

## MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 12 JUNE 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.00 PM

### **Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Alistair Neal, Andrew Mickleburgh, Andy Croy, Norman Jorgensen, Adrian Mather, Alison Swaddle, Chris Johnson, Catherine Glover and Caroline Smith

### **Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Prue Bray, Graham Howe and Ian Shenton

### **Officers Present**

Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist  
Graham Ebers, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources & Assets  
Giorgio Framalicco, Director, Place & Growth  
Emily Higson, Head of Insight, Strategy & Inclusion  
Louise Livingston, Assistant Director, HR & Organisational Development  
Sally Watkins, Chief Operating Officer  
Callum Wernham, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist

### **1. ELECTION OF CHAIR**

The Committee elected a Chair for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

**RESOLVED:** That Al Neal be elected as Chair of the Committee for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

### **2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR**

The Committee appointed a Vice-Chair for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

**RESOLVED:** That Andrew Mickleburgh be appointed as Vice-Chair of the Committee for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

### **3. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were submitted from Pauline Jorgensen and Stuart Munro.

Graham Howe attended the meeting as a substitute.

### **4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee, held on 15 March 2023, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to an amendment on Page 7, second paragraph:

“...KPIs were assigned a RAG status (Red for on target.....amend to Green for on target.

### **5. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **6. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

### **7. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

## 8. THAMES WATER

Further to a request from the Committee, Richard Aylard, Thames Water's Sustainability Director, attended the meeting to give a presentation and answer Member questions on matters of interest to residents and local communities. James Bentley, Thames Water's Operations Director, joined Richard for the Q&A which followed.

The presentation covered the following issues:

- How does a sewage treatment works operate?
- Why do flows increase after rainfall? Causes - infiltration, missed and unauthorised connections, inundation and physical damage.
- Why do flows increase after rainfall – dual manholes.
- Impacts on river water quality – reasons for not achieving Good status in the Thames River Basin.
- Event Duration Monitor (EDM) – showing the number and duration of overflows at sites in the Borough.
- Storm Discharge Interactive Map – showing storm discharge activity indicated by Thames Water's EDM at sites in the Borough. The map has been updated to include improvement plans.
- Thames Water Investment Plans – Wokingham Borough:
  - Arborfield Sewage Treatment Works (STW) – an upgrade is planned to improve the ability to treat the volumes of incoming sewage, reducing the need for untreated discharges in wet weather. Due to complete in 2026.
  - Remenham STW – is a small treatment works, currently operating well with no major upgrade schemes planned.
  - Longwater STW – ongoing work to improve the efficiency of its sludge system.
  - Ash Ridge (Wokingham) STW – an upgrade is planned to improve the ability to treat the volumes of incoming sewage, reducing the need for untreated discharges in wet weather;
  - New Mill STW – is currently operating well and there are no plans for major upgrade schemes.
  - Wargrave STW – is being upgraded to improve its ability to treat the volumes of incoming sewage, reducing the need for untreated discharges. The scheme is due to complete in 2026. Assessments for future upgrades are also being considered to cater for future growth in the Wargrave system.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions:

The Wargrave STW supported a large catchment area and a population equivalent of 119k. Local Members were interested in the planned investment plans from 2026 onwards. Richard Aylard stated that Thames Water would be happy to deliver a tour of the site for a small group – up to six people. Generally, Thames Water would be happy to deliver talks to local communities, perhaps via the relevant Town and Parish Councils.

It was noted that a number of STWs in Reading had an impact on Wokingham Borough. Reading STW was one of the biggest and newest STWs, so there were no immediate plans for investment. There were eight sewage discharges into the Kennet in 2022 which was relatively low, but still too high.

There were ongoing issues at the Grazeley Road pumping station and a new station at Three Mile Cross – the system appeared to take a long time to switch back on following incidents, resulting in problems such as sewage in gardens. Were there any plans to address this? Richard Aylard and James Bentley undertook to investigate and provide a response for Councillor Chris Johnson.

In relation to ongoing investment in infrastructure, would Thames Water be using its own money? Richard Aylard explained that the regulatory system required the water companies to carry out the works and recover the costs from customers over the life of the works. In recent years shareholders had put more investment into Thames Water, but there was a limit. Companies needed incentives to invest and the regulator (Ofwat) had to ensure that the process worked. Over the past decade, bills have reduced at the expense of increased investment.

The presentation highlighted some positives in relation to investment, but it appeared that, in the 30 years since the water companies were established, there had been insufficient investment. Richard Aylard confirmed that this was accurate, but the water companies had been constrained by what Ofwat allowed them to do. There was also an enormous challenge in relation to the state of the infrastructure (Victorian pipes, etc.) and EU Directives relating to clean and waste water. The focus on keeping water bills low had limited the funds for investment. Thames Water were now carrying out a forensic examination of all its assets and was working on a submission to Ofwat on the price review process. This submission could be shared with Members once it was finalised.

There had been two incidents relating to sink holes in Elms Field and Evendons. What learning had been taken from these events? Was Thames Water happy with the work of the contractors involved in those events? Richard Aylard confirmed that there could have been more effective communication with elected Members and residents. Thames Water were happy to look at specific points raised by Members and were willing to talk to local Members and residents.

In relation to the cost of living crisis, what measures were there to help people who were struggling to pay their bills? James Bentley confirmed that people who were struggling could receive up to 50% off their bills under the social tariff: "Waterhelp". It was noted that WBC officers needed to be aware of the help that Thames Water was offering so that residents of the Borough could be advised. James Bentley confirmed that Thames Water would welcome closer working with WBC on issues relating to affordability and on more general issues affecting residents.

In relation to the payment of dividends, could Thames Water provide clarification on payments to internal shareholders and the movement of funds within the company structure? It was confirmed that a written response could be provided to clarify this issue.

In relation to new housing developments and their impact on the supply of water, how was Thames Water working with local councils? It was confirmed that Thames Water tried to work with councils on Local Plans and tried to establish a long term view on new housing and its implications for water and sewage treatment services. If development was not

carried out properly, for example resulting in increased amounts of surface water, then problems could arise. Thames Water was a statutory consultee for local plans but not for individual planning applications. As the Council was currently working on a new Local Plan, it was important to ensure that Thames Water were involved in the process.

Richard Aylard explained that smart metering was being rolled out in 2024. Thames Water would like to talk to WBC in September about the benefits of smart meters. Compulsory smart meters would be rolled out in Berkshire from the beginning of 2024.

Thames Water suffered from a high level of leaks through burst water mains, etc. What steps were being taken to address this issue? It was confirmed that this was a top priority for the company with regular high-level meetings to discuss incidents and progress. Failure to meet leakage reduction targets resulted in financial penalties for the water companies. It was confirmed that feedback on the current situation relating to water leakages in the Borough could be fed back after the meeting.

In relation to new housing developments, there appeared to be delays in the adoption of infrastructure such as new roads as a result of inaction by Thames Water. James Bentley confirmed that the company would be happy to discuss individual cases and see what lessons could be learned.

In relation to the Climate Emergency, what steps were being taken to meet water reduction targets? It was confirmed that smart meters had an important role to play as they could result in significant reductions in water usage. Thames Water was working with developers and offering discounts for water efficient works. It was also important to provide hints and tips for residents to limit their daily water usage. Effective communication was important and councils had a part to play.

The Chair thanked the Thames water representatives for attending the meeting and engaging in a constructive debate with the Committee.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Richard Aylard and James Bentley be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Member questions in a constructive manner;
- 2) the Chair write to Thames Water with a summary of the issues discussed and an invitation to attend the Committee's meeting on 16 January 2024, in order to discuss progress on the matters discussed;
- 3) Members consider the invitation from Thames Water for small groups to visit local sewage treatment works, such as Wargrave STW, perhaps in conjunction with representatives for Town and Parish Councils;
- 4) Town and Parish Councils be alerted to the opportunity for briefings from Thames Water on local water/sewage-related issues;
- 5) further discussions be held with local Members on the lessons learned from the two sinkhole incidents (Elms Field and Evendons), potentially via a meeting with residents;
- 6) a meeting be arranged for Thames Water to brief WBC staff on the measures developed to support residents who were struggling to pay bills – the briefing to

include Thames Water's priority service register (for older/disabled residents) and the social tariff;

- 7) a meeting be arranged with Thames Water in September 2023 in order to discuss the pros and cons and rollout of smart water meters across the Borough in 2024;
- 8) Thames Water hold discussions with WBC planners and highways staff on ways to remove blockages in the process for adopting new estate infrastructure;
- 9) Thames Water and WBC officers consider ways of delivering water efficient homes through the planning process and implementation of the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan.

#### **Q4 2022/23 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT**

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 21 to 68, which set out the Q4 Performance Monitoring Report for 2022/23 (January to March 2023).

Prue Bray (Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Children's Services) attended the meeting to present the report on behalf of Sarah Kerr (Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services).

Louise Livingston (Head of HR & Organisational Development) introduced the report and highlighted some inconsistencies in the figures, including the pie charts at the start of the report.

Overall, Q4 showed good performance in spite of ongoing challenges relating to inflation and financial uncertainty at a national and international level. Of the 41 KPIs reported, 23 were Green, 7 were Amber and 4 were Red. Seven KPIs were in the process of being categorised and assigned SMART targets..

The four Red KPIs were:

- RA 10B – Completion to time and budget of regeneration works (residential works);
- CS3 – percentage of children in care who were 20 miles + from their homes and out of the Borough;
- CS4 – Percentage of Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments completed within 20 weeks of referral;
- AS2 – Social work assessments allocated to commence within 28 days of the request (counted at the point of allocation).

The report gave details of the measures being implemented to bring these KPIs back on track.

The report also gave details of the top wins, top opportunities and challenges facing each of the Council's service directorates.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions:

RA4 – Return on investment portfolio – Property Investment Fund – would it be useful to include a valuation for the assets in the Council’s property portfolio? Graham Ebers commented that the return on investment was the most useful information for Members. However, further consideration would be given to this suggestion about valuation, with feedback provided to Members.

RA8 – Capital Budget monitoring forecast position – what factors lay behind the 11% underspend on the Capital Budget? Graham Ebers stated that there were a number of factors. High inflation and high interest rates had led to a focus on avoiding Capital expenditure in certain areas in order to mitigate the impact of the current financial situation. The detail would be reported to the Executive in July 2023.

CS3 – Percentage of children in care who are 20 miles + from their homes and out of the Borough – what factors had led the KPI to move from Red to Green? Prue Bray commented that children could still be in care if placed with family members. Some families had moved out of the Borough but were still included in the report. There was also an issue around unaccompanied asylum seeker children. The KPI covered a number of complex issues. Andrew Mickleburgh commented that this KPI would be closely scrutinised by the Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Pages 29 and 33 – Challenges for Place and Growth and Children’s Services – were action plans in place to address these challenges? Prue Bray stated that action plans were in place in relation to the Children’s Services challenges. These action plans would be considered by the Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee in due course. In relation to Place and Growth, Graham Ebers commented that 2023/24 would be a challenging year for all services. A service corporate efficiency target of £12m had been set, which was twice the target in any other year. High levels of inflation, interest rates and the cost of living were ongoing challenges in addition to emerging pressures, such as home to school transport and homelessness.

Recruitment and retention appeared to be an issue across the organisation, along with sickness absence. What steps were being taken to address these? It was confirmed that the HR team were working on a new People Strategy, linked to the new Community Vision and Council Plan. Work was also ongoing to improve absence management. The report stated that the absence rate for Q4 was slightly above target but still well below the public sector average.

RA3 – usage of Wokingham Borough leisure centres – was the aim of the service to achieve financial break-even? Graham Ebers confirmed that the Council had an arrangement with the contractor (Places for People) which involved a management fee. Increased usage resulted in an increased management fee. It was noted that some of Borough’s leisure centres (such as the Carnival Hub) were achieving better results than others.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Prue Bray and supporting officers be thanked for attending the meeting to present the performance report and answer Member questions;
- 2) officers review the layout and content of the charts at the beginning of the report to ensure that they were providing accurate information and adding value to the report;

- 3) the KPI relating to use of the Borough's leisure centres (RA3) be reviewed by the Executive Member and Director in light of the recent improvement in attendances;
- 4) leisure centre attendance, targets and performance be the subject of a further report to the Committee;
- 5) officers consider the Member request for the inclusion of asset values in KPI RA4 - Return on investment portfolio – Property Investment Fund;

#### **10. CONSIDERATION OF THE CURRENT EXECUTIVE AND IEMD FORWARD PROGRAMMES**

The Committee considered a copy of the Executive Forward Programme and Individual Member Decision Forward Programme, as set out on Agenda pages 69 to 82.

**RESOLVED:** That the Executive Forward Programme and Individual Member Decision Forward Programme be noted.

#### **11. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES**

The Committee considered its forward work programme and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as set out on Agenda pages 83 to 96.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Scrutiny suggestions from Town and Parish Councils and residents (reported to the March 2023 meeting) be allocated to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees;
- 2) all Scrutiny reports and presentations be included in the published Agenda ahead of the Committee's meetings;
- 3) the Chair and Vice-Chair discuss the format and timing for the proposed Scrutiny item on Air Quality – progress against the improvement action plan.

#### **12. ACTION TRACKER REPORT**

The Committee considered the regular Action Tracker report.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the Action Tracker report be noted;
- 2) each Overview and Scrutiny Committee develop its own Action Tracker.

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