

SCRUTINY COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY, 14 SEPTEMBER 2023

Councillors Present: Carolyne Culver (Chairman), Dominic Boeck (Vice-Chairman), Antony Amirtharaj, Ross Mackinnon, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Christopher Read, Stuart Gourley (Substitute) (In place of Geoff Mayes) and Howard Woollaston (Substitute) (In place of Paul Dick)

Councillors Attending Remotely: Councillor Iain Cottingham (Executive Portfolio Holder: Finance and Corporate Services)

Also Present: DCI Emily Evans, Paul Coe (Executive Director - People), Joseph Holmes (Executive Director - Resources), Gordon Oliver (Principal Policy Officer - Democratic Services and Scrutiny) and Vicky Phoenix (Principal Policy Officer - Scrutiny)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Paul Dick, Councillor Geoff Mayes, Councillor Martha Vickers, Supt Helen Kenny and Nigel Lynn

PART I

18. Minutes

The Minutes of the meetings held on 20 June 2023 and 17 July 2023 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

19. Actions from previous Meetings

Members noted the updates on actions from the previous meetings.

In relation to the Call-In of the Executive Decision on Newbury Sports Hub (revised costs and permission to sign the Development Management Agreement), it was noted that the Commission had asked for costs to be provided. Officers had confirmed that a report would go to Executive in November, and that this would not come back to the Scrutiny Commission, which was the correct process.

The Chairman had attended the meeting of the Executive on 6 July 2023 where the Scrutiny Commission's recommendations in relation to the call-in had been presented. She had read out a statement to say that she was unhappy with the report, which she felt conflated the content of the call-in with the Scrutiny Commission resolution. The report had not been approved by her nor the Executive Portfolio Holder, and it was requested that this be addressed for future reports from the Scrutiny Commission. Also, she requested that where multiple officers contributed to a report, all names should be included on the report, or it should be changed to the most senior officer who signed it off.

Members noted that Mr Alan Pearce had written to the Leader, Scrutiny Commission Chairman and Chief Executive seeking reimbursement of his legal costs for the judicial review. The Western Area Planning Committee had been told that the Sports Hub would be a replacement for the Faraday Road facility, but District Planning Committee had been told that it would not be a replacement. Two reports to Executive had indicated it was a replacement, but at the Judicial Review, the Council had stated that it was not a replacement. The Chairman indicated that it was the role of the Scrutiny Commission to hold the Executive to account and to be transparent.

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It was noted that there was still money in the Capital Budget for the Sports Hub and planning permission was extant. It was suggested that the Commission may wish to review this matter again after the next meeting of the Executive and call witnesses as part of that review. A previous call-in request in January 2022 had asked for a Task and Finish Group to be set up to review the Sports Hub. The Chairman indicated that she would discuss this with Councillor Lee Dillon, who had been one of Members who had submitted that call-in request.

The Chairman indicated that she would be briefed by officers on the Executive report on the Sports Hub, and she undertook to share any figures about costs incurred with the other Members of the Commission and give them the opportunity to provide feedback.

20. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

21. Petitions

There were no petitions to be received at the meeting.

22. Crime and Disorder Committee - Community Safety Update

Paul Coe (Interim Executive Director – People) and DCI Emily Evans (Thames Valley Police) presented the Community Safety Update (Agenda Item 6).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Residents wanted 20 mph speed limits in Eastbury and Lambourn High Street, and to reduce the speed limit to 40 mph on sections of the B4000, but there was opposition from Thames Valley Police (TVP). Members also asked about enforcement of speeding and traffic offences.
- It was confirmed that the Traffic Team was shared with Hampshire Police. Although they did carry out enforcement, it was more challenging for them to cover villages. Neighbourhood Teams also carried out enforcement on occasions. The Police could respond to local concerns about safety by campaigning for reductions in speed limits and Members were encouraged to contact their local sergeant. The Police also supported community speed watch initiatives.
- Members highlighted ongoing drugs problems in Lambourn.
- It was explained that the Police relied on local intelligence, particularly in smaller villages. Sharing information allowed them to target particular areas. Patrols were being stepped up in parts of Hungerford in response to local issues with drugs.
- Members requested details of officers in the local neighbourhood teams.

Action: DCI Evans to provide details of neighbourhood officers.

- Speeding issues on A339 Sandleford Link were highlighted as a concern and there had been a recent fatality there. Also, issues with speeding were highlighted on Lambourn Road and Grove Road. Members asked about the use of speed enforcement vans.
- It was confirmed that TVP did not use speed enforcement vans, but they did undertake patrols. This was reliant on having the right number of officers. Due to the uplift in officers, the recent focus had been on supporting front-line teams.
- It was noted that the Home Secretary had said that every theft should be investigated, but the Chair of the Police Federation had indicated that officers were “stretched

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beyond human limits". Members asked if TVP had sufficient resources and sought assurance that local thefts would be investigated.

- TVP stated that all burglaries to dwellings were attended by Police officers. Where possible, the Burglary Team attended in the first instance to collect evidence. A recent burglary in Speen had been linked to a Slough offender who had subsequently been arrested. Statements would always be taken for thefts where there was a witness. TVP used a triage system – lower level offences may have a slower response, but they would always be investigated. Although TVP was stretched, crime levels were manageable.
- Members appreciated the PCSOs in their areas, but asked for greater notice of surveys in future to allow messages to be disseminated within the community.
- Issues were highlighted with young men racing cars on Sunday evenings through Aldermaston ward. This had been raised with TVP previously, but Members had been informed that there was little that could be done. However, Members felt that intelligence could be gathered about their activities to stop this activity.
- Members were encouraged to report offences as they occurred. If vehicle descriptions could be reported to officers then they could act quickly to disrupt activity. TVP also had access to automatic number plate cameras, which could help to trace vehicles.
- A question was asked about how frequently 'ask for Angela' was used by women locally.
- This was not thought to have been used locally. Although some sexual offences did occur, victims tended to seek help in other ways. 'Ask for Angela' had been tested locally and the test had been successful.
- Members asked if there had been a rise in shoplifting connected to the rising cost of living.
- It was confirmed that shoplifting had increased and this was thought to be linked to the rising cost of living. Officers were unable to attend as easily as in the past due to lower numbers, but responded where they could. TVP was working closely with key retail partners. Larger retailers often had their own security.
- It was noted that nationally, the number of speeding convictions had doubled, but Members felt that the uplift in offences may be even higher. Information was sought as to local trends for all categories of motoring offences and what enforcement action was being taken by Thames Valley Police. Members also asked about the number of offences that resulted in a court summons.
- TVP indicated that data could be analysed by offence type and disposal (e.g., ticket, court summons, etc.).
- Members asked about the recording of violent crimes and if they were broken down by demographics.
- It was confirmed that demographic information was captured when recording violent crime data, allowing it to be analysed in different ways.
- In relation to house closures, Members asked if this simply displaced the problem to another location.
- This was considered an effective intervention, which allowed individuals to be monitored more closely. Also moving them out of the area away from friends / associates limited their opportunity to travel back in and commit crime.

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- Concerns were expressed about safety around the weir near Victoria Park in Newbury and a recent death that had occurred there.
- It was confirmed that there were no suspicious circumstances in the recent death. The water flow was very fast near the weir, and it was difficult to get out if a person fell in. Signs and barriers had been put up to improve safety at key locations, but it was difficult to make such a large area safe.

Resolved to note the report.

23. Revenue Financial Performance Report - Quarter One 2023/24

Joseph Holmes (Executive Director – Resources) presented the Revenue Financial Performance Report for Quarter One 2023/24 (Agenda Item 7).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Members asked for clarification about the financial pressures facing the Planning Service.
- It was explained that fees did not cover the cost of processing planning applications, resulting in a subsidy to the taxpayer of around £5 million per year nationally. Planning fees were set by central government and a bill was going through Parliament seeking to increase them, but this had been delayed. The uplift in fees had been expected earlier in the year, so an in-year financial pressure had resulted.
- Concerns were expressed that the Council may not have sufficient funds to achieve its net zero carbon emissions ambitions, and it was suggested that the wording in the Environmental Impacts section of the report should be amended to reflect this.
- Officers felt that the short-term environmental impact related to this particular paper would not affect the Council's net zero ambitions. This would be more relevant for the budget reports for 2024/25.
- Members asked what assets the Council was looking to sell, and whether care homes may be sold.
- It was stated that all assets were under review. Assets not currently in use could be realised more quickly. Any proposals would require Executive approval. It was confirmed that the sale of care homes was not being considered at this time.
- There was a question about the impact of the People Directorate's recruitment and retention programme.
- Officers indicated that this was starting to be effective with an increase in the number of permanent staff and a reduction in agency staff. Monthly agency spend with Commensura had fallen from around £750,000 per month to circa £570,000. There had been positive articles in the trade press about the benefits of working at West Berkshire Council. The change was considered to be a step in the right direction, but more work was needed.
- Members noted that the biggest overspend was in Children's and Family Services. There was little that could be done to reduce placement and legal costs, which meant that agency costs had to be the key focus. Members asked what factors were proving attractive in recruiting permanent staff.
- 26 agency staff had transferred to permanent roles in the last four months. The new Talent Attraction Business Partner was felt to be instrumental in encouraging new staff to join the Council. Officers also highlighted that the Council was trying to grow

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its fostering and adoption offer, since this was cheaper than residential homes, with better outcomes for children.

- Members asked about recruitment outside the Commensura contract.
- Spend on agency staff was around £12 million in 2022/23, of which nearly £10 million was through the Commensura contract. Reasons for recruiting through other providers included: the need to recruit to specialist posts; and the need to recruit rapidly during the pandemic or in response to unexpected changes in government policy. The Financial Review Panel (FRP) was key to managing agency spend and figures would be better in Q2 and Q3.
- Members asked about the level of inflation provided for within the revenue budget.
- It was explained that different levels of inflation were used for different elements. Contracts were usually linked to CPI or RPI at particular points in the year (e.g., Waste Contract used the RPIX figure in January, which was 14.2%). The Council had greater control over non-contract spend (e.g., Adult Social Care was below 3%). Energy inflation had risen steeply, but it was now falling. It was noted that the staff pay deal had yet to be agreed.
- There was a question as to why all pressures relating to demand-led services had not been built into the budget.
- The pressures mostly related to Adult Social Care. The model produced a wide assessment of the best and worst case scenarios. The budget was set just below the mid-point, because inflation had been forecast to fall quite quickly. However, it had not fallen as quickly as Bank of England (BoE) / Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) forecasts. The budget had been set through discussion with the political administration at that time.
- Members asked what would have happened if the Council had not taken the step of introducing the FRP to reduce spending.
- It was confirmed that the overspend forecast would have been higher, but it was hard to quantify the level of impact, other than in relation to agency spending. The approach was designed to prioritise essential spending and protect vulnerable residents.
- Members challenged whether the modelling and budget setting processes were fit for purpose.
- It was acknowledged that a £7 million overspend would use nearly all of the Council's general fund reserves. The number of children in care had increased unexpectedly from 166 at the start of last year to 209 in June 2023. Some of these placements cost hundreds of thousands of pounds. There had also been an increase in the number of children with Health and Care Plans, which had driven cost pressures in the Education Service. The Council had traditionally operated with low levels of reserves and tight financial controls. The current pressures were seen as a 'perfect storm' of factors coming together. It was highlighted that other councils were facing similar pressures.
- Given that numbers in care had been rising for years, this suggested that a different way of modelling demand was needed.
- Officers indicated that the modelling results were based on the data available at the time the budget was set. The model produced best and worst case scenarios. However, numbers of children in care were at a historical high and long-term trends were much lower, so the increase had not been predicted.

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- It was suggested that preventative measures should be put in place.
- Members noted that forecasts were rarely accurate and could not foresee unprecedented levels of volatility. It was accepted that the model was flawed, but it was the best tool available.
- With regards to budgeting, it was noted that decisions about future changes in inflation were made in relation to the BoE / OBR forecasts. There had been no secrecy in how the budget had been put together. Opposition Members had had the chance to proposed amendments in relation to the budget last March, but none had been sought.
- It was highlighted that the FRP brought additional scrutiny and oversight to the process of spending public money. The Council had acted quickly when the projected overspend had been identified. Every week, proposed spending was reviewed line by line. Agency workers had been reduced from 178 to 154. There had been issues with some old invoices emerging and some spend without supporting purchase orders, but financial discipline was now being imposed. In relation to the forecast spend, it was accepted that some additional sensitivity analysis could have been carried out and there was a commitment to look at this for next year's budget. It was confirmed that the Council would work with its auditors to ensure that hit its zero overspend target. There was lots still to do in terms of understanding what was driving cost increases. For example, in relation to early help, it was highlighted that West Berkshire had fewer officers than in Bracknell and Wokingham who were working to reduce the number of children who needed to go into care.
- Members asked if the recruitment freeze applied across all levels of the Council. Also, there was a question about recruitment in other local authorities and whether small unitary authorities struggled to attract staff who could earn more elsewhere.
- It was confirmed that the FRP considered all recruitment requests. There was not a freeze on recruitment and roles were being advertised. It was accepted that some staff left to get more money elsewhere, but equally West Berkshire sometimes recruited on the basis that it paid higher salaries. The issue of staff leaving to seek more pay was not thought to be any worse than in previous years.
- Clarification was sought whether the number of agency staff had reduced just in Children's Services, or across the board. It was confirmed that the reduction related to all agency staff.
- Members asked if the reduction in agency staff would lead to an increase in children's social workers' caseloads.
- It was stated that there was a push to make agency workers permanent members of staff and there had been some success with this. Savings were not being made by increasing caseloads. Although gaps were accepted in some services, this was not the case with children's social workers.
- It was stressed that children were only taken into care when necessary. West Berkshire appeared to be an outlier compared to other local authorities and Members asked if officers understood why.
- Officers indicated that timely, proactive intervention could help families from reaching crisis and children being taken into care. Other local authorities had a broader / more robust / better resources provision. There was a question about how best to invest in the service. The Council had sought expert external advice. This had suggested that there was no single solution, but lots of small changes should have the desired effect.

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- Members asked for the Q1 deficit figures.
- The Q1 figures were highlighted in the appendix.
- There was a challenge around whether the Council should run its own care homes, or if there was a more economic way of working.
- It was explained that a Strategy Board had been held with Members to review this and further work was planned to consider the pros and cons of different approaches.
- Members asked if the LGA or the government was suggesting that local authorities should be looking at a range of scenarios (e.g., the equal pay claim faced by Birmingham City Council).
- The Executive report included details of what would happen if spend was to exceed the level of reserves. The Council would seek a capitalisation directive from the government. Other local authorities had done this and had had them approved (e.g., Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole). Birmingham and several other local authorities had issued S114 notices, which stopped all non-essential spending. Ideally, the Council would not get to either of these positions. A break even position was recognised as difficult to achieve, but as a minimum, the Council needed to ensure that the overspend was greatly reduced. Government had recently consulted on their proposals for best value and the next step for councils to consider.
- It was suggested that rising unemployment could affect residents' ability to pay their Council Tax and officers were asked if this had been considered.
- It was confirmed that Council Tax and Business Rates collection rates were holding up well, but this was recognised as something that needed to be monitored, and it was discussed as part of the budget setting process.
- Members noted the restrictions on overtime, but asked about emergencies (e.g., social care).
- Officers indicated that there were exceptions to the overtime ban.
- It was highlighted that officers may find it difficult to take time off in lieu if they were having to cover for vacant posts.
- It was confirmed that this was considered by the FRP and where possible measures were put in place to ensure that staff worked their contracted hours. This was being monitored to ensure that the Council was complying with health and safety legislation.
- There was a question about the potential to address rising home to school transport costs.
- It was highlighted that children with Health and Care Plans often had associated transport needs. Costs had gone up by 15% in the last year and accounted for around £4m per year. A review had been commissioned to identify potential savings.
- Clarification was sought as to what was involved with seeking capital directives.
- Officers indicated that government would ask questions around benchmarking of costs, auditing of accounts, levels of reserves, sources of pressures, etc. The Minister would issue a ' minded to' capitalisation directive of £Xm and the Council would be subjected to a review through the Department for Housing and Levelling Up. Subject to the outcome of the review, the Minister would then issue the capitalisation directive. The Council would need to repay this through additional capital receipts or there would be an additional charge on top of interest rates charged by the Public Works Loan Board.

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- Members asked about lessons learned through the FRP.
- There was a strict rule around no payments without purchase orders, which had been an issue with some agency staff. Most expenditure requests were approved, but some were rejected, or further information was requested. Officers were getting used to providing supporting evidence for spend. It had been a journey for the FRP and for officers. It had helped to reinforce that money was tight and it was suggested that this may become 'business as usual'.

RESOLVED to note the report.

24. Capital Financial Performance Report - Quarter One 2023/24

Joseph Holmes (Executive Director – Resources) presented the Capital Financing Report for Financial Year 2023/24 Quarter One (Agenda Item 8).

The following points were raised in the debate:

- Members asked how the Council's borrowing to income ratio compared to those of other local authorities.
- It was noted that the Officer for Local Government (Oflog) had this information on its website. West Berkshire was towards the top of the fourth quartile or bottom of the third quartile. Some of the local authorities towards the top of the list were those who had featured in the news in recent weeks.
- Clarification was sought as to why the Council was 'overborrowed'.
- Officers indicated that the Council had not undertaken borrowing in the last four years apart from the Community Bond. This was because a number of schemes had been delayed. Also, during Covid, the Council had a strong cash balance, which prevented the need to borrow. Delaying long-term borrowing was beneficial, since current interest rates were higher than they had been recently.
- A question was asked about the extent to which borrowing costs were exposed to shocks in the financial system.
- It was confirmed that borrowing rates were fixed at low interest rates. The Council did undertake some short-term borrowing for cash flow purposes. In the longer term, interest rates were forecast to fall and the Council did not want to be tied into higher rates in the long-term. It was noted that some local authorities were overexposed to higher short-term rates.
- It was noted that no reprofiling had been requested. Members asked if there was a cut-off date for requests in order not to lose the funding.
- It was explained that the Council had moved to a 10 year capital strategy, which offered additional flexibility for the capital programme. Requests for reprofiling had to be made before year end. Requests were approved through the Executive and would come through the Scrutiny Commission.
- Members asked about the London Road Industrial Estate (LRIE) scheme.
- Officers indicated that some funding had been received for the LRIE scheme from the Local Enterprise Partnership and this would be used before the Council's own funds. Securing external grants was a common reason for reprofiling spend.
- A question was asked about why funds had been reprofiled for Brookfields School and whether this would have an impact on SEND children.

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- It was confirmed that the school was in a more positive position with respect to its own capital reserves, so there had been a discussion about who was going to pay for what elements. As a result, the Council's spend had been pushed back.
- Members noted that the SEND Strategy Infrastructure Delivery had been pushed back and asked why.
- Officers indicated that options were being considered for this, including delivering better value through the government. However, the Council was committed to spend in this area.
- Concern was expressed about deferring IT spend, and Members sought reassurance around security patching and ongoing support.
- Officers confirmed that there support would be provided. It was highlighted that there had been significant investment in IT. In some cases, underspends were because projects had come in under-budget. It was stressed that IT security risks were near the top of the corporate risk register and the Executive Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate Services had regular briefings from the Acting Head of IT. Reassurance was provided that the Council would not jeopardise IT security by postponing capital spend.
- It was noted that the spend on Theale Railway Station had been reprofiled, however, work at the station was progressing well and the scheme was forecast to be completed by the winter. Officers were asked to double check the need for funds to be reprofiled.

Action: Joseph Holmes to confirm Theale Station project timeline with Councillor Ross Mackinnon.

- A question was asked about what resources were required to deliver the project listed in paragraph 7.1 of the report.
- Officers indicated that this related to project resource – officers were currently acting up or had been promoted, leaving gaps. The Council was seeking to recruit to the vacant project posts.

RESOLVED to note the report.

25. Appointment of Task and Finish Groups

The Commission considered appointments to task and finish groups and any associated terms of reference (Agenda Item 9)

It was noted that Members of the Covid and Recovery Task and Finish Group would be:

- Councillor Dominic Boeck
- Councillor Carolyne Culver
- Councillor Patrick Clark
- Councillor Paul Dick
- Councillor Erik Pattenden

Councillor Dominic Boeck volunteered to act as Chairman of the Task and Finish Group.

It was noted that the Task Group was originally scheduled to meet in September, but this had to be pushed back to October for various reasons. Conversations had started with officers regarding evidence for the first session.

Action: Gordon Oliver to liaise with Councillor Dominic Boeck regarding the Covid and Recovery Task and Finish Group.

26. Health Scrutiny Committee Update

The Chairman read out the following update from Councillor Martha Vickers on the work of the Health Scrutiny Committee (Agenda Item 10):

"On Tuesday this week, the Health Scrutiny Committee met for the second time this municipal year. The two substantive items on the agenda were Access to Primary Care and Continuing Healthcare.

"Representatives from Primary Care and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) presented papers and answered Members questions. The key issues discussed regarding Access to Primary Care included the Capacity and Access Improvement Plan, the use of Additional Roles, and communications with the public. The Continuing Healthcare item focussed on the peer review report and the ICB updated Members on the progress with the All Age Continuing Care Transformation Plan.

"There were also updates provided by the ICB and Healthwatch West Berkshire.

"The next Health Scrutiny Committee is on 12 December 2023. On the agenda will be children's mental health and emotional wellbeing, and maternal mental health. The Health Scrutiny Committee is in the process of determining the work programme for meetings in 2024. Members are welcome to put forward suggestions for items to be considered in the work programme."

Members were advised to contact Councillor Vickers directly if they had any questions about the work of the Health Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED to note the update.

27. West Berkshire Council Executive Forward Plan 1 August 2023 to 30 November 2023

The Commission considered the West Berkshire Executive Forward Plan for the period covering 1 August to 30 November 2023 (Agenda Item 11).

There was a question about what constituted a key decision. This was a decision that would have a significant impact on more than one ward, and / or a spend of £500,000 or more.

Resolved that the Forward Plan be noted.

28. Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission Work Programme

The Commission considered its work programme for the 2023/24 municipal year (Agenda Item 12).

Members noted the following:

- A proposal had come from Corporate Board for the Scrutiny Commission to review the Council's proposals to improve Recruitment of Foster Carers.
- A work planning session was planned for 19 September with Members of the Executive, senior officers, and Scrutiny Commission Members. This would make use of the PAPER methodology.
- Members highlighted the Libraries Service as a topic for review. It was noted that the service was stretched because some parish councils were not contributing financially. The requested contributions represented a significant proportion of the parish councils' precepts, and contributions were seen as double taxation. Some parishes had contributed to secure the mobile library service. It was noted that data was

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available about the number of residents in each parish who used the libraries. Members were discouraged from solely focusing on parish contributions. It was suggested that a minimum service could be to retain Newbury Library and close the others, but that would be unacceptable. Members noted that the service was last reviewed in 2017.

Action: Gordon Oliver to discuss the issues raised in relation to the Libraries Service with the Culture and Libraries Manager.

- Residents had highlighted concerns about Royal Mail. Some areas were only getting post once a week. It was noted that the Royal Mail could be asked to attend, but could not be compelled to do so.

Action: Gordon Oliver to make an initial approach to the Royal Mail regarding attendance at a future meeting of the Scrutiny Commission.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.40 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature