

The amendments to these Minutes can be found in the Minutes of the 30 November 2023 Council

COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON

THURSDAY, 5 OCTOBER 2023

Councillors Present: Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Dominic Boeck, Jeff Brooks, Nick Carter, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Jeremy Cottam (Chairman), Iain Cottingham, Laura Coyle, Carolyne Culver, Paul Dick, Billy Drummond (Vice-Chairman), Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Clive Hooker, Owen Jeffery, Paul Kander, Jane Langford, Janine Lewis, Ross Mackinnon, Alan Macro, David Marsh, Geoff Mayes, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Vicky Poole, Christopher Read, Matt Shakespeare, Richard Somner, Stephanie Steevenson, Joanne Stewart, Louise Sturgess, Clive Taylor, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers and Howard Woollaston

Also Present: Nigel Lynn (Chief Executive), Joseph Holmes (Executive Director - Resources), Paul Coe (Executive Director - People), Clare Lawrence (Executive Director Place • Director & Support), Environment Sarah Clarke (Service Director (Strategy and Governance), Benjamin Ryan (Democratic Services Officer), Sadie Owen (Principal Democratic Services Officer) and David Cook (Clerk). Honorary Aldermen Graham Pask, Tony Linden, Rick Jones and Quinten Webb.

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Lee Dillon and Councillor Adrian Abbs. Honorary Aldermen Graham Jones, Anthony Stansfeld, Adrian Edwards, Gordon Lundie, Keith Chopping, Hilary Cole, Andrew Rowles and Mollie Lock.

Absent: Councillors Dennis Benneyworth and Biyi Oloko.

PART I

21. Chairman's Remarks

The Chairman reported that he had attended the following events since the last Council meeting:

- WBC Citizenship Ceremony
- The High Sheriff's Reception
- The Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service Award Ceremony
- Newbury in Bloom Presentation
- Lord Lieutenant's Awards Ceremony
- The official opening of the Goldwell Park pump (cycle) track
- West Berkshire Macmillan event

The Vice-Chairman had also attended the United Nations Flag Raising in the Chairman's absence.

22. Presentations

The Chairman made a long service presentation to the Vice-Chairman Councillor Billy Brummond for 20 years service as a Councillor.

23. Minutes

The Minutes of the extra ordinary meeting held on 20 July 2023 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Minutes of the ordinary meeting held on 20 July 2023 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the addition from Councillor Culver

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

that with regards to the Hedgehog Petition she mentioned that the country was in the bottom 10% of 240 countries with regards to the depletion of nature and thus 'most' depleted be added to the minutes.

24. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

25. **Petitions**

None received.

26. **Public Questions**

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

27. **Membership of Committees**

The Council were advised of the following changes to the membership of Committees since the previous Council meeting:

Councillor Nigel Foot be a member of the Health Scrutiny Committee replacing Councillor Owen Jeffery who will replace Councillor Foot as a substitute.

28. **Licensing Committee**

The Council noted that, since its last **ordinary** meeting, the Licensing Committee had not met.

29. **Personnel Committee**

The Council noted that, since its last **ordinary** meeting, the Personnel Committee had met on 11 September 2023.

30. **Governance Committee**

The Council noted that, since its last **ordinary** meeting, the Governance Committee had met on 25 September 2023.

31. **District Planning Committee**

The Council noted that, since its last **ordinary** meeting, the District Planning Committee had not met.

32. **Scrutiny Commission**

The Council noted that, since its last **ordinary** meeting, Scrutiny Commission had met on 14 September 2023.

33. **Health Scrutiny Committee**

The Council noted that, since its last **ordinary** meeting, the Health Scrutiny Committee had met on 12 September 2023.

34. **Health and Wellbeing Board**

The Council noted that, since its last **ordinary** meeting, the Health and Wellbeing Board had met on 3 October 2023.

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

35. **Joint Public Protection Committee**

The Council noted that, since its last **ordinary** meeting, the Joint Public Protection Committee had met on 2 October 2023.

36. **Draft Council Strategy 2023-2027 (C4417)**

The Council considered a report (Agenda Item 17) concerning feedback received from the consultation on the Draft Council Strategy 2023 – 2027 and to request that the amended Strategy be adopted by the Council.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Jeff Brooks and seconded by Councillor Martin Colston:

That the Council:

“Adopts the West Berkshire Council Strategy for 2023 – 2027, including the Council Strategy Delivery Plan, (see Appendix B) which includes the changes proposed within this report as a result of feedback from consultation”.

Councillor Brooks informed Council that he was proud to introduce the Administration’s first Council Strategy. For the first time the Council Strategy also included a clear delivery plan that was published and would be updated annually. There were five priorities, and these were:

- Services we are proud of.
- A Fairer West Berkshire with opportunities for all.
- Tackling the climate and ecological emergency.
- A prosperous and resilient West Berkshire.
- Thriving communities with a strong local voice.

The role of every Council was to provide great services and make communities stronger. Residents were consulted on what mattered to them and the Strategy demonstrated how delivery would be achieved. Not all targets may be met but it was important to be transparent.

When the Liberal Democrat Group took control of the Council in May it was known that the budget had been set but what was not known was the level of pressures in service areas and where some areas had been under budgeted or overspending for a number of years. There was surprise at the lack of controls and thus controls were being putting in place, such as a weekly review of spend and on recruitment. The financial constraints would put the Strategy under strain in the early years and it would be necessary to cut the Council’s cloth accordingly, but the plan would be delivered. He thanked officers for all their hard work over the summer to help put the plan together and the work of Councillor Martin Colston. Councillor Brooks commended the Strategy to the Chamber.

Councillor Martha Vickers said that she wanted to highlight how part of the Environment Advisory Group had been opened up to the public which was part of the Administration’s desire to be free and open.

Councillor Carolyne Culver mentioned that she supported the Strategy and the opening up of forums to the public. She welcomed the emphasis on infrastructure and advised that she was currently chairing a Task and Finish Group for Health Scrutiny that would be looking at the provision of health care within new developments, especially in rural locations. As well as healthcare provision it was also important to consider water infrastructure as part of new developments. The Environment Agency and Thames Water had been invited to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Commission as the public were

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

concerned about sewage and fresh water infrastructure. It was important to have water saving measures in new developments. There were some good points about climate change in the Strategy but there needed to be more about water quality and security. West Berkshire's chalk streams needed protection, drought resilience was needed and work needed to be done on SuDS and flood forums.

Councillor Heather Codling said that she felt the themes and priorities within the Strategy would help ensure the long term wellbeing of residents and she was pleased to see the areas relating to young people within the community. There was the emphasis in driving up standards in education, reducing the attainment gap and the SEND Strategy was already out for consultation. The Administration was seeking to increase the number of foster carers and were also working towards offering more apprenticeships with our partners and local employers. There was also an emphasis on working with town and parish councils in further developing youth groups and assisting them in employing youth workers, especially in rural areas.

Councillor Matt Shakespeare said that as a Councillor representing the east of the district he was pleased to see that the Strategy planned to deliver to the whole of the district, especially the vibrant village thread which would support areas such as Pangbourne. It was important to support our small communities. He welcomed the review into Home to School Transport which was important for rural communities.

Councillor Iain Cottingham highlighted the robustness of the financial controls within the Strategy. It was important to have a robust and sustainable financial plan to facilitate the delivery of the Strategy. It was important that the decisions being made today ensured finances were in place for the next four years.

Councillor Owen Jeffery said he was pleased to see that the Strategy was proactive in directly involving our communities, an example of this was in Thatcham where they had received the Hemingway report and had moved into what could be done and how it could be delivered. It had been decided that the chairman of this process should be a local Town Councillor. This Administration was trying to allow local people to take part in local decisions.

Councillor Stuart Gourley said the Strategy was a sign of real ambition for the new Administration. He was pleased that the Strategy built upon their Manifesto pledges. He was pleased to see continued transparency and the Council opening up as much as possible and allowing residents to see the roadmap and journey we were on. There were SMART objectives and tangible outcomes. He highlighted the building of a community sports facility on Faraday Road, the inclusion of 20 MPH zones and a focus on flood prevention.

Councillor Janine Lewis, as Portfolio Holder for Public Health, Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside, highlighted areas around mental health, working on the active travel plan and improving physical health that would also help support net zero climate change targets and reduce pressure on the NHS with healthier lives. The libraries were going through transformation to provide a more inclusive service and improve its digital offer.

Councillor Denise Gaines referred to previous comments on the new Administration's ambition to improve inclusion and transparency, and mentioned that there was an intention to introduce a public forum that would include local housing providers and tenants from both social and private housing. She also mentioned how she would be working with local transport providers so that the needs of residents could be met.

Councillor Tony Vickers mentioned that the Administration had introduced Community Forums, the first one had already met discussing the future of the Faraday Road Football Pitch and the next one would be on rural affairs. It was planned to hold four forums per

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

year. Rural areas had been overlooked for too long and this would end now the Administration had more Councillor representation in rural wards. He said they would also listen to those who had an understanding of rural issues such as Councillor Culver. Councillor Vickers also said that he was the Council's representative on the AONB and was pleased to say that there were now more Liberal Democrats on the body and they would work together for a better future.

Councillor Dominic Boeck said that the Administration may be surprised to hear that he was impressed by the Strategy and that he was pleased to see that the strategic priorities mirrored those in the draft Strategy produced prior to the election. He did not approve of the Administration's ideological opposition to academy schools, if parents and governors wanted their school to become an academy then they should be supported. The Administration mentioned putting in financial controls, but this was nothing new and would have had to take place anyway. It had been forecasted year on year that this was going to be a tough year and next year would be even tougher. He mentioned that much of the delivery plan was really a continuation of what was already underway. It was good to see many of the goals and actions were challenging but he questioned if they were achievable. He wished Councillor Brooks well in delivering the plan and said he would be monitoring progress.

Councillor Clive Taylor said he was impressed with the Strategy especially the comments made about youth services, although he would have liked to have seen mention of youth clubs as they were important in tackling anti-social behaviour. He recommended that a future discussion topic for the Community Forums could be youth services and it would be good to get the results of the recent survey out in the public domain.

Councillor David Marsh said he was pleased to see so much support across the chamber, adding that if the Administration proposed things that were agreed with they should be supported. He raised that the start of the Strategy mentioned making West Berkshire Greener which was something he supported. He was pleased to see that there would be a trial regarding removing traffic from Newbury Town Centre making it cleaner and better for businesses. He also supported the 20-mph speed limit initiative. He mentioned that most residents supported environmental measures and a greener district. As it had not already been mentioned he raised all the good projects regarding housing and especially affordable housing, although not all affordable homes were affordable, and he encouraged more social rent homes and bringing more empty homes back in use. He was pleased to see a delivery plan appended as it allowed Council to monitor progress.

Councillor Alan Macro said that it was time to reduce the Council's reliance on agency staff. In Adult Social Care they had a lot of agency staff, this was not only expensive but also hindered continuity of care. In Adult Social Care there was an increase in demand and increased financial pressures, so he welcomed initiatives such as Shared Lives.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon said that as already mentioned there was a lot of overlap between this Strategy and the draft Strategy produced prior to the election. There may not be much disagreement on the priorities but there was on the Strategy such as the plan to reintroduce postal planning application notifications which was a costly backward step, the Council should not be building a sports stadium on the Faraday Road site when we had the Sports Hub and there was only one mention of the Local Plan in the Strategy. He mentioned that Councillor Brooks had said there had been under budgeting of services, but he had not mentioned any of this when the budget was set and they had not produced the promised emergency budget. He questioned the transparency promises and used the Environment Advisory Group as an example of the Administration still

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

having the main meeting in Part II. He had doubts on the delivery of the plan as they had already failed to deliver their 100 day plan.

Councillor Erik Pattenden mentioned that this Strategy had a delivery plan that had been missing from the previous plans from the Opposition. He also mentioned that the previous Administration's handling of budget forecasting had been poor.

Councillor Howard Woollaston questioned the ambition such as 1000 affordable homes by 2023 and not 2027, only 40 EV charging points a year and the Playing Pitch Strategy that was already in place but the document talked about implementation in 2026.

Councillor Martin Colston said that there were some very clear differences between this Strategy and the draft one proposed by the Opposition prior to the election. They had already appointed an Opposition Chairman to the Scrutiny Commission, Community Forums had been brought back and letters notifying of planning applications would be re-introduced. They would be listening to the local community and make West Berkshire an employer of choice. The Strategy was supported by a Delivery Plan with SMART objectives which had not been previously introduced. He also mentioned that the town centre steering groups would be chaired by local town councillors. He paid tribute to the work of officers for their support in putting the Strategy together.

Councillor Jeff Brooks made concluding comments by saying that he thanked all Councillors for their positive comments. It was expected that there would be bricks back from the Opposition but the Administration had opened up task groups retaining Part II capacity when advised by the Monitoring Officer, with regards to bin collections any changes would be discussed and not a decision taken in private. The Administration would also fix the flawed Local Plan that was rushed through prior to the election. The Council could have all the strategies in the world, but operational excellence would be introduced to deliver them. They would be working smartly and harder to get the plan delivered. Ambitious targets had been set and it was expected that they would not all be met and unexpected events may intervene, but we had a delivery plan that we would do what we could to achieve. With regards to the comments about only meeting 50% of the targets in the 100 day plan after 200 days he said that they had met 70% of the targets after 133 days.

Councillor Brooks went on to say that with regards to the financial position they should have been aware of the situation, yet the current administration did not know about issues such as the failed software upgrade that had taken years and cost hundreds of thousands of pounds that had not been reported. It was only by looking at the issues in detail that the situation was becoming clear. With regards to academy schools, they supported strong local education and this would be achieved by keeping services together and supporting them within the LEA. He went on to mention that the Chairman of the Scrutiny Commission had been given to an Opposition Councillor as they wanted to be challenged and put things right. He commended the Strategy to Council.

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

37. **Enhancement of Climate Emergency Declaration (C4447)**

Council considered the report (Agenda item 18) concerning the proposed changes to the Council's climate emergency declaration (made in July 2019). The changes sought would enhance, strengthen and bring clarity to the original declaration following the initial four years of delivery.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Owen Jeffery and seconded by Councillor Martha Vickers:

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

That the Council approve the following enhancements to the original climate emergency declaration:

- The ecological emergency is recognised through the new declaration being a **'climate and ecological emergency'**.
- Changing the language used in the declaration from **'carbon neutral'** to **'net zero'** to bring us in line with Government and business terminology.
- **Clarification of targets** within the declaration with the following being the Council's focus in relation to reducing emissions:

Achieving net zero by 2030 for the Council's operations and activities.

Facilitating, influencing, promoting and encouraging a reduction in emissions across West Berkshire to enable net zero to be achieved as soon as practicable for the District.

The proposed new wording for the declaration and recommended actions relating to the ecological emergency are included in section 8 of this report.

Councillor Jeffery said that he was pleased that this Council had previously unanimously approved a Declaration of Climate Emergency and he wanted to strengthen this by adding the term ecological. The Council was in a position to go against the trend of rolling back on climate change targets. There had been plenty of scientific evidence supporting that ecosystems were declining due to habitat loss and climate change. Declaring an ecological emergency would highlight the importance of preserving our local flora. Air quality and water pollution also had a negative impact on public health. Declaring an ecological emergency would provide a legal and policy framework that the Council could follow and allocate appropriate resource.

Councillor Carlyne Culver mentioned that she had proposed an ecological emergency back in September 2021 so she was pleased to see this being proposed. There was further work to be done and there would need to be cross reference with the Council Strategy, however consideration was also needed for biodiversity net gain as well as the obligation under the Environment Act for local nature strategies and networks. A local hedgehog positive campaign, as promised at the last Council meeting, also needed to be included. She encouraged the new Administration to consider things such as embedded carbon, that the Environmental Delivery Plan did not have biodiversity as a key theme and more local environmental groups needed to be included. She also recommended that more collaboration could be done with parish councils and would encourage more parish councils to be involved with the Parish Climate Forum. There was also a need to work with local land owners and farmers.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon said that the report was asking Council to declare an ecological emergency but there was no evidence supporting the need within West Berkshire. He was not saying that there was not a need but the report needed to have supporting evidence as the external report referenced dated back to 2019 and was nationwide. Most of the deliverables mentioned in the report were things the Council should be doing anyway. The report said there was no financial, legal, equalities, risk management, digital services or HR implications so it seemed there was no impact at all. He said his Group would support the report but did not feel that there was a need to declare an emergency.

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

Councillor Tony Vickers mentioned that just because you could not count certain things or have data it did not mean they did not have value. The world's environment was at risk because we did not value things, the environment did not fit into an accountants way of thinking. Just because we could not put a number on the issue did not mean there was not an emergency. He endorsed the report.

Councillor Matt Shakespeare mentioned that there was plenty of empirical evidence within West Berkshire supporting this report, he gave the example of the article in the Pangbourne magazine and the recent Environment Agency's report on the River Pang.

Councillor Martha Vickers said that there appeared to be cross chamber agreement on the report. This was an important motion and climate and ecological issues were closely linked. The report gave evidence and there were 51 sites of scientific interest in the district. She asked the chamber to acknowledge that this was an emergency and for the Council to get on with work that needed to be done.

Councillor Jeffery in making concluding comments said that he agreed with comments made that there was further work to be done, that carbon embedment needed to be considered, that further environmental groups needed to be engaged and he agreed that there was more work to be done with working with parish councils and local land owners.

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

38. **Hermitage Neighbourhood Development Plan (C4432)**

Council considered the report (agenda item 19) that sought approval of the submission of the Hermitage Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) for independent examination.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Tony Vickers and seconded by Councillor Heather Codling to resolve that the Hermitage NDP could be sent for independent examination under Regulation 17 of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012.

Councillor Tony Vickers in introducing the report said that it was important to remember that the working groups were carried out on the basis of administrative boundaries and not necessarily settlement boundaries. It had been agreed about a year ago that the Council would have to look at our administrative boundaries and it was not known what affect this would have on neighbourhood plans. It was still right that the Council adopted neighbourhood plans post being rightly initiated and led throughout by local communities, not just local councils but also volunteers on steering groups. The plans had to come to Council at set points for approval and involved a lot of officer time. It was sensible to undertake a tendering process for a number of plans that were going through the process. The Parishes would retain their right to choose their examiner from within the group of consortiums that won the tender. Over the last few years in Hermitage there had been a lot of development so there was no additional allocation of residential or employment land in the report. The final report would be brought back to Council for approval to go out to referendum.

Councillor Carolyne Culver mentioned that there had recently been a referendum on the Compton Neighbourhood Development Plan and she appreciated how much hard work went into them from volunteers in the community and officers. As she had raised many times at the Western Area Planning Committee, she highlighted the importance of addressing housing mixture and introducing more affordable housing and social rent housing. There was also a need for smaller properties for young people or the elderly

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

who wished to downsize. She mentioned that in paragraph 6.1 there was a word missing and went on to welcome that they had identified six green spaces to protect. She was pleased to see the cycle out was being extended and it was hoped that this could go from Newbury into Oxfordshire. The report mentioned that road and traffic issues could not be included in the plan but they had been included in the Cold Ash one, it was recommended that it was made clear to our volunteers what could or could not be included so we had consistency across the plans.

Councillor Heather Codling in seconding the motion said that she thought it had been Hermitage's choice not to look at traffic. She commended the work they had done as the plan captured the diversity of the village. It was a large village with a lot of new housing, it was in the countryside and AONB. Although the village had grown it was important to maintain its character along with being aware of modern living requirements.

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

39. **Cold Ash Neighbourhood Development Plan (C4433)**

Council considered the report (agenda item 20) seeking approval for the submission of the Cold Ash Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) for independent examination.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Tony Vickers and seconded by Councillor Heather Codling that the Cold Ash NDP could be sent for independent examination under Regulation 17 of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012.

Councillor Tony Vickers introduced the report and said that the process for producing this report was identical to the previous item and they had the same contractor. They had a keen steering group and he expected they were well known to Councillor Codling.

Councillor Carolyne Culver welcomed the report and congratulated everyone involved as it was a well-researched document that she enjoyed reading. She welcomed the inclusion of green buffer zones between villages and that they talked about carbon neutrality, nature recovery and water and air quality. The report encouraged residents to ask for more tree protection orders and protected woodland. As a Member of the Western Area Planning Committee, she welcomed the isometric drawing that showed the impact development had on surrounded areas. She appreciated the detail they had gone into with regards to sunken lanes and that they had included hedgehog highways. It also mentioned the Woodlands Trust Emergency Tree Plan saying that removed trees should have three planted in their place and this should be considered for the Local Plan. It was good to see smaller housing included and that flooding had been considered as well as the cumulative impact that developments could have on flooding.

Councillor Clive Taylor welcomed the report and said he would be recommending that his steering group looked at it as an example of good work. He liked the inclusion of the photographs and maps. The whole document was well presented and easy to read. The report covered both the rural and urban areas, and he also liked the mention of sunken lanes. The plan identified local needs and community aspirations.

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

40. **Annual Report - Governance and Ethics Committee (C4323)**

Council considered the report (agenda item 21) which provided an annual summary of the activities of the Governance and Ethics Committee for the 2022-23 municipal year.

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Jeff Brooks and seconded by Councillor Erik Pattenden to resolve that Council notes the report.

Councillor Jeff Brooks introduced the report and said that this was an annual report and he highlighted that there had been a lot of work done by the Constitutional Task Group. The Constitution was a living document and there was more work to be done so the task group would be reconvened in the new year. There would also be a community governance review at the appropriate time.

Councillor Erik Pattenden commended the report.

Council noted the report.

41. **Report by the Returning Officer (C4411)**

Council considered the report (agenda item 22) that informed Council of the results of the Local Elections held in May 2023 and any issues concerning the conduct of the elections.

MOTION: Proposed by the Chief Executive, Nigel Lynn, as Returning Officer to resolve that Council notes the report.

The Chief Executive informed that the Coronation of the King had compressed the time to undertake the count and it was ambitious to do it in a day but he was pleased to report that this had been achieved. Staffing of the elections continued to be an issue but the voter ID ran smoothly and 99.8% of electorates brought their ID. An issue that continued to cause a problem was the Royal Mail and officers continued to engage with them to make improvements. He thanked all staff for their excellent efforts in running a successful election process.

Councillor Jeff Brooks thanked the Returning Officer and all the staff that worked on the elections. It was an excellent job getting the district and parish elections counted and results given on the same day. With regards to voter ID, there had been a lot of tax payers money spent on promoting this new system. He felt that this was not required as it sought to solve a problem that was not there, he did not support the introduction of voter ID. He also reiterated the concern that the Royal Mail had let down some voters.

Councillor Dominic Boeck reiterated the excellent job that had been done on the elections. He said he had been involved in many elections and the staff performed extremely well providing advice in advance, running the elections on the day and performing the count with due diligence.

Councillor David Marsh said that he agreed with the comments made so far and especially the Elections Team that did an excellent job. The polling stations in his ward were very busy and the staff did a very good job helping people with voter ID but the report did highlight a number of voters that were not able to vote because of this and was concerned how many did not vote because of voter ID. This was a national issue that had been highlighted and had affected local voters. He recommended that this be raised with our local MPs, the LGA and the Electoral Commission.

Councillor Nigel Foot raised the issue of postal votes and said that it was a scandal that some votes had arrived late and thus had not been counted and as Councillor Marsh had said there was also the issue of non-voters because of voter ID. Some of the voters that

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

had been disenfranchised may have been residents with mobility issues who could not get to their local polling stations.

Councillor Tony Vickers congratulated the elections team and staff who worked on the elections as they had done an excellent job. It was unfortunate that we would not know the number of voters who were put off because of the introduction of voter ID.

Councillor Clive Taylor reiterated the thanks to the staff working on the elections on behalf of his party. He agreed with the comments made about the introduction of voter ID as he had witnessed voters being turned away.

Council noted the report.

42. **Monitoring Officer's Annual Report 2022/23 - Conduct and Ethics (C4412)**

Council considered the report (agenda item 23) which provided an update on any local and national issues relating to ethical standards and to bring to the attention of Members a summary of complaints or other problems within West Berkshire.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Jeff Brooks and seconded by Councillor Patrick Clark to resolve that:

Members note the content of the report.

It was proposed that the report be circulated to all Parish/Town Councils in the District for information.

Councillor Jeff Brooks introduced the report and explained that while there had been some tricky situations in the chamber over the years, Members generally treated each other with respect. Complaints had increased but this could be as a result of moving toward the elections earlier in the year. He went on to mention his experience of having a complaint made against him and although not upheld it was an unpleasant experience, but he was confident that the system was robust. He believed that any councillor who stood for election did so to do good work and although we may disagree on the best way of achieving this we could always treat each other with respect.

Councillor David Marsh said unfortunately he felt that the Code of Conduct was no longer fit for purpose as it did not keep up with social media. He had sat on some complaint panels and a lot of them were trivial spats between rival parties that could have been resolved with a simple conversation. He raised concerns about vexatious complaints that used up a lot of officer time. He asked that during the review of the Constitution the task group could also review the Code and complaints procedure to make them fit for purpose.

Councillor Jeff Brooks summed up by saying that the current code was fit for purpose and he encouraged those that did not think so to discuss it with the Monitoring Officer. He invited Councillor Marsh to join the Constitutional Working Party to address his views.

The motion was put to the vote and **RESOLVED**

43. **Notices of Motion**

The Council considered the under-mentioned Motion (Agenda item 24) submitted in the name of Councillor Denise Gaines relating to asylum seekers.

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

MOTION: As amended proposed by Councillor Denise Gaines and seconded by Councillor Laura Coyle.

That the Council note:

1. *“As a result of the government’s asylum process and its efforts to reduce the backlog of asylum decisions, we are seeing increased demand for homelessness prevention services in West Berkshire.*
2. *The home office has reduced the move-on period from 28 to 7 days, the time an asylum seeker must transition from their temporary accommodation to become independent. This is an unacceptably short period of transition.*
3. *As a result of the Government’s decision to drastically reduce this move-on period there has been an escalation of homelessness and rough sleeping here in West Berkshire.*
4. *The Government has effectively abdicated the responsibility for asylum seekers granted leave to remain and passed responsibility to local authorities.*
5. *We have inherited the responsibility, from the Home office, to accommodate and support any person, given the status of right to remain, and currently residing in West Berkshire.*
6. *This has placed a heavy burden on this authority and created an impossible target for us to source accommodation and house people within a very narrow time period of just 7 days. This burden comes without any additional funding from central government.*
7. *We are committed, as an authority, to playing our part in welcoming and safeguarding the welfare of all people in our communities, including people granted right to remain.*
8. *In an area the size of West Berkshire, rental properties and temporary accommodation is at a premium and having this additional pressure could make costs for this accommodation spiral in an already inflated market.*

This Council therefore resolves to request that the Leader:

1. *Write to the Home Secretary to request that the Government:*
 - *extend the transition period to a more realistic time period of 8 weeks to enable local authorities and the newly recognised refugees sufficient time to have all the official documentation in place to apply for work and to find accommodation;*
 - *provide Local Authorities with emergency funding to support those who have a right to remain.*
2. *Request the LGA as the national voice of local govt to lobby relevant ministers on the plight facing Local Authorities*
3. *Ask the three MPs within the Council area to support this Motion and to raise at the highest levels of government.”*

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

The Chairman advised that Council would debate the Motion this evening in order to facilitate the discharge of business in accordance with Procedure Rule 4.9.8.

Councillor Denise Gaines introduced the motion and informed that the Government had failed West Berkshire and other Councils who opened their doors to asylum seekers. The country always had a reputation of welcoming people in need and there were many conflicts in the world and many people suffering persecution. When an asylum seeker had been granted leave to remain, they still required support and this was where the Government were letting us down and leaving local authorities to pick up the pieces. West Berkshire Council currently had about 170 asylum seekers in our hotels at any one time and if they were given new status, they would only get 28 days to leave the hotel and start their new lives with no immediate access to funding. It had come to light that some were now being given as little as 7 days' notice. The Housing Team and local charities tried to help as much as they could. Nationally there had been a 19% increase in asylum seekers awaiting assessment and as the Government looked to clear the backlog this would increase the pressure on local authorities, especially around housing support. The Council's temporary accommodation was already over stretched and there was an increase in rough sleepers. As the Portfolio Holder responsible for housing, she would be setting up a steering group that would include local charities to look at this issue and homelessness in general. She would consult the Executive to see if it was possible to set up a hosting programme similar to that of the Ukrainian programme. She asked Council to support the motion.

AMENDED MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Ross Mackinnon was displayed on screen but the Monitoring Officer advised that under paragraph 14.2 of the meeting rules a proposed amendment must comply with the requirements, one of which was that it should not negate the original motion and it was her view that this amendment had the effect of negating the motion and she advised the Chairman that it should not be allowed. The Chairman declined the amendment.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon made reference to a video the Leader had published in the Newbury Weekly News where he got two things right; that the public should be humane towards asylum seekers and that the two individuals sleeping in tents outside the Council Offices were not the fault of the Council. He did, however, feel that part of the motion was a falsehood. He stated that the Home Office had not reduced the period to leave hotels from 28 days to 7 days and this should have been checked before introducing the motion and making statements to the press. In one of the Leader's television interviews it was clear to see from a letter displayed that 28 days notice was given. The Administration should have checked their facts before making falsehoods on this emotional issue. He agreed that it would be a challenge dealing with asylum seekers granted residency, but they should be treated no differently than local residents who also needed support. He agreed that the Council should work with the Government regarding housing issues, but he also requested that the Administration apologise for the false statements they had spread.

Councillor Jeff Brooks encouraged Members that if they wished to introduce amendments that they share them beforehand to give time for consideration and not to put forward amendments that change the original motion. With regards to the issue of asylum seekers he mentioned how last year some of them staying at the Regency Park Hotel put a lot of effort into helping the community and integrating as best as they could. The motion was to help those who were given the right to stay by extending their time to leave the hotel and giving them pathways to getting a home and job. The Government

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

needed to work with local authorities to help those who have been granted the right to stay, those who may not speak very good English. He supported the motion.

Councillor Stephanie Steevenson reiterated what had been said about some of the asylum seekers trying to help the local community as they had often offered Thatcham Town Council their time. This showed their willingness to be part of our community.

Councillor Nigel Foot made reference to how officers had worked daily with the gentlemen having to sleep in tents outside the Council and how Councillor Gaines had also engaged with them. These people were forced to sleep on our street after having to leave the hotel be it with 28 or 7 days notice. It was shameful that once they were granted the right to stay, they had to seek help from charities as the Government did not support them.

Under Paragraph 4.9.12 the Chairman proposed the extension of the meeting this was seconded by Councillor Barnet and was **CARRIED**.

Councillor Owen Jeffery mentioned that he had seen a letter sent to one of the asylum seekers informing them that they had less than a month to leave. These were people who had been assessed as having a legitimate reason to stay in our country but were being treated without dignity.

Councillor David Marsh said he had heard words such as a disgrace, but it was a disgrace that we are having to have this debate when the Government were stirring up hatred. He supported the motion.

Councillor Clive Taylor reiterated what had been said about the disgraceful situation that had resulted in the people having to sleep in tents outside the Council offices. It did not make a difference what length of notice they had been given this was about extending the notice period and giving them support.

Councillor Paul Kander said that he did not disagree with the comments on the time people were given to leave but he did disagree with the inaccurate statements that if not corrected would go down in history as facts.

Councillor Laura Coyle mentioned that the letter informing people of the need to leave the hotel did not give the recipient immediate access to benefits and work as suggested, it advises that you can remain in the country but you have to wait to get your residents permit. The motion was an urgent one as it had to highlight issues that were happening in our district outside the building. You could not just walk into an office and claim universal credit it took time to process. This motion was not about the national issue such as small boats crossing the channel but how we treated people who had been granted permanency. These were vulnerable people that needed our support and this needed an appropriate amount of time. With regards to homelessness the Government said that the Council had a 56 day period to help prevent homelessness by helping them find somewhere else to live so there was a discrepancy between how the asylum seekers were being treated.

In summing up Councillor Gaines said that the two people having to sleep in tents outside were not isolated incidents and that there were about 170 asylum seekers currently in hotels within our district. So we needed action now.

The Motion was put to the vote and declared **CARRIED**.

FOR the Motion:

Councillors Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Nick Carter, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Iain Cottingham, Laura Coyle, Carolyne Culver, Billy Drummond, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Owen Jeffery, Janine Lewis, Alan

COUNCIL - 5 OCTOBER 2023 - MINUTES

Macro, David Marsh, Geoff Mayes, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Vicky Poole, Christopher Read, Matt Shakespeare, Stephanie Steevenson, Louise Sturgess, Clive Taylor, Martha Vickers and Tony Vickers

AGAINST the Motion:

None

ABSTAIN:

Councillors Dominic Boeck, Jeremy Cottam, Paul Dick, Clive Hooker, Paul Kander, Jane Langford, Ross Mackinnon, Richard Somner, Joane Stewart and Howard Woollaston.

44. Members' Questions

Members agreed to receive written responses which can be found via the following link.

(The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and closed at 10.13 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature