

## MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 4 OCTOBER 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.15 PM

### **Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Alistair Neal (Chair), Andrew Mickleburgh (Vice-Chair), Andy Croy, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, Adrian Mather, Stuart Munro, Chris Johnson, Catherine Glover and Caroline Smith

### **Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Stephen Conway and Sarah Kerr

### **Officers Present**

Narinder Brar, Head of Enforcement & Safety  
Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist  
Louise Livingston, Assistant Director, HR & Organisational Development  
Jackie Whitney, Assistant Director

### **35. APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Alison Swaddle.

Councillor Graham Howe attended the meeting as a substitute.

### **36. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **37. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **38. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

### **39. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

### **40. A VISION FOR OUR BOROUGH**

The Committee considered a presentation, set out at agenda pages 15-32, which provided an update on the development of the Community Vision and Council Plan.

Councillor Stephen Conway (Leader of the Council) attended the meeting to answer Member questions, supported by Louise Livingston (Assistant Director, HR and Organisational Development) and Jackie Whitney (Assistant Director, Digital, Change & IT).

The presentation reminded Members that the Council had been working with consultants New Local to develop a Community Vision for the Borough. The Vision was being co-produced with partners and work had been ongoing to identify key themes, gauge stakeholder appetite for involvement and develop potential governance arrangements.

Three workshops had been held in early 2023 with around 150 attendees from a range of stakeholders including community groups, Town & Parish Councils, NHS, Thames Valley Police, Age UK and CLASP. The workshops had identified six key engagement themes:

- health and wellbeing;
- equality, inclusion and opportunity;
- environment and sustainability;
- community engagement, empowerment and action;
- engagement with young people;
- engagement with the business community.

The development of the Vision was overseen by a steering group made up of a range of stakeholders including the voluntary sector, Healthwatch, the Youth Council, Reading University, Wokingham Volunteers Centre and Churches Together in Wokingham. The steering group had met recently and the next step was to engage with the public using the Engage platform. The community engagement included questions such as “what do you like about the Borough?” and “what would you change?”

Councillor Conway stated that an updated Council Plan would be informed by the priorities and outcomes set out in the Community Vision. The Council Plan would set out targets relating to the strategic priorities in the Vision and would set out the outcomes to be achieved. Delivery would be underpinned by the three-year Medium Term Financial Plan. The current Council Plan ran until 2024. This would be refreshed until 2025 and would be followed by the new five-year Council Plan.

The aim was to carry formal public consultation on the new Community Vision in March/April 2024 with final approval in July 2024. The five-year Council Plan would be launched in April 2025. Further engagement with Overview and Scrutiny would be included in the programme for developing the Vision and Council Plan.

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

The approach to developing the Community Vision – co-production and community engagement – was welcomed. It was important to explore options for partnership working with neighbouring authorities and to maximise opportunities for additional/external funding. It was confirmed that the Berkshire leaders were receptive to greater partnership working. A key principle was to maximise opportunities for synergy and the sharing of ideas and experiences. Ongoing engagement and stakeholder input was crucial as the process continued.

How effective was the engagement with Town and Parish Councils? It was confirmed that the Town and Parish Councils were key stakeholders in the development of the new Vision. Regular contact was made through the Clerks Forum. It was also hoped to identify a representative to attend the steering group. Engagement with elected Town and Parish Councillors was seen as a priority.

What was the level of engagement with local businesses? It was confirmed that a range of businesses had been involved in the process to date. Work was also ongoing to bring businesses and local charities together in order to identify mutually beneficial opportunities. The local media were also involved in the development of the Vision.

As the Community Vision and Council Plan were not a statutory requirement, was the Council confident that they would make a positive difference and justify the resources used in their development? It was confirmed that the difference between this process and previous iterations was the strong involvement of key stakeholders in a genuinely co-produced Vision. The challenges in working together were recognised but, so far, joint working through the steering group was very positive. It was also recognised that success would also depend on changes to WBC's organisational culture. It was noted that relationships with, for example, Town and Parish Councils had been effective in the past. The Tenant & Landlord Improvement Panel (TLIP) was cited as a good example of a genuine partnership which delivered better outcomes for residents.

The ongoing engagement with young people was seen as a positive. It was important to understand their priorities as they were the future of the Borough. It was noted that the Youth Council were represented on the steering group. Councillor Conway had also agreed to visit local secondary schools to seek the views of students.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Stephen Conway, Louise Livingston and Jackie Whitney be thanked for attending the meeting to answer Member questions;
- 2) Scrutiny Member comments and suggestions relating to the Community Vision and Council Plan be fed into the development process;
- 3) a further update report be submitted to the Committee in early 2024.

**41. WBC FUTURE OFFICE PROVISION**

The Committee considered a report, set out at pages 33-48, which gave details of proposals to review the Council's future office accommodation, including any opportunities for relocation of its headquarters out of the current Shute End location. The issue had been considered by the Council's Executive at its meeting on 28 September 2023. The Executive had agreed the principle of relocation and a preferred alternative site, subject to more detailed feasibility and planning work.

Councillor Stephen Conway (Leader of the Council) and Sarah Morgan (Assistant Director – Commercial Property) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that one impact of Covid-19 had been a change in working practices involving a reduced demand for traditional office provision (fixed desks) with greater levels of home working. This provided an opportunity to review the quantity and location of workspace for the Council's staff. The existing headquarters at Shute End in Wokingham was the largest and most costly office asset which, therefore, provided the biggest opportunity to generate savings. This was important in light of the significant budgetary pressures facing the Council. Effective and efficient use of the Council's property portfolio could help to free up funds to support front-line service provision.

An initial appraisal of potential options for future provision had identified three possible sites:

- Shute End – consolidated to lower and ground floors only;

- 23-38 Peach Street – former Marks & Spencer site;
- Rubra 2 Mulberry Business Park.

Following a financial and non-financial appraisal it was concluded that 23-38 Peach Street was the most suitable of the three locations. Consequently, the Executive was asked to note that this site would be the preferred new headquarters location and would be the subject of more detailed feasibility and planning work.

Councillor Conway confirmed that the identification of a preferred option at this stage did not preclude the consideration of other options including community hubs, the leasing of a building in third party ownership and/or a location outside Wokingham town.

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

Members felt that the first step in this process should be to develop a clear understanding of the needs of staff and other stakeholders (including residents) – then explore suitable accommodation options which would meet those needs. So, for example, car parking was a key issue at the current headquarters location and would need to be considered carefully as part of any new provision. It was confirmed that a staff change group had been set up in order to discuss issues relating to the potential options and to understand the needs of staff. Discussions would also be informed by the development of the corporate Modern Workforce programme which aimed to modernise existing policies and practices to ensure that staff could be as effective and customer-focussed as possible. The importance of flexible meeting and work space was emphasised.

Councillor Conway confirmed that the Executive were keen to work closely with Overview and Scrutiny on the development of this project. This meant that reports would be submitted to the Committee at key “gateway” points over the next 18 months. It was suggested that these gateway points be identified to enable the Committee’s forward work programme to be updated.

It was important to recognise the role of the Council’s headquarters in the democratic process. The existing Council chamber was used for Council meetings but also hosted planning appeals and other significant meetings. It was confirmed that discussions were ongoing with other Councils to understand how they used accommodation to support the democratic process. It was suggested that a range of venues could be considered for the staging of Council and other large public meetings.

Had there been any commercial interest in 23-38 Peach Street? It was confirmed that a planning application had been submitted for a gym with accommodation above. However, there was no current commercial interest in the site.

It was important to explore a wider range of options. Shute End and 23-38 Peach Street could be two of the most valuable sites in the Council’s portfolio. Sites outside Wokingham town, such as Winnersh Triangle, may provide better value for money, e.g. in relation to car parking and access to public transport. Parking linked to the Peach Street site appeared to be a challenge, for example in relation to visitor parking. It was noted that the Wokingham Medical Centre was located next to the Peach Street site, which may create additional pressure for parking.

It was suggested that the next update to the Committee include details of the work undertaken to date on this issue together with the forward programme and key milestones.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Stephen Conway and Sarah Morgan be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) the Executive be recommended to include other accommodation options across the Borough within the feasibility work, in addition to the identified preferred option of 23-38 Peach Street and the status quo via improvements at Shute End;
- 3) the Committee receive a further report setting out the timeline for further “gateway” update reports;
- 4) the financial implications of the proposals be scrutinised via the ongoing Budget Scrutiny process.

**42. UNAUTHORISED ENCAMPMENTS UPDATE**

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 49 to 59, which provided an update on unauthorised encampments and site provision for 2022/23.

Narinder Brar (Head of Enforcement & Safety) and Gina Frost (Localities Manager) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that the Council’s aim was to reduce the number and impact of unauthorised encampments across the Borough. During 2022/23 there were five unauthorised encampments. Of these, two were on private land, two were on Town Council land and one was on WBC land. Four of the five encampments were located in Woodley with the remaining encampment in Earley. This activity compared to six unauthorised encampments in 2021/22 and 11 in 2020/21. It was confirmed that activity usually occurred between March and September, although a new encampment had been reported recently.

The report reminded Members that the Council responded to unauthorised encampments through a joint Protocol with Thames Valley Police. (A public information leaflet was appended to the report). Once a report had been received, officers attended the site to carry out welfare checks and note the number of families, caravans and animals. Any welfare concerns were passed to the relevant service for a response as necessary. The Council and police used the relevant common law and police powers available and WBC employed bailiffs to carry out enforcement as necessary.

The report stated that an accommodation needs assessment had been carried out in 2017 which identified the need for 26 to 90 permanent pitches in the Borough – this would cover the needs of the nomadic and non-travelling communities. Details were included of the additional residential pitches which had been provided since the 2017 needs assessment.

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

In relation to the GRT sites identified in the report, who owned the sites and what was the current occupancy levels? It was confirmed that a written response would be provided.

In relation to the Local Plan Update, was any further site provision being considered, particularly more convenient sites adjacent to the RBH? It was confirmed that this issue was being considered by housing and planning officers. At this stage, no potential additional sites had been identified near to the RBH. A written answer would be provided with more details.

Also in relation to the Local Plan Update, had any transit sites been identified? It was confirmed that no transit sites had been identified to date, but work continued on this issue.

Were welfare checks carried out on all unauthorised sites – public and private? It was confirmed that checks were carried out on all unauthorised encampment sites. The checks were comprehensive, involving the use of screening questions. Any health issues were passed to the relevant healthcare professionals. Officers carried out revisits as necessary.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Narinder Brar and Gina Frost be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) the update on unauthorised encampments in the Borough in 2022/23 be noted;
- 3) officers be congratulated for the speedy and effective response to unlawful encampments during the year;
- 4) further information be provided to Members as requested.

#### **43. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES**

The Committee considered its forward work programme and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as set out on Agenda pages 61 to 82.

It was agreed that an update on the St Crispins Leisure Centre consultation be considered by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to its consideration by the Executive.

It was noted that ongoing scrutiny of all elements of the Barkham Solar Farm project would be undertaken by The Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

It was agreed that the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutinise the transport plans for the new developments in Barkham, including the solar farm and the two SEND schools.

**RESOLVED:** That the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes, as amended, be noted.

#### **44. ACTION TRACKER**

The Committee considered the regular Action Tracker report, set out at Agenda pages 83 to 86.

**RESOLVED:** That the Action Tracker report be noted.