

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 4 SEPTEMBER 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.57 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Chris Johnson (Chair), Peter Dennis (Vice-Chair), David Cornish, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, Alistair Neal, Marie-Louise Weighill and Alison Swaddle (Substitute)

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Paul Fishwick and Sarah Kerr

Officers Present

Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Sofia Charalampidou (Senior Transport Planner), Robert Curtis (Transport Planning Team Manager), Chris Easton (Assistant Director - Highways), Giorgio Framallicco (Director - Place and Growth), Matt Gould (Head of Service, Highways and Transport), Rhian Hayes (Assistant Director Economic Development and Growth) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

24. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Laura Blumenthal.

Councillor Alison Swaddle attended the meeting as a substitute.

25. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 3 July 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

26. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillors Neal, Fishwick and Kerr declared that there were members of Cycling UK, however they had taken no part in the group's response to the draft Local Transport Plan 4.

27. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

28. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

29. GARY COWAN HAS ASKED THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question:

All of us in public life share a common duty to protect our local taxpayer's interest which is critical for sound financial management and key to ensuring that every pound spent by local government is used to support the communities they serve.

At Exec I asked to see the business case for the purchase of the care home on Barkham Road including all the costs incurred by the Borough Council.

The reply I was given stated as the Borough Council had signed a non-disclosure agreement I could not have that information.

There are councils which have got into serious financial difficulties over external investment and have effectively gone bankrupt.

Keeping a tight rein on such spending would appear to be right and proper hence my interest in all external investment not just this one.

My question is how does this Council with due diligence manage its checks and balances on investments such as this to ensure the Councils are properly protected.

Answer:

Executive and Council prescribed the criteria and process, including those that must be involved in decision-making, for the use of the Property Investment Fund, known latterly as the Community Investment Fund, for acquisitions made within this programme. In all cases external professional expertise has also been used to inform the decision and the strength of Investment. This supplements the opinion of internal subject matter experts.

Performance is reported publicly through O&S performance reporting, quarterly on the Council Website and at high level through Revenue Monitoring and Capital Monitoring (e.g. an exception to expected delivery is a budget variance). Both Internal Audit and External Audit have reviewed our activity and have provided strong assurances on our approach and practices, including compliance with the arrangements approved by Executive and Council. Furthermore, there has been specific scrutiny by O&S on the investment activity.

Given the commercially sensitive nature of the negotiations on these acquisitions, at times an (often temporary) non-disclosure requirement is in place, to enable these negotiations to conclude in a timely and commercially sensitive way and ensure they represent best value to the Council. A non-disclosure agreement is currently in place with regards to the care home on Barkham Road. The purchase price for the home will become publicly available following the sale, which is expected to complete in September.

Meanwhile, I understand that the Executive Director of Adults, Children and Health has offered to talk you through the Business Case, including the cost of acquisition but this would obviously need to protect the current commercial sensitivities.

Supplementary Question:

The LGA commented on Woking Borough Council's financial position with debts of £1.8 billion and rising. The LGA went on to say that the investments failed to deliver returns, resulting in unaffordable borrowing, inadequate repayment plans and high value irrecoverable loans. The LGA also said that Local Authorities must not forget their primary purpose is regeneration, for property development it is not. The skills needed by Local Government Leaders must match the challenges and expectations of the public, not just the skills and professional capabilities of the officers but also the skills of elected Members to offer challenge and to understand risk. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountability point out in their lessons learnt from reporting previous Section 114 notices that if Members are not informed enough to make decisions and challenge effectively they are more likely to take easy routes. Members need to be engaged and financially literate to

understand all aspects of the plans and issues that come before them. If there is no challenge, then Members may not recognise how serious the situation is.

My question is, how can this be achieved when elected Members are asking questions that challenge decisions are denied requested information? I must also point out that as elected Members are not to be trusted, it would appear, is this approach a train wreck waiting to happen?

Supplementary Answer:

Thank you Gary, I will turn around and say that I do expect that this requires a further written answer, but I will make a comment. The question challenges the precept that you were informed that the information was subject to a non-disclosure arrangement, that an offer was made for you to discuss it. So I would say that you have had the opportunity to challenge the purchase and to ask questions about it, but that it can't be publicly declared at the moment.

Written Supplementary Answer:

The constitution sets out the formal governance and decision-making arrangements, which as in the case of the care home, has been followed thoroughly and included detailed reports to advise and assist the right decision. Any variances in the delivery of that decision would again be subject to the appropriate governance and decision making, including where appropriate through the Committee system.

Outside of formal arrangements, officers will meet relevant members to assist with any further detail or questions they may have – as was offered in this case. As with all commercial activity across all sectors, there will be times where detail cannot be shared more widely.

You will be aware that the Council has over a period of time sensibly and successfully invested in Borough, including the Town Centre, Housing and Leisure facilities. Performance on these investments is included in the Treasury Management reports that are reported through to Council (and as part of the Treasury Management Strategy agreed by council annually).

30. ARTS AND CULTURE STRATEGY UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 15 to 30, which provided a summary of the work and achievements of the strategy to date.

The report outlined the six priorities to in order to achieve the vision:

1. Enhancing cultural identity and sense of 'place'.
2. Fostering social interaction and community cohesion.
3. Improving health and well-being.
4. Developing opportunities for children and young people.
5. Supporting economic growth.
6. Maximising partnerships and collaboration.

The Executive Member outlined that this strategy was of significant importance to the corporate vision as it brought with it significant economic and social value. Arts and Culture was what made life worth living, and this strategy was about working strategically

across the organisation and community. The Executive Member added that the first senior cultural development officer had recently started in order to progress this strategy.

Sarah Kerr (Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services), Frances Haywood (Head of Strategic Housing), and Nicola Peacock (Senior Cultural Development Officer) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- Whilst the document listed a considerable amount of activity, it was sometimes difficult to understand what the product actually was and what would change in 5 years' time. Could this be clarified? Executive Member and Officer response – All work that was being undertaken was linked to the vision in the strategy and to the Council's corporate vision. The strategy would help to facilitate a range of benefits including health and wellbeing and economic benefits. An example of this was the close work being carried out in conjunction with our educational psychologists to ensure a joined up approach;
- Why was Shinfield Studios not mentioned within the document? Executive Member and Officer response – The list was not exhaustive, and officers were working closely with Shinfield Studios. By the end of the programme it was hoped that the Borough would have a strong cultural identity which would benefit the wider community. There was also a close working relationship with Shinfield Parish Council, including a community engagement strategy;
- Was there a need for more focus within the strategy? Executive Member and Officer response – Whilst there was always the risk of trying to cover too much ground, it was crucial that the 'seed was sown' as quickly as possible. The Senior Cultural Development Officer post was grant funded for a set period of time, and it was vital to embed arts and culture throughout the Borough whilst building up a clear evidence base to enable further funding bids in order to deliver a legacy of arts and culture. An example of particular focus was the close working relationship with the University of Reading, whilst other areas of focus would need to be phased in over time;
- Could more detail be given regarding the libraries bid on agenda page 18? Officer response – This bid was led by senior officers including Jackie Whitney (Head of Customer Excellence) and Richard Alexander (Head of Customer Excellence). Unfortunately the bid was unsuccessful and therefore this capital development could not progress in the same way;
- It was noted that it would be useful for future versions of the document to show which bids were in progress, finished, delayed or cancelled;
- How were officers engaging with the planning policy team? Officer response – Officers were working with the Local Plan Update team to assess if contributions from developers towards arts and culture projects were viable. The Working Group were considering this at the moment and such a decision would not hold up the completion of the Local Plan Update;
- What challenges were envisaged moving forwards, and what effort was being made to integrate new residents to the Borough into the cultural vision? Executive Member and Officer response – The big challenge was that there could be huge scope, which could

result in the service taking on too many tasks. Officers needed to be mindful of where to focus strategically, whilst engaging with external partners and aligning the work to the Council's strategic vision. There was an integrated approach to engage all new and existing residents into the cultural vision. Additionally, it was crucial to build up a strong evidence base to demonstrate the value in putting resources into arts and culture, for example by demonstrating that children who had access to arts and culture performed better than those who did not;

- Could additional support be made by other bodies to support the fixed term post? Executive Member response – Local Government would always have a role to play in this space as the convenors of place and people, but it was equally important to engage with a range of bodies and community groups in order to realise the full potential of the strategy. If the strategy could demonstrate less pressure on other services, for example through promotion of health and wellbeing, then it could be classified as a worthy investment;
- What support was being offered to local businesses to help deliver this strategy? Officer response – The arts, business and culture forum had been set up to allow the arts and business sector to support each other. The economic development team was working closely with the arts and culture service to ensure support for the sector. There were already a number of job opportunities in the sector throughout the Borough, including with Shinfield Studios and with the British Museum, whilst the aim was to create even more opportunities in order to benefit the local economy;
- Did events such as Earley Town Council's COP26 events, which included events on nature and the environment, fall outside the scope of the strategy? Executive Member response – Not necessarily, as these events were embedded in culture;
- What efforts were being made to promote the strategy and vision with the University of Reading, to advertise opportunities in the sector to the next generations? Officer response – This was a key and ongoing area of focus for economic development colleagues;
- Most if not every Town and Parish Council had their own Arts and Culture Committee. Had the strategy been to these Committees for consultation? Executive Member and Officer response – The original consultation document went to all Town and Parish Councils for comment. The Arts and Culture Forum included representatives from some Town and Parish Councils, whilst there were also other methods of engagement available. There was a dynamic relationship between the service and Town and Parish Councils, with some authorities more involved than others;
- How were we engaging specifically with young adults? Officer response – There had been a piece of work carried out with children and young people across the Borough in terms of what they were currently participating in with regards to arts and culture, what they would like to see, and what the barriers to engagement were. This was carried out both via surveys and face to face meetings. One of the challenges, in terms of resourcing, was how we could best focus our efforts. One key theme identified through this work was the link between health and wellbeing and arts and culture. Moving forwards, there were plans to utilise the UK SPF funds to engage with more people within these age groups and to utilise funding. Members were of the opinion that this was great news, and asked for it to be publicised more broadly;

- What was the measure of success, and was there any funding for university leaders in terms of jobs? Officer response – The British Film Institute were working closely with economic development colleagues, and had significantly contributed to the National Saturday Club Pass funding. It was important that the service was very clear as to what it wanted to achieve, and a range of KPIs would help understand what success looked like. Additionally, success would be embedding arts and culture across the organisation, whilst providing fantastic social value to be used as an evidence base;
- It was requested that the Chair liaise with officers, the clerk and the Executive Member to establish an appropriate Committee meeting to provide an update on tangible outputs that the public could recognise as successes of the strategy;
- It was important that the strategy had a whole Borough focus, and was not just Wokingham centric. As such, how many events had been delivered in the other towns of Woodley and Earley last year? Executive Member response – The Council headed the strategic arm of the strategy, and was not putting on events per se but was enabling and empowering organisations to hold their own events across the Borough;
- It was requested that the arts and culture service plan 2023/24, an internal officer document, be shared with the Committee at the appropriate time.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Sarah Kerr, Frances Haywood and Nicola Peacock be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Officers consider amending any future versions of the Committee report to show which bids were in progress, finished, delayed or cancelled;
- 3) Officers consider placing additional efforts into advertising the ongoing and future work of engagement with young adults;
- 4) The Chair liaise with officers, the clerk and the Executive Member to establish an appropriate Committee meeting to provide an update on tangible outputs that the public could recognise as successes of the strategy;
- 5) The arts and culture service plan 2023/24, an internal officer document, be shared with the Committee at the appropriate time.

31. HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT - CUSTOMER SERVICE, POTHoles AND SMALL PROJECTS

The Committee considered a presentation, set out in agenda pages 31 to 52, which provided an updated on the service delivery within the Highways and Transport Service.

The presentation outlined that approximately 80 percent of works were carried out by utilities companies, whilst the service was responsible for the maintenance of around 725km of roads (including 9km of motorways, 829km of roadside footways, 53km of off-road cycleways, and 4,500 manholes.

Paul Fishwick (Executive Member for Active travel, Transport and Highways), George Framalitto (Director of Place and Growth), Matthew Gould (Head of Service, Highways

and Transport) and Chris Easton (Assistant Director – Highways and Transport) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- The Committee thanked the team for their hard work on delivering this service, which was not always easy at times;
- Could further details be given regarding the following points: emails received by customer services, out of hours contact, life extension roadworks projects, and conflicting communications between Reading Buses and Wokingham Borough Council regarding the park and ride parking services. Officer response – Customer services received highways emails which were then processed and forwarded onto the Highways service. Regarding out of hours support, officers were aware of a specific query and were working to address this. The specific query was the responsibility of Thames Water, and officers could not do anything until the site was deemed as unsafe. officers would follow up this matter directly with Thames Water. Officers were looking to develop a standard proforma to help improve communications with regards to preventive treatment works. There was a new customer experience colleague starting who would help identify any gaps in communications and would produce a programme;
- How were ‘Fix my Street’ reports received and dealt with? Officer response – This service was not affiliated with the Council and officers did not encourage reports via this service as it created additional points of failure. Officers had to manually gather the reports from this service and input them into the Volker Highways system. There were roughly around 200 reports a year via this service, and officers would continue to work with communications colleagues to encourage all users to report directly via the Council’s system;
- It was noted that the ‘Fix my Street’ data did not automatically disappear when works were complete. Officers had recently contacted the service to get them to clear 14-15 years’ worth of reports. There would not be capacity to continually ask ‘Fix my Street’ to clear specific requests;
- Did WBC have the powers to dictate where broadband providers placed their cabinets, in order to improve the experience for pedestrians? Officer response – Unfortunately WBC did not have such powers. WBC tended to get notification of installation works close to the date of installation, and officers had very limited powers to object. New roads were built with wide pavements and roads whilst utilities companies were required to install their infrastructure first and to the side of the pavement;
- How could residents report damage specifically to a pavement? Officer response – The wording of the report function could be tweaked to reflect this;
- Members had witnessed very large HGVs performing tight turns on the Molly Millars Road, damaging the surface. Could tougher road surfaces be installed in such areas? Officer response – This would be mentioned to the team for assessment. Members were welcome to report any such incidents directly to the Service, with video or photo evidence being particularly valuable;

- Was there ongoing two-way communications between WBC and Town and Parish Council's regarding the possible use of CIL money for smaller projects? Officer response – The team were always reaching out to Town and Parish Councils and met with those who wished to do so on a quarterly basis. It was very helpful for Town and Parish Councils to input individual schemes into the system to get them logged, whilst officers would continue to push for additional engagement;
- With regards to speed limits, the Chief Constable had previously informed Members that enforcement of speed limits was a low priority in the area due to fantastic community speed watch schemes. Did this present an opportunity for WBC to use its own initiative? Officer response – Speed limit amendments followed a statutory process. Should the police object to such a change, it may require a brave Executive Member and Council to persist with the plan, due to enforceability requirements;
- What could be done with areas of roads and cycleways which had been resprayed and reported as a rough surface? Officer response – Members and residents could report these areas, which would allow officers to ascertain whether these patches were the result of utilities works or WBC works;
- In response to a query about Member oversight of small projects and TRO feedback, officers stated that the team was working hard to improve visibility of why a TRO was or was not supported, and Members should contact the team directly if they were not receiving this information;
- It was noted that the Individual Executive Member Decision report or Executive report in relation to a TRO would contain the detail of why the TRO was being proposed, and representations received;
- It was highlighted that there needed to be an awareness that residents were customers of a monopoly when accessing Council services, and as such metrics such as call volume may not be that useful as some residents may give up prior to receiving a resolution. What could be done to improve the perception of people's concerns not being followed up? Officer response – Highlighting the volume of calls was not just about determining the raw numbers of calls but also highlighted the amount of potential failure points. There was a plethora of data available for officers to utilise in order to continue improving the service, and a follow-up session could be arranged for the Committee in future;
- There were many examples of roads with new facilities and developments adjoining them, with speed limits remaining at 40MPH. What could be done to push back against police objections to speed limit reductions on the grounds of duty of care? Officer response – Local Authorities were responsible for setting speed limits in line with speed limit guidance, which required consistency of speed limits with similar roads. WBC could and did push back, for example with the upcoming TRO on the Shinfield and Basingstoke Road;
- It was noted that the Local Plan Update was the opportune time for residents to feedback as to potential speed limit alterations where development was proposed.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Paul Fishwick, George Framalitto, Matthew Gould and Chris Easton be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Officers seek to amend the wording of the report function to specify reports to pedestrian footpaths;
- 3) Members and residents be invited to report any such instances of HGVs damaging road surfaces as a result of turning manoeuvres;
- 4) Members and residents be invited to report instances of rough patches of roads and cycleways as a result of respraying;
- 5) Members contact the Highways team directly should they not be receiving details of TROs within their Ward;
- 6) The Committee consider a follow-up session to highlight any improvements made with regards to communications and resident satisfaction.

32. LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN 4

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 53 to 298, which provided the draft Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4).

The report outlined that an updated LTP would be an important part of Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) ambition to make the Borough a net-zero carbon producer. The LTP would support local priorities, including a prosperous economy, improving the quality of life for residents, and reducing the environmental impact of transport.

The Executive Member highlighted that he wanted the hierarchy of road users to be included in the final document. In addition, the service was awaiting guidance from Central Government, however it was not possible for the service to wait any longer to produce this plan.

Paul Fishwick (Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways), George Framalitto (Director of Place and Growth), Sofia Charalampidou (Senior Transport Planner) and Robert Curtis (Transport Planning Team Manager) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

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

- In relation to the low response rate of 0.2% population, was this a cause for concern? How were officers seeking to engage different groups, for example younger age groups? Executive Member and officer response – This level of response was not abnormal based on previous LTP consultations. Further consultation would be carried out, and specific outreach would be offered to secondary schools;
- Members raised some concern as to what could be extrapolated from such a small sample size;
- It was noted that there were no proposed changes to the air quality management areas within the Borough. Members noted that the DEFRA site did not show the output or recording of these areas, and we were reliant on them telling us. Officers confirmed that they could liaise with our public protection partnership colleagues regarding this,

whilst WBC submitted annual summary reports to DEFRA with regards to two of the three areas in the Borough;

- Should the LTP4 be promoting scooting on public highways when e-scooting was currently illegal on public highways? Executive Member response – This referred to push-scooters which were allowed on public highways, however the wording could be amended to better reflect this;
- Members felt that it was very important to see the demographic data, to understand who we had reached and who we had missed. Officers stated that this could be added into the draft LTP4;
- It was noted that the Executive Member and officers would assess the data received from the consultation and place a special focus on any groups which had been underrepresented in future consultations on the LTP4;
- It was suggested that an Executive Summary be produced, outlining the conclusions and recommendations of the report to help residents to easily engage with the plan and proposals;
- It was suggested that officers explore application of more standard market research techniques, in order to reach a wider range of people and to help qualify the data;
- The Chair suggested that a further session may be required to offer additional overview and scrutiny of the LTP4 prior to its consideration at the Executive.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Paul Fishwick, George Framalitto, Sofia Charalampidou and Robert Curtis be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Officers consider adding the hierarchy of road users into the LTP4;
- 3) Officers consider amending the wording of the section on scooting to specify push-scooting;
- 4) Officers consider adding in information relating to demographic data from the consultation into the draft LTP4;
- 5) Executive Members and officers be requested to assess the data received from the consultation and place a special focus on any groups which had been underrepresented in future consultations on the LTP4;
- 6) Officers consider providing an Executive Summary at the beginning of the LTP4, outlining the conclusions and recommendations of the report to help residents to easily engage with the plan and proposals;
- 7) Officers consider exploration of more standard market research techniques, in order to reach a wider range of people and to help qualify the data;
- 8) The Committee consider if a further session be required to offer additional overview and scrutiny of the LTP4 prior to its consideration at the Executive.

33. ACTION TRACKER

The Committee considered their action tracker, set out in agenda pages 299 to 300.

The Committee noted that the action in relation to the Combatting Drugs Partnership had now been completed.

With regards to the draft Violence Against Women and Girl's Strategy, Members requested further details of tangible delivery dates and achievements at a future meeting.

It was noted that responses in relation to the Community Safety Partnership would be fed back directly to Members.

It was requested that a briefing note be provided, detailing the performance of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Team, including how many requests were received, how long they took to close, and what level of follow up was ordinarily required.

RESOLVED That the above points be noted.

34. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their Work Programme, set out in agenda pages 301 to 310.

The Committee were advised that the item on the Local Plan Update would need to move to one of the November meetings of the Committee.

The Committee were advised that a further update on the Violence Against Women and Girl's Strategy would now be scheduled for the January Committee. In addition, the Chair would meet with the Executive Member and appropriate officers in order to discuss the points raised earlier in the meeting with regards to tangible delivery dates and achievements.

The Chair commented that he would speak with officers with regards to potentially scheduling some currently unscheduled topics.

The Committee gave their thanks to the Clerk, Callum Wernham, who would be leaving the Council after nearly 6 years of service. The Committee thanked Callum for his hard work, in particular via his clerking of this Committee for over five years, and wished him well in his future endeavours.

RESOLVED That the above points be noted and reflected in the Committee's work programme.

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