

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 17 FEBRUARY 2022 FROM 5.30 PM TO 6.30 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray, Wayne Smith and Bill Soane

Other Councillors Present Virtually

Graham Howe, Children's Services
Gary Cowan
Jim Frewin

97. APOLOGIES

Councillor Graham Howe was unable to be present in person at the meeting but attended remotely.

98. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 27 January 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Leader of Council.

99. 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 Non-Executive Directors of Optalis Holdings Ltd;
- Councillor Charles Margetts on the grounds that he was a Non-Executive Director of Optalis Ltd;
- Councillors John Kaiser, Stuart Munro and Wayne Smith on the grounds that they were Non-Executive Directors of WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen declared a person interest in Agenda Item 104 Commercial Waste and Recycling Contract on the grounds that her husband worked for a company that might bid for the contract. Councillor Jorgensen remained in the Chamber during the debate and voted on the item.

100. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader of Council made the following statement:

It is seventy years this month that King George passed away, leaving the throne to the Queen and I am sure that you will join me in thanking her for her service and to share her hope that the jubilee will provide an opportunity for people to come together after the difficulties of recent years. In recognition of the Jubilee, we will be providing free residential street closures.

It is now almost two years since Covid entered the Borough for the first time. The first case was on February 29th, 2020. 351 deaths have been recorded. I would just like a moment's silence to commemorate all those who have tragically died and those whose lives have been impaired in the Borough and elsewhere. All our thoughts are with them.

In the last month we have seen cases of the new Omicron variant in Wokingham reach new heights but also begin to decline. The current rate of new Covid cases is 917 per 100,000. The current rate reflects the week 2-9 February although we must be cautious to remember that these case numbers are reliant on the testing behaviour underlying them. The majority of cases remain within our school age population and their parents.

The past month has seen a shift in tone from central Government, looking to a future where we learn to live with Covid as an endemic disease. The detail around what this future endemic response will be released on Monday and our Officers will continue to work to communicate any new guidance and information to our residents, through the Community Champion newsletter, via our website and other channels, and also support our partners and providers working with care settings and educational settings as they navigate the transition into an endemic landscape. As we await to hear the detail from central Government we must note that the guidance has not yet changed, we have therefore to encourage people to continue to test when they have Covid symptoms and isolate where appropriate.

A cornerstone of the endemic response to Covid is to encourage as many residents as possible to get vaccinated, be it their 1st, 2nd or 3rd booster vaccine. I am delighted to announce that from Friday 18th February we will have a local vaccine provision in Wokingham Central Library open weekly on a Friday, Saturday and Sunday, with opening hours to suit our busy residents. All residents who are eligible, including importantly 12-15 year olds, pregnant ladies and those not registered with a GP, can walk up to the library and receive their vaccine at a time convenient to them. I urge you to encourage everybody to use this vaccination centre.

As we try to understand and implement policy around what life with endemic Covid looks like it is important to remember that different people in our communities have had very different lived experiences over the past two years and therefore will be entering this period of transition with different perspectives. We need to continue to work together, to be patient and understanding within our communities, so that we can move forward and begin to recover from the pandemic all together.

I want to make it clear again that all this administration, my party and I are completely opposed to the loss of every blade of grass, tree, shrub, field or greenspace in the Borough. Once it's gone it's gone forever. The verdict of the Borough's "enough is enough" consultation was also clear that the residents of the Borough agree with our stance.

Pinewood has never been a site allocated for housing. It is a site for numerous valuable clubs and organisations. I have made it very clear that this is the case on numerous occasions. Some seem to ignore what the Council says and plough on with a narrative that it is not the case. Wokingham Without Parish Council has a long lease on the site at a peppercorn from the Borough. It is included in the local plan to permit their development to improve their facilities should they wish it and included in our recently published Leisure Strategy.

We must obey Government mandates, which require us to make provision for a Government determined number of houses.

We have the option to do nothing, which would mean that we have no plan and therefore no defence against speculative development. There is not a square inch of the Borough which has not been optioned by a developer who would seek to exercise that option by

claiming we have no plan or five-year land supply. The developer would be successful. I have no doubt that we would be faced with housing numbers several times those currently mandated. This is the option that the Lib Dem South Oxfordshire District Council took with the result I understand of many more houses and the original plan reimposed.

I have worked hard and successfully to ensure that our housing numbers were reduced from 1,635 to the current 789 and campaigned again successfully to oppose the planned changes to national planning policies. I will continue to press Government to make more changes and encourage our MPs, who are all critical of the housing numbers and planning policies to join me in so doing. I have been successful in the past and hope to be so in the future.

I am conscious that this is the start of a very long evening for most for which the main topic of discussion is the Medium Term Financial Plan and associated strategies and policies.

However, it would be wrong to embark on these topics without acknowledging the success of the Borough's economic regeneration, whether it be Wokingham Town Centre, the tech industry, the University or Shinfield studios. We can thank twenty years of solid stable administration, which has created and welcomed these opportunities.

This did not happen by accident but by the achievement of Officers and members throughout the twenty years of this administration. We have demonstrable resilience and financial probity.

We are continuously researching new opportunities as we are repositioning our approach to inward investment and business. We are very enthusiastic to support proposals for the Royal Berks to relocate some or all its services to the Borough, which would not only create economic opportunity but also be integral to our health and wellbeing strategies for all our residents.

As we view the changing landscape and adapt to it, one of the early and visible casualties is the bus network. It appears that passengers are not returning in sufficient quantities to make the current network viable. To support it we are having to increase the subsidy but can only do this in the medium term in its current form if passenger traffic does not return.

I am recommending this budget to the Council. A budget that contains substantial investment in vital services for the community and contains no cuts. It is safe and prudent and will ensure we continue to deliver the high quality services that the residents have come to expect and rely on.

101. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions received.

102. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

102.1 Jim Frewin asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

A number of videos and other communications have been recently released by Executive Members, aimed at relieving some of the concerns and anxiety residents have with

regards to the Local Plan update. One of the main resident concerns is the potential impact additional traffic might have on the local highway systems.

To help local Councillors assist in managing some of the residents' Local Plan anxieties will the Executive Member kindly provide access to the detail and cost of the traffic modelling analysis undertaken in reaching the Local Plan recommendations?

Answer

The Transport Assessment Report which represents the output of transport modelling undertaken to the various growth strategies to inform the latest Revised Growth Strategy Consultation is all available on our website. Once you have had a look at that, if you have any detailed questions, I am quite happy to work with the Strategic Transport Team and set up a meeting with them.

The work was part of a wider commission, however the associated costs with modelling and the preparation of the report were just over £50k.

Further transport assessment work will be commissioned and published as part of the local plan and as the plan moves forward into the next stages. But as I said earlier the Team would quite happily take you through that modelling either on-line or if you would come into Shute End.

Supplementary Question

The reason I asked that question was that I was invited to a briefing by the Reading University, with regard to the local plan Hall's Farm proposal.

I attended because I had been made aware of a previous briefing that had also taken place with non-elected representatives of the local Conservative Association. To ensure my independence I asked to be accompanied by a totally independent witness, which was kindly accepted. During this briefing the University discussed many things including the traffic modelling and they made a statement of costs which was well into six figures. I do not know how many of these briefings they had, or plan to hold, but if they are quoting, and they confirmed when I challenged a six figure cost and you are telling me it was £50k, then we need to stop that going out because a six figure cost is a lot more than £50k

Supplementary Answer

It absolutely is. If you could just let me know who you spoke to, who was at that meeting, and then I will follow it up with the people who are now running it from the Reading University side.

102.2 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

In a recent article in the Bracknell News Councillor Wayne Smith, when questioned about a proposed site for 270 houses on Council owned land in Barkham explained: "We are required to assess all land promoted for development as part of the local plan process".

Councillor Wayne Smith also said "We are required to assess all land promoted for development as part of the local plan process" but he did add that "the Council wants a majority of new homes to be built in the so-called 'Hall Farm / Loddon Valley' major development in Arborfield" – a location where 2,200 homes could be built by 2037/38 which is the end of the plan period.

If the Council needs to build 2,200 houses to meet its housing needs in Hall Farm/Loddon Valley by 2038 yet their draft LPU consultation plan is to build 4,500+ houses at Hall Farm meaning many Wokingham residents in the South of the Borough will be forced to live in a building site up to the year 2057 or longer.

From today that is 35 years away. All on the banks of a river that has a history of flooding and under the shadow of a Category A dam at Bearwood Lakes in a climate emergency.

Why do you plan for 2,200 houses in the Local Plan update but consult on 4,500+ houses?

Answer

I know you know most of this because we are living with your Plan as we speak.

National policy requires strategic policies in local plans to look ahead over a minimum of 15 years from adoption. However, when larger scale developments form part of a strategy, policies should be set within a vision that looks further ahead to take into account the likely timescale. Government policy now refers to a 30-year vision.

Providing a long-term vision, which sets out a holistic vision for a new community, can only be the right approach. To take any other route would be significantly misleading because it would be building on, building on, building.

The Hall Farm / Loddon Valley Garden Village proposed in the Revised Growth Strategy Consultation, provides an opportunity to create a sustainable new community with 4,500 new homes alongside jobs and the creation designated with a regional park along the River Loddon Valley, which currently does not have public access.

Setting a long-term vision of the new garden community is the right thing to do. This not only provides transparency; but allows the Council and other stakeholders to plan infrastructure appropriately. Having only a partial or short-term vision, would require infrastructure to be designed and added on in an ad hoc fashion over time, risking the quality and sustainability of the place.

As you are aware, no new homes or jobs would be located within areas at risk of flooding, nor would development have an impact on the communities further downstream. The consideration of flooding has been a key consideration from the outset of the masterplanning analysis, with a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment also undertaken.

I hope that helps.

Supplementary Question

You will recognise that I do not quite agree with that.

In connection with the LPU consultation, referred to in my question, a resident of Arborfield wrote to Michael Gove MP, yourself, Councillor Halsall and Sir John Redwood on 6th December concerning the inconsistency between Michael Gove's evidence given to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on Monday 8th November and the approach being adopted by Wokingham Borough Council in respect of its strategic plan update. The Secretary of State did reply on 31st January and the resident e-mailed me again, also Councillor Halsall and yourself, on 2nd February. He did advise me that he received no reply or acknowledgement from either of you to both e-mails, although I did reply to both.

My question is as the resident raised his initial concerns to the Secretary of State during the Local Plan Update Consultation period, although the Secretary of State did not reply until 31st January, will you instruct the Local Plan Update Team to accept the reply from the Secretary of State as part of the submitted evidence to the Local Plan Update Consultation?

Supplementary Answer

There is no reason why we would not accept that. Also, Gary as a bill to that John has written to Mr Gove asking for a meeting. The letter that has been written is quite a detailed letter and we are waiting for a meeting with Mr Gove. So, it is not that we are ignoring any communication with the Secretary of State, quite the opposite. We want to meet him to discuss the various points we raised in our letter.

103. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET 2022/23

The Executive considered a report setting out the Housing Revenue Account Budget for 2022/23.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing introduced the report and highlighted that the Housing Revenue Account was a ring fenced fund that included all the Council's social housing assets. Councillor Kaiser went through the recommendations and advised that the increases to council house dwelling and garage rents were under inflation.

Councillor Kaiser highlighted the importance of social homes in the Borough, mainly because affordable homes were no longer affordable for people on the lowest incomes.

Councillor Kaiser further advised that over the last few years around 1,700 affordable homes had been built which had kept up with demand. Unfortunately, Covid accelerated the number of people who were homeless, and it was therefore intended to bring forward, in due course, other changes which would help in meeting homeless need in the Borough. To this end Councillor Kaiser stated that he would like to see adopted in the new Local Plan a 50% policy with a larger proportion of that turned into social homes.

RECOMMENDATION That Council be recommended to approve the following:

- 1) the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2022/23 (Appendix A);
- 2) Council house dwelling rents be increased by up to 4.10% effective from 4 April 2022 in line with the Council's Rent Setting Policy that was approved by Executive on 25 November 2021;
- 3) garage rents to be increased by 3.80% effective from April 2022 in line with Council's general fees and charges;
- 4) Shared Equity Rents to be increased by 4.86% based on September RPI, effective from April 2022;
- 5) Tenant Service Charges to be set based on cost recovery;
- 6) the Housing Major Repairs (capital) programme for 2022/23 as set out in Appendix B;

- 7) Sheltered room guest charges for 2022/23 remain unchanged at £9.50 per night per room.

104. CAPITAL PROGRAMME AND STRATEGY 2022-2025

The Executive considered a report setting out the proposed Capital Programme and Strategy for 2022-2025.

During the Executive Member for Finance and Housing's introduction he highlighted that despite the challenges of Covid over the past two years, and being the lowest funded unitary authority per head of population in the country, the Council's finances were in good shape.

Councillor Kaiser drew the meeting's attention to the fact that the Chartered Institute of Public Finances, having looked at the Council's finances, had stated that Wokingham was among the best 20 unitary authorities in the country with regards to resilience in the Council's accounts.

Councillor Kaiser advised that no cuts to services were being proposed in the forthcoming budget and the Council would continue to invest in Children's Services by making an additional £1.4m available. Investments in Adult Social Care of £3.8m would be included in the budget to meet the growing demand of the Council's vulnerable population. A £1.7m increase in the Place and Growth budget was intended to improve the environment.

The Council's capital investment in the community over the next 3 years was intended to be £265m.

Councillor Kaiser also highlighted a number of other areas that the Council was focussing on which included continuing investment in climate change measures, delivering more homes at a social rent, the implications of adult social care reform, and the local settlement which was only for one year and the new Government funding methodology which would be designed in the context of the national levelling up agenda. All of these areas would have an impact on the Council's finances which were already facing considerable challenges and uncertainties going forward.

Councillor Margetts emphasised the threat of the Social Care Reform and advised that discussions had been held with West Berkshire and The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Councils about the implications of the reforms and as a result a letter has been sent to the Secretary of State and it was intended to continue lobbying to raise the matter with as many people as possible in the hope of addressing the problems that were likely to arise.

RECOMMENDATION that Council be recommended to agree the following:

- 1) the Capital Strategy for 2022 - 2025 - Appendix A;
- 2) the three-year capital programme for 2022 - 2025 – Appendix B;
- 3) the draft vision for capital investment over the next five years - Appendix C;
- 4) the use of developer contribution funding (s106 and CIL) for capital projects as set out in Appendix D. Approval is sought up to the project budget.

105. TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2022-2025

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposed Treasury Management Strategy for 2022-2025.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing informed the meeting that the Council invested money in order to generate revenue to support Council services. Without these investments and the capital generated it would be difficult to provide some of the non-statutory services.

Councillor Halsall queried what the likely impact of the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) change would be on the Capital Investment Programme? Councillor Kaiser provided further explanation of the MRP change and clarified that this would not have an impact on the town centre as the project was at the point where it was paying back on its interest and that would enable it to pay its MRP. It was noted that when the housing companies borrowed money from the Council this would be subject to MRP but the companies, unlike the Council, were able to take account of any depreciation in their accounts. Councillor Kaiser also mentioned the issues that may arise with forward funding of building projects.

In response to a query about general fund borrowing Councillor Kaiser confirmed that the Council's current net borrowing was approximately £170m.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) the Treasury Management Strategy as set out in Appendix A, be noted, including the following additional appendices;
 - Prudential Indicators (Appendix B)
 - Annual Investment Strategy 2022/23 (Appendix C)
 - Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy (Appendix D)
- 2) it be noted that the Audit Committee agreed the Treasury Management Strategy on 2 February 2022 and have recommended the report to Council;
- 3) it be noted that the cumulative financial impact on the Council of its borrowing activities equates to a net credit to the general fund for the taxpayer of £42.70 per band D equivalent at end of 2022/23 and noting this credit increases to £62.47 at the end of 2024/25.

106. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2022-2025 INCLUDING REVENUE BUDGET SUBMISSION 2022/23

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposed Medium Term Financial Plan for 2022-2025, including the Revenue budget submission for 2022/23.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Finance and Housing highlighted the role of the Capital Programme on the Council's MTFP and some of the projects contained within it.

With regard to the building of an adult social care home Councillor Margetts stated that the potential financial cost to the Council if this was not built would be expensive placements, probably out of Borough, which would not only cost more but would necessitate residents having to travel out of Borough to visit members of their family.

RECOMMENDATION That:

- 1) Council be recommended to approve the Summary of Budget Movements (SOBM) (Appendix A);
- 2) the report of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee relating to Scrutiny of the Budget Setting Process 2022-23 and the Medium Term Financial Plan 2022-2025 (as set out in Appendix B to the report), be noted;
- 3) the schedule of fees and charges, as set out in Appendix C to the report be approved, to be effective from the dates listed on the schedule;
- 4) it be noted that the MTFP, Housing Revenue Account, Capital Strategy and Treasury Strategy budget papers do not include any budget changes in relation to the Gorse Ride Redevelopment project. Any changes to this project agreed by Executive will be enacted by the Deputy Chief Executive across the MTFP, Housing Revenue Account, Capital Strategy and Treasury Strategy where appropriate;
- 5) authority be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Lead Member for Finance and the Lead Member for Leisure, to approve reductions, discounts and/or promotions for fees and charges within sports and leisure, up to £100 per fee or charge.

107. COMMERCIAL WASTE AND RECYCLING CONTRACT

(Councillor Pauline Jorgensen declared a personal interest in this item)

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposal to renew the Commercial Waste and Recycling Contract which was due to expire on 31 July 2022.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing clarified that this contract did not relate to the disposal of household waste and recycling collected from people's homes but related to commercial waste that the Council generated from not only its corporate sites, but from its country parks, cemeteries, schools etc.

RECOMMENDATION: That the renewal of the Commercial Waste and Recycling Contract and for Procurement to advertise the opportunity and procure via a competitive tendering process be approved.

108. SCHOOL ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS 2023/2024

The Executive considered a report setting out the proposed School Admission Arrangements for 2023/24.

The Leader of Council advised that the Council had a statutory duty to determine admission arrangements for the 2023/2024 academic year by 28 February 2022.

The Executive Member for Children's Services confirmed that the Council had a duty to co-ordinate the admissions of children into Reception, Year 3, and Year 7. The Council did, however, provide a co-ordination service to other year groups and most schools opted into this service. Councillor Howe highlighted some of the key changes to school admission arrangements as set out in the report:

- Changing the deadline for providing evidence of house moves to 31st December, in order to align with neighbouring authorities;
- The Schools' Adjudicator had determined a reduction in the Published Admission Numbers (PAN) for Colleton 60 to 45, Radstock 60 to 45 and Loddon 90 to 60 Primary schools;
- Farley Hill School would increase their PAN to 60 and the designated area of the School would be increased to include two additional areas. Both of these changes would assist those who lived close by and who wished to attend the school.

Councillor Howe clarified that the Council only determined the admission arrangements for community schools and highlighted that with regard to secondary schools the only community school was Bulmershe. This meant that nine of the secondary schools and about half of the primary schools in the Borough determined their own admission policies.

RECOMMENDATION That:

- 1) the proposed Admission Arrangements for school admissions for the school year September 2023 to August 2024 be approved;
- 2) the final report be agreed for publication including incorporation of statutory changes and non-material amendments and updates as required to the published version;
- 3) authority be delegated to the Director of Childrens Services, in consultation with the Lead Member for Childrens Services, to determine Admission Arrangements for school admissions, if there are no substantial changes to the arrangements, in future years;
- 4) it be noted that a further paper regarding place planning specifically, will be submitted to Executive as a separate report at a later date.

109. GORSE RIDE REGENERATION PROJECT CHANGES TO DELIVERY MODEL

The Executive considered a report relating to proposed changes to the delivery model for Gorse Ride Regeneration Project.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing went through the report and confirmed that the Gorse Ride Regeneration Project would provide more and better affordable homes. The Project recognised the value a thriving community can make to a successful housing regeneration project and to this end had worked collaborative with residents to ensure that the sense of community was preserved throughout the proactive engagement process.

Councillor Kaiser highlighted that the provision of well-planned and delivered affordable housing had never been more important. Homelessness was on the increase and increasing house prices in the Borough continued to make home ownership unaffordable for many. It was noted that the project was generally well supported by residents, who along with the Tenant and Landlord Improvement Panel, were updated on progress on a regular basis.

Councillor Kaiser reminded Members that in May 2018 the Executive approved the Gorse Ride Regeneration Project to replace the existing 178 poor quality, primarily Council owned social homes with 243 new high quality, well designed and energy efficient homes.

The current proposal was for a total of 249 new homes to be built, of which 136 would be socially rented, 49 shared ownership and 64 private sale homes. This was 51 more affordable housing properties than were currently provided on the old development. The new proposal was for the regenerated properties to be transferred to the HRA, rather than to Loddon Homes, which would allow access to the HRA borrowing capacity without the need for additional affordable housing contribution and enable access to the use of Right to Buy receipts as an additional funding scheme.

RECOMMENDATION that Council be recommended to:

- 1) approve that the development of homes within the Gorse Ride regeneration will be transferred to the Housing Revenue Account. (With market sale element in the general fund)
- 2) approve the expenditure budget up to the total cost of the scheme of £105,601,534 funded through a combination of HRA borrowing, capital receipts, developer contributions and right to buy receipts. (Further information provided in the report);
- 3) give delegated authority to the Director of Resources and Assets, in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing and Finance, to approve the use of additional Affordable Housing s106 commuted sums as a contingency against cost and funding variations such as any future design changes and/or fluctuations in costs and values of up to 15% of the cost of the scheme in the event of any other financial impacts;
- 4) agree that any appropriation of land between the HRA and general fund required to deliver the scheme will be delegated to the Director of Resources and Assets, in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing and Finance.

110. LOCAL BUS SERVICES

The Executive considered a report relating to the provision of support to local bus services if required until clarity on future Government funding was known.

During the introduction the Executive Member for Planning and Transport advised that during Covid there had been a slump in bus usage which was not predicted to recover until at least 2023. As a result of low passenger numbers, the No 7 bus was withdrawn at very short notice by Reading Buses.

In addition, Councillor Jorgensen advised that there was currently no certainty on Government funding for buses post April. Therefore it was proposed to allocate money from S106 funding to bridge the gap, on the basis as set out in the report, to ensure that bus services were maintained in the short term until clarity over Government funding was known.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) it be agreed to appropriate S106 funding being made available to support local bus services during 2022/23 for a short period of time, in accordance with details in Part 2 sheet;

- 2) authority to draw on the S106 funding as and when required be delegated to the Director of Place in consultation with the Deputy Chief Executive/ Director of Resources and Assets and the Executive Members for Highways and Transport and Finance.