

## MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 19 DECEMBER 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.15 PM

### **Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Chris Johnson (Chair), Peter Dennis (Vice-Chair), Laura Blumenthal, Catherine Glover, Norman Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Alistair Neal, Marie-Louise Weighill and Shahid Younis

### **Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Prue Bray, David Hare and Andrew Mickleburgh

### **Officers Present**

Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist) and Matt Pope (Director of Children's, Adults and Health Services)

### **75. APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Pauline Jorgensen.

Councillor Shahid Younis attended the meeting as a substitute.

### **76. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee, held on 28 November 2023, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **77. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **78. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

### **79. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

### **80. MTFP 2024/27**

The Committee considered a report, set out in the Supplementary Agenda, which gave details of Revenue and Capital bids relating to the Children's Services and Adult Social Care directorates.

Prue Bray (Executive Member for Children's Services) and David Hare (Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services) attended the meeting supported by Matt Pope Director of Children's, Adults and Health Services.

The report stated that the Children's Services Budget Strategy was based on not destabilising the existing very low cost base in Children's Social Care, maintaining the "protective" factors of early help and a workforce that effectively managed risk in the community. This was supported by work to reduce unit costs by better commissioning and the development of in-house accommodation solutions. The aim was to break the cycle of overspends, based on an accurate assessment of future pressures and a reset of Children's Services within the Medium Term Financial Plan.

The report highlighted a number of key risks facing Children's Services. These included the changing number of Looked After Children with an increase in Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking children and the low number of children in care in the Borough – other council were seeing increases. The pace of national reforms in Children's placements was also slow, with continued market failure leading to an increase in placement costs, particularly for the most complex cases. National policy on SEND was also unlikely to change in the near future, impacting on the pressures and costs relating to Home to School Transport.

The report also gave details of specific risks relating to Adult Social Care. These included the impact of inflation, workforce issues, market sustainability, the increase in the National Living Wage (not supported by a funding increase), NHS pressures and failure to transfer funds and the increasing level of need and complexity impacting on service provision.

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

CS. R10 – Home to School Transport – EHCP numbers had increased from 867 in 2018 to 1688 in 2023. What were the reasons behind this significant increase? It was confirmed that the figures reflected the national picture. Factors included changes in national policy, the development of improved diagnosis and the impact of Covid-19. The Council's Safety Valve Programme aimed to achieve a reduction in the rate of EHCP growth. The increase in local provision of SEND schools would help to reduce the number of long journeys and more SEND units in schools would help to keep children in mainstream settings. It was confirmed that schools were being supportive in relation to this objective although it was more of a challenge for the smaller schools. The growth in the Home to School Transport budget was partially offset by the proposed saving (CS.R3) relating to improved access to independent travel training, Personal Travel Budgets and greater route optimisation.

Was there any update on the level of core grant funding from the Government? It was confirmed that the Local Government Finance Settlement was announced on 18 December 2023. It appeared that there was no improvement in the level of funding for WBC expected from the Government. Full details would be reported to the Committee at its meeting on 22 January 2024.

The Committee had recently considered the proposal to provide £1m Capital funding to facilitate additional school places at St Crispin's. Which budget was funding this allocation? It was confirmed that the St Crispin's proposal was being funded from the Secondary Basic Needs Programme budget (Page 74 of the report). This reflected the Council's statutory duty under the Education Act to ensure that there were sufficient school places in the Borough.

Adult Social Care Carry Forwards – Page 31 – the older people's dementia home – did this relate to the proposed home at Toutley? This was confirmed, although the delivery model was still under consideration. The care home refurbishment budget related to a care home on the Barkham Road.

ASC.R3 – Securing health income for residents – this saving related to ensuring that correct funding streams were identified for services relating to health interventions which were not the responsibility of Adult Social Care. WBC Had the lowest success rate in the country relating to these payments. Work was ongoing with the Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust and the Integrated Care Board to address this issue.

Were there plans to improve engagement with parents in relation to the cessation or reduction of EHCPs? It was confirmed that a Communications Plan was being developed which included a newsletter and improved, plainer English correspondence. The model was based on earlier intervention before EHCPs were needed. It was accepted that there would be a period of turbulence as this change was implemented.

In relation to the stability of the care home industry, what steps were the Council taking to ensure that the market was sustainable? It was confirmed that there would have to be significant changes if the sector was to continue to deliver services. In effect there was a national crisis in adult social care, a crisis which had not been tackled by successive Governments. The Council had been lobbying Government about the need for action and would continue to do so. The state of the care home market was high up on the Council's corporate risk register. The Council had developed Optalis, purchased a care home and was seeking to control costs through direct provision.

CS.R4 – Local Care Leaver Accommodation – What was the impact of the proposal? It was confirmed that care leavers liked to live in groups settings where possible. The proposal would repurpose some of the Council's property assets into group living and individual accommodation units, thereby achieving savings compared to sourcing from the private sector. It was likely that the number of care leavers would increase over the next five years with the inclusion of unaccompanied asylum seekers.

In relation to care workers, what was the likely impact of the recent announcement about restrictions on the number of dependants that foreign care workers could bring to the UK? It was confirmed that the likely impact would be a reduction in workers from overseas at a time when it was difficult to recruit in the UK. The Government needed to develop a national workforce strategy for the sector, similar to the NHS strategy. As an example, the increase in the 10% increase in the national living wage was welcomed but there was no additional funding for Councils in order to pay it.

CS.R6 – Building a Permanent Social Worker Workforce – The number of newly qualified social workers recruited had fallen from 10 in 2022 to four in 2023. What were the reasons for this reduction? It was confirmed that the Council had a good record in recruiting newly qualified staff until the dip in 2023. A key issue was the fact that the Council could not match the salaries paid by some other councils – a market supplement had been introduced to address this. The Council was also engaging with regional universities and improving the training and support available to staff. Salaries at the market rate combined with a strong learning and development offer should attract more newly qualified staff. More generally, there was a national shortage of experienced staff which resulted in use of agency staff. The Government was being lobbied to implement a cap on agency fees in light of the financial pressures on councils.

CS.R4 – Local Care Leaver Accommodation – Did the properties being considered include Seaford Court? It was confirmed that there was a legal covenant linked to Seaford Court. This was being addressed with a view to making Seaford Court available as an option. This would be part of a wider review of the Council's property assets, due to be reported to Members in 2024.

CS.R14 – Education Management System (special item) – What was the context for this proposed special item? It was confirmed that there had been an ongoing issue with accurate management information in Children's Services. This item would facilitate more

effective use of existing IT systems with the aim of providing better management information, leading to better decision-making.

CS.C3 – Laptops for Children in Care – This proposal was welcomed. How did officers ensure that value for money was achieved? It was confirmed that the provision of laptops was part of the Council’s Pledge for Young People in Care. The laptops were used for homework, leisure and keeping in touch. The laptops were purchased through existing procurement routes, thereby achieving value for money.

ASC.R6 – Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) Changes to Charging – What was the impact of the proposal on residents? It was confirmed that this proposal aimed to align the MIG pension with the state pension age. This would bring the Council into line with neighbouring authorities. The proposal would be subject to consultation and an equalities impact assessment.

ASC.C2 – Facilitating Better Health for Residents of New Developments – How would the S106 monies be spent? It was confirmed that the proposed expenditure would be a matter for discussion between the Council and its health partners via the Wokingham Integrated Care Board. The aim was to deliver projects which improved the health of residents living in wards impacted by new development.

CS.R7 – Securing Health Income for Residents – What was the process and timeline from expenditure to costs being recouped from the NHS? It was confirmed that, as an example – Education, Health and Care Plans – the NHS should be funding the Health element of these plans. WBC had a poor record in relation to recovering this money from the NHS. Officers were working on this issue with health colleagues through the Integrated Care System.

**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 Children’s Services and Adult Social Care directorates, be fed into the development of the Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/27.

## **81. LITTER BINS TASK & FINISH GROUP**

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 16, which set out the final Terms of Reference for the Litter Bins Task & Finish Group as agreed by Members at the meeting on 28 November 2023.

The report stated that the aim of the Task & Finish Group was to scrutinise the Council’s existing policies and procedures relating to the provision and emptying of litter bins across the Borough. The Group would produce a report for consideration by the Executive with recommendations for improvement and any associated financial savings.

In carrying out its review, the Task and Finish Group would interview key stakeholders including Town and Parish Councils, community groups and specialist organisations. There was no pre-judgement about the need to reduce the number of litter bins across the Borough. The Group would carry out its work and make judgements and recommendations based on the evidence received.

The proposed composition of the Task & Finish Group was five Members – 2 Conservative, 1 Labour and 2 Liberal Democrat. The Group would elect a Chair at its first meeting in early 2024.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the proposed Terms of Reference for the Litter Bins Task & Finish Group, as set out in the report, be approved;
- 2) membership of the Task & Finish Group be Councillors Keith Baker, Catherine Glover, Beth Rowland and Marie-Louise Weighill, with a second Conservative Member to be confirmed;
- 3) the Task & Finish Group commence its work in early 2024.

## **82. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee considered its work programme for the remainder of 2023/24 as set out at Agenda pages 17 to 18.

Members were notified of a request to hold an additional meeting on 28 February 2024 in order to consider two items:

- Strategic Asset Management – to scrutinise a review of WBC’s Borough-wide assets and future opportunities for use and service delivery;
- New development in the Barkham area – to scrutinise the co-ordination of new development including the two SEND schools, solar farm and new housing developments – the aim being to maximise awareness and minimise disruption for local residents.

It was requested that the item on Violence against Women and Girls (22 January 2024) include an update on the Anti-Abuse Charter.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the work programme, as amended, update be noted;
- 2) an extraordinary meeting of the Committee be arranged for 28 February 2024 to consider the Strategic Asset Review and co-ordination of new development in the Barkham area.

## **83. ACTION TRACKER**

The Committee considered the regular Action Tracker report, as set out on Agenda pages 19 to 24.

Members made the following comments:

- The item on the Combatting Drugs Partnership had been transferred to the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

- The informal working group looking at the business case template had met. It was suggested that the working group provide an update report in 2024.
- A meeting date to be scheduled for the update report on outputs from the Arts and Culture Strategy.
- A briefing be provided for Members on Freedom of Information requests made to the Council.

**RESOLVED:** That the Action Tracker, as amended, be noted.