ability to grit the pedestrian areas evenly and efficiently in our town centres and these could be used on dedicated cycle routes as well.

Supplementary Question

The current HGV driver crisis has impacted on the green waste collection service. How will winter maintenance be continued whilst still maintaining other Council services?

Supplementary Answer

I am not sure it is directly connected to the question but I think it was announced today, if not yesterday, that the green waste collection is back to normal and that we have restarted it and I don't foresee any issues with the gritting.

If you have any issues, of course, Paul I would be very happy to hear from you.

54.2 Imogen Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport the following question:

Question

Looking at the Bus Service Improvement Plan - our new housing estates are filling up with residents and we have bus shelters along the main roads, but as of yet, no bus services to these neighbourhoods.

Understanding that this Council has declared a Climate Emergency, we need good public transport to be an alternative to persuade people out of their cars and that cycling and walking does not work for everyone, especially in bad weather. To be useful, the bus service needs to run in the evenings and at weekends and they were supposed to be available when people started moving in. So, when are we likely to see a regular bus service in these new estates?

Answer

The Bus Service Improvement Plan as you will have seen from tonight's agenda is a high-level strategy, it is not intended to provide detailed amendments and delivery dates for every bus service in the Borough, but you can see from it how much we do actually spend on bus services. It is a considerable amount of money in order to try and encourage people to use bus services and provide appropriate services for them.

Development in Shinfield and Spencer's Wood has already been provided with additional bus services to serve new homes in Croft Gardens and the Thames Valley Science Park. In North Wokingham the 121 service was amended to re-route the bus through Mulberry Grove using S106 funding to cover the costs. Both bus services have developer funding until 2026 to try and establish commercially sustainable services, although the pandemic has had a significant impact on passenger levels and growth.

Currently passenger recovery rates are 65% of the pre-Covid level, bus services need to recover before new services are added. Adding new services when passenger demand is low results in high operational costs and low on-board revenue. Ultimately, where passenger demand is low there is a risk that developer funding will be exhausted before the service can be established so we need to try and introduce it at the right time so that it has got a chance to be established before we run out of developer funding because the last thing we want is to have to withdraw a service because it is not viable at the end of the developer funding.

Bus services for new developments will be addressed as part of the Enhanced Partnership agreement. The Enhanced Partnership agreement will provide greater detail on the frequency and days of operation of bus services along with commitments to delivery dates. The agreement will be available on 1st April 2022. As you will see we have some pretty ambitious targets in terms of improving the bus services, improving integration, improving fares, improving ticketing and really actually making the bus services as good as we can.

Supplementary Question

It is good to know that you are at least thinking about bus services and I realise that it is not a complete thing yet and it is good to know that they are improving.

The thing we have in Wokingham is that there really isn't a very good evening bus service, everything sort of stops about 8pm. I believe the last bus to Woosehill leaves town at 19:05 and if you were a commuter coming out from London that is a little bit early for you. Also, if you are living on Finchampstead Road there is no bus service. In Barkham, I think, the last bus is about 8pm.

If we want people to leave their cars at home this is kind of crucial to the climate emergency; to provide an alternate public transport service that people can choose so that they don't use their cars. I would really like to know what is the plan, particularly in the run-up to Christmas and when there is poor weather? What are the alternatives we are providing for people other than using their cars, particularly in Wokingham?

Supplementary Answer

I agree with you Imogen, my profession is transport and one of the things that is very clear from transport theory and reality is that the more frequent you have services and the more convenient they are, for where people want to go, the more people use them. That is undoubtedly correct, but we do have to get to a position where the bus services are viable and economic.

As you see the Bus Service Improvement Plan will roll out things we have been talking about. Things like the bus service to Winnersh Triangle station which shuts off too early for anybody using it for commuter purposes. Those sorts of things are important to try and see if we can work with Reading Buses, and other bus providers, to make sure that we get services that match, as much as possible, the desire so that they get more passengers, we get more usage and in the end we provide a bus service that is viable. I think that is the key message.

So, I am on the same page as you as far as frequency and timing is concerned but we cannot afford to spend unlimited amounts of money on buses unfortunately. We already spend £810k a year on supporting bus services. We spend almost £1m on concessionary fares and we also spend over a £100k towards community transport and volunteer services. We also spend about £400k from S106 on supporting bus services. These are very significant amounts of money. John has given a very good summary of where the finances of the Council are. We need to get these bus services frequent, and we also need to get them viable so that they are operable and provide the bus companies with a revenue that means that they can continue to deliver them.

55. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT FY2021/22 - QUARTER TWO

The Executive considered a report setting out the expenditure for the second quarter of the current financial year and the forecast outturn positions for the Council's net revenue expenditure, its General Fund Balance, the Housing Revenue Account and the School's Block funding.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing advised that in addition to the financial challenges mentioned in the Leader of Council's earlier statement there were also pressure on the schools' budgets and the areas covered by the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), which had a forecast overspend of £9.6m. This figure was likely to rise because of the increase in pension contributions for school staff and the much-deserved salary

increase for teachers. The Council would also have to bear the increase in gas and electricity costs, which was estimated to be in the region of £500k. Councillor Kaiser advised that efforts were being made to reduce the deficit in the Dedicated Schools Grant through the provision of a SEND school, Oaktree. Unfortunately, the DfE had advised that they would be postponing this provision which had the effect of costing the Council £1m pa until the provision was available.

Councillor Kaiser also highlighted the end of September position and the forecast overspend of the revenue budget, as set out in the report, and pointed out that the overspend was only 0.3% of the initial budget, and half of that was due to Covid. In addition, Councillor Kaiser drew attention to the two supplementary estimate requests and the reasons for them.

In relation to the deficit in the DSG Councillor Munro queried whether the deficit would increase year on year, particularly as the Council was responsible for the provision of services but did not have any authority over academies etc? Councillor Kaiser explained that because the DSG was outside the Council's revenue account the deficit could increase year on year but at some point, accountability for it would be required. The Government had stated that more money would be available for schools however it was unknown whether this would assist in reducing this deficit.

Given the importance of the new homes bonus to the Council Councillor Smith queried whether the Council should be taking the matter up with the relevant Government department? Councillor Halsall confirmed that he had alerted the four local MPs to the Council's financial situation including the impact of increased gas and electricity costs, the DSG, the new homes bonus and also the Health and Social Care Bill.

Councillor Kaiser commented that although there were a number of pressures the Council was still in a strong financial position, including having a high level of non-specific usable revenue reserves.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the 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), as illustrated in the Executive Summary and appendices attached to the report, be noted;
- 3) a supplementary estimate of £151,270 for the Equalities and Diversity programme be approved;
- 4) a supplementary estimate of £250,000 for the re-integration of Trading Standards and Environmental Health to WBC be approved. This money was identified in last year's Medium Term Financial Plan to be spent in 2022/23 however the project costs are forecast to now be spent in 2021/22 rather than 2022/23.

56. CAPITAL MONITORING 2021-22 - QUARTER 2

The Executive considered a report setting out the progress made by the Council in delivering its capital programme in the current financial year and the position as at the end of the second quarter.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing went through the report and reminded the meeting that the capital budget was used to deliver a large number of projects including roads, schools etc. Councillor Kaiser went on to explain the underspend of £8.1m, which had been achieved through budget savings that had been identified in a number of areas, as set out in the report.

Councillor Kaiser drew Members' attention to the fact that the Public Loans Board was currently consulting on changes to their methodology for lending money and this may result in implications for the Council.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the proposed rephrasing to the Capital Programme following the 'in-year' review, 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 2022/2023;
- 2) the position of the Capital Programme at the end of Quarter 2 (to 30 September 2021), as summarised in the report below and set out in detail in Appendix A, be noted;
- 3) the successful application for external funding of £98k, for allocation to new capital schemes to put in place a heat decarbonisation plan for four Leisure Centres, Bulmershe Secondary School and Waterford House (as set out in paragraph 7 of the report) be noted.

57. BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN (BSIP)

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposed Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) which sets out the Council's high-level ambition for future bus services to meet local need.

During her introduction the Executive Member for Highways and Transport explained that this was the next phase of the BSIP which was being driven by a statutory timetable and was required to maintain the Council's current bus service funding from the Government. This phase required the Council to produce and approve a BSIP, which was a high level document that contained some aspirational and ambitious policies, by 31 October 2021. It was noted that discussions had been held with bus companies and other providers to find out the extent of transport that was available in the Borough and what these providers intended to include in their improvement plans.

Councillor Jorgensen advised that by having a BSIP the Council would be able to bid for future funding opportunities as part of the £3bn transitional plan for bus services and other funding may be available based on how ambitious it was felt the BSIP was. The intention was to enable local bus services to recover to pre-pandemic levels and then facilitate continued growth in bus passenger numbers as well as providing the right level of bus provision in the right place that would support continuous economic growth of the whole Borough and the wider Thames Valley region. To this end the Council would be looking at

end to end routes rather than between individual towns and villages. Improving accessibility to transport services and local bus networks and achieving a greener bus network to provide an opportunity to reduce carbon emissions was also due to be considered.

Councillor Jorgensen further advised that the BSIP also included some ambitious targets in relation to journey times, punctuality, passenger growth and customer satisfaction. The delivery policies contained in the BSIP, and set out in the report, were also highlighted.

RESOLVED: That it be agreed that Wokingham Borough Council publish the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) document by 31 October 2021.

58. COMMUNITY DELIBERATIVE PROCESS FOR THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY PROPOSAL

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposal for the delivery of a Community Deliberative Process for Climate Emergency.

The Deputy Executive Member for Equalities, Poverty, the Arts and Climate Emergency introduced the report and reminded the meeting that the Executive had previously decided to engage local residents and businesses in a community deliberative process for the climate emergency. After extensive review a proposal had been developed, as set out in the report.

Councillor Blumenthal confirmed the importance of constantly engaging with residents to get the behaviour change that would be required for the Borough to be net zero carbon by 2030 and this involved listening to their needs, concerns and ambitions. The proposal had been designed to enable the Council to engage with a diverse range of people across the Borough and it was intended that residents would start engaging with the deliberative process in the new year.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the proposal to deliver a Community Deliberative Process for the Climate Emergency through deliberative peer groups and e-panels to engage the community with the Council's response to climate change be approved;
- 2) £46,000 be approved to fund the delivery of Community Deliberative Process for the Climate Emergency as described in the proposal (as set out in Appendix A to the report);
- 3) the key objectives and outcomes of the process for wider engagement with the community to empower stakeholders including but not limited to, Wokingham Borough residents, young people, community groups and the business community to play as full a role as possible in achieving a net-zero carbon borough by 2030 be noted;
- 4) that it be noted that the outcomes and recommendations from the process will be taken to Council next year with the commitment that their feasibility will be explored by Officers. Officers will report back to Council to inform which recommendations will be incorporated into the Climate Emergency Action Plan to support further action.

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