

# SCRUTINY COMMISSION

## MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 17 JULY 2024

**Councillors Present:** Carolyne Culver (Chairman), Antony Amirtharaj, Jeremy Cottam, Ross Mackinnon, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Christopher Read, Richard Somner (Substitute) (In place of Dominic Boeck) and Joanne Stewart (Substitute) (In place of Paul Dick)

**Also Present:** Nigel Lynn (Chief Executive), Joseph Holmes (Executive Director - Resources), Jon Winstanley (Service Director (Environment)), Kofi Adu-Gyamfi (Service Lead - Climate Change), Daniel Warne (Waste Manager) and Catalin Bogos (Performance Research Consultation Manager), Gordon Oliver (Democratic Services) and Thomas Radbourne (Zoom Host)

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting:** Councillors Dominic Boeck and Paul Dick

### PART I

#### 3. Minutes

The Minutes of the meetings held on 25 April 2024 and 2 May 2024 were approved as a true and correct records and signed by the Chairman.

#### 4. Actions from previous Minutes

Members noted the updates on actions from the previous meetings.

Comments were made in relation to the following items:

- **122** – The Transport Advisory Group had been due to consider the Bus Strategy in July, but the meeting had been cancelled due to the election and so it would be considered at the next meeting in October.
- **131** – Members asked about preparation of the Section 19 report. Jon Winstanley undertook to circulate the timeline to Members.
- **132** – Officers had confirmed that a report on the Council's response to the recent floods was being prepared.
- **146/150** – The previous version of the Forward Plan had shown a report on CIL without a date. This was a duplicate item - the report had gone to Executive in May 2024.

**Action: Timescales for preparation of the Section 19 report to be circulated to Members.**

#### 5. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Jeremy Cottam declared an interest in Agenda Item 6, by virtue of the fact that he was a member of Thatcham Refillables. As his interest was a personal or other registrable interest, but not a disclosable pecuniary interest, he determined to remain to take part in the debate and vote on the matter.

#### 6. Petitions

There were no petitions to be received at the meeting.

## 7. Waste Strategy

Councillor Stuart Gourley (Executive Portfolio Holder: Climate Action, Recycling and Biodiversity) and Daniel Warne (Waste Manager) presented the draft Waste Strategy (Agenda Item 6).

Members asked if paper got wet whether that affecting recycling and whether the crates should have lids to keep contents dry. Officers confirmed that wet paper was not a problem, other than increasing haulage weights, but Veolia had not raised this as a concern.

The issue of overflowing dog waste bins was raised. It was suggested that bins should have QR codes to make it easier for users to report when they needed emptying. It was explained that dog bins were the responsibility of the Countryside Team.

It was suggested that educational material may help to increase food waste recycling. Officers confirmed that educational material had been included when the food waste bins had first been provided, but further information would be sent out in future. The most recent data showed that 59% of households took part in the food waste recycling scheme.

Member praised the repair cafés, which appeared to be working well.

It was suggested that some residents struggled to find compostable food caddy liners. It was confirmed that these were available from supermarkets, as well as online retailers such as Amazon. Also, residents could put loose food waste in the caddies. The Council had previously given away food waste bags via local libraries, and further giveaways were being considered.

It was highlighted that when Veolia collected food waste, bags were thrown in a large wheelie bin, leading to unpleasant smells. Concern was expressed that staff did not have suitable PPE. Officers confirmed that checks were made to ensure that Veolia met all relevant safety standards.

It was noted that just one of the options listed on page 72 of the agenda pack included free garden waste collections and that this was only anticipated to increase recycling rates from 52% to 53%. Members asked if the Administration was still committed to removing the charge. It was confirmed that the manifesto pledge was to phase out the charge, but there was no specific date for this.

It was suggested that some households would struggle to cope if black bin collection frequencies moved from fortnightly to once every three or four weeks, and that this would be unpopular with residents. Members asked how many other local authorities had already made this change. It was confirmed that several Councils had done this, including Bracknell Forest Council. It was stressed that this was just one of the options being considered. It was recognised that this would not work for everyone, and exceptions could be made where households needed more frequent collections.

It was noted that when this had been discussed at Environment Advisory Group, it had been misreported in the media, and it was stressed that this was just one of a number of options being considered.

Members asked if burnt-out vehicles could be removed more quickly than at present. Officers confirmed that they sought to remove vehicles as quickly as possible, but they had to comply with relevant legislation.

It was noted that the fly-tipping section of the strategy had not yet been completed. Officers confirmed that this would be in the next draft.

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It was highlighted that the colours used in the strategy document made it difficult to read. It was confirmed that it would be checked by the Comms Team prior to publication.

Members asked if affluent areas such as West Berkshire produced more waste than other areas and if benchmarking had been undertaken. Officers felt that there was a link, but confirmed that benchmarking would be undertaken to confirm this.

Members thanked those who took part in community litter picking and suggested that its impacts should be monitored and reported. It was noted that the Council's equipment was well-used, but some communities had their own equipment, so there was a need to work with partner organisations to measure impacts. Officers confirmed that they would look at how measurement and reporting could be improved.

Members asked if the 60% recycling target was sufficiently stretching and how this compared to other local authorities. Also, Members asked if achievement of the targets required a move to four-weekly bin collections. It was confirmed that a 60% recycling rate would be challenging to achieve and would put the Council in the top five local authorities nationally.

It was stressed that the top performing local authorities had introduced strong incentives for residents to recycle and throw away less. In other areas, public concerns before a move to less frequent black bin collections largely disappeared following the change. Push and pull factors would be needed in order to achieve recycling targets.

It was noted that Reading Borough Council had introduced smaller bins. Members asked if that had been considered for West Berkshire. Officers confirmed that it had, but reducing the frequency of collections had been shown to be more effective. Also, this was the cheaper and more environmentally friendly option, since the Council did not need to pay for new bins or dispose of existing ones.

Members stressed the importance of education programmes in schools. Experience suggested that younger children often brought family members to community litter-picks, and the primary school curriculum appeared to be effective in engaging children. It was noted that a recent waste vehicle livery competition had attracted over 500 entries and had proved an effective way to engage local schools. Also, the Waste Team had a dedicated officer who undertook educational visits to schools.

It was suggested that having local litter picking kits may make it easier for residents to take part. Officers undertook to consider whether this could be incorporated into the strategy.

Members highlighted that less frequent grass-cutting meant that litter was often hidden, and it was suggested that litter-picks be linked to cutting schedules.

The Great British Spring Clean was welcomed, but it was suggested that additional events be organised at other times throughout the year.

It was noted that the mini-recycling centres were well used, and it was suggested that if more could be provided, they would help with recycling of large cardboard boxes. It was confirmed that the cardboard recycling facility at Tilehurst would not be replaced following a recent fire. However, if large cardboard boxes were folded to a size no larger than a wheelie bin, then they would be collected from the kerbside. It was also confirmed that CCTV would be installed at recycling centres to try to address anti-social behaviour.

Members asked if it would be possible to have soft plastic collection in town centres. Officers confirmed that local authorities would be required to collect this from the kerbside by 2027.

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There was some discussion about why garden and food waste were collected separately when they were subsequently mixed at the depot. It was explained that food waste was collected weekly, but garden waste was collected fortnightly, and the contract was specified and resourced on that basis. Research had shown that separate collections resulted in increased volumes being recycled. Also, separate food waste collections allowed households to see how much they were throwing away and so they were more likely to modify their behaviour. If food waste was processed via anaerobic digestion, it would generate energy from the resulting bio-methane. This was something that the Council was considering for the future.

Proposals to use lids or nets for kerbside recycling boxes were noted. Members felt that lids were preferable, since nets posed a risk to wildlife.

Concerns were highlighted about the Continental contract. It was suggested that if parish councils pulled out of the contract, this may have implications in terms of economies of scale. Officers confirmed that the contract was procured through the Countryside Team. Bin collection was a relatively small part of their operations, so the impacts of parish councils pulling out would be minimal.

### **Actions:**

- **Suggest use of QR codes on dog bins to the Countryside Team.**
- **Waste Team to develop additional educational materials to promote food waste recycling.**
- **Ask Comms Team to check the accessibility of the Waste Strategy, including colour contrast.**
- **Undertake benchmarking with other local authorities to check link between affluence and waste volume.**
- **Consider how measurement and reporting of community litter-picking could be improved, and consider increased provision of community litter-picking kits.**
- **Consider synchronising litter-picks with grass-cutting schedules.**

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

## **8. 2023/24 Performance Report Year End**

Catalin Bogos (Performance Research and Consultation Manager) presented the 2023/24 Performance Report Year End (Agenda Item 7).

There was some discussion about the pros and cons of the new report format.

It was noted that the report did not contain detailed performance information, but instead required several clicks to navigate to the online portal. It was suggested that this was neither intuitive nor transparent. It was not possible to print out the information or read it off-line. It was suggested that the administration was 'hiding behind clicks'.

An opposing view was put forward suggesting that the old report was too long and inaccessible and the new system was an improvement, being transparent and nicely presented in a graphical format. It was suggested that it would be unlikely that anyone would want to print it off.

Officers suggested that the performance portal was easier to find than a report within a set of committee papers. The portal could be accessed via a computer, tablet or phone and included more detail than could be provided within a report.

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It was recognised that some people preferred digital communications, while others preferred printed reports. It was suggested that a longer report be made available in future that could be downloaded if required.

It was suggested that the 'performance in pictures' on page 109 of the agenda did not provide an adequate summary of the Council's performance and was just 'spin'. It was suggested that this should be further developed for future reports.

It was noted that areas of poor performance were clearly shown. The report provided a high level summary and allowed for more in depth interrogation via the performance portal. It was suggested that the next report should show how areas of poor performance were being addressed, since these were of particular interest to the Scrutiny Commission.

Members queried the overall status of particular categories, since one segment was shown as green despite three out of five elements being red. It was suggested that the outer circle be amended to provide some indication as to the weighting of the components.

It was suggested that previous years' data should be included in Appendix D.

It was noted that the Department for Transport had requested that consultation be carried out on the proposed pedestrianisation of Northbrook Street prior to implementation of the experimental traffic regulation order. Opposition Members had previously advocated this approach.

Members asked about the impacts of the Housing First scheme in terms of tackling rough sleeping. Also, concern was expressed about the number of empty Sovereign Network Group properties and the number that were being sold because they needed extensive renovation. Officers explained that there were initiatives for the Council to use its own assets to provide additional accommodation. Also, action had been delayed due to resourcing issues.

Members asked about the delay to the Local Transport Plan. It was confirmed that formal guidance was awaited from central government. The target date had been pushed back to March 2025.

Members expressed disappointment that the Executive Portfolio Holder was not present to answer questions.

Members noted that Catalin Bogos was leaving the Council and thanked him for his contributions.

### **Actions:**

- **Future reporting to include a detailed downloadable/printable report alongside the performance portal.**
- **Develop the 'performance in pictures' infographic to provide a more comprehensive summary of the Council's performance.**
- **Provide historic data within the influencer measure dashboard.**
- **Amend the outer ring of the sunburst diagram to more accurately reflect performance.**
- **Chairman of Scrutiny Commission to discuss issues relating to Housing First and empty homes with the relevant Executive Portfolio Holder.**

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

**9. Revenue Report Outturn 2023/24**

Councillor Iain Cottingham (Executive Portfolio Holder: Finance and Resources) and Joseph Holmes (Executive Director – Resources) presented the Revenue Report Outturn 2023/24 (Agenda Item 8).

It was noted that the report related to the previous administration's budget and it was acknowledged that the Council was currently in a difficult position.

Members congratulated the Executive on reducing agency staff spending. It was confirmed that savings factored in all oncosts associated with in-house staff.

Members asked about anticipated returns on transformation activity. It was confirmed that this information was provided in the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts report that went to Council in February each year. One example was the use of enhanced recruitment/retention payments in Children and Family Services. This had reduced agency staff from 34% to 12-14%. Other examples included the repurposing of assets such as Walnut Close and digitalisation. Reassurance was provided that a thorough process was in place to calculate return on investment of transformation activity.

A question was asked about the future of the Council's own care homes. It was confirmed that various scenarios were being investigated, including for alternative providers to provide care.

Members asked about the decision at Schools Forum to clawback funding from maintained schools to help fund overspends in SEND/high needs block. It had been confirmed that this decision could not be called in, but Members were concerned that funds raised independently by schools may be at risk. Members also asked whether other services could be subject to in-year clawback of funds.

It was confirmed that clawback was related to dedicated schools grant payments, and that funds raised by PTAs should be ring-fenced in a separate account and therefore would not be subject to clawback. Other clawbacks would depend on the terms of the government grants, which would be for the new government to determine. Some of these were due to end shortly (e.g., Household Support Fund). It was confirmed that Adult Social Care was mostly funded through the general fund rather than specific grants.

Members asked if schools would have to make further in-year savings. It was confirmed that funds clawed back had been accumulated over a number of previous financial years. Schools had been requested to provide evidence of their funding priorities and where allocations had been made as part of their budget-setting process.

Members asked if the headteachers of schools affected by the clawback had been allowed to vote in the decision at Schools Forum. It was confirmed that only Members of maintained schools had been allowed to vote on the matter, but schools affected by the clawback had not been permitted to take part in the vote. It was suggested that this was unfair, since schools that were not affected by the clawback had an incentive to support it. It was suggested that the way the Schools Forum was constituted and its decision making processes should be reviewed.

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

**10. Capital Financing Performance Report Outturn 2023/24**

Councillor Iain Cottingham (Executive Portfolio Holder: Finance and Resources) and Joseph Holmes (Executive Director – Resources) presented the Revenue Report Outturn 2023/24 (Agenda Item 9).

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Members welcomed the categorisation of capital expenditure and reprofiling based on the Council Strategy priorities. Further detail was requested about the impacts of reprofiling of £12M under business as usual activity, and whether any critical projects would be affected. It was explained that schemes funded by the Local Enterprise Partnership had been delayed, but any changes were reflected in the Performance Report.

The Commission noted that capital expenditure often had to be reprofiled. While it was frustrating to see projects delayed, this was mostly due to resource constraints and external factors. Members felt that any issues had been well-explained.

Concern was expressed about the Theale Railway Station project. It was suggested that the new government should be lobbied to ensure that it stayed on track.

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

### 11. Annual Scrutiny Report 2023/24

The Chairman presented the Annual Scrutiny Report 2023/24 (Agenda Item 10).

It was noted that the report was due to be presented at Council on 18 July and Members were encouraged to speak to the item at that meeting should they wish to do so.

Members thanked the Chairman for her work over the last year and thanked the officers who had responded to requests for information.

The Commission welcomed having information on Scrutiny and Health Scrutiny in one place, with links to particular meetings.

It was suggested that Members may wish to consider alternative formats for future annual reports and it was noted that some other local authorities included multi-media content in their reports.

It was noted that the Peer Challenge had recommended more visible leadership of scrutiny, so the Chairman indicated that she would be meeting with the Comms Team to discuss how to promote the work of the Scrutiny Commission.

The Peer Challenge had also recommended that the Scrutiny Commission maintain a log of recommendations to the Executive to allow for tracking of responses and implementation of actions.

Members noted that a paper was due to go to the Constitution Review Task Group about the structure of scrutiny. This would look at scrutiny models adopted in other local authorities.

Councillor Richard Somner proposed to accept the recommendation set out in the report. The motion was seconded by Councillor Erik Pattenden. At the vote, the motion was carried.

**Action: Set up log of recommendations to Executive.**

**RESOLVED** to agree the Annual Scrutiny Report 2023/24 for presentation to Council.

### 12. Appointment of Task and Finish Groups

The Chairman introduced the item on Appointment of Task and Finish Groups (Agenda Item 11).

The Chairman requested nominations for membership of the Sports Hub Task and Finish Group by the end of July. At least three Members were needed, but five would be preferable. The Chairman indicated that she would be happy to Chair the Task and

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Finish Group. Councillors Jeremy Cottam and Chris Read indicated that they would like to be part of the Task and Finish Group.

It was suggested that an additional Liberal Democrat Member and a Conservative Member should be nominated to fill the remaining places.

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

### 13. Task and Finish Group Updates

The Commission considered the Task and Finish Group Updates (Agenda Item 12).

The Chairman read out the update provided by Councillor Paul Dick. This can be viewed on the meeting recording here:

[Scrutiny Commission, Wednesday 17 July 2024 \(youtube.com\)](#)

The Chairman felt that it had been an interesting and worthwhile review.

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

### 14. Health Scrutiny Committee Update

The Commission considered the Health Scrutiny Committee Update (Agenda Item 13).

The Chairman read out the update provided by Councillor Martha Vickers. This can be viewed on the meeting recording here:

[Scrutiny Commission, Wednesday 17 July 2024 - YouTube](#)

**RESOLVED** to note the report.

### 15. West Berkshire Council Forward Plan May to August

The Commission considered the Executive Forward Plan for the period covering May to August 2024 (Agenda Item 14).

Members had no comments on the Forward Plan.

**Resolved that** the Forward Plan be noted.

### 16. Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission Work Programme

The Commission considered the draft Work Programme (Agenda Item 15)

It was suggested that Project Management be considered by a Task and Finish Group that rather than as a single item at the next meeting. Members observed that a large number of public sector projects failed relative to those in the private sector, and so it would be worth devoting more time to this topic.

It was noted that the original intention had been to look at project management of IT contracts, but the brief had been extended to include Faraday Road and consider project management processes in general. It was suggested that Faraday Road should be considered separately from the IT projects.

It was confirmed that officers had not yet started work on writing the report for September.

It was suggested that draft Terms of Reference for the Task and Finish Group could be brought to the next meeting for approval.

Members indicated that project management should be carried out to PRINCE 2 standards, but that did not always happen and different approaches were often used. It

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was suggested that the Task and Finish Group needed to look at whether officers received PRINCE2 training.

In relation to IT projects, it was felt that external influences were a key issue.

Members expressed concerns that the review could lack focus if too much was rolled into the Terms of Reference.

Councillor Erik Pattenden proposed that a Task and Finish Group be established to review the Council’s Project Management Methodology to cover Care Director, iTrent and the Faraday Road Football Ground. This was seconded by Councillor Chris Read. At the vote the motion was carried.

**RESOLVED** that a Task and Finish Group be established to review the Council’s Project Management Methodology to cover Care Director, iTrent and the Faraday Road Football Ground.

The Chairman indicated that she would discuss this with officers and the Executive Portfolio Holder: Transformation and Corporate Programme.

It was suggested that the new Executive Portfolio Holder be briefed for the Community Safety Update item planned for the September meeting.

It was noted that the planned Social Care briefing related to high cost clients.

It was noted that the Governance Committee was also looking at SEND.

A provisional date of 17 October 2024 had been set for the Thames Water and Section 19 flooding report.

It was proposed to hold another work planning session with Executive Members and Corporate Board in September.

**ACTIONS:**

- **Brief the new Executive Portfolio Holder about the Community Safety Update.**
- **Set up a work planning session with Executive Members and Corporate Board.**

**RESOLVED** that the amended work programme be noted.

*(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.03 pm)*

**CHAIRMAN** .....

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