

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 27 JULY 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.03 PM**

Committee Members Present

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

19. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Sarah Kerr.

20. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 29 June 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

21. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The following declarations of personal interest were made by Executive Members in relation to agenda item 31: Shareholders Report. These Members did not participate or vote on this item.

- Councillor Prue Bray as a Chair and a Non-Executive Director of Berry Brook Homes, a Non-Executive Director at WBC Holdings Ltd and Chair of Wokingham Homes Limited.
- Councillor Stephen Conway as Chair and a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and Chair of WBC Holdings Ltd
- Councillor David Hare as Chair and a Non-Executive Director of Optalis Ltd.

22. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER

“Given that some doubt has been cast on the need to make savings, I should like to take this opportunity to remind everyone of the gravity of the situation we face. High inflation, combined with increasing demand for statutory provision, especially in Children’s Services, is creating enormous pressure on the Council’s finances. It’s made worse by the rise in interest rates, which has added to the cost of servicing our borrowing for capital projects.

Wokingham as I think many people are now aware, receives less core funding from government per head of population that any other unitary authority in England.

The headline inflation figure nationally has fallen slightly in recent weeks but the inflation in our costs continues to pose a significant challenge and when combined with growth in demand for statutory services, requires us to find a staggering £11.8m worth of efficiencies and income generation this year, more than anyone can remember before.

I would welcome Opposition councillors constructive engagement with the savings process. Our residents expect all councillors to behave responsibly in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. If we receive no help from the Opposition, we will not be deterred from doing our duty to protect the Council’s finances.

We overcame significant financial challenges last year, by making tough decisions in the public interest. We will continue to put financial sustainability of the Council on which many people of the borough depend for vital services, as our top priority this year.”

23. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

24. DAVID IRELAND HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT, SPORT AND LEISURE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

The Chair advised that he had been informed that this question had been withdrawn. If it transpired that this was not the case, a written response could be provided.

The Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure advised that a written response had already been provided.

25. PETER WHITE HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND RESIDENT SERVICES THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question:

Peter White asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

(In the absence of the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services, the Leader answered the question on her behalf)

My decarbonisation plan:

solar panels, £9000 pounds, generation of 5Mwh of electricity per year. 1 ton CO₂E equivalent, about the same as a medium sized tree. Developer near me cut down two large trees to widen a drive.

Environmental impact survey request for 155 houses in Three Mile Cross. Approximately 15 ktons of CO₂ (mostly Scope 3, so WBC doesn't need to count that !).

Electric Vehicle, £18000. milage 6000 per year, 3 tons of Co₂e equivalent . A development like Hall farm (4500 homes) might have half a million tons of embodied Co₂e. I could drive a gas guzzler for 150000 years to emit that much.

Heating (ongoing): IR panels £6000, or an Air source heat pump £15000 to £20000. These are big numbers again, and I'm wondering is it all worth it ?, will it make a difference? Am I the only person who sees it this way ?.

Does WBC have a coherent, realistic strategy for explaining to residents why they should engage with the Climate Emergency Action Plan, considering the cost of even attempting to become carbon neutral, and that fact that development in WBC wipes out any gains we might make individually ?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Peter. I commend your commitment to invest in these measures to minimise your carbon footprint. As you know, reducing our carbon footprint is important because it mitigates the effects of climate change. The recent weather conditions over the past few weeks in much of the world is evidence enough for the need to take action.

Delivering sustainable communities is important to this agenda. While building new homes does have a carbon impact, those homes, especially affordable homes, are vitally important to meet housing needs. It is important that those homes are delivered to the highest possible environmental standards and that they are well connected to jobs and services via public transport, and safe walking and cycling routes.

We do recognise that current building regulations fall short of what is needed to address the climate emergency. The particular development that you reference at Three Mile Cross was approved in 2016, when the current Building Regulations were applied of that time and this was the limit of what could be asked of developers.

We are now currently progressing a review of our planning policies and the timetable for the new Local Plan is set out on this agenda. Our intention is to include a suite of new policies which reflect best practice by seeking to achieve zero carbon impact from regulated activities.

You have highlighted the cost of some energy efficiency measures, most of which require an upfront investment and you gave some examples. These measures do lead to significant savings in the long term. On this point, I want to mention a Council-led scheme that's currently open for registrations, Solar Together, that aims to facilitate residential installations of solar panels at a competitive price through vetted suppliers.

Residents and organisations have a part to play in the Borough's decarbonisation journey, by shifting to more sustainable behaviours and minimising their carbon footprint and I would encourage people to follow your example where they can.

Supplementary Question:

The Climate Emergency Action Plan on page 5, contains what is basically a mission statement for residents of the borough. I'm sure you've read it. It says in a carbon neutral borough, our community will breathe clean air, clean and green biodiverse spaces. People work, wheel, scoot or bicycle, use accessible public transport and low admission vehicles. Homes, businesses places of leisure will be low carbon and energy efficient. Buy renewables and innovative technologies, that pave the way forward of future generations. Wokingham will be a diverse and inclusive community where everyone plays their part in contributing to a carbon neutral future. Based on the CEAP, the expected new Local Plan, issues of major house building with insufficient supporting infrastructure, and the increasing population of Wokingham Borough, can the Executive at Wokingham Borough Council give a score on a scale of one to ten of how well you think you are in terms of succeeding in our carbon neutral mission for 2023, can you please justify your answer.

Answer:

Thank you, Peter. That is a very detailed and quite probing supplementary. I will have to defer to my Executive Member, Sarah Kerr who holds responsibility for this area and has much of that detailed information that you are seeking. We will provide a written response for you.

26. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

27. COUNCILLOR GARY COWAN HAS ASKED THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question:

At the Planning meeting on the 13th of July 2022 the Council's legal representative present, referenced that the Town and Country Act applied to Part II issues only, which I found surprising. My comments then are recorded in the minutes of that meeting.

The Town and Country act was written to prevent corruption by creating greater transparency. An example of corruption was John Poulson, jailed for five years for corruption after being found guilty of bribing public figures in a web of corruption that encompassed 23 local authorities and 300 individuals.

I make no allegation against the Council but perhaps it explains why the Planning Committee accepted the legal advice and approved the planning application.

My questions to Officers had led to an email from the legal department suggesting I may want to consider declaring an interest and the Chair of the committee asked the same question. I stayed and I immediately resigned from the Planning committee at the end of the discussion.

My question is as it has been reported that the project is to be cancelled as its costs have risen by £6.5 million how much has already been spent including design costs.

Answer:

Last month the Executive agreed to the cessation, not the cancellation, of the construction of a care home as part of the Toutley East strategic masterplan as previously approved, whilst the viability of alternative delivery models for the care home are explored.

Approximately £340,000 was spent on site surveys, feasibility and design work and planning application preparation to secure outline planning consent for the whole of the Toutley East site. Following the granting of planning consent approximately £800,000 has been spent on detailed design and pre-construction works. This spend is within the capital budget for the project, as allocated within the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan. Costs expended to date can be transferred to schemes that come forward on this site and have all contributed to the increasing value of the overall site following the granting of planning consent.

Supplementary Question:

I notice the Planning Committee recommended the demolition of a house in the countryside to be replaced by a 68 acre Care home, contrary to Policy PP11 and also that the Council has purchased a Care home on Barkham Ride. Has there been any information from the Council on costs or business case for the one on Barkham Ride?

Supplementary Answer:

There had been Gary, but I don't have those details at hand. We will provide you with a written reply.

28. COUNCILLOR PAULINE JORGENSEN HAS ASKED THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HOUSING THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question:

Could the Leader explain what he is doing to prevent council changes to key services, for example caddy liners and litter bin service reduction, being implemented without following due process and proper approval.

Answer:

Thank you for your question, Pauline. To answer it directly: an error was made in progressing savings in the Place and Growth Directorate without due process being followed. That is now being rectified; public consultation and the involvement of the council's overview and scrutiny process will precede a decision being made. I have already apologised, on behalf of the council, for the error. Mistakes happen, as any leader knows, in all organisations. Mistakes were made when your party ran the council, as I recall. None of us want mistakes to occur, and we will do all we can to reduce the risk of them occurring again. We will review procedures and make sure constitutional requirements are better understood throughout the council.

28.1 Councillor Peter Harper has asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:**Question:**

In the 2022-23 MTFP the Barkham Solar Farm capital cost is shown as £8m but in the Climate Emergency Progress Report from September 2022 it is shown as £26.8m. Which is the correct figure?

(In the absence of the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services, the Leader answered the question on her behalf)

Answer

The cost of the Barkham Solar Farm is currently forecast to be a total cost of round £26.8m; as was reported into Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee in October of last year. That figure is based on the detailed design work undertaken to date and granting of planning consent, with specialist input from industry consultants. It also includes the cost of connection to the Grid. The figures published in the 2022-23 Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), were the best estimate available at that time when the project was at an early stage and before any detailed design work had been undertaken and before the cost of the Grid connection was known.

Solar farms, as with any other infrastructure project, are subject to location, site specific and capacity requirements. All these factors will affect the cost of the project and are only known once detailed feasibility assessments are completed.

In its decision to approve the Procurement Business Case for the build contractor for the solar farm in June 2022, Executive requested that an up-dated business case reflecting the most recent costs and revenue forecasts be reported back into Executive for review, once the contractor procurement process had been completed. Subject to resolving the current grid connection issue, I expect this up-dated business case will be presented in due course.

Supplementary Question:

I've looked at the latest MTFP, there is no mention of the Solar Farm at Barkham, no capital expenditure catered for. There is some carry forward from last year's budget but it only accounts for £1.4m, at the moment it doesn't look like there is any capital spend

scheduled for this year or for future years for phase 1 of the Solar farm at Barkham, let alone phase 2 which I believe, similarly has no spend set aside. So, where is the budget if its not in the MTFP and how will it be funded?

Supplementary Answer:

I'm confident my colleague Sarah Kerr would be able to provide a very good response to this, I will provide you with a written response.

29. COUNCILLOR CHARLES MARGETTS HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HEALTH & WELLBEING AND ADULT SERVICES THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question:

In March 2022 the Council had a plan to close Suffolk Lodge and build a new care home at Toutley. I understand the Council is buying the Four Seasons Care Home on Barkham Road and has been looking to purchase other homes. I also understand the council plans to proceed with a reduced scale Toutley Home. Please can you advise the overall plan with the acquisition of care homes. How many homes / beds are you planning to purchase or build and what is the future of Suffolk Lodge?

Answer

As I am sure you know, all the information I can give you must be in the public domain. The number of older people who are expected to require residential and nursing care provision, funded by the council, is projected to rise. This will probably be from 284 residents in 2020 to 499 residents by 2040.

On the 29th June 2023, the Executive considered a report by the Leader of the Council and the Executive Member for Business and Economic Development on the Toutley East Development and the residential delivery model. This unfortunately identified that the current delivery model for the care home was no longer delivering good value for money to the Council and its residents. The Executive was therefore requested to agree a pause to the delivery of the care home at the Toutley East site, whilst alternative models of delivery for the care home are considered. This altered scheme, if it progresses, will still give an excellent dementia care home.

Suffolk Lodge is a well-loved care home within the community run by Optalis providing a good standard of care. There are no plans to change this whilst we explore the delivery method and delivery of a new care home.

On 14th July, the administration was delighted to announce the acquisition of the Berkshire Care Home. Wokingham Borough Council has now exchanged contracts with Four Seasons Health Care on the purchase of the home on Barkham Road, Wokingham. Information regarding this purchase is in the public domain, we are not however, able to give further information until the purchase is completed, due to our contractual obligation. Like Suffolk Lodge this 50 bed care home, that will be run by Optalis, is well loved by residents even though it might not have the cutting edge technology of a new home. To manage demand for local authority funded care, we are looking to increase our portfolio of care homes in the borough. We will continue to work with the market to ensure sufficiency but our offer will include a mixture of new developments and acquisitions. .

Supplementary Question:

I understand that the acquisition was funded by the Property portfolio investment group. Which was set up 3-4 years ago, to buy assets for commercial return. Can you confirm if that is the case? Also are you able to send me a copy of the business plan.

Answer:

I can send you the business plan. I haven't heard what you have set out in terms of funding, I am happy to send you a written response.

30. COUNCILLOR SHAHID YOUNIS HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT, SPORT AND LEISURE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question:

There was a recent Council press announcement that the number of rubbish bins in the borough will be reduced, and the remaining bins will be emptied less frequently.

There are already reports of bins being covered with black bags and waste piling up around overflowing bins.

Inevitably, this will result in piling up of litter around the streets, footpaths and children's play areas and risks encouraging vermin. Who will be responsible for clearing up this mess and what extra costs will it incur?

Answer

The Council is currently projecting significant financial pressures both in the current and future financial years and these must be addressed if we are to maintain statutory services and in particular support those in most need.

The Council has worked hard to find a way forward with its contractors and began to implement its budget and service changes which included the taping over of some bins. Given the impact of these changes it is recognised that the Council began this work without the appropriate approvals and necessary supportive work in place.

Investigations and efforts by the Council have begun to remedy or mitigate the changes in service and a consultation will be held in due course that will consider frequency and prioritisations of street cleaning activities to address the very issue raised In the question, whilst remaining within the funding available, a recent media release has been recently issued that provides more detail and context pending the completion of a review. We are working to minimise the cost of additional clearance where possible and to complete the review as quickly as possible.

Supplementary Question:

I believe there was a list of bins which are to be taken out, when will that list be made public? Will you be sticking with this list following the review or will there be a new one?

Answer:

I'm asking that the list be part of the consultation and that list will be subject to input from both Ward councillors and from members of the public. I'm not sure that the bins that were selected, were the correct ones and we want to make sure that those going forward will be the correct ones.

31. COUNCILLOR GRAHAM HOWE HAS ASKED THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question:

The Bohunt school expansion was unanimously agreed by Full Council in March 2022, including Sixth Form, SEND provision and extra year 7 places.

The budget was £4.5 million.

Following the Liberal Democratic/Labour Coalition last year, costs were forecast at £6.5 million. The increase was partly change in specification for the extra provisions and material cost increases due to COVID.

We then learned that there were delays with contracts.

Councillors Shenton and Cornish said, presumably informed by the Executive Member, that the Bohunt facilities would open September 2023 but then published a public apology saying it was not going to happen. The Wokingham Paper stated from Liberal Democratic sources that the Bohunt Trust was not going ahead with the project. This was not the truth. The Bohunt Trust were considering what extra contribution they could make to the project, not to abandon it.

We now learn that costs are nearer £10.5 million, an extraordinary 2 1/2 times the original estimate.

Can the Executive Member put an end to opaque, changing stories so that residents of Bohunt community can be informed but also other Wokingham schools impacted, and can she give a clear explanation of the provision, the costs, and timelines?

Answer

Before I give my response, I would like to exonerate Councillor Ian Shenton from the above, he did not make any comment.

In March 2022, the Council's Executive approved the proposal to part fund a scheme to create a new sixth form, create additional Year 7 places and enhance inclusion at the Bohunt Wokingham School. At the time, the project was intended to provide a 300 place sixth form, opening in the near future with costs split between the council (£3.7m) and the Bohunt Education Trust (BET) (£2m). The cost was estimated by BET in its business case submitted to the Council.

However, the original financial budget, as indicated in BET business case for the sixth form accommodation, is significantly underestimated for delivering a new build expansion to the school. This follows more detailed design work and costings of the initially proposed scheme taking into account the government's school building standards and significant inflation costs. The current estimated cost of the proposed new build expansion is £10.5m.

Working with BET, officers are working on options available to bring sixth form education to Bohunt and a further report on the timescales and costs will be reported back to me in Autumn.

While the options are being explored, the school has informed the Department of Education (DFE) that it has not been possible to secure the commencement of a 6th form offer from September 2023 as originally proposed. The council are working to provide information to assist the students affected by this to find alternative sixth form places

available in the Wokingham area. Other schools in Wokingham, including Forest School have sufficient available places to admit students from Bohunt.

Supplementary Question:

First of all I apologise to Councillor Shenton, I have misquoted. It was another councillor who made that social media statement alongside Councillor Cornish. I know that it is difficult to get these sorts of project through. There is a vast change here, now in the spirit of collaboration and getting things done for the community that Bohunt would service, what is it that you need from your co-councillors to make this happen?

Answer:

I would suggest that there are councillors in the area around the school perhaps not of my own political party, who might like to get their facts accurately evidenced, when they are making statements on social media and that would be a great assistance in getting this project sorted out. There is a report on the agenda this evening, I'm quite happy to receive questions from any Member, we are expecting to bring a report back in the autumn and we are working with the school. I would rather people come and asked me about things rather than putting misleading statements on social media.

32. DELIVERY OF WELLINGTON ROAD AFFORDABLE HOUSING SCHEME

The Leader reported that this Scheme would make a welcome contribution to the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) properties, catering particularly to two groups in particular need of affordable housing, care leavers and key workers. He thanked Housing officers for working hard to bring this Scheme before the Executive for decision.

The Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty stated that she was also pleased to see this scheme before the Executive. It was an area with good transport links, providing opportunities for travel to education and work. The Cost of Living had pushed many into a very precarious position, this Scheme would help to alleviate some of the pressures. The Scheme was also very sustainable.

RESOLVED: that Executive approved:

- (1) the expenditure budget of the total costs of the scheme of up to £6,600,000 be funded through a combination of borrowing, capital receipts, developer contributions and Homes England funding. To note: budget approval would be dependent on Homes England grant being awarded;
- (2) the release of up to £3m commuted sums (developer contributions for affordable housing) to be used in conjunction with borrowing via the Housing Revenue Account ("HRA") and Homes England grant as per the proposed funding model;
- (3) that the scheme goes into the Housing Revenue Account ("HRA").

33. CAPITAL MONITORING 2023/24 - QUARTER 1

The Executive Member for Finance advised that this report presented the position in terms of capital spend at the end of quarter one. The report showed the additional cost of Winnersh Park and Ride of an additional £600,000. Other savings had been identified to compensate for this overspend in part.

The Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport & Highways reported that the Scheme had now been completed but that the delays had led to the developer submitting compensation costs.

It was noted that the initial spend for the Berkshire Records office was agreed at full Council in July 2021, since then costs had risen considerably, all councils had subsequently been asked to increase funding to address the increased costs. This was an unavoidable cost.

RESOLVED: that the Executive:

- 1) noted the position of the capital programme at the end of Quarter 1 (to 30 June 2023) as summarised in the report and set out in detail in Appendix A to the report;
- 2) approved and noted the proposed carry forwards in the capital programme as set out in Appendix B; and
- 3) approved a supplementary estimate of £222,000 for Wokingham's share of the Berkshire Archives Extension project.

34. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2023-24 QUARTER 1

The Executive Member for Finance reported that this quarter one report highlighted the serious situation that the Council finds itself in. Significant challenges were presented in this quarter, as a result of rising inflation. Revenue overspend was currently approximately £2.9m this year. This could potentially be exacerbated by other pressures such as the annual staff pay awards. If inflation continued to rise, the problems would worsen.

The graph in the agenda papers showed the effect that inflation was having on the Council, which was adding an unprecedented shortfall of over £11m in the year 2022-23, progressing into this financial year. This was the reason that significant changes to services were needed, such as the increase to car parking charges and changes to litter bin provision. Unprecedented inflation had forced the Council into this difficult situation.

It was noted that councils were not allowed to go bankrupt, the government was required to step in if this was likely to happen. Councils such as Slough, Thurrock and Woking had all been required to accept government intervention. Others such as Southampton, Guildford, Birmingham, Kent and Hastings amongst others had expressed they were in financial difficulty and faced an unsustainable future. Government intervention would lead to very little choice and minimal service delivery, Slough had been required to significantly increase council tax.

If Wokingham could not claw back from its overspend, similar problems would be faced as the Councils already mentioned. It was critical that the council continued to support low income families and made significant savings to protect the borough's most vulnerable residents. Wokingham received the lowest grant from government and was therefore left with no other option than to make savings to ensure the solvency of the council.

The Executive Member for Environment, Sport & Leisure reported that statutory duties continued to grow year on year, yet funding continued to fall, the net result was that the council was forced to continue to cut in non-statutory areas.

The Executive Member for Children's Services reported that Children's Services continued to contribute to the majority of the predicted overspend, the council was battling hard to prevent costs from escalating. Two particular aspects where costs were being reviewed were, home to school transport and cost of placements of children with complex needs.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- 1) noted the overall forecast of the current position of the General Fund revenue budget, Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) illustrated in the Executive Summary and appendices attached to the report.
- 2) noted the proposed consultation and timeline on grass cutting, public bin collections and street cleaning as set out in the report.

35. SHAREHOLDERS REPORT

The Executive Member for Finance reported that this report was produced in the interests of transparency and set out the performance of each company.

RESOLVED that the Executive noted:

- 1) the Housing companies' budget and operational position for 2022/23 financial year and
- 2) the Optalis budget and operational position for 2022/23 financial year.

36. BOHUNT WOKINGHAM SCHOOL SIXTH FORM: UPDATE AND BUDGET

The Executive Member for Children's Services reported that a twin track approach was being taken to this work to develop the new build/existing build.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- 1) noted the progress made on the Bohunt Wokingham School to date, and
- 2) requested that the options to bring 6th form education to Bohunt and a further report on the timescales and costs be reported back to the Executive in Autumn.

37. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEME 2023

The Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan reported that the report set out the next stage for the Local Plan and provided an opportunity for residents to comment. The Leader expressed his thanks to the Executive Member for all his work on this, including the immensely complex set of calculations.

RESOLVED that the Executive adopts the Local Development Scheme 2023, attached as Enclosure 1 of the agenda papers.

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