

MINUTES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 17 OCTOBER 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.26 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Peter Dennis (Chair), David Cornish (Vice-Chair), Shirley Boyt, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen and Alistair Neal, Anne Chadwick (Substitute) and Adrian Mather (Substitute)

Executive Members Present

Councillors: Rachel Bishop-Firth (Executive Member for Equalities Inclusion and Fighting Poverty), Stephen Conway (Executive Member for Housing), Lindsay Ferris (Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan) and Ian Shenton (Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure)

Officers Present

Ian Bellinger (Service Manager for Growth and Delivery), Narinder Brar (Community Safety Manager), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Mark Gwynne (Strategic Lead - Chief Executive's Office), Emily Higson (Head of Insight, Strategy and Inclusion), Sean Murphy (Public Protection Partnership Manager) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

Others Present

Jake Morrison (Chief Executive – Citizens Advice Wokingham), and Emma Cantrell (Chief Executive – First Days)

37. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillors Laura Blumenthal and Chris Johnson.

Councillors Anne Chadwick and Adrian Mather attended the meeting as substitutes.

Councillor Gregor Murray attended the meeting via Microsoft Teams, meaning that he could participate in discussions but not vote.

38. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

39. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

40. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

41. COST OF LIVING CRISIS RESPONSE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 5 to 22, which outlined Wokingham Borough Council's initial and ongoing response alongside the Hardship Alliance to address the cost-of-living crisis.

Stephen Conway, Executive Member for Housing, and Rachel Bishop Firth, Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty, provided a brief overview of the partnership working being undertaken to help tackle this crisis. This was a very difficult

time for a lot of residents in the Borough, and a considerable amount of hard work was being undertaken to help support individuals and families. Practical advice and help were being provided in relation to issues such as food, keeping warm and managing impacts on mental health. The support being provided in conjunction with the Hardship Alliance was critical, and there was a real desire to strengthen and improve this type of collaborative working where possible.

Jake Morrison, Chief Executive – Citizens Advice Wokingham, provided the Committee with a background to the increased service demand being seen within the Borough. The same number of individuals had been referred for help in the first two-months of 2019 than had been referred this morning. There had been a forty-percent increase in the number of individuals being referred for benefit issues, and a twenty-percent increase in the number of individuals being referred with debt issues. Whilst it was good that people felt confident to reach out for help, demand had increased markedly with a thirty-five percent increase in calls received in October. The typical service request had also shifted, as previously people were contacting the service when bailiffs were at their door, whilst it was now more common for people to be contacting the service regarding not having access to essentials such as food, clothes or energy. More and more individuals were now considering or carrying out self-harm, whilst staff on phones regularly spoke to suicidal individuals. A survey had been sent regarding the cost-of-living crisis, with 680 responses received to date. Seventy-five percent of respondents had yet to reach out to services for support, whilst nineteen percent had borrowed money from either a friend, bank, payday loan company or a loan shark to pay for essentials.

Emma Cantrell, Chief Executive – First Days, provided the Committee with a background to the increased service demand being seen within the Borough. The issues being dealt with now were ordinarily seen in more deprived areas in places such as London. Demand management was introduced a few years ago to allow staff to work more closely with fewer families, however staff now dealt with far more cases than ever before.

Stephen Conway (Executive Member for Housing), Rachel Bishop Firth (Executive Member for Equalities Inclusion and Fighting Poverty), Mark Gwynne (Strategic Lead – Chief Executive's Office), Emily Higson (Head of Insight Strategy and Inclusion), Jake Morrison (Chief Executive – Citizens Advice Wokingham), and Emma Cantrell (Chief Executive – First Days) attended the meeting to answer member queries.

During the ensuing discussion, members raised the following points and queries:

- What level of additional work was being undertaken by Council officers to provide additional support? Executive Member and officer response – An Assistant Director was named for a specific response area, and they came together each fortnight to discuss response progress. Response areas were aligned with officers' core responsibilities, and this was very much an area where additional work and effort was required to see results. This was both a corporate and political priority, and whilst Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) did not have vast amounts of funding to put into this area, we had other resources which could be utilised;
- It was requested that officers continue to explore any opportunities from Central Government as to additional grants or funding available in this area;

- It was noted that whilst Wokingham was seen as an affluent area, for many people it would only take a small change in their financial circumstances for them to be in a crisis situation;
- It was noted that individuals were cutting back on anything that was considered as non-essential, including gym memberships and heating in some cases. This could have adverse consequences on individual's health;
- It was noted that poverty had been in Wokingham for a long time, it was just more hidden and now impacted a wider range of people;
- How was the targeted approach being managed? Executive Member and officer response – Public Health and other services were on hand to identify people most in need, whilst modelling was underway with adult social care data. There were a lot of people in the Borough who had a high income and lived comfortable lives, and this could make it harder for those on the lowest incomes, as it made prices higher including housing and food costs. People on low incomes could feel unsure about where or who they could turn to for help, and in areas of higher deprivation there was often better community signposting. Lobbying of Central Government was taking place on a cross-party level about this issue. There was concern that funding which was currently being utilised by WBC to continue free school meals in school holidays could be cut, and additional lobbying needed to take place to make the case for this funding to continue;
- It was noted that some individuals required for their debt to get worse before help and intervention could be provided. The way which individuals were treated by all Council Services and the Hardship Alliance should be a single excellent level of service, with departments talking to each other and referring issues to the most relevant contact for a speedy response;
- What could be done on a local level to assist people with rising utility bills? Hardship Alliance response – Citizens Advice were calling for a winter ban of energy companies forcing people onto prepayment meters. It was requested that WBC consider writing a letter in support of this sentiment;
- How was the dashboard (operated by Citizens Advice Wokingham) being constructed? Hardship Alliance response – There was a public cost of living dashboard which could be circulated to members for information. Data was submitted weekly to WBC in an anonymised format;
- This area had not been a typical set of issues that Town and Parish Councils were asked to offer support for. How were Town and Parish Councils now being involved? Hardship Alliance response – Town and Parish Councils had been reached out to, as in many cases they were landlords of buildings that could be used for community gatherings or acting as a 'warm bank'. There was a plethora of fantastic and engaged clerks who were very open to providing support where they could;
- It was noted that prepayment meters usually attracted a higher unit cost, and as many of them were not compatible with smart meters this meant that residents could not see what was drawing the most power (and therefore cost) in their homes;

- Were there plans to get practical advice and signposting into the Borough News? Executive Member response – Officers were looking to get advice into printed format in addition to social media output, whilst residents associations were also being informed about signposting and support on offer;
- It was noted that the component organisations of the Hardship Alliance undertook a considerable amount of specialist work, and they have come together to work towards a common purpose. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Wokingham Borough Community response had no stigma towards it, and this was the direction that the Hardship Alliance wanted to aim towards;
- Had options been explored to place ‘QR’ codes on stickers to be placed on lampposts, as had been done during the pandemic. This would reduce the stigma that some people might feel, and increase the places that people could access information and help. Executive Member response – This point would be noted and explored by officers;
- It was noted that reference to crowdfunding was about enabling local people who were able to and who wanted to donate to a number of the great charities operating in the borough;
- It was commented that some elderly people were ringing the emergency services, citing an accident, just to enable them to speak to someone as they were feeling lonely and isolated;
- Were large companies operating in the Borough being contacted to explore any donation matching schemes open to their employees (many large business matched staff donations up to a certain amount)? Executive Member and Hardship Alliance response – This was being actively explored, as were any corporate responsibility funds operated by these companies. It was noted that there would also be employees and pensioners in the Borough working for large organisations who were not based in the Borough;
- Payday loans offered a terrible interest rate, as such, were community loans being explored? Hardship Alliance response – Credit Unions were an excellent resource for offering loans for certain expenditure. Community First in Norreys had spoken for some time about setting up a form of community loans service;
- It was noted that a cross-party letter or motion would be written to the Chief Executives of electricity companies, raising concern about how defaulting customers were being treated, included being placed on prepayment meters. It was added that Citizens Advice Wokingham could feed into this process via the provision of a policy statement;
- It was noted that teachers could often be the first point of contact within schools, and were therefore well placed to signpost families to the support on offer. Officers noted that schools were being actively engaged with as part of the community response to this issue;
- Could Town and Parish Councils legally use a portion of their precept to deliver services for select parts of the community, for example provision of warm banks? Executive Member and hardship Alliance response – A framework could be provided to Town and Parish Councils as to how they might wish to get involved in this

response. The best approach to something like a warm bank was making it a universally accessible session. Rather than promoting it as a place to stay warm, it could be promoted as a chance for local people to get together and have a cup of tea, play some board games, and talk about issues in the community. Best practice and guidance about warm banks was being produced and could be sent to Town and parish Councils. In terms of the use of funds or grants to deliver these services, it was suggested that Town and Parish Councils reach out to each other as some authorities had similar existing programmes. It was noted that Citizens Advice could share localised ward data with individual Town and Parish Councils on request.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Stephen Conway, Rachel Bishop Firth, Mark Gwynne, Emily Higson, Jake Morrison, and Emma Cantrell be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Officers continue to proactively explore any additional funding or grant opportunities from Central Government;
- 3) A cross-party motion or letter be written, with inclusion of a policy statement from Citizens Advice, raising concern about how defaulting customers were being treated, included being placed on prepayment meters;
- 4) The Citizens Advice cost of living dashboard be circulated to the Committee;
- 5) Officers explore placing cost of living support information on lamp posts;
- 6) Town and Parish Councils be sent upcoming guidance and best practice regarding warm spaces;
- 7) Town and Parish Councils be informed that they could request localised ward data from Citizens Advice Wokingham.

42. FRAUD AND UNFAIR TRADING UPDATE

The Committee considered a presentation, set out in agenda pages 22 to 30, which provided an update on fraud and unfair trading practices within the Borough and measures to tackle such offences.

The presentation noted that this was an underreported area of crime, and forty percent of victims were aged between the 70 and 84.

Ian Shenton (Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure), Sean Murphy (Public Protection Manager) and Narinder Brar (Community Safety Manager) attended the meeting to answer member queries.

During the ensuing discussion, members raised the following points and queries:

- What could Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) do to help communicate information on fraudulent practices and reporting methods, and what could WBC do to help small businesses on a proactive basis who think they may have been the victims of fraud? Officer response – It was crucial that this entire area was dealt with understanding and awareness. WBC worked with other support organisations to help communicate key messages, whilst there was a key focus on preventative action. For businesses,

intellectual property was key as without it there may not be a core business and room for innovation;

- It was noted that there was a tendency for people to become repeat victims, which effected their mental health and went beyond the offence itself;
- Could data be provided with regards to the types of fraud being committed, how many cases were being resolved, whether KPIs were being achieved, and feedback from victims who had been supported? Officer response – There was no doubt that things were changing in this area, and specialised staff were required to deal with many cases including computer forensic consultants. A further session could be delivered for members to explore the trends behind the figures;
- With regards to Action Fraud, it was noted that they dealt with the reporting of instances of fraud. There was a huge amount of fraud and only a limited resource available to deal with it. The Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley had recognised fraud as a high priority crime which was interlinked within the complicated web of organised crime. Stating this as a specific priority would hopefully allow further inroads to be made in combatting fraud locally;
- Who could be contacted to help solve fraud locally? Officer response – If it was within the Borough and trading related, trading standards could be contacted. Other issues should be reported to the police;
- Was social media being used to inform residents of potential scams in their area, and did scammers take notice of 'no cold calling zones'? Officer response – Information regarding the use of social media to inform residents could be shared with the Committee. With regards to 'no cold calling zones', there was a legal point that traders were required to leave a person's property when asked to do so. Provision of notices outlining this meant that traders were already served with this notice prior to knocking on doors;
- How were elderly residents proactively contacted to make them more aware of potential scams? Officer response – There was additional funding being placed into proactive messaging, including community visits. This also included providing support directly to victims, which in some cases had resulted in victims having lost funds returned;
- Were care homes visited and engaged with to give tenants knowledge about scams and fraudulent practices? Officer response – Yes, community support officers were always happy to talk to any groups including care homes.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Ian Shenton, Sean Murphy and Narinder Brar be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) An additional session be considered to explore the trends behind the figures provided by officers and partner organisations;
- 3) Information regarding the use of social media to inform residents of fraudulent activities be shared with the Committee;

- 4) It be noted that local trading standards could be used to report trading related fraudulent concerns within the Borough.

43. LOCAL PLAN UPDATE - PROGRESS UPDATE AND NEXT STEPS

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 31 to 40, which set out a progress report on the development of the Local Plan Update (LPU).

Lindsay Ferris (Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan) Stephen Conway (Executive Member for Housing) and Ian Bellinger (Service Manager for Growth and Delivery) attended the meeting to answer member queries.

During the ensuing discussion, members raised the following points and queries:

- What timeline was being worked towards and was it possible to speed it up, and if the Government changed the housing number requirement after publication of the LPU could the LPU be updated? Executive Member and officer response – The team had not been asked to adhere to a strict schedule of key milestones as of yet as it was still to be decided which direction Wokingham Borough Council would prefer to go. The two options available were to progress to a regulation 19 order, meaning that WBC would predominantly progress with the previously consulted plan, or go out for a further regulation 18 order, which would present a number of different options via consultation. The direction of progress would be discussed by the cross-party working group, whilst officers would produce a technical recommendation and if members wished to move in a different direction, then a regulation 18 consultation would be required. Progress had already been slow due to the necessity of two regulation 18 consultations. The Local Plan was required to be reviewed every 5 years, however it could be reviewed more frequently as and when required;
- Was there a requirement to provide an additional twenty-percent of housing in case under delivery, and was it possible to omit this as WBC had a history of over delivery? Officer response – The twenty-percent figure was for Local Authorities with a history of under delivery. WBC had a five-percent figure applied to allow for market changes;
- What were the implications of not meeting the December 2023 deadline for a completed LPU? Officer response – There was generally no intervention by Government so long as progress was evidenced to be made. The December 2023 deadline would already be a push to achieve, and the risk of intervention was a matter of debate;
- It was noted that WBC could not currently demonstrate a five-year housing land supply. The argument proposed by WBC that over delivery of housing in prior years should be taken into account should temper the balance of the lack of five-year housing land supply with inspectors, however this issue would persist from now until a new Local Plan was adopted. It was expected that WBC would lose more appeals due to the tilted balance process;
- Was it possible to plan infrastructure such as telephone masts at the outline stage of development, were there powers to enforce community spaces and building to be delivered at new developments, and was the Borough Design Guide planned to be updated alongside the LPU? Executive Member and officer response – Policies could be updated to stress that infrastructure was required to be installed early in the development process, however planning officers could not stop people or companies

coming back with a planning application for things such as telephone masts after development was completed. If community buildings were specified as part of the planning application, then they would have to be delivered as part of the development else an amendment to the application would be required to be submitted. Delays to construction of such buildings often occurred due to issues with phasing. The Borough Design Guide was also being updated, and members and the public were encouraged to come forward with any suggestions;

- What percentage of social housing was being sought at new developments? Executive Member response – The aspiration was to deliver fifty percent of all new housing as social housing, however this may not necessarily be achievable as it was a balancing act to get a number of different things from developers such as infrastructure and other payments;
- It was noted that developers had an option on almost every potential piece of development land in the Borough. Developers could also choose the pace of development, by delivering a large development quickly (as had been happening on Wokingham) or slowing it right down;
- Was it possible to plan to deliver a new secondary school as part of the LPU? Officer response – The only land suitable to deliver a secondary school was at Hall Farm;
- Was there anything that could be done to speed up the timeline of development of the LPU? Executive Member and officer response – The team were undertaking a considerable amount of detailed technical work, in conjunction with working alongside the cross-party working group. This work was crucial to deliver a sound and acceptable LPU;
- It was noted that due to the Borough's proximity to London, this would continue to push house prices up. There was a critical need to deliver truly affordable housing within the Borough;
- When would it be possible for officers to deliver a technical recommendation to members? Officer response – Initial discussions would take place prior to Christmas 2022, whilst technical testing of the evidence base would take place next year, and an informal recommendation hoped to be delivered in around the pre-election period next year;
- It was requested that main roads were not positioned between housing and schools at new developments;
- It was requested that an update be considered by the Committee in May or June 2023;
- Were there plans to engage with residents and developers? Executive Member response – This would be considered, however the LPU needed to get to a point where a strong case could be demonstrated for a particular site or sites;
- Was there a communications plan to engage early and often with residents who were voicing concerns over potential development sites? Executive Member response – It was important to recognise that there was a very specific process to be undertaken here. If a developer sensed that a decision was being made on anything other than

sound planning grounds they would then raise this at a public inspection. All interested parties were invite to the public inspection to make their case.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Stephen Conway, Lindsay Ferris and Ian Bellinger be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) An additional update be considered by the Committee in May or June of 2023.

44. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their work programme, set out in agenda pages 41 to 46.

The Committee noted that time management of upcoming meetings was crucial, to give proper consideration to items scheduled prior to the Medium Term Financial Plan, and the Medium Term Financial Plan itself.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Callum Wernham be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The Committee's work programme be noted.

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