

EXECUTIVE
MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON
THURSDAY, 15 JUNE 2017

Councillors Present: Dominic Boeck, Keith Chopping, Jeanette Clifford, Hilary Cole, Lynne Doherty, Marcus Franks and Graham Jones

Also Present: Nick Carter (Chief Executive), Sarah Clarke (Acting Head of Legal Services), Melanie Ellis (Chief Accountant), Kevin Griffin (Head of ICT & Corporate Support), Gary Lugg (Head of Planning & Countryside), Peta Stoddart-Crompton (Public Relations Officer), Rachael Wardell (Corporate Director - Communities), Desre Wicks (Exchequer Services Manager), Stephen Chard (Principal Policy Officer), Councillor Lee Dillon, Councillor Billy Drummond, Councillor Mollie Lock, Councillor Alan Macro and Gabrielle Mancini (Group Executive - Conservatives)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Anthony Chadley, Councillor James Fredrickson and Councillor Rick Jones

PART I

4. Minutes

Councillor Graham Jones opened the meeting by welcoming Councillor Keith Chopping back to the Executive as Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services.

Councillor Jones also took the opportunity to wish Councillor Dominic Boeck a happy birthday.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 4 May 2017 and the special meeting held on the 25 May 2017 were approved as true and correct records and signed by the Leader.

5. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

6. Public Questions

There were no public questions submitted.

7. Petitions

There were no petitions presented to the Executive.

8. Financial Performance 2016-17 Provisional Outturn (EX3138)

The Executive considered a report (Agenda Item 6) which set out the provisional financial outturn of the Council for 2016-17.

Councillor Graham Jones introduced the report and explained that the provisional revenue outturn was an overspend of £7,487 against a net revenue budget of £116.8m, which equated to 0.006% of the net budget. Councillor Jones also reported that 95% of the 2016/17 savings programme was achieved in year.

Councillor Jones felt that these were commendable achievements during difficult financial times. This was particularly so when considering the difficulties being experienced by some near neighbour local authorities. By way of an example, Councillor Jones referred to Reading Borough Council whose provisional outturn was an overspend of £7.3m.

Councillor Lynne Doherty stated her pleasure at the underspend reported for Children and Family Services. This was particularly commendable when considering that the

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service had undergone an improvement journey. A number of measures had been implemented successfully in order to achieve this, whilst still meeting demand. There had therefore been no need to utilise the service risk fund.

Councillor Doherty added that there had been a reduced need for agency staff in the service and therefore cost, with the use of agency staff having reduced from 29% to 12% of the workforce. Placement costs had also been well managed.

Councillor Lee Dillon referred to Adult Social Care. He noted that the overspend in this service had reduced from Quarter Three and this was partly due to client care packages not commencing as previously forecast. He queried whether this was due to some clients having a less acute need than originally anticipated.

Councillor Dillon also noted that there had been less use of direct payments and queried whether there was a need to educate residents on the use of this funding to encourage them to make use of it.

There had also been a lower demand for carer support. Councillor Dillon queried whether this was due to the needs of residents being less complex or whether there was a stricter assessment process in place for this support.

In response to these points, Rachael Wardell explained that a high cost scenario was forecast for care packages. Actual costs became clearer towards year-end and some lower cost packages had been achieved. It was also the case that not all packages would continue for a full year as, sadly, some clients died.

Direct payments were discussed with clients as part of social work reviews when consideration was given to the expenditure of this funding and whether the needs of clients were being sufficiently met. This was alongside seeking to encourage independence of service users.

Rachael Wardell agreed to explore with the service whether there was an identifiable reason for the reduced demand for carer support and to confirm that in writing, but confirmed that the service did take steps to ensure carers were made aware of support available.

Turning to the Education Service, Councillor Dillon noted that savings had been achieved in Property due to a reduction in reactive and planned maintenance. He queried whether this related to corporate buildings or schools, and whether reductions to planned maintenance could lead to higher building costs in future years.

Councillor Doherty explained that this related to both corporate buildings and schools. She added that savings to planned maintenance were due to works not being required currently and this would not therefore impact on future years.

In the Capital Programme, the Superfast Broadband project had underspent by £740k as one of the main contractors, Gigaclear, had not invoiced the Council by year end. Councillor Dillon queried whether it was also the case that the project was behind schedule.

Councillor Dominic Boeck advised that Phase Two of the Superfast Broadband project would be completed by year end, whilst acknowledging that the project had suffered some delay. By that time, the necessary invoices would have been received and paid, with the 2016/17 underspend carried into 2017/18 to meet these costs.

Councillor Alan Macro noted that the weekly cost of residential and nursing care home beds had increased by 12% and 14% respectively. He was concerned should this level of increase continue and queried whether this was budgeted for in the 2017/18 financial year.

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Rachael Wardell explained that an increase in care home beds was budgeted for and added that prices were reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure funds were adequate. Whilst there had been no need to utilise the Adult Social Care Risk Fund in 2016/17, it continued to be available to meet pressures.

Councillor Macro then queried the grant received from the European Social Fund. This helped to achieve a underspend in the Education Service, but Councillor Macro queried why this had not already been included in the budget. Councillor Doherty gave her understanding that this grant, which served to provide support to young people for costs relating to 2015/16, was based on the number of eligible young people in a Census count and the number of young people, and therefore the level of grant, was not known in advance of the grant being received.

Councillor Macro next made reference to the fact that a payment from Kennet School for Kennet Leisure Centre of £43k was still in dispute. He queried how long this had been an issue and whether efforts were being made to resolve it. Councillor Hilary Cole agreed to provide a written response on this point, but gave an assurance that efforts continued to resolve this matter.

Income on interest on investments was £113k below target due to factors including the low level of interest rates currently available in the market and a lower cash fund balance in 2016/17 because of use of balances in 2015/16. Councillor Macro queried why this had not been identified earlier. Melanie Ellis agreed to provide a written response to this query that would contain a detailed breakdown of why this target was not achieved.

Councillor Billy Drummond noted that pressures had arisen in Highways and Transport in relation to street lighting energy. It was explained in the report that this was a result of the new corporate energy contract, but Councillor Drummond queried the reason for this pressure developing. Councillor Jeanette Clifford explained that while expenditure on street lighting had reduced, this was not at the level forecast earlier in the year, hence the pressure.

Councillor Drummond also noted that high consultancy costs for large planning applications was another pressure within Highways and Transport. He queried whether it would be preferable and more affordable for the Council to have in-house staff able to perform this work. Councillor Clifford responded that these were exceptional projects which required additional resource. Councillor Cole added that it was standard practice for the highways modelling team, in West Berkshire and other areas, to buy in consultants for specialist work on major applications.

Councillor Dillon accepted the point around exceptional cases, however with a view to ongoing and further large planning applications, he queried whether it would be more efficient for the Council to have its own in-house team for this purpose. Councillor Cole responded that this was not felt to be the case. She assured Members that effort was always given to deliver the most efficient and effective service, and a decision to bring in external expertise was always carefully considered first, with the merits of doing so carefully weighed up. In some cases this was felt to be the appropriate way forward as it reduced the risk of the Council being challenged on its decision making for major planning applications.

RESOLVED that:

1. the outturn position be noted and that the service specific risk funds would not be called upon, due to under spends in other areas across the Council.
2. the budget movements processed in year and detailed in Appendix E had been reviewed.

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Reason for the decision: The report forms part of the Council's financial monitoring framework.

Other options considered: None– factual report for information only.

9. **West Berkshire Council ICT & Digital Services Strategy 2017-2020 (EX3267)**

The Executive considered a report (Agenda Item 7) which provided a high level overview of the various sections of the Council's new three year ICT and Digital Services Strategy.

Councillor Dominic Boeck introduced the report and explained that the time had come to replace the existing three year Strategy with this new Strategy that would cover the period 2017 to 2020.

Councillor Boeck explained that there were a number of opportunities arising for West Berkshire from the new Strategy. This was particularly the case when considering the excellent superfast broadband coverage that was being introduced by Gigaclear, with coverage close to 100% being achieved by year end. Only a small number of homes would be without superfast access (in the tens).

It was also the case that four out of five residents owned and regularly used a smart phone and/or other digital asset.

The above two points would enable residents to perform more digital transactions.

ICT was also the catalyst for many changes, and would greatly aid the Council in providing more efficient and effective services.

Councillor Lee Dillon referred to discussions held at the Resources Select Committee in January 2017 on the Strategy. At that time he raised the potential to procure ICT systems etc jointly with other local authorities. He noted that there was concern with doing so as a result of contracts in different areas ending at different times, but he felt that this was something that Officers should be asked to explore further and should be a consideration as part of the Strategy. Cost effectiveness and potential for savings did feature within the Strategy, but this did not specifically cover joint procurement.

Councillor Dillon was pleased to note the customer centric focus of the Strategy. As stated in the Strategy, this would benefit internal and external customers, including residents. However, access was a key component of this focus with more services moving online and it was important to not lose sight of residents without internet access, i.e. the elderly and vulnerable residents, to ensure they could access services. There was a potential role for the voluntary and community sector to assist/train these residents.

Councillor Boeck stated that these were good points. He would continue to work closely with the ICT Service and the potential for joint procurement would be an element of that. Councillor Boeck added his agreement to the need to be conscious of people who were unable to access services online to ensure their service delivery was not negatively affected.

Councillor Alan Macro was disappointed at the lack of reference to specific digital developments. He also raised concerns with the search facility on the Council's website, but the Strategy did not propose any improvements in that respect.

Councillor Macro then queried whether the costs of Gigaclear, in comparison to other providers, i.e. Virgin, were a barrier to developments. Gigaclear cost £12 more per month per individual contract than Virgin. Councillor Boeck explained that this was not a straight forward comparison. Gigaclear was a new organisation who were working on today's

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prices, whereas the costs for Virgin, a long established organisation, were based on a legacy network.

Councillor Macro raised a concern in relation to 4G 'not-spots' in areas without a strong signal. This would be a barrier to digital services. Councillor Boeck explained that this was beyond the Council's control.

Councillor Macro noted that an ICT Cloud would be used for back up purposes. He encouraged enhancing this for storage. Councillor Boeck noted this good point.

Councillor Macro felt there was a need to manage expectation levels, specifically an expectation that online Council services could be accessed anytime/anywhere. This level of response would not be possible and could be compromised by ICT upgrades. Councillor Boeck stated that a 24/7 type response had never been promoted and there was not therefore an expectation that this would be available.

Councillor Billy Drummond explained that superfast broadband coverage did not include Greenham. This was a concern for Greenham residents.

Councillor Graham Jones commended the Strategy. The Council needed a robust Strategy that enabled good digital access, balanced with a robust security network. He agreed however with the importance of ensuring services remained available for residents without access to online services.

RESOLVED that the West Berkshire Council ICT & Digital Services Strategy 2017-2020 be approved.

10. Members' Questions

A full transcription of the public and Member question and answer sessions are available from the following link: [Transcription of Q&As](#).

- (a) **Question to be answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure submitted by Councillor Mollie Lock**

A question standing in the name of Councillor Mollie Lock on the subject of the progress made with the process of decanting the residents of Four Houses Corner was answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure.

- (b) **Question to be answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure submitted by Councillor Mollie Lock**

A question standing in the name of Councillor Mollie Lock on the subject of the procedure for the residents of Four Houses Corner that owned their own homes was answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure.

- (c) **Question to be answered by the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People submitted by Councillor Mollie Lock**

A question standing in the name of Councillor Mollie Lock on the subject of the arrangements in place for the children of Four Houses Corner to continue in their current place of education was answered by the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People.

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- (d) **Question to be answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure submitted by Councillor Alan Macro**

A question standing in the name of Councillor Alan Macro on the subject of unallocated Section 106 funding for off site affordable housing was answered by the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Leisure.

- (e) **Question to be answered by the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment submitted by Councillor Alan Macro**

A question standing in the name of Councillor Alan Macro on the subject of the number of volunteers recruited to man public libraries during the current year was answered by the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment.

11. Exclusion of Press and Public

RESOLVED that members of the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the under-mentioned item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as contained in Paragraphs 1, 2 and 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information)(Variation) Order 2006. Rule 8.10.4 of the Constitution also refers.

12. Request for Debt Write Off (EX3312, EX3313, EX3314)

(Paragraph 1 – information relating to an individual)

(Paragraph 2 – information identifying an individual)

(Paragraph 7 – action taken in relation to crime prevention)

The Executive considered an exempt report (Agenda Item 10) which sought approval to write off debts.

It was agreed, in the Part II debate, that the total figure proposed to be written off should be included within these minutes. The total debt proposed to be written off was £65,577.43.

RESOLVED that the recommendations in the exempt report be agreed.

Reason for the decision: as outlined in the exempt report.

Other options considered: as outlined in the exempt report.

(The meeting commenced at 5.00pm and closed at 5.45pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature