

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

EXECUTIVE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 22 MAY 2025

Councillors Present: Jeff Brooks (Chairman), Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines (Vice-Chairman), Stuart Gourley, Tom McCann, Justin Pemberton and Vicky Poole

Also Present: Councillors Dominic Boeck, Richard Somner, David Marsh and Clive Hooker

Officers Present: Melanie Booth (Group Executive), Sam Chiverton (Democratic Services Officer Apprentice), Shannon Coleman-Slaughter (Service Director – Finance, Property & Procurement), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director – Children’s Services), Joseph Holmes (Chief Executive), Clare Lawrence (Executive Director – Place), Melanie O’Rourke (Service Director – Adult Social Care), Sadie Owen (Principal Democratic Services Officer) and Nicola Thomas (Service Lead – Legal and Democratic)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Iain Cottingham

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 3 April 2025 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Leader.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. Public Questions

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

4. Petitions

There were no petitions presented to the Executive.

5. Environment Strategy Annual Progress Report and Environment Strategy 2025 Refresh (EX4649)

Councillor Stuart Gourley introduced and proposed a report (Agenda Item 6), which presented the Annual Progress Report on the Environment Strategy covering the fourth year of the delivery of the Strategy, and proposed for approval the Environment Strategy 2025 Refresh which aimed to focus on meeting the target of net zero emissions by 2030 for the Council.

Councillor Nigel Foot seconded the recommendations made within the report and commented that reaching net zero was a realistic possibility and that the Council had made good inroads into achieving it. Councillor Foot further emphasised the health in all policies aspect of the Strategy and applauded its aspirations.

Councillor Dominic Boeck was pleased to hear about the achievements made and requested clarification and assurance that carbon sequestration would be delivered. Councillor Gourley responded that the sequestration was based on a study undertaken by Future Nature, the consultancy aspect of the Berks, Bucks, Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT), and was based on the total annual carbon sequestration across the whole of West Berkshire Council’s land holdings for the existing established habitat.

EXECUTIVE - 22 MAY 2025 - MINUTES

Councillor Boeck queried who was undertaking the sequestration. Councillor Gourley explained that the land was owned by West Berkshire Council but leased to BBOWT to conduct and manage.

Councillor Richard Somner commended officers for their hard work and appreciated the acknowledgement of local volunteer groups within the Strategy. Councillor Somner suggested that Members should recognise the level of learning that officers had undertaken, and their creation of an exceptional department which was leading the way for other local authorities.

Councillor Somner commented that it was a shame to see the wildflower verges stop, as they had been well received in most areas. Councillor Gourley commented that a lot of data had been gathered in respect to verges and that there would be a review to see what else could be done with them. Councillor Gourley agreed with the praise for volunteers and commented that it would be impossible to achieve and deliver without them.

Councillor David Marsh commented that during 2023-24 he had successfully proposed funds for watering trees in drought conditions. Councillor Marsh suggested that there would almost certainly be a drought in the summer and queried whether the Council would continue to water trees.

Councillor Marsh agreed with Councillor Somner that the wildflower verges were important and appreciated by residents, and requested that they continue.

Councillor Marsh suggested that the current government had launched an attack on the natural world through the planning system and queried whether the Council had a robust plan to counter it.

Councillor Gourley responded that he would consult with officers in relation to the drought query.

Councillor Gourley commented that the draft Local Plan would be discussed at Council soon and that he supported the environmental aspects of the Plan which would help to protect the Council in relation to planning applications.

Councillor Nigel Foot commented that there were just over 1,200 km of rural roads within the district which would amount to a significant amount of carbon sequestration. Further Councillor Foot reported that he met regularly with the grounds maintenance contractors and that they were working to only cut the top layer of verges to allow for self-seeding and natural growth.

RESOLVED that: Executive

- Note the Annual Progress Report on the Environment Strategy (as included in Appendix C) and agree its publication on the Council's website, and;
- Approve the Environment Strategy 2025 Refresh (as included in Appendix D) and agree its publication on the Council's website including the associated Delivery Plan (Appendix E) and Carbon Definitions Report (Appendix F).

6. Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge progress review 2025 (EX4689)

Councillor Jeff Brooks introduced a report (Agenda Item 7), which published the results of the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge progress review for West Berkshire Council.

Councillor Brooks noted that two thirds of the actions had already been completed and that he was pleased with the progress that had been made against the findings.

EXECUTIVE - 22 MAY 2025 - MINUTES

Councillor Dominic Boeck referred to recommendation 2 within the progress review which required that the Council 'Ensure that there is traction on the delivery of the Delivering Better Value SEND programme and have a plan to resolve the High Needs Block Deficit'. Councillor Boeck suggested that the response in the Action Plan did not indicate that the Council was managing to reduce the deficit and further suggested that following government policy changes, there may be an increase in movement of SEND children from private to mainstream schools. Councillor Boeck queried whether the Council was ready for such pressure. Councillor Heather Codling acknowledged that the High Needs Block continued to grow and that there was a struggle to make any impact, however there had been no perceived movement yet from private to state schools. Councillor Codling did however concede that such a trend may not be discernible until the new academic year.

RESOLVED that: Executive considered

- the Corporate Peer Challenge progress review report produced by the LGA following a visit in January 2025; and
- the progress made since the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge report was published in 2024.

7. **LGA Peer Review - Children's Safeguarding (EX4688)**

Councillor Heather Codling introduced and proposed a report (Agenda Item 8), which shared the feedback, findings and recommendation from a recent LGA Peer Review in Children's Services.

Councillor Codling reported that the Council had invited the LGA in to review the family safeguarding service and that the ensuing report highlighted strengths and improvements, particularly the strong leadership and enthusiastic work force, balanced by the financial uncertainty and high caseloads.

Councillor Patrick Clark seconded the recommendations within the report and commented that the LGA was an excellent resource to provide an objective view of the Council's work and to highlight where improvements could be made.

Councillor Dominic Boeck acknowledged that the findings were encouraging, however highlighted one which noted that the role of the virtual school was not fully developed. AnnMarie Dodds, Executive Director (Children's Services) explained that historically the virtual school had worked solely with children 'looked after' by the local authority, but recent requirements were also to work with children with a social worker. The peer reviewers had wanted to see a more developed approach to children with a social worker. AnnMarie Dodds clarified that this was a view held by the LGA but was not shared by Ofsted, who had liked the work of the virtual school.

RESOLVED that: Executive

- Review the report written by the LGA peer review team and give due consideration to areas for action (recommendations) whilst also acknowledging areas of strength in the Family safeguarding Service.
- Share the LGA Peer Review Report with the relevant scrutiny committee to explore next steps in the ongoing development of children's social care.
- Agree to the West Berkshire Council publication of the LGA report in line with the standing agreement with the LGA following the conclusion of a peer review.

8. **Carers Strategy 2025-2028 (EX4617)**

Councillor Patrick Clark introduced and proposed a report (Agenda Item 9), which sought agreement to adopt the Carers Strategy. Councillor Clark endorsed the Strategy and

EXECUTIVE - 22 MAY 2025 - MINUTES

noted the fundamental role that carers undertook. Councillor Clark further highlighted Carers Week which would commence on 9 June 2025.

Councillor Heather Codling seconded the recommendation within the report and praised the Strategy for recognising the important role provided by young carers.

Councillor Dominic Boeck thanked Councillor Clark for the Strategy.

Councillor Richard Somner reported that he had spoken to Councillor Jo Stewart who had commented that she was pleased with the corrections and amendments, and that the Strategy could now be adopted.

Councillor Jeff Brooks thanked Members of the Opposition for challenging the original Strategy and for highlighting the inaccuracies.

RESOLVED that: the attached Strategy is adopted.

9. Members' Questions

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

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 7.30 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature