

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 14 NOVEMBER 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.10 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Chris Johnson (Chair), Peter Dennis (Vice-Chair), Laura Blumenthal, David Cornish, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Alistair Neal and Marie-Louise Weighill

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Prue Bray, Stephen Conway, Lindsay Ferris, Sarah Kerr, Ian Shenton and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

Officers Present

Dave Allen (Senior Specialist - Communications, Engagement & Marketing), Neil Carr (Democratic Services), Chris Easton (Assistant Director - Highways & Transport), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive), Rhian Hayes (Assistant Director - Economic Development & Growth), Peter Kilkenny (Leisure Consultant), Helen Watson (Director of Children's Services) and Ming Zhang (Assistant Director, Education)

59. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

60. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 30 October 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

61. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

62. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

62.1 Nick Fellows asked the Chair the following question:

The Public Consultation on the future of St Crispin's Sports Centre was, supposedly, predicated on slightly reduced usage among a section of users of the centre, compared to pre-Covid levels. Some users had reportedly migrated to the new Carnival Hub for some activities.

At the Public Consultation meetings, the Leisure Officer leading the consultation was not clear on whether or how the school had been included in the consultation.

The report presented to today's meeting has shifted the emphasis entirely away from the demand for sports facilities and community space and focusses entirely on the need to create extra school places and to do this as cheaply as possible. It disregards the consultation, which showed 80% public support for retaining existing provision, in one passing comment, that this is merely one part of the decision-making process.

So: does the Committee accept that the public consultation was misleading (at best) and that the recommendation in the report will be widely interpreted as having been pre-

determined based on an entirely different agenda from that presented; and, if the Committee recommends the preferred option to the Executive, will it include a requirement (further to recommendation 6) to ensure meaningful public access is retained?

Answer

This Committee will be considering the Executive report on the future of St Crispins Leisure Centre later in this meeting. Therefore, it would be premature for me to draw any conclusions before Members have had that discussion.

I would note that the option of transferring the asset to the Trust was included in both the Executive report that authorised the consultation and in the consultation itself. It is also worth reiterating that consultations are not referendums; they are one of the sources of information that supports decision-making and implementation.

When we come to scrutinise the report, we will consider the points made in this question and review the extent to which views and concerns expressed in the consultation are being considered.

Supplementary Question

I should say firstly that I acknowledge that there are some great new facilities in the Borough and this is of great credit to the Council. However, this report neither sought nor considered the views of bodies most pertinent to the impact that would be caused by the closure of the sports centre, including the Borough's own statutory Health & Wellbeing Board, the Borough's Wellbeing Strategy, Get Berkshire Active (the body established by the Sports Council to promote sport and PA in the Borough), the Borough Council's own Leisure Strategy (which sets as a priority maintaining and extending access to indoor leisure facilities) and the wider Voluntary & Community Sector, members of which are crying out for access to more built facilities to support some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

How can this Committee fulfil its very important duty of Scrutiny if it neither seeks nor considers comment from, and the wider implications of these critical factors?

Supplementary Answer

I am not at leisure to answer all those points as there are a few topics in there which are not in front of us, but I will reiterate that we are here to look at the evidence placed before us and we will consider your comments as part of that. If you do require a written answer to the supplementary question we will provide that for you.

63. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

64. ST CRISPIN'S LEISURE CENTRE

The Committee considered a report, set out in the Supplementary Agenda, which gave details of the outcome of a consultation exercise relating to the future of the St Crispin's leisure centre. The report was submitted to the Committee for Scrutiny prior to its submission to the Executive for decision at its meeting on 30 November 2023.

Ian Shenton (Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure) and Prue Bray (Executive Member for Children's Services) attended the meeting to present the report, supported by the relevant Directors and officers.

The report stated that, during the summer of 2023, a public consultation had been carried out on the future of St Crispin's Leisure Centre. The Council had sought input on the future of the leisure centre from residents and users of its facilities. The backdrop to the consultation was a decline in usage and concerns expressed by St Crispin's School, which adjoined the Leisure Centre and used it for various educational purposes. The consultation asked for views on a number of options for the site, as detailed in the report. The consultation responses had now been analysed and were being reported back to the Executive for a decision on the future of the leisure centre.

The report stated that the consultation has been considered in the following context and that this context had informed the recommendations in the report.

- There was significant pressure on secondary school places and there was an opportunity to expand St Crispin's School which, if not taken, would contribute to a shortfall in school places in September 2024.
- Transfer of the site to the school was included in the consultation and, although retention of the site as a leisure centre was the most popular outcome of the consultation, it was noted that consultations were carried out in order to assist with decision-making. The consultation outcomes were only one factor that needed to be taken into account when a decision was made.

The report stated that the current situation provided an opportunity to help the Council to fulfil its legal duty for sufficient school places by approving the transfer of land to St Crispin's School (the Circle Trust). This would enable the school to deliver 55 extra places each year for the next five years. This would be subject to associated conditions of transfer and use of the site so as not to detract from contractual issues within the Leisure contract between the Council and Places for Leisure. The existing leisure centre could be repurposed for dedicated school provision through a small scale of work schemes which would need to be specified and delivered by the Trust after the handover.

Subject to Executive approval of the recommended option, the Council was proposing funding of £1m to the Circle Trust to enable them to make any necessary adaptations for extra school places until 2029.

The report also provided a short summary update on the reduced usage of the St Crispin's site since the pandemic and the opening of the new facilities in Wokingham town centre. The report noted that the Circle Trust was keen to work with the Council and the local community to continue the provision of squash and other community activities currently delivered at St Crispin's Leisure Centre.

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

The report did not provide a clear argument for handing the leisure centre over to the Circle Trust as opposed to the Council retaining control of the leisure centre and leasing the facility to the school for day-time usage. The latter option would allow the Council to retain the asset. It was confirmed that the proposal followed the established model of adding the asset to the 125 year school lease. The leisure centre would become an

educational facility – the current gym would be removed and the daytime operation of the squash courts would cease.

Members expressed sympathy with the points raised earlier in the Public question. The consultation was about the future of the leisure centre but the main driver in the Executive report appeared to be educational need. The fact that the Circle Trust was “keen” to work with the Council on continued use of the facility for squash and community activities was welcomed, but more certainty on this point would have helped to reassure the current users of the centre and members of the Committee.

A number of current users had indicated that they could not relocate to other facilities such as the Carnival Hub. This included older residents who attended the SHINE classes at the centre. In effect, this was a service cut for residents in the local community. Many residents felt that the Carnival Hub was a much bigger, more intimidating facility. There were also concerns about car parking at the multi-storey car park.

Prue Bray confirmed that the consultation responses had not been ignored. However, there was a need to balance the views of residents with the urgent need to provide additional school places. The proposed legal agreement with the Circle Trust would seek to continue existing uses of the leisure centre. The Trust had demonstrated a willingness to find a solution and to work in partnership.

The report discussed the delivery of 55 extra school places for the next five years. What was the significance of the five year period? It was confirmed that projections indicated that the “bulge” pressure for additional places would exist for a five year period, with the upward pressure ceasing after 2029. It was not possible to make firm predictions after 2029, but the general increase in the Borough’s population (estimated to be 200,000 by 2031) would also have an impact.

The report stated that the Revenue impact of ending the Council leisure contractor’s use of St Crispin’s Leisure Centre would be funded through the Leisure Management Equalisation Fund. What were the financial implications for the Council? It was confirmed that this would be the subject of commercial negotiations between the Council and the contractor (Places for Leisure). It was not possible to quantify and financial implications at this point, but this would be one of a number of variations over the duration of the contract which still had ten years to run. There was also the potential for other community facilities to come on stream, such as the proposed Montague Park Community Centre – though this was at a relatively early stage.

If the St Crispin’s Leisure Centre was handed over to the Circle Trust, what guarantees were there that continuing community/squash uses would be underpinned by appropriate levels of maintenance to ensure that health and safety requirements were being met? It was confirmed that this would be part of the ongoing negotiations with the Trust. There was no provision in the MTFP for investment in improving the current leisure centre.

How did the proposal for additional school places at St Crispin’s fit into the Council’s overall strategy for additional school place provision across the Borough? It was confirmed that Scrutiny of the wider school places strategy should be carried out by the Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Prue Bray, Ian Shenton and the supporting officers be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) the Executive Members be requested to withdraw and review the current Executive report on St Crispin's Leisure Centre, in order to include exploration of:
 - better protection for the Council's assets;
 - clarity on what happens if the demand for school places is a bulge and comes back down again afterwards;
 - clarity on the operating arrangements for the school holidays and outside of school hours;
 - reinforcement of maintenance arrangements;
 - protection for community use going forwards;
- 3) the Executive Members be requested to submit a revised report to the next meeting of the Committee on 28 November 2023, prior to its submission to the Executive;
- 4) option 3 in the current report (use for other service), option 4 (disposal of site for residential) and option 5 (demolish and mothball) are not supported by the Committee;
- 5) progress on the development of the strategic plan for school places across the Borough be reported to the Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

65. MTFP 2024/27

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 102, which gave details of the Revenue and Capital Bids for the Place & Growth Directorate.

Executive Members Stephen Conway, Sarah Kerr, Lindsay Ferris, Paul Fishwick and Ian Shenton attended the meeting to answer Member questions on their individual portfolios, supported by George Framallicco (Director of Place & Growth) and the relevant Assistant Directors.

The report stated that considerable work had been undertaken by budget managers, senior officers and Executive Members in arriving at the proposals set out in the Agenda for this meeting. Some of the proposals could be seen as challenging or even contentious, but this was inevitable in the context of the severe financial challenges facing the Council. The Council was required to set a safe and balanced budget. The Committee was requested to provide challenge and new ideas which would help to bridge the current Revenue budget gap of £5m and the Capital funding gap of c£34m.

Appendix A to the report set out the overall context, key Revenue savings, income generation and Special Items. Page 18 of the report outlined key risks facing the service. These included non-realisation of income targets, impact of inflation, procurement challenges, and the increasing cost of temporary accommodation. The report stated that templates for Revenue bids over £50k were set out in Appendix B, whilst the highest spend new Capital bids were set out at Appendix C.

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

PG.C4 – Refurbishment and Extension – 48 Oxford Road – conversion of the existing site office to a double bedroom. What was the impact on the current users of the office? It was

confirmed that, as the office was not used for a specialist purpose, it could be made available for accommodation.

PG.R27 – Housing Benefit income for Bed and Breakfast. What lessons had been learned in relation to the gap in funding for this service? It was confirmed that a more cost-effective solution was the provision of temporary accommodation owned by WBC as opposed to private sector bed and breakfast accommodation. The focus was on identifying opportunities for greater use of temporary accommodation.

PG.R30 – Planning and Enforcement staffing costs. Was there a balancing saving, e.g. interim staff/consultants, to offset the Special Item? It was confirmed that the service was holding vacancies with a view to reducing the establishment by not filling some posts. The situation was helped by the announcement that planning fees would be increased by 35% from 6 December 2023.

PG.R8 (linked to PG.R31) – Residents Parking Zones – including parking permits. Was the outcome an increase in the number of resident parking zones? It was confirmed that the proposal was for an extension of resident parking zones and a move from unrestricted street parking to 1 and 2 hour metered parking zones. Residents living in the affected streets would be able to purchase parking permits. The proposals would be subject to consultation with a potential implementation date, if approved, of 2025. It was suggested that consultation include local businesses in order to understand the impact on staff. It was noted that businesses did have the option to reimburse staff for the cost of parking. Another suggestion was the provision of permits for essential workers. It was confirmed that a lot of work was required to progress this proposal which would include detailed consideration of feedback from the consultation exercise.

PG.C8 – Wokingham Highways Investment Strategy (WHIS). Did the proposal amount to a below inflation rise in maintenance funding through the WHIS? It was confirmed that increased funding would be desirable but this would mean reductions elsewhere in the Capital programme.

PG.R13 – School Keep Clear Markings – roll-out of parking enforcement scheme. What was the impact of this proposal? It was confirmed that, currently, cameras were being trialled at two schools (the Holt and Loddon Primary). The proposal would see an expansion to other schools. If parking behaviour became compliant at one school, the cameras could be moved to another school, and so on. The long term aim was to ensure compliance at all schools which would improve safety across the network.

RG.R11 – Utility and Works permits – fee increase and expansion. Did the Council have statutory powers to charge for permits for level 3 and 4 roads? It was confirmed that the Council did have the power to charge for these permits. Neighbouring councils were already charging. Implementation would involve consultation with all utility companies.

Damage to highway assets – was the Council able to reclaim costs for damage to its highway assets? It was confirmed that costs could be reclaimed if vehicle details were made available.

Was there a potential saving in bringing the management of highways car parks and country parks car parks under the same management? IT was confirmed that this was already in place. The distinction in the budget papers reflected the split between highways and leisure.

PG.RG3 – VAT exemption on Country Parks parking charges. Could the potential 20% rebate be implemented retrospectively? It was confirmed that discussions were ongoing with HMRC on this issue. Officers would be taking advice on the potential impact of car park users seeking reimbursement from the Council. The potential savings did not apply to the Aviation Museum (where people parked to avoid charges at Dinton Pastures). It was noted that the VAT reduction did not apply to highway/off-street parking.

PG.R4 – Countryside – implementation of peak car parking charges. Was this a sensible proposal in light of the ongoing cost of living crisis? It was confirmed that the proposal was under review and may not appear in the final budget papers. However, the income target would have to be delivered elsewhere in the budget.

Aviation Museum – introduction of car park charges. As the museum was only open two days each week, was the income target of £40k achievable? It was confirmed that the proposed charges were aimed at people using the car park as a means to avoid paying charges at Dinton Pastures.

PG.R20 – Income generation through commercialisation across Place & Growth. Where any specific commercialisation schemes under consideration? It was confirmed that this was work in progress. Specialist advice had been retained to work up proposals for a comprehensive commercialisation plan.

RG.R28 – Waste collection service charges – Special Item (linked to RG.R1). The start date for the new service was August 2024 – this appeared to have been pushed back from July 2024. Was there a specific date for the commencement of the new service? It was confirmed that August 2024 was the go-live month. There was no specific start date in August 2024 at this stage.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Executive Members and officers be thanked for attending the meeting to present the Budget proposals and answer Member questions;
- 2) the comments and challenges provided by the Committee, relating to the Place & Growth directorate, be fed into the development of the Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/27.

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