

# **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION**

## **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY, 10 AUGUST 2021**

**Councillors Present:** Adrian Abbs (Substitute), Peter Argyle (Substitute), James Cole, Lee Dillon (Vice-Chairman), Lynne Doherty, Gareth Hurley, Alan Law (Chairman), Thomas Marino, Steve Masters, Tony Vickers and Howard Woollaston

**Also Present:** Nick Carter (Chief Executive), Sarah Clarke (Service Director (Strategy and Governance)) and Paula Goodwin (Service Lead HR) and Gordon Oliver (Principal Policy Officer)

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting:** Councillor Jeff Brooks and Councillor Claire Rowles

### **PART I**

#### **17. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

#### **18. Items Called-in following the Executive on 15 July 2021**

The Commission accepted a call-in request following the last Executive meeting which was submitted on 23 July 2021 to review the Executive's decision (EX4011) of 15 July 2021 concerning Timelord 2. The call-in request had been submitted in accordance with Sections 5.3 and 6.4 of the Council's Constitution.

The Timelord 2 report was presented for consideration by the Executive on 15 July 2021. The report recommended that the Executive resolved to approve as follows:

- To approve the Timelord 2 working model as set out in the covering report.
- To approve an ongoing allocation of funding from within existing budgets for a staff home working allowance of £150,000 per annum.
- To approve £50,000 of costs, from within existing budgets, to fund the ongoing additional costs of the internal booking system, staff development and support costs in respect of Timelord 2 and a doubling of the Reasonable Adjustments Budget.
- To approve the sum of £691,130 to be borrowed to fund the capital works required to support the goals of Timelord 2.
- To review the effectiveness of new proposals six months after the Timelord Programme has been implemented.
- Once this review has been completed; to approve the disposal of the West Street House and West Point buildings if appropriate.

In accordance with the Council's Constitution five Elected Members (Councillors Lee Dillon, Alan Macro, Jeff Brooks, Tony Vickers and Erik Pattendon) called in the Executive Decision (EX4011) on the basis of the following:

- 1) Concerns around signing off a largely operational strategy before our new CEO is in post.

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- 2) Concerns that in 4.1.1 and 7.8 none of the key principles refer to our residents and the quality of service they receive and the few measures in place to address this.
- 3) The cost to the Council of paying £12.50 to staff to work from home when many of them will be saving on commuting costs.
- 4) Lack of evidence that this new arrangement can “better support service users from home” and the need for such evidence to be provided.
- 5) Concerns around confidentiality and safeguarding for customers and residents as 20% to 30% of WBC’s workforce do not have dedicated office space at home and a lack of mitigation measures in this matter. We do not believe it is sufficient to say that the working from home pattern over the last 17 months has resolved this aspect.
- 6) That if core hours cease (8.37) allowing highly variable work hours, there will be a concomitant lack of effective communication and continuity of service between employees, resulting in a poorer service for residents and customers. Core hours should be maintained, even if adapted.
- 7) The challenge that variable work-styles and core hours will create for managers in ensuring that new starters have requisite support in for the first 6 months of their contract.
- 8) Concerns over the haste with which these changes are being made despite the assertion (7.13) that it is not known how things will work post Covid.
- 9) Lack of measures to mitigate potential problems with delivering dynamic training, advice, interventions, pastoral care and support and cultivating a team spirit that happens in a face-to-face environment.
- 10) Lack of an assessment to determine the effectiveness of our services now and prior to the implementation of these new working policies/practises.
- 11) The effect of variable working hours and styles leading to a decrease in social interaction that promotes innovation and creativity, as well as rapid reactions to issues and challenges, as staff will not be meeting so regularly.
- 12) Concerns regarding the effect on the Newbury Town economy from these new ways of working.
- 13) The potential for highly variable numbers of staff working from the office on any given day meaning basic resources, such as desks, may be unavailable.
- 14) Lack of information on how Unison has reacted to these proposals.
- 15) The effects of these changes on staff contracts.

Nick Carter stated that the idea contained in his report was not a new concept and that for over 10 years Council staff had been home working. Ideas in Timelord 2 were merely extensions of Timelord 1 that took into consideration advances in digital technology and there was a strong sense from Council staff that the change was welcomed. A year of planning and lots of consultation went into Timelord 2 therefore it was ready to be implemented. Many Unitary Councils in the surrounding areas and UK wide were in similar positions to West Berkshire Council and had already implemented similar ways of working for their staff.

Councillor Lee Dillon told the Commission that his reasons for the call in and its context were outlined in the call in report; his group rarely exercised their right to use the call-in procedure unless they felt it was absolutely vital. He said they were not against the strategy of Timelord 2 and they were not challenging the concept of the plan in the report

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but did not feel that they received adequate answers to their questions. Mainly, the group felt that the answers did not reflect any evidence of the effectiveness of the plan. Therefore, Councillor Dillon would like the implementation of Timelord 2 delayed which would allow further work to be done and to allow further feedback to be taken into consideration.

Councillor Tony Vickers said that his main concerns were within points 1 – 4 of the call-in report, but that he also feared there would be and has been a difficulty in West Berkshire residents contacting Council Officers. He also could not see the need for the implementation of Timelord 2 to occur before the new Chief Executive was in post. Furthermore, Councillor Vickers believed as Councillor Dillon did, that a further survey should be carried out and also further involvement of Unison was required. He felt that the financial reimbursement that was proposed for Council staff could be seen as an incentive and would not be in staff's best interest as those that needed to be in the office could be swayed by this incentive. He said any payment amount proposed needed to be reported more explicitly.

Nick Carter addressed the issues that were raised and responded to Councillor Tony Vickers' comments first. He claimed that Unison had been involved, a resident survey had been conducted and considerations had been taken on board around communication and how residents felt. As far as West Berkshire Council staff were concerned, Nick Carter said that the vast majority of staff had worked from home for a decade and that the move from Timelord 1 to Timelord 2 was not a seismic shift; a parallel piece of work around how the Council would rethink their engagement with customers and working more effectively had been done. In terms of comments around working from home and the risk to confidentiality and data protection breaches, Nick Carter stated that if staff could not provide capacity to ensure that at home then they would need to work in the office and no one would be compelled to work from home. In response to the financial reimbursement for homeworking, he said that £150/year was a contribution toward facilitating working from home and that in consultation with Unison, Unison had actually proposed that the contribution should be more.

Nick Carter further stated that Timelord 2 was proposing staff worked three days from home and two in the office which was not dissimilar to what was being established as a norm for many other businesses and Councils across the country. Core hours would be set by the Council but managers would have flexibility to direct staff as required and staff would continue to use a booking system to ensure the office could accommodate them. Shaw House would be utilised as a corporate office and could be used for informal development work. In terms of the concern on impact to Newbury town centre, Nick didn't believe that the figures which showed the impact would be much more than they were ten years ago when Timelord 1 was introduced.

Councillor Howard Woollaston added that he never expected or anticipated that when the Timelord 2 report went to Executive it would have been controversial and that he was unprepared for the scrutiny. He said that Nick Carter had given assurances to all the concerns raised and he was happy to support the report wholeheartedly.

Councillor Adrian Abbs questioned the Green impact and effect on CO2 emissions and whether the distances between Market Street and Shaw House were taken into account as more Council staff may use their cars to travel between the two locations. He stated that this may not be the case but that he was merely trying to demonstrate some of the assumptions the report presented.

Councillors Lynne Doherty, James Cole and Gareth Hurley all said they fully supported the report. Councillor Cole stated that nothing in the call-in would make him say no to the report and that the new CEO had approved the concept if Timelord 2 so he didn't believe

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it should be delayed. Councillor Hurley said that staff retention and recruitment could be an issue within the Council if they failed to act swiftly.

Councillor Lee Dillon reiterated what Councillor Abbs said in terms of assumptions and that residents of West Berkshire should be at the core of this paper; no evidence had been shown that this would be the case. There was no process mapping, backed up with core data that could be seen or verified and breeches in confidentiality and data protection had likely already occurred but just had not been reported.

Councillor Steve Masters agreed with Councillor Dillon that the report contained many assumptions; he was also concerned about the lack of communication with Unison and that the Executive had voted this through whilst still in the consultation phase with staff. He said Unison should have been central to this and that any feedback Unison provided should have been taken on board.

Councillor Tony Vickers said he was pleased the call-in mechanism was used on this occasion because there were some reassurances given in the answers received; however, he cautioned about risks to capital with the Council's properties and said he still supported the idea of the delaying Timelord 2, for the new CEO to make the formal decision.

Councillor Alan Law said relevant points around customer satisfaction and project plans had been raised but no one would ever have all the answers. Nick Carter gave assurances that in terms of project management, Joseph Holmes would play an integral part as he worked in HR; and therefore the strategy would be able to move onto implementation. In regards to the Unison comments, he said their suggestions were taken on board and that the staff consultation had been completed prior to Executive, it was actually a second survey that was on-going at the time; however, the results showed that job satisfaction had gone up quite significantly according to the survey.

**Resolved** that Timelord 2 would be accepted and implemented as set out in the report set out at Executive on 15 July 2021.

*(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.48 pm)*

**CHAIRMAN** .....

**Date of Signature** .....