

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 16 FEBRUARY 2023 FROM 5.30 PM TO 6.10 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Clive Jones (Chair), Stephen Conway (Vice-Chair), Rachel Bishop-Firth, Prue Bray, Lindsay Ferris, Paul Fishwick, David Hare, Sarah Kerr and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

Apologies

Councillor Ian Shenton

81. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 26 January 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

82. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

83. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER

'The Council will be debating the first Liberal Democrat budget for 20 years and I begin this evening's Executive meeting by thanking all of you for the tremendous efforts that you as an Executive are putting in to ensure we have a balanced budget to present to the Council. I would also like to thank all of the officers who have worked so hard, its been a long process, set against a backdrop of the worst Cost of Living crisis seen for 40 years, with inflation at 10%. Increasing demand for services and the huge increases in interest rates.

We have a sound forward looking and compassionate budget. We have taken tough decisions, some that we desperately didn't want to take. We have invested in the future, in Climate Change initiatives and in providing more school places. We have focussed on helping those residents most in need, especially helping to improve special educational needs. We have found the money to protect much needed bus services, which are subsidised by the Council for the next three years. We have set up a fund to support those struggling on very low incomes during this Cost of Living crisis. We have been able to do this and more because of your hard work and dedication to your roles and the hard work and dedication of the officers and because the residents gave us the opportunity to run the Council's administration after last May's local elections.'

84. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

85. COLIN WATTS HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ACTIVE TRAVEL, TRANSPORT & HIGHWAYS THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question

The impact of the major housebuilding in the Arborfield and Shinfield areas in recent years is now directly affecting traffic in the mornings from Arborfield, through Sindlesham and on to Winnersh. For example, most mornings traffic is backed up from the Hatch Farm Way/King Street junction underneath the M4, back to the Reading FC training ground on Mole Road. On bad days the traffic queue can reach even closer to Arborfield Village and

we have examples where it has been quicker to walk the 40 minutes from our home to Winnersh Railway station, rather than travel by car. What traffic management actions can the council undertake in such circumstances to reduce the environmental impact of the queuing traffic and the significant inconvenience to drivers caused by the delays encountered?

Mr Watts was not present at the meeting and so it was agreed that a written response would be provided and is included below:

Answer:

The council has been working with developers to minimise the impact of development on the existing highway network. Through the planning process we have delivered significant major schemes including the relief roads and distributor roads as well as greenways and making other improvements for walking, cycling, and public transport all with the view to promote active travel and encourage alternative options to private car use for many.

The My Journey team continues to promote active and sustainable travel and we are developing our Local Walking and Cycling Implementation Plan which is our plan for a comprehensive joined up network which will enable more people to switch to walking and cycling.

There is an ongoing increase in population in the borough and we have to ensure that there are alternative transport options available to prevent an increase in road traffic as much as possible. Lastly our Local Transport Plan is currently in development, we are currently consulting on some high-level principles which will help us understand many people's priorities for transport in the borough and help us plan better when new developments and promoted by developers / land owners.

Regarding the specific question around traffic management, we have a rolling programme of signal upgrades and continually work to try and improve performance of junctions. During one of our recent reviews an issue was identified at the signals within Winnersh, once tweaked and repaired the observed increase in queues and delays were improved. We continue to monitor our signal junction's operations and performance to ensure the best operation is achieved.

The availability of other roads such as Mill Lane Sindlesham can also have an impact on the B3030 King Street Lane and Mole Road. When Mill Lane is closed, traffic that would normally use it would be diverted through the Hatch Farm Way junction and add to the normal queues in the am peak.

Through ongoing assessments junctions like the showcase roundabout, Winnersh, which has been assessed, options to upgrade this junction to a system called MOVA (Microprocessor Optimised Vehicle Actuation) are being considered and could be developed subject to future scope/funding.

Whilst junction / signal optimisation and improvements can be beneficial, our longer-term aspirations need to focus on active travel which will also have environmental and health benefits for our residents as well as aligning to our Emergency Climate Change Action Plan.

86. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

87. GARY COWAN HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR PLANNING AND THE LOCAL PLAN:

Question

The Exec Member last February in answer to my question on Hall Farm stated that “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 master planning analysis, with a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment also undertaken”.

As 12 months have gone past my question is can you now show this Council the SFRA’s associated with Hall Farm, Ashridge, South of Wokingham and any other large potential developments being evaluated as part of the ongoing process.

Councillor Gary Cowan was not present at the meeting and so it was agreed that a written response would be provided and is included below:

Answer:

The position remains the same as advised previously.

A Level 2 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment was published alongside the Revised Growth Strategy Consultation in November 2021 and remains available on the website.

The Level 2 study considered flood risk for the two promotions at Hall Farm and South Wokingham, and supplements a Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment published in 2020 which considered all areas promoted for potential development at that time. This study is also available on the website.

I would be happy to ask officers to provide you with hyperlinks if helpful and to talk you through the findings of the studies, if that would help.

For your information, updates to both the Level 1 and Level 2 Strategic Flood Risk Assessments are being progressed which will assess areas promoted since the original studies, reflect refined modelling, and to take account of amendments in national guidance.

88. CHARLES MARGETTS HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question

Please can you update me on progress with the new sixth form, extra year 7 places and extra send provision planned for Bohunt school. How is it progressing and when will it open?

Answer

The Council continues to work with the Bohunt Trust to finalise the legal agreements underpinning our relationship and to develop proposals that are satisfactory to the Trust.

The Council expects the sixth form to open this September, with the new build works to be completed over the course of 2023 and 2024. I do have to add that this is still subject to satisfactory conclusion of the on-going work on legal agreements, due diligence and final agreement to a satisfactory building proposal.

Supplementary question

Firstly I would like to state my full support for what you have just said, I lobbied my own administration against their wishes to see things move forward. I am keen to be supportive in any way I can. You said that the aim was to open in September 2023, and I note the conditions you put around that, I am assuming that will be in temporary buildings rather than be a new plan building initially?

Answer

Yes and no. We have plans, it is possible that it will be some in temporary accommodation, its possible that they will use some of the existing buildings. We are in constant touch with them, we've had emails today about some details, we are meeting with them regularly and it progresses on that basis. There hasn't been an update as we haven't reached any final positions, when we do know exactly what will be ready in September, we will let all the local Ward Members know.

89. PETER HARPER HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ACTIVE TRAVEL, TRANSPORT & HIGHWAYS THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

As Councillor Peter Harper was unable to attend the meeting, Councillor Charles Margetts asked the following question on his behalf:

Question

Considering the significance of the project to change the layout of the California Crossroads and the impact on my residents, will the Executive member for Highways commit to holding a meeting in the near future with the members for Finchampstead North and Finchampstead South to provide a full briefing on the proposed works, the likely schedule, the estimated costs and the current status of the tendering process?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Peter.

The proposed improvement works to the junction came from a Planning condition from the Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location. The developer could have carried out the works on the junction, but Wokingham Borough Council opted at the time to improve a wider area including some of the fronting to the shops, where possible. Therefore, a section 106 agreement with funding was obtained.

During the early part of 2015, a working group was formed, consisting of Wokingham Borough Council members, including local ward members for Finchampstead, Finchampstead Parish Council members and some local business owners.

This group met periodically over a period of time and it was agreed that the area was vehicle dominated within the village centre.

Following investigation and concept design work, a presentation to local residents was given by officers, which received positive feedback. This broadly followed on from a scheme presented and included within the wider Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development location application.

It was then identified to develop the California Cross into an area which benefits local business owners and residents by creating a place where pedestrians, cyclists and vehicle traffic can co-exist.

It was intended for this scheme to have been delivered during 2019/2020, however the Thames Water works which resulted in the lengthy closure of Nine Mile Ride, followed by the global pandemic and then the closure and repairs on the Ridges prevented works from being carried out as this would have caused significant disruption.

However, I am more than happy to meet with members along with officers to provide an update on the current status of the California Cross project. Ahead of this though I can advise that the project is due to go out to tender at the end of this month.

Once we have a contractor appointed, we will be setting up a steering group with local ward members, business, and the parish council to talk them through the scheme, understand the businesses logistics and the programme of works which we wish to carry out causing the least amount of disruption as possible.

We hope to be able to meet in June 2023 following the completion of the tender process.

90. ALISON SWADDLE HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question

You have previously criticised the former Conservative administration for using reserves in the aftermath of a global pandemic. If that action was wrong, why are you using reserves to balance this budget?

Answer

The Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy is very clear on the appropriate use of reserves - let me read the pertinent bit: "The authority's reserves should not generally be used to pay for day-to-day expenditure. They should not, except in the most exceptional circumstances, be used to fund a budget shortfall either, without a plan in place to address the underlying deficit and to replenish the reserves."

During the pandemic, the Conservative Administration drained the General Fund and last year they took over £2.3M out of this Council's General Fund Reserves to prop up the budget. While I agree that this reserve can be used for emergencies, it should be the last resort and there is no evidence that there was a plan put in place to restore the fund to its original level. I am personally not convinced that all other options were explored.

This year's budget was handed to us with a General Fund Balance of only £9M. The budget overall did not include some key items, such as the deficit in Home to School transport or the shortfall in the Capital funding for Winnersh Park and Ride, both of which had been known about by the previous administration for some time and it also still reflected the depleted General Fund Reserves. Now, with our Partners and our Liberal Democrat leadership, we are working to replenish these Reserves and over the next year we will bring them back up further into the safe zone. Not yet to the levels we were a few years ago, but we are working on it.

I agree that the reporting of the General Fund in our MTFP is only showing our predictions for the end of Quarter 3, this year – we still have Quarter 4 to go and it initially looks like it might be short. However, if you look at the words on page 9, you can also see that it says that we fully intend for it to be back to £9M at the end of this year. Next year, we do intend to build in more resilience in the General Fund Reserves throughout the next financial year of 23/34.

This is all pretty amazing when you consider that, this year's budget was set before the war in Europe occurred, causing unprecedented inflation affecting all areas of this Council just as much as our residents. Our officers and the Executive have had to make difficult decisions about savings and changes to revenue income to bridge this gap and produce a balanced budget for next year.

91. MATTERS REFERRED TO THE EXECUTIVE

92. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET 2023/24

The Executive Member for Housing reported that with reference to recommendation 2 below, he would have preferred the rise in council house dwellings rents to be less than 5.99% but that this was a full percentage point less than the government cap. A balanced decision had been taken that this was necessary, as this was a year of intense financial pressure on the borough and particularly on those on low incomes who needed support. The money generated would be used to help those tenants who ran into difficulties and were most in need.

It was noted that recommendation 5 should be amended to 5.99%.

RESOLVED: That the Executive made the following recommendations to Council. That:

- 1) The Housing Revenue Account budget for 2023/24 (Appendix A of the agenda papers) be approved;
- 2) That Council house dwelling rents be increased by up to 5.99% effective from 3 April 2023 in line with the council's Rent Setting Policy that was approved by Executive on 27 October 2022.
- 3) Garage rents to be increased by 5.99% effective from April 2023;
- 4) Shared Equity Rents to be increased by 5.99% effective from April 2023;
- 5) Tenant Service Charges to be increased by 5.99% effective from April 2023;
- 6) The Housing Major Repairs (capital) programme for 2023/24 as set out in Appendix B be approved;
- 7) Sheltered room guest charges for 2023/24 remain unchanged at £9.50 per night per room.

Reason for Decision

The revenue and capital budgets for 2023/24 are set and tenants rent levels are set for 2023/24 to ensure sound finances and value for money in providing housing services for council tenants.

93. CAPITAL PROGRAMME AND STRATEGY 2023-2026

The Executive Member for Finance reported that whilst the capital programme was looking stable for the next year, years two and three would bring greater challenges. The capital programme this year would fund an expansion in school places, creating urgently needed school places. Funding for alternative transport schemes, urgent work at Toutley Depot as well as various roads and infrastructure improvements.

In addition, the Developer contributions report, approved by the Executive includes funding for sixth form expansion in schools, new social housing on Wellington Road, bus stop infrastructure in Arborfield, the A327 cycleway, improving transport choices and reducing congestion.

It was noted that the work around Earley foot bridge would be carried forward into the next year.

RESOLVED: That the Executive noted and recommended to Council that:

- 1) the Capital Strategy for 2023 - 2026 at Appendix A of the agenda papers, be approved
- 2) the three-year capital programme for 2023 - 2026 at Appendix B of the agenda papers, be approved;
- 3) the draft vision for capital investment over the next five years at Appendix C of the agenda papers be approved;
- 4) the use of developer contribution funding (s106 and CIL) for capital projects as set out in Appendix D of the agenda papers, be approved. (Approval is sought up to the project budget.)

Reason for Decision

The capital programme and strategy 2023-2026 sets out the capital investment for the benefit of the community and how this is funded.

94. TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2023-2026

RESOLVED: That the Executive;

- 1) noted the Treasury Management Strategy as set out in Appendix A, of the agenda papers including the following additional appendices;

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- Prudential Indicators (Appendix B)
- Annual Investment Strategy 2023/24 (Appendix C)
- Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy (Appendix D)

- 2) noted that the Audit Committee agreed the Treasury Management Strategy, including the change of minimum credit rating for investments, on 1 February 2023 and have recommended the report to Council.

Reason for Decision

To agree the treasury management procedures, limits, and objectives for 2023/24.

Effective and safe use of our resources to deliver service improvements and service continuity through the management of the council's cash flow and investments while funding the capital programme.

95. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2023-2026 INCLUDING REVENUE BUDGET SUBMISSION 2023/24

The Executive Member for Finance thanked everyone involved in working towards achieving a balanced budget, it had been a year long process. The administration had managed to close the revenue gap of £4m and £40 in the capital programme this year, but this had required some difficult decisions to be taken. The administration would need to continue to take difficult and responsible choices going forward.

RESOLVED: That the Executive:

- 1) recommended to Council that the Summary of Budget Movements (SOBM) be approved. (Appendix A of the agenda papers);
- 2) noted the report of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee relating to Scrutiny of the Budget Setting Process 2023-24 and the Medium Term Financial Plan 2023-2026 (as set out in Appendix B to the report);
- 3) approved the schedule of fees and charges, as set out in Appendix C to the report, to be effective from the dates listed on the schedule and the schedule of fees and charges, as set out in Appendix E in relation to the decision at Licensing and Appeals Committee;
- 4) agreed delegated authority for the Chief Finance Officer to draw funds from the Dedicated Schools Grant to support delivery of the Safety Valve Programme.
- 5) noted in relation to the capital programme, additional challenges have emerged in the secondary school places capital programme and were currently being worked through and would be reported to Executive in early 2023/24 to seek the necessary budget provision.

Reason for Decision

To provide the Executive with the key revenue budget extract for 2023/24 of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2023-2024 for submission to Council.

96. SELECTION OF THE COUNCIL'S PREFERRED REGISTERED PROVIDERS

The Executive Member for Housing thanked everyone involved in this work, it had been a long and exhaustive process.

The Executive noted that each registered provider had been asked to detail their proposals to work towards carbon neutral homes. This would be monitored going forward.

RESOLVED: That:

- 1) the following Registered Providers (RP) be approved as Partners for the next three-year period commencing on 1 April 2023, with a further two years subject to satisfactory performance:

A2Dominion

Aster

Housing Solutions

Loddon Homes Limited
Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing
Places for People
Silva
Sovereign Housing Association
Vivid

2) noted that performance during the initial partnership period will be assessed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the end of the three year period.

3) the Council and the nine RPs enter into a Partnership Agreement. The Agreement will detail expectations and responsibilities and will outline the basis for regular performance monitoring. The agreement will also contain an action plan which all partner RPs will be expected to adhere to.

Reason for Decision

The delivery of affordable homes is an underpinning principle of the Council's vision. The approval of carefully selected Registered Provider (RP) Partners for the Council will ensure that those RPs delivering affordable housing in the borough via s106 agreements and other land opportunities are aligned to the Council's strategic vision and aspirations. In doing so, this will positively benefit the community through provision of high quality, well-managed affordable homes, with the Council gaining full nomination rights to these homes.

97. CONTRACT FOR LEGAL ADVICE FOR ADULTS & CHILDREN'S SERVICES RESOLVED: That the Executive:

i) approved the continuation of provision of adults and children's legal services by the Joint Legal Team based in Reading Borough Council on the basis of the "Heads of Terms" (appendix 1); and

ii) delegated to the Director of Children's Services and Director of Adults' Services, in consultation with the relevant officers in legal, finance and service areas, authority to enter into a contract for joint services with Reading Borough Council.

Reasons for Decision

The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Executive of the "Heads of Terms" (attached as Appendix 1 of the agenda papers) which will inform the new 5 year Shared Agreement for the Joint Legal Team (JLT) serving Adults' and Children's Services which will involve expenditure of approximately £4.6 million over 5 years.

98. CONTRACTED BUS SERVICES

The Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport & Highways reported that local bus services were vital for the Wokingham and wider area. They were a lifeline for the community. During the summer last year, whilst under significant financial pressure, an additional £300,000 had been invested into local bus services. This enabled services to be operated until 31 March 2023.

The Council had secured s106 funding from developer contributions, however it should be noted that this funding was finite. A growth bid would need to be submitted and approved if services were to be continued from September 2026. This report sought an extension of

existing services which would provide continuity and assurance to residents and local businesses.

The Executive thanked Rebecca Brooks and other officers for their hard work.

RESOLVED: That the Executive:

1) agreed to a further extension of the existing contracts between 1 April 2023 and 31 August 2023 for the following services:

- a) local bus services for Wokingham Town and the surrounding areas (Norreys Estate, Mulberry Grove, Woosehill, Emmbrook, Wokingham Without and Crowthorne, Winnersh, Hurst, Twyford, Charvil, Sonning and Woodley)
- b) local bus services for the villages which lie south of the M4 (Shinfield, Spencerswood, Swallowfield and Riseley)
- c) Services on the A327 corridor,
- d) the 19a/b/c services between Lower Earley, Maiden Erlegh, Woodley, the Royal Berkshire Hospital and Reading Town Centre

2) agreed to the retender of local bus services and agreed to make the increased budget available for the above services, as detailed in the exempt information in the report.

3) agreed to the release of any appropriate S106 funding to support any such decision in recommendation 2.

4) noted that S106 funding will only be sufficient to fund the services for a three-year period. A growth bid will need to be submitted if services were to continue beyond September 2026.

5) agreed to delegate the authority to award contracts for the above bus service to the Director of Place & Growth in consultation with the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways.

Reason for Decision

Existing local bus contracts came to their natural end on 30 June 2022. The contract term was modified until 31 March 2023 under procurement Regulation 72 (1)(c) and approved via an Individual Executive Member Decision. The contracts were retendered in Winter 2022 for the same level of service at the same cost. No successful bids were received.

The Executive is now asked to agree to the extension of the services for a further five months until the end of August 2023, and the retender of the services for a further three years. The Executive is also asked to agree to further budget and the release of S106 funding to allow the continuation of the services for a further 5 months until the end of August 2023, and the retender and delivery of the services for a further 3 years.