

COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON

THURSDAY, 24 MARCH 2016

Councillors Present: Peter Argyle (Chairman), Howard Bairstow, Pamela Bale, Jeremy Bartlett, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgman, Paul Bryant, Anthony Chadley, Jeanette Clifford, Hilary Cole, Richard Crumly, Lee Dillon, Lynne Doherty, Billy Drummond, Adrian Edwards, Sheila Ellison, Marcus Franks, James Fredrickson, Dave Goff, Manohar Gopal, Paul Hewer, Clive Hooker, Marigold Jaques, Graham Jones, Rick Jones, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Mollie Lock, Tim Metcalfe, Anthony Pick, James Podger, Garth Simpson, Richard Somner, Anthony Stansfeld, Virginia von Celsing, Quentin Webb (Vice-Chairman), Emma Webster and Laszlo Zverko

Also Present: John Ashworth (Corporate Director - Environment), Nick Carter (Chief Executive), Sarah Clarke (Legal Services Manager), Martin Dunscombe (Communications Manager), Peta Stoddart-Crompton (Public Relations Officer), Andy Walker (Head of Finance) and Rachael Wardell (Corporate Director - Communities), Stephen Chard (Policy Officer), Moira Fraser (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager) and James Gore (Digital Content Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Steve Ardagh-Walter, Councillor Jeff Beck, Councillor Dennis Benneyworth, Councillor Keith Chopping, Councillor James Cole, Councillor Roger Croft, Councillor Rob Denton-Powell, Councillor Nick Goodes, Councillor Carol Jackson-Doerge, Councillor Mike Johnston, Councillor Gordon Lundie, Councillor Alan Macro, Councillor Ian Morrin and Councillor Graham Pask

Councillor(s) Absent:

PART I

111. Declarations of Interest

The Deputy Monitoring Officer noted that Councillor Lynne Doherty had been granted a dispensation by the Governance and Ethics Committee to speak and vote on financial proposals pertaining to Short Breaks Funding should they arise during the discussion that evening.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer stated that Councillors Marcus Franks and Lee Dillon had an interest in Agenda Item 3 (2016/17 Budget - Phase 2 Consultation and the Transitional Grant) by virtue of the fact that their employer, Sovereign Housing Association, received funding from the Council for its Neighbourhood Warden Scheme. Both Councillors had applied to the Governance and Ethics Committee for a dispensation to speak and vote on this item. The Committee decided that a dispensation should be granted but that the dispensation would permit Councillor Franks and Councillor Dillon to speak but not vote on this item.

Sarah Clarke explained that Councillor Carol Jackson-Doerge was a trustee of the Corn Exchange. As she had a fiduciary duty to the trust she determined, in respect of Agenda Item 3 (2016/17 Budget - Phase 2 Consultation and the Transitional Grant), not to attend the meeting and would therefore not take part in the vote.

The Councillors set out below declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 3 (2016/17 Budget - Phase 2 Consultation and the Transitional Grant).

Councillor	Outside Body	Other
Bale, Pamela	East Downlands Children's Centre Advisory Board	Regular user of Pangbourne Library

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Councillor	Outside Body	Other
	Governor of Pangbourne Primary School	
Bryant, Paul	Greenham Common Trust Donnington Trust Harwell Restoration	
Clifford, Jeanette	Governor of St Bartholomew's School A foundation Governor of the St Bartholomew's Foundation A member of The Corn Exchange Newbury Town Council link Councillor to the West Berkshire Museum Trustee of Mabel Luke Charity – almshouses	User of Newbury Library; User of Northcroft Leisure Centre; Attends events at The Watermill;
Goff, Dave	Foundation Governor at St Bartholomew's School	
Jackson-Doerge, Carol	Corn Exchange The Watermill Theatre Governor of St Marys Burghfield	
Jaques, Marigold	West Berks Citizens Advice Bureau	
Jones, Rick	WB Mencap – WBC representative West Berkshire Disability Alliance	
Lock, Mollie	Burghfield Children's Centre - Member on the Board (no financial responsibilities)	User of Mortimer Library. User of No 75 Bus service. Bus Passes.
Macro, Alan		Occasional user of Theale Library

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Councillor	Outside Body	Other
		Member of Theale Parish Council. (Theale Parish Council utilises, and helps fund, the Neighbourhood Warden Service and CCTV Service)
Podger, James	Governing Body at Mary Hare School	
Stansfeld, Anthony		Police and Crime Commissioner

112. 2016/17 Budget - Phase 2 Consultation and the Transitional Grant (C3100) (Urgent Item)

(All Members, had been granted a dispensation by the Monitoring Officer to speak and vote on this item should discussions refer to Council Tax matters).

(Councillor Lynne Doherty's employer was a recipient of Short Breaks funding. Following the granting of a dispensation to speak and vote on this item, unless short breaks for children were specifically discussed, she determined to remain in the meeting and vote on the item).

(Councillors Marcus Franks and Lee Dillon declared a personal and disclosable pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 3 by virtue of the fact that their employer, Sovereign Housing Association, received funding from the Council for its Neighbourhood Warden Scheme. Following the granting of a dispensation to speak but not vote on this item they determined to take part in the debate but not vote on this item).

(Councillor Jeff Beck declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 16 by virtue of the fact that he was a trustee of the Corn Exchange, Readibus and the Volunteer Centre West Berkshire. However as he had a fiduciary duty to these trusts he determined to leave the Chamber during the discussion of this item and did not take part in the vote).

(Councillors Pamela Bale, Paul Bryant, Jeanette Clifford, Dave Goff, Carol Jackson-Doerge, Marigold Jaques, Rick Jones, Mollie Lock, and Anthony Stansfeld declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 3 for the reasons set out in the table in Agenda Item 2. As their interest was personal and not a disclosable pecuniary interest they determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

The Council considered a report (Agenda Item 3) which provided an update on the results of Phase 2 of the public consultation exercise in relation to the 2016/17 budget. The report provided information on the total number of responses received to the consultation and details of the total number of responses received for each savings proposal including the one income proposal relating to car parking fees and charges.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Graham Jones and seconded by Councillor James Fredrickson:

That the Council:

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1. **“notes the responses received to each of the 15 public facing savings proposals and the one income generation proposal in relation to Phase 2 of the public consultation exercise undertaken on the 2016/17 budget.**
2. **makes available the remaining 2016/17 transitional funding to those services set out below**
 - Library Service - £475,000
 - Theatres (Corn Exchange) - £56,000
 - Public Transport - £337,000
 - Children’s Centres - £50,000
 - Domestic Abuse Response Team - £25,000
 - Neighbourhood Wardens - £50,000
 - Citizen’s Advice Bureau - £25,000
3. **That, where transitional funding is not deemed to be appropriate, the recommendations set out in the Overview and Recommendations template (Appendix C) be approved.”**

Councillor Graham Jones in introducing the item commented that at the 01st March 2016 meeting the Council had to adopt the most difficult budget that he had ever been involved in. The scale and speed of the reduction in Government Grant funding were immense. He noted that the changes had produced a lot of debate and he thanked Members and residents for the quality and maturity of the debate that had ensued. He noted that communities across the District would be significantly affected by the cuts however the authority had to live within its means both nationally and locally.

He explained that the Council would have to recalibrate what it could do given the ongoing reduction in its income and also taking account of growing pressures particularly in the care area. He noted that the care area consumed a significant portion of the Council’s budget and that in future the Council would be able to provide care, collect waste, maintain the road network and precious little else. Other activities would have to be facilitated and that would require significant leadership from elected Members but also those present in the chamber.

The Council has had to rethink what it did and how it did things as well as what functions were important to the communities and how they would be provided. He thanked the local Members of Parliament that had lobbied hard for the transitional funding that the Council had received to transform services.

There had been two phases to the consultation that had informed the thinking behind the recommendations that were being considered at this meeting. He thanked Officers, residents and Parish and Town Councillors for their input, In particular he thanked the town and parish councillors for their input as to what was important to their communities and what they could do to deliver those services.

At the 01st March 2016 meeting Members had allocated £400k of the transitional funding. Following the completion of the second phase of the consultation Members were now in a position to allocate the remaining £1m. The proposals were set out in paragraph 2.2 of the report. He highlighted that £475k had been allocated to libraries which he recognised as important community assets. Councillor Jones stated that no libraries would be closed until a needs impact assessment had been concluded. The Council wanted to work with communities and parish and town councils to transform these services.

Councillor Jones also noted that £25k would be allocated to the Domestic Violence Team. He noted that this area had generated fewer responses to this area but the Council recognised its responsibilities to this largely invisible function.

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Councillor Jones reminded those present that the funding that was being discussed that evening was for the transformation of services and not to be used for ongoing expenditure. The Council would need to seek solutions if these services were to be continued and dialogue with interested groups would continue. He noted that there was an opportunity for town and parish councils to take on services that were important to their communities. The Council would continue to work with them to seek solutions for the long term benefit of the District.

Councillor Lee Dillon noted that there had been an impressive response to the consultation especially given the short time scales and he thanked those that had participated. He especially thanked SOS for their energy in engaging with both residents and Members. These responses made it easier to understand what was important to residents. He had understood from those responses that what was important to residents was: protecting the vulnerable, keeping communities connected and committing to younger years education.

He then commented on the individual proposals. He stated that it was important to signpost the small number of regular users of the Calcot Service point to the online services that they could access when the service closed.

He felt that transforming the Children's Centres would be reliant on finding suitable community access points. There were some rural communities whose community faculties were already fully booked at peak times and he was concerned if they could not be identified it could lead to increased rural isolation. He therefore asked that the decision to reduce to single hubs be reconsidered and that permanent bases be found in rural communities and that they were fully resourced.

He noted that the Council was asking parish councils and community groups to take on additional services and therefore lamented that no transitional funding had been allocated to the CCB to support these endeavours. He would however encourage the parish councils to work more closely with the CCB to develop the skills needed to deal with these changes so that they would be more resilient and could deal with the changes.

He encouraged Members to take a more active role in mitigating the cuts especially in the Trading Standards, Licensing, Environmental Health Services and dealing with service complaints. In order to do so Members would have to be trained and he suggested that this training be deemed mandatory for all Members.

There had been a reduction in funding for substance misuse services. Although some transitional funding had been allocated for this area of work a reduction in funding could lead to increased costs to the public purse overall and could also impact negatively on the users themselves. This hard to reach group could become disengaged from local services and one of the consequences of this could be an increase in crime levels. He therefore asked to see the detail behind these proposals as soon as possible to ensure that early intervention was focussed on.

In terms of public transport funding it was important for residents to remain connected and should enable them to access vital services including for example hospitals, the CAB and leisure centres. He was concerned about pockets of residents that would not have any access to services for example residents of Beech Hill. He therefore requested that some of the transition funding be used to keep the 154 service from Beech Hill to Reading going.

He also asked the Council to revisit the decision to purchase the three mini buses using £150k of the transition funding. He felt that the mini buses could be funded through the capital programme which would mean that the majority of the £150k could be diverted to protect other frontline services.

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Councillor Dillon acknowledged the role played by the Neighbourhood Wardens and he hoped that a solution could be found by the town and parish councils to retain this valuable service.

In terms of libraries the Liberal Democrat Group welcomed the comments made by Councillor Graham Jones that no libraries would be closed until a needs assessment had been completed. They also asked that the communities be re-consulted on any proposals arising post the needs assessment.

Councillor Dillon stated that he hoped that the two Groups would be able to work together to find ways to reduce the impact of the cuts.

Councillor Hilary Cole stated that post the announcement that transitional funding would be received she had worked closely with Officers to develop proposals for the Library Service and the Corn Exchange.

She noted that £475k of the transition funding would be spent on the library service. Following the consultation 2751 responses were received in relation to the proposal to reduce the library service which demonstrated how much residents loved and valued their libraries. A number of petitions were also submitted. Members had taken cognisance of the responses and acted accordingly.

During the consultation advice was sought from a number of key agencies including the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as well as town and parish councils. The Council sought advice from the DCMS on the statutory duties outlined in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. They advised that a needs assessment would assist the Council in developing the best model for the library service in the immediate future.

The revised proposal recommended the retention of seven static libraries and one mobile library. Streamlining the routes of the mobile service and using one mobile library was a sensible efficiency saving. Funding had been allocated to rural bus subsidies to enable residents in rural areas to continue to access library services. The 'at home' service would also be continued. This service allowed volunteers to deliver books to residents who were genuinely unable to access libraries.

The two libraries proposed for closure were Theale and Wash Common. These two libraries cost the most in relation to their footfall. This did not however mean that these libraries would be closed. Officers would meet with Theale Parish and Newbury Town Councils to establish how they or any community groups could run a service and, if so, at what level of assistance could be offered by the Council. Councillor Cole stressed that the proposed closure of Theale Library would not impact on the library at Theale Green School. Self Service and Self Access technologies would be installed at the libraries that were not closed thereby reducing the staffing levels required.

Further meetings would continue to take place with town and parish councils and community interest groups to give more focus to how the transitional funding could be used to develop more effective partnerships.

Councillor Cole noted that £56k of transitional funding had been set aside for the theatres. The consultation had generated 3224 responses which illustrated how important the cultural offering was to residents. The Corn Exchange received significant funding from the Council but because of the large reduction in the Council's Revenue Support Grant the proposal was to reduce this sum. Following a meeting with them it was agreed that £56k of transitional funding would be allocated to them. This would allow them time to seek other funding streams and review their own strategy during the transition period.

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Councillor Cole thanked Officers who had worked with her to deliver these proposals. The timescales had been challenging but the Officers had risen to the challenge and she felt that they should be commended on their efforts.

Councillor Garth Simpson commented that in terms of reductions in bus subsidies, totalling £780k, priority had been given to preserving the route network as much as possible by reducing the number of peak services or lowering the frequency of services or number of days. Of necessity some services had to be withdrawn as the subsidy costs had been huge. There were 398 consultation responses which included 327 comments. Meetings had taken place with parish councils to discuss the impact the cuts would have on them. Some of the parish councils (Pangbourne, Basildon, Aldermaston and Lambourn) had made offers of financial contributions in order to retain services. The Council welcomed their input and would seek to try and incorporate their improvements within the limitations of cost. The Council had awarded £337k of transitional funding to support subsidised buses. Negotiations and discussions with other authorities and organisations were ongoing and it was possible that further improvements to routes might yet emerge.

There were three other proposals for reducing expenditure namely the withdrawal of the Readibus Service as of 27 March 2016, the withdrawal of the Council contributions to the national concessionary travel scheme as of the 01 May 2016 and the removal of funding for the development and maintenance of real time passenger information except where Reading Council had an interest in retaining the service.

The Council is also considering buying up to three, from capital funding, 16 seater mini buses that could be used to replace the commercial services on certain routes as cheaper substitutes. The Council has purchased a total transport study from Plymouth University and this has shown some options to consider in order to make better use of community transport assets. A pilot operation was underway with South Central Ambulance Service and the Council's community transport mini buses. These options would be evaluated over the forthcoming year.

Councillor Simpson noted that residents needed to patronise the buses as the Council could not subsidise empty buses. Councillor Simpson commended the Officers in the Transport Operations Team who had worked under extreme pressure.

Councillor Alan Law commented that in addition to the consultation responses listed on page 13 of the papers a number of petitions had also been submitted. As there were a few petitions submitted in relation to public transport the number of responses to this issue were sometimes understated .

Councillor Law responded to the criticism about the consultation process levied by Councillor Dillon. He pointed out that the Council was made aware of the need to find the additional £5m or £6m savings just before Christmas, Given the holiday period the Council could only undertake a three week consultation period on the phase two savings. The Council had been able to undertake a six week consultation on the phase one savings as there was sufficient time to do so. He accepted that the three week consultation was not ideal. He felt, however under the circumstances, that the Executive and Officers should be congratulated on an excellent job. He thanked residents for the excellent response that they had provided which had given a clear steer to the Administration.

Councillor Law noted that nationally there was a trend of devolution of responsibility down closer to the users of services. He was therefore encouraged to hear that some local parishes were getting involved with the subsidy of bus services. The positive side of the financial situation was that it had enabled Councillors and the community to focus on

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issues that they normally did not engage on. He thanked the local MPs and the Leader for securing transitional funding.

Councillor Dominic Boeck commented on the use of the transitional funding to support Children's Centres. This was an area that had received the fourth highest number of responses to the consultation, a total of 384 responses. He noted how important the services that were delivered at these centres were to residents. He commented that these centres were important to people, often including some of the most vulnerable members of the community, who were not always the most vociferous residents.

He was working with Officers to ensure that the services currently being provided by the centres continued to be provided albeit it that they would be delivered in a different way but affordable way. He therefore proposed that £50k of the transitional funding be used to establish a wider network of community access points. This would enable the Council to use hubs supported by community outreach services. If approved the funding would be used to work with faith groups, voluntary organisations and health professionals to provide a good range of resources to be delivered through the access points. Training would have to be provided funded by the transitional grant. During the consultation it became apparent that there was a lot of concern about the loss of buildings, He sought to reassure residents and Members that the services would continue to be delivered.

Councillor Marcus Franks noted that the Council was required to set a balanced budget. The phase one and proposed phase two savings had generated a lot of soul searching. The reality, however, was that local government was changing and the authority had to concentrate on its statutory duties and protecting the most vulnerable residents.

He thanked all those residents that had participated in the consultation but was concerned that the most vulnerable residents were often not able to generate a lot of signatures and responses. He was therefore pleased that this concern was reflected in the proposed expenditure of the transitional funding which Members were being asked to consider at this meeting.

Councillor Franks noted that at the start of the economic downturn the Council had provided the Citizen's Advice Bureau with additional funding to meet the anticipated increase in demand for their services. It was therefore unfortunate that the Council had now been forced to reduce the funding it made available to them. However he was pleased to note that an additional £25k of transitional funding had been made available to the CAB thereby halving the funding cut for the forthcoming year.

Councillor Franks welcomed the transitional funding of £25k for the Domestic Abuse Response Team. He noted that in addition funding had also been secured from the Home Office to continue the work of the domestic abuse outreach service in the community.

Councillor Franks also drew Members' attention to the savings proposal relating to the Waste Service in relation to the contract with RE3 Partnership for the Smallmead Household Waste and Recycling Centre. He and Officers continued to hold discussions with the RE3 Partnership with the aim of retaining access for West Berkshire residents to the site. He urged residents in that part of the district to ensure that they were aware of what recyclables were collected at the kerbside and to make use of that service. He also encouraged them to acquaint themselves with the recycling centre at Padworth,

Councillor Pamela Bale thanked the Executive and relevant Officers for the amount of time they had spent reviewing the considerable number of responses to the phase two consultation. She acknowledged that it had been difficult to find constructive ways of maintaining these important services with the limited transition funding. She was therefore particularly pleased to see the proposals that affected Pangbourne. In particular

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she welcomed the retention of the 143 bus service which was often a lifeline for older and vulnerable residents in the village. Residents valued the service and this was borne out by the petition that they had submitted and she, therefore, thanked the Parish Council for committing additional funding which would help to secure the service.

The potential closure of Pangbourne Library had generated a lot of concern. Residents registered their support for the library by responding to the consultation but had also set up an embryonic 'Friends of Pangbourne Library' group. The transition funding will enable Officers to set up the self service model but would also allow the Friends Group time to look at ways that they could support the new service.

The Children's Centre in Pangbourne, which was scheduled for closure, operated from the local school and the transition funding would allow time for the school and the Children Centre to review possible options identified by the users of the Centre during recent discussions..

Councillor Bale acknowledged that it was impossible to meet the imposed savings requirement without affecting the services provided to residents. The Neighbourhood Wardens was also a valued service and she hoped that it would be possible to identify a way to retain that service. By working together she hoped that the impact of the savings requirements could be minimised and she again thanked all those involved in this difficult process.

Councillor Tim Metcalfe reported that West Berkshire was very proud of its brigade of volunteers, many of whom gave freely of their time. The onus was therefore on the Council to support them in whichever way it could and efforts should be made to reduce bureaucracy wherever possible.

Councillor Tony Linden was pleased to note that one of the mobile libraries would be retained and he hoped that ways could be found to retain the Neighbourhood Warden service in his area. He hoped that the engagement with residents on these savings proposals might encourage more residents to consider joining their local parish councils. He encouraged Central Government to ensure that Business Rates were retained locally and that the distribution of this funding was done equitably.

Councillor Mollie Lock was pleased to note that the retention of the 154 bus service was being looked at as it would prevent isolation of the residents of Beech Hill. She also welcomed the use of transition funding to support Children's Centres which she felt were an essential service.

Councillor Adrian Edwards stated that he was closely associated with Wash Common Library since 2004. He commented that it was a well used community centre and he was therefore sad to hear that the proposal was to close it. It cost £37k to run the library and he would hold discussions with the town council and community groups to see if options could be found to retain it albeit perhaps on a smaller scale as it was an essential part of the community.

Councillor Graham Bridgman noted that Beech Hill was an isolated community. It did not have many community facilities but it did have a vociferous parish council and a good striving community and to keep that community in touch with the rest of the District and Reading was vital. He was therefore pleased to hear the comments about the potential retention of the 154 bus service.

Councillor James Fredrickson commented that the vast majority of the Council's budget was spent on services that it was legally obliged to deliver and for which there was increasing demand. The Council therefore had to consider removing funding for services such as Neighbourhood Wardens as part of the recent consultation exercise. The consultation had however brought parishes and community groups together to see what

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further contributions they could make to retaining these valued services. The consultation exercises highlighted that the community values the work that the wardens did to make the areas safer, cleaner and more welcoming. As a result £50k of transitional funding would be made available to them.

Unlike many authorities in a similar situation West Berkshire Council had decided to consult publicly on the savings proposals. Even when the timescales were very limited the Council agreed that it wanted to engage with the community to understand their views and priorities.

Councillor Fredrickson commented on the concerns raised about the legality of the savings proposals including the potential closure of libraries. He noted that discussions were taking place with the Department of Communities and Local Government throughout the process to ensure that due process was being followed.

Councillor Fredrickson noted that the Council and local MPs had fought hard for transition funding which not all authorities had received. Once it was received it was agreed that it would all be spent on protecting front line services. Work was ongoing to try and secure more access to the £80m of Business Rates that was generated in West Berkshire.

As part of the consultation the Council had engaged with over 40 organisations and over 300 meetings had been attended over the last three months. The reality however was that savings had to be made. The transition funding needed to be made available as soon as possible to the communities so that they could make the best possible use of it.

Councillor Fredrickson commented that immense care had gone into the preparation of the budget proposals whilst balancing very difficult decisions that no Members wanted to make.

Councillor Graham Jones thanked Members for the full debate. He commented that the consultation had highlighted to him how different things mattered to different people. Members had to grapple with balancing very different and conflicting needs. The budget that the Council had to spend was limited and both locally and nationally residents and authorities had to live within their means.

A number of solutions were being considered. In terms of rural isolation a lot of good work had been done on introducing village agents. In terms of Children's Centres the services mattered more than the buildings and therefore the services needed to be protected.

Councillor Jones noted that many Councils in the South East would be having similar debates to this one as they had been particularly badly affected by reductions in the Revenue Support Grant. If the Council was aware of the level of savings that had to be made the budget would have been prepared very differently. The settlement had come as a shock to West Berkshire and most authorities across the Council. He paid tribute to his colleagues for their creative thinking particularly in relation to the libraries where there was a lot of very good work going on to try and protect and transform the service.

Councillor Jones also recognised the novel and creative work that was been undertaken in respect of bus services to try and protect that service as far as possible. He thanked the community for the way that they had engaged in the process. The Council had consulted, listened and acted but there was still a lot more work to do.

The Motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.41 pm)

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CHAIRMAN

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Date of Signature

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