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RESOURCES AND PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2025

Councillors Present: Carolyn Culver (Chairman), Ross Mackinnon (Vice-Chairman), Antony Amirtharaj, Laura Coyle, Erik Pattenden, Christopher Read, Richard Somner, Howard Woollaston and Alan Macro (Substitute) (In place of Jeremy Cottam)

Also Present: Joseph Holmes (Interim Chief Executive), Sarah Clarke (Executive Director (Resources)), Clare Lawrence (Executive Director - Place), April Peberdy (Service Director - Community Services), Shannon Coleman-Slaughter (Service Director for Finance, Property and Procurement, Section 151 Officer), Gabrielle Mancini (Service Lead - Cust Engagement & Transformation) and Elizabeth Beverley (Libraries Manager), Councillor David Marsh (Minority Group Leader), Stephen Chard (Democratic Services Manager), Nicola Thomas, Councillor Jeff Brooks, Councillor Tom McCann, Councillor Vicky Poole, Councillor Nigel Foot (Executive Portfolio Holder: Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside), Gordon Oliver (Principal Policy Officer (Scrutiny & Dem Services)) and Felicity Harrison (Libraries Manager)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Jeremy Cottam

PART I

1 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2025 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2 Actions from previous Minutes

Members reviewed the actions from the previous meetings. The following points were noted:

Members agreed to suspend standing orders to allow Ms Paula Saunderson to address the Committee on action points 116 and 143 in relation to activity of Thames Water and the Environment Agency.

116 and 143 (Thames Water and Environment Agency) – Councillor Carolyn Culver explained that an update on progress with the business case had been requested.

Ms Saunderson noted that evidence of severe pollution at the Northbrook had been presented when the issue was first raised in October 2023. Since that time, concerns had been raised of contamination from historic landfill which created a health hazard with ground water flooding in residential gardens. Thames Water had conducted research on the issues and had reported that no evidence had been found of foul water contaminating the Northbrook. The Environment Agency had advised that pollution testing of the Northbrook was not a priority for them at the present time with a number of competing priorities to manage.

Ms Saunderson asked that the Council take action as corporate landlord by requesting that testing take place of non-dissolvable pollutants and for cameras to be installed to monitor the situation and help identify ways to resolve it.

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Councillor Culver confirmed that these would be actions for the Council to consider undertaking as landlord.

212 (Faraday Road Football Ground) – Councillor Nigel Foot explained that an update on the project plan and objectives for Faraday Road would be provided at the Executive on 25 September 2025.

223 (Thatcham Sewage Works) – Councillor Culver explained that the concerns with the sewage works being at capacity and action needing to be taken as a result were being progressed by the relevant Portfolio Holders (Councillors Stuart Gourley and Denise Gaines).

156, 157 and 232 (Waste Strategy) – discussion on the Waste Strategy was scheduled on the Work Programme for March 2026. This would need to cover implications of the move to three weekly black bin collections.

(Councillor Ross Mackinnon joined the meeting at 6.40pm)

236, 237 and 238 (Corporate Programme) – actions remained outstanding. It was however noted that the action relating to iTrent implementation would be incorporated within the work of the Project Management Task Group.

239 (Policy Development Group) – the next meeting of the Policy Development Group was provisionally scheduled for 2 October 2025 to discuss viable villages.

240 (Capital Financing Report Outturn 2024/25) – a response to the query as to why the project 'Special Education Mental Health and Autism Spectrum Disorder Reduced Provision' had slipped had been circulated prior to the meeting. This explained that £214,210 (the High Needs Provision Capital Allocations (HNPCA) Grant) had been slipped to 2025/26 to meet outstanding commitments, complete post occupation security works and final retention release.

3 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Howard Woollaston declared an interest in Agenda Items 7 (Library Service) and 10a (Sports Hub) by virtue of the fact that he was the Shadow Portfolio Holder for both of these areas, but reported that, as his interest was a personal or an other registrable interest, but not a disclosable pecuniary interest, he determined to remain to take part in the debates and any votes on these matters.

4 **Petitions**

There were no petitions received at the meeting.

5 **Review of Transformation Programme**

The Committee considered the report (Agenda Item 6) which provided an update on the outcomes delivered to date by the Council's transformation programme, additional projects supported, recent departmental restructuring and leadership changes, and the planned development of a new forward looking transformation plan. This was an invest to save programme aiming to achieve efficiencies and effectiveness across the Council.

Councillor Vicky Poole, the Portfolio Holder for Transformation and the Corporate Programme, introduced the report. The transformation programme had been running for a two year period and in that time transformation had become widely embedded across the organisation. A number of successes had been achieved and in particular, Councillor Poole highlighted the Walnut Close temporary accommodation project. This had done much in supporting individuals who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless as well as achieving cost avoidance and savings.

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Gabrielle Mancini (Service Director for Transformation, Customer and ICT) explained that the decision was made two years ago to pull together transformation projects and the Service Director role was created to take this forward. Six projects were identified for the original programme based on the potential for savings and the outcomes that could be achieved. These six projects were as follows:

- Business Support Review
- Strategic Asset and Locality Service Delivery Model
- Place Service Improvement Plan
- Corporate Recruitment Review
- Review of care home provision
- Review of home to school transport

The LGA Peer Review, conducted in January 2024, endorsed the principles of the transformation programme, alongside noting the spread of projects across the Council. This contributed to holding an internal restructure which resulted in centralising transformation to better track progress and achieve benefits. Policy Development Group (PDG) meetings would be taking place to further progress transformation work.

Councillor Jeff Brooks took the opportunity to highlight further successes. Greater efficiencies had been achieved in recruitment processes and retention (as part of the Employee Value Proposition). Annual savings in the region of £5m-£6m were being achieved from reduced employment of freelance/temporary contractors.

He did however acknowledge that work to review care home provision had not progressed as had been hoped as private sector organisations had not come forward to potentially run the Council's care homes. That said, greater efficiencies had been delivered in the care homes and savings achieved, whilst continuing, most importantly, to support residents with their care needs.

Councillor Brooks added that service areas were progressing transformation, beyond the six specific projects. Transformation was embedded across projects that were being run from the centralised team. Transformation was a continually evolving process that would continue to work to improve services as well as making savings.

Councillor Carlyne Culver highlighted the need to be clear on net costs, including officer time, to fully understand the level of savings being made. She then invited questions and comments from Members, and a number of points were discussed in the debate.

Efficiencies achieved in relation to home to school transport were contractual and in terms of route optimisation. It was noted that transport costs for SEND pupils (pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) could be high as placements could often be outside of the district. Therefore, wider discussions were ongoing in relation to the availability of SEND placements within West Berkshire.

Gabrielle Mancini agreed to provide information on whether improvements had been achieved to the waiting list for home to school transport.

Councillor Chris Read noted that it was a difficulty using larger vehicles when it came to navigating rural roads. He raised the importance of considering social impacts/benefits for home to school transport as well as looking to reduce costs. Gabrielle Mancini assured Members that social aspects were considered above financial benefits.

In some cases, officers were moving from service areas to the centralised service. This was being undertaken within the same financial envelope.

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The move to a centralised service was to achieve greater consistencies and greater benefit realisation. However, the need for specialist officers for projects was also recognised and portfolio managers would be appointed to support this.

In response to a question in relation to monitoring performance via key performance indicators (KPIs), Gabrielle Mancini explained that this would be part of the work undertaken by the PDG. Individual business cases were required and progress with them was tracked. This could be a role for Scrutiny Members.

Councillor Poole explained that new policies and procedures were being formed to strengthen the programme and would include thresholds for escalation should this be needed with a project. The mechanisms for considering new projects would be part of the PDG's discussions.

Councillor Brooks added that each project would have its own business case which would be monitored. Focus would be given to points including project delivery and return on investment. He also made the point that some projects were ongoing and could achieve savings over a period of time.

Councillor Brooks felt there was scope for increased commercialisation of the Council's services and suggested this could also be a topic for the PDG. There was the potential to progress this as part of the Ridgeway proposal if that way forward was taken.

Councillor Read felt that it would be useful to measure the social benefits being achieved for residents. He highlighted the ongoing role for scrutiny of analysing the benefits achieved and prioritisation given to projects.

The capital spend on Walnut Close was £86k. The savings achieved (in the region of £650k) were net of staffing costs.

Councillor Alan Macro was pleased to note that the temporary supported accommodation at Walnut Close made it possible for families to be more closely located to each other and the local area. Gabrielle Mancini was pleased to report that the need for bed and breakfast accommodation for individuals and families who were homeless had been significantly reduced.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon highlighted that transformation activity took place, including on some large scale projects, under the previous Administration, prior to the past two years. Councillor Brooks acknowledged this was the case, but pointed out that the centralised approach being taken commenced in 2023.

Councillor Richard Somner noted that the Transformation Review document did acknowledge the transformation work that had been carried out pre May 2023.

Councillor Mackinnon made reference to the budget reports approved by Council in February 2025 which outlined proposed savings of £469k in the operation of resource centres, with the aim to explore delivery with the external market. However, he felt that the wording in the report in relation to exploring opportunities to co-locate services was a complete move away from the proposal in the budget reports. He queried if this decision had been made.

Councillor Mackinnon noted from the report that the saving of £469k remained. However, he queried if this was still the case as the commentary provided in the report in relation to the way forward for resource centres had changed. He was concerned that this created uncertainty for resource centre users and members of staff.

Councillor Brooks clarified that the £469k saving remained as agreed within the budget. Work on the service provision had been undertaken and it was the intention to provide an announcement/an update at the Executive on 25 September 2025.

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Councillor Poole described the process in place of moving onto a new project(s) while current projects were being finalised. A number of projects were pending and were being prioritised. There was therefore no time lost between a project concluding and another commencing. Projects would run concurrently.

Councillor Brooks explained that project management was being centralised and an officer was being recruited to take a lead on project management. This would help project delivery and reduce the risk of single points of failure.

It was noted that the Project Management Task and Finish Group had commenced its work.

Councillor Culver sought to understand whether officers engaged in transformation activity were being paid from capital or revenue funding and whether this was being monitored, including cases where the funding of a post could change, i.e. if a post was made permanent. Shannon Coleman-Slaughter (Service Director for Finance, Property and Procurement) explained that transformation activity was funded by capital receipts and this applied to all transformation officers regardless of whether they were permanent or temporary members of staff.

A written answer would be provided in response to the query from Councillor Culver seeking information on the income from selling assets, alongside costs incurred/rental income lost to fully understand the benefits achieved from transformation. Information was also sought on the costs of retaining an asset and using it in a different way vs the savings achieved.

Councillor Culver expanded on this point by querying if time spent by officers as part of business as usual (revenue costs) on transformation work was captured. Councillor Brooks agreed that it would be useful to understand this on a broad level, but it was not the intention to be overly specific, i.e. by asking officers to complete timesheets.

Gabrielle Mancini provided an assurance that time spent by senior officers in assisting project delivery fell outside of the performance of their regular duties and did not impact on the performance of their weekly hours.

Appendix A provided a summary of transformation programme savings and Councillor Culver queried those cases which showed savings and cost avoidance as zero. It was explained that some of the projects listed remained in progress or had only just commenced.

A key purpose of the project to enhance Market Street's meeting facilities was to move away from the use of Shaw House for meetings and instead seek greater commercial use of Shaw House. It was explained that work on some projects helped to unlock savings in other projects.

Councillor Somner highlighted the importance of being fully clear, with projects such as this one, on costs incurred to deliver a project vs the savings achieved. Gabrielle Mancini agreed with the importance of this, explaining that costs were fully reflected on and scrutinised as part of business cases. In the case of the Market Street project, a budget had already been identified as part of maintaining the building and was not funded by new money.

Councillor Somner requested that this level of cost detail be captured with future work/within future reports.

Gabrielle Mancini described the detailed work conducted by a Transformation Manager and two Business Analysts for the Business Support Review. A systematic analysis was conducted to identify processes and functions across the Council that were similar in nature and could be centralised.

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Councillor Poole gave as an example the work undertaken to standardise functions conducted by social care teams covering different localities across the district. This would increase resilience and efficiencies.

In response to queries on how this impacted officers who worked in a specialist team, but performed similar duties to others, Councillor Brooks explained that these officers would continue their roles. However, centralisation would serve to increase resilience and remove single points of failure.

Feedback had been obtained from those officers who performed these duties and the process models that had been developed had been validated by these officers.

In some cases, the decision was made to not centralise some activities due to, for example, their confidential nature.

Councillor Culver reinforced the need for further information on savings achieved as well as costs incurred. For example, if the savings for the Walnut Close temporary supported accommodation were fully net of spend (£86k). Gabrielle Mancini agreed to provide additional detail that would cover savings, cost avoidance and Government income that was able to be used for this project, alongside costs.

It was explained that the £50k spend on consultancy fees for the Place Service Improvement Plan (specifically Planning) was incurred prior to the formation of the Transformation Programme. It was the intention for this work to be used as a starting point by the Service Director for the Improvement Plan, but this had been delayed as the role had not been filled for a period of time. However, many service improvements had still been identified and progressed in Planning, i.e. the enhanced use of software to process planning applications.

Councillor Culver highlighted that the proposal for care homes to be managed by an external provider had not found support among all Members and she queried if this proposal would still be taken forward as it had not progressed to date. Councillor Brooks explained that a procurement process was ongoing and could therefore provide no further comment at the present time.

Councillor Culver followed this by querying the impact on the Revenue Budget of not taking this project forward as per the original timeframe. Councillor Brooks acknowledged that this had caused a strain on the budget, which had been covered as part of the outturn for Adult Social Care. It was felt that the savings identified for care home provision could still be achieved and Shannon Coleman-Slaughter clarified that a £1.2m saving was identified in this financial year. Councillor Brooks added that £600k was already forecast as being achieved.

The report noted that website improvements had led to improvements in staff recruitment. Councillor Brooks advised that retention was also improving and this linked closely with the Employee Value Proposition. This included an improved candidate experience and a positive induction programme.

The cost of employing a consultant as part of the home to school transport review was in the region of £15k. This was commissioned prior to the formation of the transformation programme. Gabrielle Mancini added that the savings for home to school transport were net figures that took account of the costs of the Transport Review Officer. The additional income from the farepayer scheme had been noted as part of the Revenue Budget.

Appendix A gave total anticipated savings of just over £3m, some of which was in delivery and some of which had been achieved. It was noted that with the reduction in agency spend, this figure rose to £7.6m.

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Councillor Culver proposed as a recommendation that a request be made for further information on savings achieved and cost avoidance, as well as all costs incurred to establish the net position and assist further scrutiny. This would capture the information in one document and could take the form of an enhanced Appendix A and/or the transformation cost tracker that had been tabled. Regular update reports were requested. This was supported by the Committee.

Councillor Brooks agreed this would be provided and suggested this enhanced information could be brought back to the Scrutiny Committee in the new year, by which time transformation work would have been reviewed by the Policy Development Group.

Actions:

- **Gabrielle Mancini to provide information on whether improvements had been achieved to the waiting list for home to school transport.**
- **Information would be provided on the income from selling assets, alongside costs incurred/rental income lost to fully understand the benefits achieved from transformation. Information would also be provided on the costs of retaining an asset and using it in a different way vs the savings achieved.**
- **Further information would be provided on savings achieved and cost avoidance, as well as all costs incurred to establish the net position and assist further scrutiny. This would capture the information in one document and could take the form of an enhanced Appendix A and/or the transformation cost tracker that had been tabled. Regular update reports were requested. The next update would be received by the Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 10 February 2026.**

RESOLVED to note:

- the achievements of the existing transformation programme and the additional projects.
- the restructure of the service and appointment of a new Service Director.
- the proposal to bring forward a refreshed transformation plan in the coming months.

6 Review of the Library Service performance and funding model

The Committee considered the report (Agenda Item 7), the purpose of which was to review the performance of the Library Service since the introduction of its new funding model in April 2025.

It was reported that the new offer to develop additional library services, which were chargeable, was set within the context of the current financial challenges faced by the Council.

Councillor Nigel Foot, the Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside, presented the report. He started by giving his view that the team of officers and volunteers delivered an exceptional service to library users.

He gave some background to the funding situation for the Library Service over past years. The budget had reduced and so too had the level of officer resource, Wash Common Library had closed (although it had since reopened and was being successfully run by the local community), and the mobile library had reduced. Voluntary financial contributions had been sought from town and parish councils but it had not been possible to achieve the target that had been set.

The new funding model introduced in April 2025 followed a decision to move away from seeking these voluntary contributions as it was considered an unfair approach with some parishes paying for the services, while others were not able to.

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The decision was also taken to cease the mobile library service as usage was limited and the cost of replacing the vehicle was high. As an alternative, pop-up libraries and community bookshelves had begun operating. The number of visitors at these three pop-up libraries were exceeding those seen by the mobile library and it was the intention to increase their number. The pop-up libraries had proved invaluable to parishes who could be offered bespoke services. They were also an ideal place to share key information with residents.

A number of points were raised and questions asked during the debate. Summarised as follows:

- This was noted as a positive report.
- Felicity Harrison, Culture and Libraries Manager, agreed to provide national library trend data for comparison with the picture in West Berkshire.
- There had been a shortfall in the revenue budget for the Library Service over recent years, but additional Council funding of £92,900 had been added to the Library Service budget to cover this shortfall through an investment bid. The income from the chargeable services being offered was additional to the base budget and it was therefore felt that the budget had moved to a sustainable and more stable position for the future as part of the new funding model.
- E-library services had moved to being provided by a single provider and this had enabled clearer marketing of the services to take place, and this would be increased.
- Councillor Foot explained his intention to attend many parish and town council meetings both to promote the services being offered and as a chance to gain information on local needs.
- It was explained that it was possible to access data on library users, i.e. their postcodes, to help build the picture of where users were accessing library services to help inform the Council and parishes. The Library Service annual report for 2024/25 had recently been sent to all parishes which included information on service provision, this would assist with promotion.
- Very useful information had been provided by the mobile library driver on the best locations to locate pop-up libraries. There was however no set criteria, and approaches were welcomed from all parish and town councils.
- Praise was given by Members who had attended pop-up libraries in their Wards and felt this could be usefully provided in other areas of the district. It was also felt that interested parishes could be invited to existing pop-ups to aid them in their considerations for their areas. It would be useful to involve parishes at the earliest stage possible.
- Councillor Foot took the opportunity to highlight that a recent publication of the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association included an article to highlight West Berkshire's pop-up library provision.
- Libraries were being used as a hub for the community outreach programme 'Let's Talk' which commenced in May 2025 and this included pop-up libraries. Councillor Jeff Brooks felt that libraries held a key role as information hubs for local communities, and this was one of the reasons for wanting to retain West Berkshire's libraries.
- It was acknowledged that there had been a slight decline in the number of new library members in 2024/25, but 2023/24 had proved to be a bumper year following focussed

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efforts to increase numbers through schools. It was the intention to resume this type of work to again encourage residents to become library members.

- Praise was given for the At Home Library Service and Felicity Harrison explained that there were plans to link this with community hubs and cafes across the district, and contact was being made to try and facilitate this. However, community hubs could make direct contact with officers if they wanted to take this forward.
- The enthusiastic library staff and volunteers were commended for all their efforts in their work to deliver services to West Berkshire's residents.

Action:

- **The national library trend data would be provided for comparison with the picture in West Berkshire.**

RESOLVED to note the performance of the library service since the introduction of the new funding model in April 2025.

7 Capital Financing Performance Report Q1 2025/26

The Committee considered the report (Agenda Item 8) which presented the provisional outturn position for the 2025/26 financial year, as forecast at Quarter One, against the approved Capital Programme and summarised the financial implications for the 2026/27 financial year.

Councillor Jeff Brooks, Leader of the Council, presented the report on behalf of the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources. He explained that approximately £73m of the current year's Capital Programme was expected to be delivered.

The aim was to achieve 70-75% in year delivery of the Programme but it seemed unlikely that this would be achieved for 2025/26. Councillor Brooks advised that a complicating factor in achieving this percentage was the reprofiling of projects from the previous year. It was also the case that some projects could roll forward from year to year due to a number of factors, and improvements at Theale Railway Station was given as an example of this.

Councillor Brooks also highlighted the financial support that needed to be given to the growing pressure of the High Needs Block (HNB) within Education. This was expected to have a negative impact on what could be funded from the Capital Programme in the coming years.

A number of points were raised and questions asked during the debate. Summarised as follows:

- It was felt to be the case that providers on a project could be the cause of delays. A delayed project would likely see an increase in costs due to inflation, which was a reason for seeking delivery of projects in year.
- It was clarified that the sum of money identified for a project was not held in an account, funding for a project was brought forward at the appropriate time from, for example, the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) or from money received from Government grants.
- Appendix A to the report (reprofiling requests) only listed major projects whereas the figure in paragraph 2.1(a) of the report gave the full figure. Shannon Coleman-Slaughter (Service Director for Finance, Property and Procurement) agreed that a full list could be provided.
- The projects identified for reprofiling generally became clearer during the course of the year as progress with a project became clearer. Councillor Brooks clarified that

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while every attempt was made to take a project forward, slippage could occur. This could be for factors outside of the Council's control. However, the intention would remain to deliver the project and in some cases delivery could take place over a number of years.

- It was acknowledged that there was a risk of some grant funding being lost if the project in question was reprofiled. Energy projects carried a particular risk. However, it was clarified that the majority of annually reoccurring grants were awarded for a particular purpose and not a specific project.
- £16m was the original budget for the solar farm, but slippage in the project had led to this figure growing to £19m. Councillor Brooks assured Members that a strong business case remained for this project and he agreed for this to be circulated to the Committee.
- Clare Lawrence (Executive Director for Place) explained that unfortunately, it had not been possible to appoint a contractor to develop the solar farm. Procurement had therefore been restarted, via a matrix arrangement, and progress so far had been positive.
- Councillor Brooks supported the statement made in paragraph 5.6 of the report which included the point that the Council invested heavily to ensure that West Berkshire remained an affluent and prosperous area.
- It was noted that as at 31 March 2025, the Council's total level of long term borrowing to fund capital spend was £202.7m, with short term borrowing at £65m.
- The authorised limit for external debt was set at £402.9m for 2025/26. The Council was somewhat distant from that limit, but it was acknowledged that the level of debt would grow, again recognising pressures with the HNB.
- As per the Investment and Borrowing Strategy, alternative methods of borrowing and sources of funding were considered. This could include the issuing of bonds.
- A concern was raised that the Liability Benchmark was showing an increase from £241m in 2024 to £372m in 2028 (the latter figure getting close to the limit for external debt). Shannon Coleman-Slaughter explained that this was the current projection which was revised year on year with a number of factors considered. Higher borrowing would impact on repayments from the Revenue Budget.
- It was noted that the proportion of total borrowing that would mature within 12 months was around £71m and it was explained that, where necessary, debts would be refinanced in line with the Investment and Borrowing Strategy.
- Paragraph 5.14 of the report outlined that the 2025/26 Capital Programme was expected to inflate the Council's Capital Financing Requirement (CFR) to £346m. The figure from 2024/25 would be confirmed.

Actions:

- **A full list of reprofiling requests would be provided in future reports.**
- **The business case for the solar farm would be circulated to the Committee.**
- **The CFR from 2024/25 would be confirmed.**

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

8 Revenue Performance Report Q1 2025/26

The Committee considered the report (Agenda Item 9) which outlined the financial performance of the Council's revenue budgets at Quarter One of 2025/26. The report detailed the variance between the budget set in February 2025 and the current forecast of the year end position.

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Councillor Jeff Brooks, Leader of the Council, presented the report. He explained that the forecast net overspend at Quarter One was £681k after the application of transformation funding. He felt this was a satisfactory position at this point in the financial year against a net budget of £183.4m. Efforts would continue to be made to manage the forecast position throughout the year.

A number of points were raised and questions asked during the debate. Summarised as follows:

- Greater clarification would be provided of the graphs presented in paragraph 6.2 of the report.
- Approximately half of the budgeted savings for 2025/26 were on track to be delivered and it was queried if that position was likely to be maintained. Councillor Brooks explained that some risks to achieving the savings had been identified. Shannon Coleman-Slaughter (Service Director – Finance, Property and Procurement) added that Finance were in constant contact with service areas and received quarterly reports as part of ongoing efforts to achieve as many savings as possible.
- Triple Value Impact (TVI) was an organisation which specialised in process management and had advised the Council on transformation projects to pursue with the aim of achieving savings. This included the provision of software and toolkits to assist with projects. Councillor Brooks explained that a number of options had been put to the Council and it had taken time to decide which ones were best to pursue. As a result, this had delayed the achievement of savings.
- It was felt that a more suitable term should be used for savings not expected to be achieved rather than 'ragged red'.
- Net variance of £2.9m was noted for Transformation, Customer and ICT.
- The £608k saving in Adult Social Care had been identified from work to achieve efficiencies in care homes.
- It was noted that high costs could be incurred as a result of pressures within social care.
- Short term borrowing was required to be repaid in under one year. Some of this borrowing would need to be refinanced and it was agreed that the Committee would be provided with information on the profiling of this short term debt. Borrowing that needed to be repaid in future years was considered long term borrowing.
- A transformation cost tracker had been circulated to the Committee. Shannon Coleman-Slaughter explained that this covered all transformation activity across the Council and not just the activity in the official Transformation Programme. The areas listed in the cost tracker were all being applied to the revenue budget.
- There was concern that some items in the cost tracker could be considered as revenue costs. In response, Shannon Coleman-Slaughter explained that thorough reviews were undertaken of how transformation funding was being used. In the previous financial year, some areas were moved from capital expenditure to revenue.
- Councillor Carolyne Culver felt it would be useful for Scrutiny Members to receive a private finance briefing to aid Members' understanding of factors related to the budget, such as Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) and borrowing arrangements with the Public Works Loan Board (PWLb), and how best to scrutinise them. This was something she had already discussed with Councillor Iain Cottingham, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources. It would be open to all Members to attend.

Actions:

- **Greater clarification would be provided of the graphs presented in paragraph 6.2 of the report.**

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- Information would be provided on the profiling of short term borrowing and repayment.
- A private finance briefing would be arranged for Scrutiny Members, open to all Members, to aid Members' understanding of factors related to the budget, such as Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) and borrowing arrangements with the Public Works Loan Board (PWLb), and how best to scrutinise them.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

9 Task and Finish Group Updates:

10 Sports Hub Task and Finish Group Report

The Committee considered the report (Agenda Item 10a) which presented the findings of the Sports Hub Task and Finish Group (the Task Group). The Task Group had sought to determine whether there was a strategically and financially sound business case for the Monks Lane Sports Hub, whether the project was well managed, and whether reliable and consistent advice was given to Members about the project to assist them in their decision making roles.

The report proposed recommendations based on the evidence gathered which, if implemented, would help to inform the Council's approach to future sports and leisure projects.

Councillor Carolyn Culver presented the report and started with thanking her fellow Members of the Task Group: Councillors Jeremy Cottam, Paul Dick, David Marsh and Chris Read. She also thanked Gordon Oliver, the Clerk to the Task Group, and the internal and external witnesses who gave evidence to the Task Group.

Objective One: To determine whether the Sports Hub project was value for money

The Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS), adopted in February 2020, identified the relocation of the Faraday Road pitch as a top priority. The budget to do so (£5.6m) proved to be insufficient and, as a result, the alternative was to create six new 3g pitches over a five year period.

Costs were analysed by the Task Group as was information provided by Newbury Community Football Group (NCFG). The NCFG suggested a more cost effective approach could have been achieved. They had a business case to reopen Faraday Road approved by Sport England for £1.1m. Sport England and the Football Foundation had offered to fund 75% of the cost of works.

The Council had invested £214k-£219k into the Sports Hub but this outlay had been lost.

The Task Group felt that reopening Faraday Road would have been better value for money than the Sports Hub project.

Objective Two: To determine whether the project would have delivered on the Council's strategic objectives

The Task Group felt that there was greater potential to progress the PPS via the use of Faraday Road. The Sports Hub facility did not have the same potential as Faraday Road in terms of the level of football (tier of football) that could be achieved.

There was concern over limited public consultation.

Objective Three: To determine whether the project was well managed

Councillor Read outlined the concern that lessons identified as part of previous scrutiny reviews had not been learnt, i.e. from the London Road Industrial Estate (LRIE). There

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had also been a particular difficulty in being provided with a timeline for the Sports Hub project.

These were points that would be reflected upon as part of the Project Management Task and Finish Group.

Objective Four: To determine whether reliable and consistent advice was given to Members about the project to assist them in their decision-making roles

In summary, the Task Group did not feel that reliable and consistent advice was provided to Members at planning committees or meetings of the Executive.

A particular concern was the changing advice on whether or not there was a need to replace the Faraday Road pitch or whether the Sports Hub should be considered as a standalone project.

Sport England had stated that they would have objected to the Sports Hub proposal if it was to be a replacement for Faraday Road as it would not achieve the same standard. However, their consideration was restricted to the Sports Hub as a standalone project as that was how it was progressed through the planning process.

Objective Five: To determine whether the Council's decision to abandon the project in its original form was a strategically and financially sound decision

The Task Group was concerned that the Sports Hub project had been taken forward and that monies had been spent unnecessarily. They felt that the funding would have been more efficiently used in reopening Faraday Road and/or other aspects of the PPS.

Objective Six: To establish whether the Council intends to deliver any elements of the original project at Monks Lane (bearing in mind planning permission remains and project funds are being carried forward)

No recommendations were arising from this objective.

Councillor Marsh took the opportunity to thank Councillor Culver for her dedication in Chairing the Task Group, and added thanks to the other Members on the Task Group and Gordon Oliver for their work.

He felt the 27 recommendations provided a set of robust proposals that would result in improvements with future project management.

Councillor Howard Woollaston voiced his concern with the report, feeling it did not take account of the plans put in place by the former Administration for the Faraday Road site and the Sports Hub. The proposals for the Faraday Road site would have brought many positive factors, including economic regeneration of the area, affordable housing provision and financial benefits to the Council. He felt these points had been ignored.

Councillor Woollaston acknowledged that improvements were needed in project management.

A clear business case had been produced for the Sports Hub by the organisation who had since become the Council's leisure contractor. The Sports Hub proposal would have enabled greater use than at Faraday Road and would have been available for use at a much earlier stage. He praised the superb changing room and social area facility that was proposed for the Sports Hub.

Councillor Woollaston felt the report was one sided and the Task Group would have benefited from including a Member from the previous Administration.

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Councillor Culver pointed out that Councillor Woollaston had been invited as a witness as the previous Portfolio Holder, but explained that it was not permitted to have a previous Portfolio Holder (decision maker) on the Task Group.

She added, in response to the point about changing room facilities, the view from the Task Group that the provision formally at Faraday Road should not have been allowed to deteriorate, with much of that former facility lost. This should have been maintained.

Councillor Woollaston felt that it would have been useful to return to a Task Group meeting as a witness on another occasion so that points could be clarified. Councillor Culver explained that this was not current practice for task and finish groups, but added that the scope of these groups was being reviewed.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon made a number of comments on the report. He disputed the point made that the Council was obliged to replace the Faraday Road pitch, although Sport England could request a replacement or object through the planning process. He felt the Council could choose to close a facility it owned and use the site for another purpose.

Councillor Mackinnon felt that the report did not adequately explain the roles the Council held as Local Planning Authority and as the developer for Faraday Road.

He then questioned the cost information considered by the Task Group. As stated in the report the cost of the proposed Sports Hub was £3.878m. Alongside this, the NCFG submitted documentation which outlined the cost of the Sports Hub, over a 40 year period, as being a minimum of £11.58m. The NCFG business case for Faraday Road gave initial costs of £1.1m, but not costs over a 40 year period. He did not therefore feel there had been a like for like comparison and questioned if there had been due diligence of the NCFG financial information. Councillor Mackinnon did not feel there was evidence to show that use of Faraday Road as a football pitch was better value for money than the Sports Hub as had been claimed in the Task Group's report.

Councillor Mackinnon did not feel there was evidence to support some of the claims made in the report. He questioned whether there was evidence to show that trust had been eroded in the Council as had been stated.

Turning to the consultation, Councillor Mackinnon questioned the suggestion that the consultation questions had been formed in order to obtain favourable answers and identified question one as an example where this was not the case. He did not think it appropriate to describe the consultation response as being patchy, this needed evidence. The consultation did not include questions relating to use of Faraday Road as a football pitch as the site had been identified for commercial use.

He also responded to the point made that Council Members did not have chance to seriously consider the Sports Hub plans until the planning committee meetings. He pointed out that two reports went to the Executive in 2021, prior to the planning committees, giving Members a chance to look at the proposals and ask questions.

Councillor Mackinnon concluded his comments by giving his view that the evidence of some witnesses to the Task Group had been given greater weight than others.

Councillor Culver stated that the need to replace the Faraday Road pitch was based on advice from the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that it should be replaced by an equivalent or better facility.

On the cost information, the figures provided by the NCFG included the expectation that the Council would need to subsidise the Sports Hub for many years to come and these costs had not been recognised. The NCFG had also confirmed that they could obtain financial assistance with their proposal.

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Continuation of meeting - in accordance with the Council's Constitution, Part 3, point 10.8, the Committee supported the motion that the remaining business could be concluded by 10.30pm, and therefore proceeded with the meeting.

Councillor Culver felt that there had been a loss of trust in the Council among the external witnesses to the review. There had been numerous questions asked of the Council and the Executive in an effort to obtain further information. The Task Group also held the view that the Council could have done more to improve the relationship with the NCFG.

Councillor Marsh explained that the Task Group did form the view that the consultation questions were largely leading questions about whether respondents wanted to see better facilities. There was also concern that only one public consultation was held and that was at an early stage of the process.

Councillor Read added that the main bodies to the review, the NCFG and the Rugby Club, did not feel they were a partner to the Council in the project.

Councillor Mackinnon noted that the loss of trust had been raised by witnesses to the review and felt it would have been useful to clarify this in the report.

Councillor Mackinnon acknowledged that the NPPF might have requested a replacement facility but did not have the ability to insist the Council took action to achieve that end. Councillor Culver responded that if the need for a replacement facility had been made clear, then this would have given interested parties grounds on which to challenge the closure of Faraday Road without a replacement.

Councillor Mackinnon commented that the NCFG did not help with forming a positive relationship, referring to comments the group had posted on social media.

Councillor Erik Pattenden felt the Task Group had undertaken a useful exercise that had identified many valuable recommendations. His only comment was that it would have been useful for the timeline to include the date the Sports Hub project was cancelled. Councillor Culver agreed this could be added.

Action: the timeline would include the date that the Sports Hub project was cancelled.

Councillor Pattenden then proposed an amendment to the Task Group's recommendations, proposing that recommendations 23 and 25 be removed. Recommendation 23 referred to whether or not it was appropriate for Executive Members to participate on Council applications at planning committees, and Councillor Alan Macro gave the view that Members were subject to the Council's Code of Conduct and therefore needed to abide by planning law which gave clear advice on participation. Councillor Culver clarified the Task Group view that, in cases where the Council was the sponsor of a project, Executive Members should not speak to the item at a planning committee.

Recommendation 25 suggested that the Council should refer itself to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) and ask them to consider this report. Councillor Macro felt this step was unnecessary, as much had been learnt from this process, and felt that such a referral would not achieve anything further. Councillor Culver commented that individual Members would be able to reserve the right to make a referral to the LGO if they wished to.

The amendment was seconded by Councillor Antony Amirtharaj and put to the vote.

RESOLVED that the Amendment be approved. Recommendations 23 and 25 would be removed.

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Councillor Jeff Brooks made it clear that the Sports Hub project was run by the Conservatives while they were in Administration and was not overseen by the current Liberal Democrat Administration.

Councillor Brooks then queried the absence of other witnesses, i.e. the former Leader (former Councillor Lynne Doherty) and the former Chief Executive of the Council (Nick Carter). In response, Councillor Culver explained that Councillor Woollaston was identified as the most appropriate witness as the former Portfolio Holder for this area of activity.

RESOLVED that with the exception of Recommendations 23 and 25, the Task Group's recommendations would be referred to the Executive for consideration.

11 Project Management Task and Finish Group Update

The Committee considered a verbal report on progress with the Project Management Task and Finish Group (Agenda Item 10b). Councillor Chris Read, the Chairman of the Task Group, gave the following update:

The Task and Finish Group held its first evidence session on 1 September, which was focused on how the Council currently manage its projects, and the following officers attended to give evidence. Councillor Read gave thanks for their time and input:

- Sarah Clarke – Executive Director (Resources)
- Gabrielle Mancini – Service Director (Transformation, Customer and ICT)
- Kate Pearson (Service Lead - Commissioning & Procurement)
- Melanie Best (Transformation & Programme Manager)

The session explored a variety of aspects including:

- Project management methodology
- Training
- Project governance arrangements
- Document management

It was clear that the project management methodology had improved significantly over time, informed by lessons learned from previous projects.

The Task Group had asked to see examples of various project documents to understand in more detail how the adopted project management methodology worked in practice. This included examples from positively run projects.

Members were informed that further changes were coming, with plans to centralise the project management resource so all project managers would come under the auspices of the Programme Management Office, rather than sitting within services. This should help to achieve a more consistent approach and encourage peer learning.

Discussions had begun on some of the issues around Care Director 6 and iTrent Phase 1, which would inform the Task Group's work over the coming sessions.

For Care Director 6, the Task Group would be surveying the front-line staff who were involved with testing/using the new software to seek their views, as well as talking to the project sponsor, project managers, and technical staff. An invitation would also be extended to the supplier to give evidence, although it was recognised that they were not compelled to do so.

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The next meeting was provisionally arranged for 20 October. Looking forward, it was felt realistic to aim to complete this work and prepare the draft report in February 2026, prior to bringing the report to Scrutiny Committee on 17 March 2026.

12 Appointment of Task and Finish Groups

This item was not discussed as there were no terms of reference to approve, and no changes were proposed to the membership of existing task and finish groups.

13 Executive Forward Plan September to December 2025

The Committee noted the Council's Forward Plan for the period covering 1 September 2025 to 31 December 2025.

14 Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Committee considered its Work Programme (Agenda Item 13) and discussed a number of forthcoming items.

Ridgeway Council Proposal – an Extraordinary meeting date had been provisionally arranged for this item on 1 October 2025. However, it was noted that the dates to bring this proposal forward were changing.

(Post meeting note: the dates to consider the Ridgeway Council Proposal had been confirmed for Extraordinary meetings of:

Council on 4 November 2025

Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee on 10 November 2025

Executive on 12 November 2025).

Social Housing – a briefing note had been requested to help inform the scrutiny of this topic. Members felt that it would be beneficial to invite social housing providers to the meeting to discuss issues. The Council's Housing Officers would be liaised with on this point.

Clare Lawrence (Executive Director for Place) advised that much activity was ongoing in this area. This followed changes to the way that Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) were funded and to the Government's approach to affordable housing. Clare Lawrence suggested that the Committee be provided with information including some context of the current situation, areas of challenge and potential solutions.

Thames Water and the Environment Agency – scrutiny of this area needed to be programmed. This would need to include coverage of work on flood alleviation schemes, implications of the Section 19 report in relation to flooding and issues raised in relation to the Northbrook highlighted earlier in the meeting.

Pedestrianisation – it was felt that the proposal to bring an update on this topic to the meeting in March 2026 was correct as this would allow time for officers to consider the responses received to the public consultation.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 10.25 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature