

**MINUTES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 15 DECEMBER 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.40 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), Parry Batth, Graham Howe, Charles Margetts and Bill Soane

Other Councillors In Attendance

John Kaiser, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance and Housing
Pauline Jorgensen, Highways and Transport
Stuart Munro, Business and Economic Development
Wayne Smith, Planning and Enforcement
Laura Blumenthal
Gary Cowan
Sarah Kerr

75. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Gregor Murray.

Councillors Pauline Jorgensen, John Kaiser, Stuart Munro and Wayne Smith did not 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.

76. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

77. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader of Council made the following statement:

Last month we were seeing Covid numbers going down very favourably and there were grounds for belief that the pandemic was being contained. This was true for Delta but sadly we have now seen the emergence of Omicron; which presupposes that we had ten variants in between which did not bear mentioning.

Currently, the rate of new Covid cases within the Borough remains high. The current rate is 610 per 100,000. This rate is slightly below the rates across the South-East; 649 per 100,000. Most cases continue to occur within our school age population and their parents as we reach the end of the school term this week.

The current rate reflects the cases across the week 1-6 December, and does not begin to reflect any potential impact of the new Omicron variant in Wokingham. UK Chief Medical Officers, earlier this week, increased the UK Covid Alert from Level 3 to Level 4 due to a rapid increase in cases of the Omicron variant. There is much still to learn about the new variant but what is known is that it is extremely transmissible, cases are doubling every 2-3 days, which means that cases will rise exponentially across the coming weeks.

It is too early to draw firm conclusions about the severity of the disease that Omicron causes. However, even if it is a milder illness in an individual, the sheer volume of cases that are expected, coupled with a slight drop in vaccine effectiveness would lead to a substantial increase in hospitalisation. Hospitalisations are expected to rise in the UK over the next two weeks.

Data published last Friday suggests that vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic infection is substantially reduced against Omicron where a person has had two doses, but that a third dose boosts protection back up to over 70%. There is an urgent national Omicron appeal for the public to 'Get Boosted Now', we need to call upon all our residents to come forward for their booster; indeed, if they haven't their first or second doses. We are working tirelessly to support health partners on the delivery of the vaccination programme across the Borough, offering our local buildings and staff to facilitate vaccine delivery and advocating for our residents to maximise their opportunity to access their vaccine or booster.

Officers across the Council are working to maximise the effectiveness of the Government's Plan B implemented over the past week. For residents this means wearing masks where it is appropriate for them to do so, working from home where possible and accessing their Covid passports where necessary. We also continue to work tirelessly to ensure people are getting tested when it is right for them to do so (rapid lateral flow testing before socialising where someone has no symptoms, or regularly across seven days as a contact of a case; and PCR testing when someone has symptoms) and encouraging subsequent isolation when required.

The coming weeks will see many occasions and celebrations bringing people together in the run up to Christmas. Please remember that we are now within ten days of Christmas so anyone testing positive from now will be isolating across the Christmas period. We must remain cautious and continue to employ all measures we can to make these occasions as safe as possible and reduce transmission as much as we can.

So, the message remains please get your jabs and booster and encourage everybody else to do so as well.

My Administration commissioned a LGA Peer Review as part of our aspiration "to be the best we can be". We know that we are a good organisation; we want to be the best. The acid test is the service we provide for our residents. This is one of the strategic priorities contained within our Community Vision. My Administration is committed to continuously learning and continuously improving, and the peer review makes an important contribution to that process.

My Administration has reviewed the impact of the pandemic on our local priorities and has identified emerging areas of need for example, equalities and deprivation.

As the Council is about to enter the next phase of development it is a good time to receive independent feedback of our progress, how we are perceived by our stakeholders, and how well placed we are to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

I am delighted to report that the feedback from the Peer Review was very positive. We are a very good Council, which is very well run in their opinion. We are addressing tonight their initial criticism in that we could do better in our community engagement and digital communications.

Last month we launched the Local Plan consultation. Numerous drop-in sessions have been held together with additional consultations at Shute End. Several local groups have emerged to oppose parts of the consultation.

We have no wish to extinguish one square inch of greenfields and have opposed housing numbers vigorously. We, a Conservative administration, we, as a Council, and in particular I, both as a Councillor and a resident, will continue to do so. We are emotionally and intellectually against more development in the Borough.

However, there are councils who have refused the Local Plan process and have had one imposed by the Ministry of Housing who can in extreme cases of non-cooperation result in the loss of the local authority right to determine planning applications.

Again, I stress this is a consultation and there is a long way to go before it emerges as a Local Plan, if indeed it ever does. Please respond to the consultation either on-line, by email or by post. We are seeking all your views and want to hear what all our residents want to say.

Whilst the housing number is greater than I would wish, the Government proposed a revision to their standard method which would have more than doubled our annual requirement to over 1,600 dwellings a year. We campaigned hard and submitted robust technical challenges against the proposal which was subsequently abandoned by the Government. We led the cause.

Local Plans are key documents which set out the strategy and associated policies for managing development. Not having a current Local Plan means that developers can successfully apply for planning permission. This speculative development occurs with little infrastructure and more housing. There is hardly a square inch of the Borough which is not optioned by a developer. Not having a Plan could result in several times more homes being built.

Our current Local Plan, the Core Strategy, has worked well, with most of the development occurring in places where planned, supported by huge investment in infrastructure including new schools, roads, and green spaces, more importantly it has allowed the Council to refuse and win at appeals against developers proposing unsuitable sites.

Refreshing our Local Plan will mean our planning policies continue to be effective and will be difficult for developers to challenge with inappropriate alternative sites. Without a new Plan, there will be less control over where development happens, and it will be much harder to try and improve infrastructure alongside.

For housing, the Government introduced a standard method which calculates the housing need for local authorities. For Wokingham Borough the housing need currently calculates as 768 homes each year.

My Administration has engaged the leading planning barrister and statistician to help understand whether we could progress a case for exceptional circumstances. Disappointingly the outcome was that there were no compelling reasons under the current Government framework to do so.

To be clear, if we progress a Local Plan which does not enable this amount of housing expected by the Government, it will not pass examination in public, bringing all the

negatives of loss of control. I am however continuing to lobby the Government at every level to see what we can do to reduce the housing numbers.

To summarise this is a consultation. We would like as many residents as possible to respond to this consultation so that we can get the next iteration right. Please respond either on-line, by email or by letter.

Today's main item of business is to agree my Administration's approach to Domestic Abuse, detailed plans about how this will be achieved are set out in the new Domestic Abuse Strategy 2021-2024. However, with the importance of this subject, I spent some time reflecting on the journey that we have embarked upon to get us to this point.

Over the past three years, through the width and breadth of the work of the Community Safety Partnership, we have been driving and embedding continuous improvements across the whole organisation including, Housing Services and Children and Adults' Social Care and Place and Growth. We have prioritised our corporate commitment to further raise the skills and expertise and embed good practice across the whole organisation.

We have put in place an Anti-Social Behaviour Officer, to ensure that our multi-agency work with our partners including Thames Valley Police and housing associations, victims of anti-social behaviour are safeguarded and helped. This has ensured that complex issues affecting residents, often interlinked with domestic abuse are resolved expediently.

To improve our service offer for residents, we are bringing the Public Protection Partnership back in-house, under the Safety and Enforcement Service. With the direction of a newly appointed service manager, this team will ensure that residents receive a comprehensive out of hours response to a wide range of anti-social behaviour and noise nuisance complaints; something which has not currently existed within the PPP. We have also put in place a newly appointed Emergency Planning Manager, to further bolster my Administration's civil contingencies resilience response.

More than a year before the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, we recognised that the demand from victims of domestic abuse had increased dramatically locally. To ensure the right level of safe provision was in place we acted by increasing our investment in funding for our local commissioned service by 55%. We also, took the key decision to recruit, a subject matter expert on domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Co-ordinator post has been pivotal in helping us navigate and embed this vital work. We fully recognised that this would be the foundation upon which we would build our wider response to the violence against women and girls' agenda.

Since then, we have engaged and regularly facilitate the bringing together of 43 domestic abuse stakeholders. Many of which are local organisations such as Kaleidoscopic UK, a peer support service for victims and SupportU, a service offering support for LGBT+ victims, and amongst others, Cranston our local commissioned domestic abuse service provider. These 43 stakeholders share key service information and work hand in hand to help victims of domestic abuse.

Furthermore, we have set up a strong Local Domestic Abuse Partnership Board which has made considerable amounts of progress on delivering our Domestic Abuse Duty which came into force on 29th April 2021. The local Board has attendance and expert input from the National Domestic Abuse Commissioners Office as well as the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities.

We have taken the opportunity to talk and consult with victims and survivors of domestic abuse, including children, who must be recognised as victims of domestic abuse. We have asked them what they would like to see implemented in local services. This information has formed the basis of our local approach.

We have started work to secure Domestic Abuse Housing Accreditation for our Council Housing Services. This will ensure that we have clear actions focused steps, in both our policies and practice to deliver the safest and most effective response for domestic abuse victims seeking help from the Council.

My Council has one of the most comprehensive Home Security Schemes, often referred to as a Sanctuary Scheme, which offers practical home security adaptations to secure properties for victims. The offer of help is for all residents, in privately owned, rented, Council or housing association properties. The Scheme provides an essential and practical offer of help for victims of domestic abuse and assists them to stay in their own homes. Something victims have told us they would prefer to do, where safe and possible.

Furthermore, in recent months we have undertaken a comprehensive audit and review of training for Officers and frontline staff to ensure that they are fully equipped to help victims. We have put in place Workplace Domestic Abuse Guidance to ensure that managers can recognise and spot the signs to help support staff members that maybe victims and in need of help.

A communications strategy together with regular press and social media posts has been rolled out. Together with information and ways to access help, which has been provided at Covid clinics and testing locations.

Building on my Administration's wider Equalities Strategy, this Domestic Abuse Strategy will further assist and drive my Administration's ambition and vision to embed a White Ribbon Plus approach. The Domestic Abuse Strategy recognises that whilst women are most likely to be the victims of domestic abuse 1 in 3 victims are male and therefore equality and access to services for all sections of our communities is vital. To build safer communities, services that meet the needs of male victims, LGBTQ+ victims and victims from a range of other protected characteristics is essential.

In addition to all this good work, we are active members of several national accredited programmes including the Employers Initiative on Domestic Abuse (EIDA).

We are working towards DAHA (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance) accreditation: which is the UK benchmark for how housing providers should respond to domestic abuse.

We are exploring several other good practice and inclusive accreditation schemes including, UK Safe Spaces and Call for Action on Perpetrators. A workstream which shares research findings, best practice and drives national policy work on perpetrators. We are in talks with Ask for ANI which allows the use of nationally recognised stickers on office buildings to signal staff are aware of domestic abuse and can provide a room where victims can call helplines for support.

Whilst we are proud to say that our efforts have been commended by the National Domestic Abuse Commissioners Office, who have recognised the level of commitment and good practice being undertaken locally we still have more to achieve, we are not

complacent, to ensure we make the Borough a safe place for all victims. A vision underpinned by this Domestic Abuse Strategy, which will be presented tonight.

Last, but not least, in what has been a very difficult year I would like to thank each and every one of our staff, Councillors and residents for your incredible efforts and forbearance during this last year. I know it has been an incredible strain for now two years. Notwithstanding the pandemic we as a Council have achieved some remarkable outcomes of which we are rightly proud. It is an enormous privilege to be Leader of Council and I thank everyone for their support.

Lastly, Happy Christmas and a very prosperous, merry, healthy and successful New Year to everyone.

78. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions received.

79. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

79.1 Sarah Kerr asked the Executive Member for Neighbourhood and Communities the following question:

Question

How was a contract awarded for a domestic abuse refuge service to a provider that doesn't have any domestic abuse provision?

Answer

Following a robust tender process, the contract for Wokingham Domestic Abuse was awarded to Cranstoun and commenced on 1st July 2021.

Domestic abuse is a priority area for the Borough and in recognition of this and increased demands on services in this area, Council funding for this contract has been significantly increased.

The provision of support for victims of domestic abuse is in place as required as part of the commissioned service.

Prior to launching the domestic abuse arm of the Cranstoun service Cranstoun committed 10 years to developing their current domestic abuse model. To do this cohesively they worked with Respect, Safelives, Domestic Violence Intervention Programme, Women's Aid, to name a few all of whom are key stakeholders within domestic abuse.

Cranstoun offer a fully integrated domestic abuse service in Barking and Dagenham, the County of Sussex, and Sutton all of which are well established. They also deliver victim and survivor work in the following areas, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Birmingham, West Midlands, West Mercia Police Force and 11 Boroughs and Sussex County. They have also won a fully integrated domestic abuse service in South Yorkshire.

This is a considerable reach across the country and one which demonstrates their capability to deliver a comprehensive domestic abuse service to Wokingham residents.

Supplementary Question

You sort of really did not answer my question and I am not sure that they actually have refuge places.

What I also wanted to know is that I understand that Cranstoun is supposed to be attending the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board meetings and the Executive meetings and it is my understanding that they have so far only attended one of these. So how is Cranstoun actually being held accountable?

Supplementary Answer

If I can just come to your first point about having a refuge within the Borough. What I can say is that no one will be left without support and a safe refuge in our Borough should they require it. We do have facilities to be able to house people who are in need of that refuge.

Let me just say that since 21st July, when Cranstoun took over, we have had no demand for a refuge place but that is not to say that there would not be in the future.

Also, I would like to say that when a company takes on a new contract you can hardly expect them to have a house in place ready to house people should they need one and we are actively looking for our own refuge rather than having to rely on outside bodies. But to actually do this I think you have got to also remember that domestic abuse unfortunately is not only about women it is about men and children as well. Therefore to find a suitable property to be able to house a mixed group is very difficult but we are working very hard to do that. Let me go back and say that yes there is availability for anybody who needs refuge, and they would not be denied in our Borough.

As for the meetings I will have to check on that for you as I have got no figures here as to whether they have attended the meetings or not and I will have to come back to you on that particular point.

79.2 Gary Cowan asked the Leader of Council the following question:

Question

The Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge Update states that the CPC at Wokingham took place between 9th and 17th November during which the Peer Team met with over 100 people comprising approximately 200 hours.

How many members of the public, parish and town councils were met and how many were staff/Members in this 200 hours?

Answer

During their visit the Peer Challenge Team held a wide range of meetings with residents, Members, staff, trade union representatives, partners, and town and parish councils. It is important to emphasise that the Peer Challenge Team itself led this review, independently and objectively, choosing which individuals and groups it wished to speak with in order to gain a rounded perspective of the Council.

In their feedback meeting to us on 17th November, the Peer Challenge Team reported that they had met 100 people over approximately 200 hours of work. The majority of the people the Team met were staff, as the Team asked to speak to a wide range from across the Council. Of course, many of our staff are also residents of the Borough.

There were eight, approximately one hour, meetings with Member groups, including a specific meeting with your Group Leader, Councillor Frewin, who also attended the feedback session on the 17th. Specific focus groups were also held with residents and town and parish clerks.

Supplementary Question

The report states that “the peer challenge approach involves a team of experienced officers and members from other local authorities”, etc, etc and it did go on to add that “the approach is valuable in identifying and addressing issues and challenges”, which I would recognise to be a good idea. “Local priorities and outcomes and how to make our overview and scrutiny function more meaningful and effective”.

This still gets back to my original question which was that I actually asked for specific numbers of how many opposition Councillors, parish and town councils, were included, as I was really interested in the number? Anyway, I welcome your answer

Supplementary Answer

I would just like to add that what I said before that the Peer Challenge Team made their own decisions on who they were going to meet. We do not have the full report yet so we do not know who they specifically met, and we may not know after the report because that was at their own discretion.

80. DOMESTIC ABUSE STRATEGY 2021 - 2024

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposed Domestic Abuse Strategy covering the period 2021-2024.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Neighbourhood and Communities informed Members that the Strategy had been delayed in order that the relevant parts of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 could be included within the Strategy. Councillor Soane thanked Karen Evans, the Domestic Abuse Co-Ordinator, for all her hard work in putting the Strategy together.

Laura Blumenthal highlighted the awareness training that was being made available to Council staff and stated that she was impressed that every month a training session, often delivered by specialist charities and groups, was set up covering domestic violence against various groups including, older people, LGBT victims and men. Councillor Blumenthal thanked Officers for establishing this learning culture about domestic violence and empowering front line staff to support domestic abuse victims. In addition, trauma training would be offered to staff in the new year which would assist them in spotting the signs of victim behaviours in relation to domestic violence so that victims could be provided with the support they needed.

Councillor Howe stated his surprise that 1 in 3 victims of domestic abuse were men. He highlighted the figures in the Foreword of the Strategy which stated that in the year ending 31st March 2021 1,479 women and 568 men in the Wokingham area had reported domestic abuse incidents to the police. Councillor Howe believed that the true number was actually 2,700 women and 1,500 men. This showed that the number of male victims was increasing and queried if it was known why this was? Councillor Soane responded that believed that the increase in the number of men coming forward to report domestic abuse may have always been the true figure but because the matter was now more openly discussed and the stigma of being a victim had gone away more men now felt able to report the fact that they had been victims of domestic abuse.

RESOLVED: That the Domestic Abuse Strategy 2021-2024 be approved so that it can be released for publication.

81. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE UPDATE

The Executive considered a report relating to an update on the initial findings of the recent Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge.

The Leader of Council advised that the intention of bringing the report to the Executive at this stage was to appraise Members of the initial findings of the Peer Challenge, which had been a lot of work with the Team meeting over 100 people with 200 hours of discussion. Headlines from the feedback session highlighted that the Council delivered valuable, well-performing services that produced good outcomes for its residents. One of the issues highlighted by the Peer Challenge was the Council's engagement with the public, both by digital and physical means. The Council wished to work on this area at the earliest opportunity therefore a supplementary estimate of £150,000 was being requested. Councillor Halsall stated that the LGA's final report was due early in the new year.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the initial high level findings from the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge that took place in November 2021 be noted;
- 2) a supplementary estimate of £150,000 to support the delivery of key actions arising from the review be agreed; and
- 3) it be noted that the finalised LGA CPC report and associated action plan will be reported to the January 2022 meeting of the Executive.

82. CROWN HOUSE LEASE

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposal to acquire a 5-year lease on the Crown House building situated on the Toutley Industrial Estate, Toutley Road, Wokingham.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources went through the report and advised the meeting that during Covid the Council had seen a large increase in homelessness in the Borough. This coupled with the Council's commitment to remove all the rough sleepers from the streets and to allocate suitable accommodation had put considerable strain on the Council's resources and assets. Councillor Kaiser reported that it was planned to meet this need by delivering over 20 units of modular temporary accommodation, similar to those planned in Reading, and this would allow short term housing until permanent homes could be found. This was however not enough and therefore it was proposed to enter into a 5-year lease for 24 units at Crown House which would enable the Council to reduce expenditure by £163k per annum. which over the 5-year lease was a saving £815k. Currently the Council pays £436,800 per annum to use the same facilities and this would mean that the current nightly rate of £50 a night would be reduced to £32 a night, a 37% reduction. This would also enable the Council to ensure that there would be sufficient provision for urgent use and thereby reduce the need for expensive hotels. In addition this would also support the wider work to reduce the level of temporary accommodation.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the acquisition of a 5-year lease of the Crown House building, Toutley Road, Wokingham, at a cost of £275,000 per annum for the use as long-term temporary accommodation, be approved; and
- 2) it be noted that there is an option to renew the lease in WBC's favour for a further 5 years, at the passing rent at the end of the initial term.