

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 16 JANUARY 2024 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.30 PM

Committee Members Present

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

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Stephen Conway

Officers Present

Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Graham Ebers, Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Resources & Assets
Andy Glencross, Head of Environmental Services
Rhian Hayes, Assistant Director - Economic Development & Housing
Frances Haywood, Head of Strategic Housing
Louise Livingston, Assistant Director - HR & Organisational Development
Susan Parsonage, Chief Executive
Will Roper, Customer Insight Officer & Performance Analyst
Sally Watkins, Chief Operating Officer

56. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

57. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee, held on 15 November 2023, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

58. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

59. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

60. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

61. THAMES WATER

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 16, which provided an update on actions agreed with Thames Water following attendance by representatives of the company at the meeting held on 12 June 2023.

Richard Aylard (Thames Water Sustainability Director) and Nikki Hines (South Thames Valley Stakeholder Engagement Manager) attended the meeting to provide and update and answer Member questions.

Richard Aylard provided the following updates:

- Site visit at the Wargrave Sewage Treatment Plant – the site visit took place on 30 November 2023 with six WBC Members in attendance.

- Briefings on issues such as sewage discharge, water leakages and investment plans for Town and Parish Councils and community groups – Thames Water representatives had been invited to attend a meeting of the Borough Parish Liaison Forum in 2024.
- Councillor Chris Johnson raised issues about the performance of the Grazeley Road/Three Mile Cross pumping stations – a meeting was held on site on 19 August 2023 with Councillor Johnson in attendance.
- Thames Water Business Plan 2025-30 – a copy of the Business Plan (submitted to Ofwat) had been circulated to the Committee.
- Payment of dividends to shareholders and the movement of funds to Thames Water's internal stakeholders – it was confirmed that no dividend payments had been made to Thames Water shareholders for seven years, with the exception of interest payments. The Business Plan indicated a commitment to invest £18.7bn over the five year period.
- Thames Water agreed to provide feedback on the level of water leakages in the Borough and the action plan/investment in place to address this matter – it was confirmed that it was difficult to provide information for the Borough as the area was covered by both Thames Water and South East Water. Across the total Thames Water area, leakage was broken down by leaks on Thames Water pipes (33%), leakage on customer pipes (33%) and leaking taps/toilets, etc. (33%). The implementation of smart meters would be a big help in identifying the location of leaks, followed by remedial action.
- A joint meeting was agreed for September 2023 when Thames Water would brief WBC Members and officers on the roll-out of smart meters in the Borough in 2024 – the Member briefing took place on 29 September 2023.
- Thames Water and WBC officers would meet to discuss issues relating to delays in the adoption of infrastructure linked to new housing development in the Borough – meetings to be arranged once specific sites were identified by WBC.
- Learning points from the sink hole incidents in Elms Lane and Evendons – it was confirmed that the learning points included the need for swifter action to support the local school, traffic control in the wider area and more effective communications. These learning points had been shared with the relevant Thames Water teams.
- Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 – Thames Water was lobbying the Government to implement Schedule 3 to the Act which would provide a framework for the approval and adoption of sustainable drainage systems to regulate rainfall, decrease the volume of water flowing into sewers and storm flow overflow discharges. Thames Water welcomed any support from the Council in lobbying on this issue.
- It was reported that a number of ongoing issues had been identified as follows - these would be submitted to the Thames Water representatives for a written response:
 - foul sewage flooding to properties in Hurst;
 - surcharging of a surface water sewer in Colemansmoor Road;
 - surcharging of a surface water sewer in Whitley Wood Lane;

- liaison maps showing relevant Thames Water contact officers.

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

In relation to the Priority Services Register, a resident was receiving frequent text messages about leaks in the area. It was confirmed that Thames Water would check the details and provide a contact at South East Water if necessary. Nikki Hines was the consistent point of contact at Thames Water for WBC Members and officers.

Were there any practical steps that WBC could take to support Thames Water when incidents occurred? It was confirmed that WBC could help to publicise Thames Water's on-line reporting service. On-line reports received a quick follow-up from teams on the ground, thereby minimising any negative impacts caused by delays. Thames Water would also welcome the Council's support in lobbying the Government over the implementation of Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act, 2010.

How did Thames Water monitor the impact of new housing developments and the compliance of developers? It was confirmed that Thames Water worked with developers to ensure that the drainage hierarchy was followed. It was important ensure that foul and surface water were kept separate as much as possible. The Council's Local Plan Update would play a role in ensuring future compliance by developers.

The Thames Water Business Plan 2025/30 included a commitment for 75% of eligible customers to be on the Priority Services Register. What was the current % for Wokingham Borough? It was confirmed that Thames Water would check the situation and provide a written answer.

Councillor Stuart Munro referred to ongoing issues with the holding tank outside Swallowfield Village Hall. The tank was emptied three times each week. Thames Water agreed to investigate the situation and report back.

The Thames Water Business Plan referred to the increasing number of vulnerable customers as a result of the ongoing "cost of living" crisis. It was estimated that 5.5% of households in the Thames Water area were living in water poverty. In response, Thames Water was rolling out a new targeted social tariff which could see a reduction of up to 50% in household bills for affected customers. The roll-out of smart meters would also assist as they promoted more efficient use of water.

The Thames Water commitment to invest £18.7bn was noted as was the company debt of £14.7bn. In light of the scale of debt, was the investment proposed realistic? It was confirmed that the proposed level of investment (proposed to Ofwat at this stage) was deliverable. Ofwat had the power to agree the financial elements of the business plan. The impact of the investment on the Borough would include reduced infiltration of water and improvements at local sewage treatment plants.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Richard Aylard and Nikki Hines be thanked for attending the meeting to provide the update and answer Member questions;

- 2) the WBC Communications team be encouraged to explore opportunities to share key Thames Water information with residents, e.g. the Priority Service Scheme and on-line reporting of issues;
- 3) WBC officers engage with Thames Water to explore opportunities to lobby MPs and the Government on the implementation of Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act;
- 4) WBC officers consider opportunities to work with Thames Water to support vulnerable residents during incidents, e.g. by delivering supplies of bottled water;
- 5) the Executive Member and officers be requested to consider opportunities, through the Local Plan Update, to encourage developers to deliver more effective water demand management and more water-efficient houses.

62. LEADER & CHIEF EXECUTIVE

The Committee considered a presentation from Councillor Stephen Conway (Leader) and Susan Parsonage (Chief Executive), as set out at Agenda pages 17 to 24. The presentation gave details of the challenges facing the Council and a number of examples of new initiatives and partnership working.

The presentation identified a number of challenges, including:

- Financial pressures exacerbated by high inflation and the cost of living crisis;
- Inconsistency in partnership relationships leading to missed opportunities for collaboration;
- Increasing levels of demand and complexity, especially in Adult, Children's and housing services.

The Council's response to these challenges was underpinned by a focus on early intervention and prevention. Examples included developing in-house capacity through purchase of a care home, the development of two SEND schools and the Safety Valve agreement with the Government aimed at reducing costs and delivering improved services for families in the Borough.

The presentation referred to the Reading University-Wokingham Borough Council Strategic Partnership. The partnership comprised a strategic programme of work across shared areas of community interest and impact. Key themes being addressed included climate and environmental sustainability, art, heritage and culture, economic development and growth and participatory action research.

The presentation gave details of progress in working with partners to develop the new Community Vision for the Borough. A wide range of partners were involved. They were using their existing networks and connections to promote the vision and gather input from seldom-heard groups. Input from the wide range of sources was being analysed in order to co-design and create the Vision in the early part of 2024. The Community Vision would be out for consultation later in the year. Agreement on the Vision would be followed by the development of an updated Council Plan.

In terms of next steps, the presentation identified the following priorities:

- Continuing to provide a safe budget position, now and in future years, whilst continuing to support the most vulnerable residents in the Borough.
- Moving forward with the Vision for the Borough through co-production and community engagement.
- Working in partnership with more organisations to drive better outcomes for the Borough.

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

In relation to Reading University-Wokingham Borough Council Strategic Partnership, could the university's research expertise be used to assist the Council in analysing issues such as the demand for school places and Home to School Transport across the Borough? It was confirmed that this could be covered by the growth and participatory action research work-stream. The suggestion would be pursued with the university.

In relation to the partnership with the university, the university's actions in relation to property development were not seen as a positive across the Borough. Was there a risk that this negativity may cause reputational damage to the Council? It was confirmed that this viewpoint was understood, but there was real potential in working with the university and this should be pursued. Many other Councils were seeking to develop constructive, mutually beneficial partnerships with local universities and colleges.

It was noted that some of the Council's partnerships were more effective than others. For example, the relationship with Town and Parish Councils had been inconsistent partially due to unaligned objectives. It was confirmed that effective partnership working required commitment and hard work on both sides. The Council was focussed on developing a stronger relationship with each Town/Parish Council.

The focus on maintain a safe budget position was welcomed. What steps was the Council taking to highlight the ongoing funding challenges faced by the organisation? It was confirmed that lobbying of the Government was ongoing. The existing funding formula, based on indices of deprivation, did not produce a fair outcome for the Borough as it did not take into account the cost of providing increasingly complex services in an area with high living costs. Members supported the development of an evidence-based approach to lobbying on this issue, using individual stories to build up a picture of the financial challenges facing the Council in response to increasing and increasingly complex demand.

In relation to partnership working, was the Council working more closely with neighbouring authorities? It was confirmed that the Berkshire Leaders met each month to discuss issues of common interest and cross boundary co-operation. This included the formulation of a Berkshire Prosperity Board which would bid for funding in areas such as cross-boundary infrastructure projects.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Stephen Conway and Susan Parsonage be thanked for attending the meeting to provide an update and answer Member questions;
- 2) the Committee supports the ongoing development of an evidence-based approach to support the Council's case for improved funding;

- 3) the Leader and Chief Executive be invited to provide a further update to the Committee on key challenges in six months' time.

63. Q2 2023-24 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Committee considered the Quarter 2 Performance Monitoring Report (July to September 2023) as set out at Agenda pages 25 to 74.

Councillor Stephen Conway (Leader of the Council) attended the meeting, supported by officers, to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that Quarter 2 showed good overall performance in the face of significant ongoing challenges to service delivery, including high inflation and interest rates and increasing demand for key services. The report stated that the current projected revenue monitoring position for the end of 2023/24 was an overspend of approximately £3.6m.

As part of the annual performance cycle, Directors had met with Executive Members to review KPIs and targets for 2023/24 to ensure that they focussed on performance in the key areas of the Council's activity. Some new KPIs had been introduced whilst others had been retired.

The report stated that five KPIs had reported as Red in Quarter 2, as follows:

- PG8 – Total Household Tonnes (Waste);
- PG9 – All recorded crime in Wokingham Borough (excluding fraud);
- PG13A – Completion of Standard Work Orders within 28 days (Highways);
- RA10 – Revenue Monitoring Forecast Position;
- CS1 – Percentage of Continuous Assessments (Children's) completed within 45 working days.

The report gave details of the background to the KPIs reported as Red in Quarter 2 and the corrective action being taken to bring them back on track. It was also noted that two KPI's were currently without targets.

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

RA4 – Occupancy Rate of WBC-owned regeneration units – were any occupiers struggling in the current economic climate? It was confirmed that the town centre regeneration portfolio had shown strong performance in the face of continued market and economic uncertainty for high street retailers. Could the data be expanded to show the level of income received by the Council and any trends? It was confirmed that the KPI provided an overview of how well the town centre units were being filled. Officers would consider the provision of information on income levels and trends as requested.

Top Wins (Page 32) – Attendance at prevention services including live well gyms at the Carnival Hub, Bulmershe and Loddon Valley leisure centres. How were the prevention services funded and how secure was the funding? It was confirmed that these services were funded through the Public Health grant and the funding was secure for the time being.

RA3 – Completion to time and budget of regeneration projects – was there any update on this project since Q2? It was confirmed that a contractor had been appointed and it was expected that the scheme would be completed by the end of 2024.

RA10 – Revenue Monitoring Forecast Position – It was noted that the forecast overspend had worsened in Q1 and Q2. What was the latest position? It was confirmed that current forecast was an overspend of £3.6m. The Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been carrying out detailed scrutiny as the 2024/25 budget was being developed.

PG9 – All recorded crime in Wokingham Borough (excluding fraud) – Q1 and Q2 both showed a Red RAG status. The report stated that the majority of crime categories had seen an increase, mainly driven by theft from businesses, shoplifting and theft from vehicle offences. Could Members receive more information on clear-up rates for specific types of crime? It was confirmed that officers would provide a written response following discussion with Thames Valley Police.

PG13A – Completion of standard works orders within 28 days – The KPI was showing Q2 performance of 42.6% against a target of 75%. What were the reasons for this apparently poor performance? The report stated that measures had been put in place since October 2023 including deployment of an additional team to clear the backlog of works, extra support programming and a reduction of lead-in times. It was confirmed that a written response would be provided for Members to confirm the current position.

CEX4 – Customer satisfaction Web – It was noted that satisfaction had decreased from 69% in Q1 to 59% in Q2. What were the reasons for this decrease? It was confirmed that the new corporate website had been launched in July 2023. Since then the Digital team had been working on a programme of enhancements reflecting customer feedback. This would lead to an improvement in customer satisfaction in Q3.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Stephen Conway and supporting officers be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report;
- 2) the additional information requested during the discussion be circulated to Members;
- 3) the relevant KPIs be scrutinised by the Children's Services and Health Overview & Scrutiny Committees.

64. AFFORDABLE HOUSING STRATEGY

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 75 to 98, which gave details of the development of an Affordable Housing Strategy.

Stephen Conway (Leader and Executive Member for Housing) attended the meeting, supported by officers, to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that the Affordable Housing Strategy set out four strategic priorities as follows:

- Addressing and understanding our housing needs;

- Providing suitable accommodation options for our most vulnerable residents;
- Ensuring that homes were healthy, safe, efficient, environmentally sustainable and well designed;
- Creating positive social impact to promote inclusive growth and develop thriving communities.

The report also highlighted proposed changes for key workers within the Council's Allocations Policy, removing the requirement to have lived within the Borough for the previous five years. This change would help to support the local economy and especially the care sector.

The aim of the strategy was to improve the housing outcomes for residents, as well as helping to mitigate the increasing financial pressure created by the Council's duty to provide accommodation. This would be achieved by providing additional housing options with varying levels of support to ensure sufficiency of provision for a range of priority groups.

The strategy would be considered by the Executive in March 2024 and agreed by full Council in June 2024. The strategy would run for four years and would be assessed throughout that period. A decision to remove the local connection test for key workers to have lived in the Borough for the previous five years would be the subject of a separate report to the Executive in March.

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

The report referred to more opportunities for supporting sectors such as care or the creative industries. Did "creative industries" come within the definition of key workers? It was confirmed that a key focus was on the care sector, but the wording would be reviewed to reflect feedback from the Committee.

Could the needs of young people be included in the strategy, for example the implications for young people leaving military service? It was confirmed that consideration would be given to this suggestion.

In relation to understanding our housing needs, for example linked to the aging population and residents who retired but could not afford local rents? It was confirmed that a lot of work was ongoing looking at need assessment, for example in relation to disability and complex health needs. This would help to inform the future pipeline of housing provision.

The Scrutiny Task and Finish Group looking at registered providers found that external providers did not meet the same standard as delivered to WBC tenants. It was confirmed that a more rigorous process had been implemented to ensure that preferred registered providers were able to deliver a reasonable level of service for tenants.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Stephen Conway and supporting officers be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) feedback from the Committee be incorporated into the Affordable Housing Strategy prior to its submission to the Executive;

- 3) the proposed changes for key workers within the Council's Allocations Policy, removing the requirement to have lived in the Borough for the previous five years, be supported;
- 4) the Committee recommends that the reference to support for workers in the "creative industries" in the strategy be removed.

65. CONSIDERATION OF THE CURRENT EXECUTIVE AND IEMD FORWARD PROGRAMMES

The committee considered a copy of the Executive Forward Programme and the Individual Executive Member Decision Forward Programme, as set out on Agenda pages 99 to 108.

RESOLVED: That the Forward Programmes be noted.

66. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered its forward work programme and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as set out on Agenda pages 109 to 120.

RESOLVED: That the Overview & Scrutiny work programmes be noted.

67. ACTION TRACKER

Due to time constraints, the Action Tracker was not considered.

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