

Executive 18 January 2024

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
EXECUTIVE

held on 18 January 2024

Present:

Cllr A-M Barker (Chairman)
Cllr W Forster (Vice-Chair)

Cllr I Johnson Cllr D Roberts
Cllr L Lyons

Also Present: Councillor A Boote.

Absent: Councillors P Graves and E Nicholson.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Graves and Councillor Nicholson.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor I Johnson declared an interest in minute item 7 – UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) in respect of the reference to Citizens Advice Woking arising from his wife's employment by the charity. The interest was such that Councillor Johnson would leave the Council Chamber during the determination of the item.

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Strategic Director – Corporate Resources, Kevin Foster, declared a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which he was a Council-appointed director. The interests were such that Mr Foster could advise the Executive on those items.

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Strategic Director – Communities, Louise Strongitharm, declared a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which she was a Council-appointed director. The interests were such that Mrs Strongitharm could advise the Executive on those items.

The interest of the Head of Transformation, Digital and Customer, Adam Walther, was referred to in the agenda but it should be noted that Mr Walther was not present at the meeting.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 14 December 2023 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of Urgent Business under Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

5. QUESTIONS

The Leader welcomed Mr B Clarke who had submitted a question under Section 3 of the Executive Procedure Rules regarding the Leisure Centre. A copy of the question together with the reply was before the Executive. The question, together with the reply from the Leader of the Council, was presented as follows:

Question from Mr Brian Clarke

“Can we sell the Leisure Centre to a private concern and get a lump of money and try to reduce the debt?”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“Woking Leisure Centre is a much loved and well used community asset. The Leisure Centre has over 350,000 visits a year and currently covers its operating costs, being generally a cost neutral part of the leisure contract. Going forward, the Council will need to undertake a condition survey to understand and plan for future building maintenance and investment requirements, similar to the exercise already undertaken for Pool in the Park.

The Council recognises the role this community asset plays in supporting our health and wellbeing strategy. The disposal of such a community asset would come with restrictions on how the land and facility could be used to secure its future for the benefit of the local community. Therefore, if sold, it would be unlikely to achieve a high capital value and would make a minimal contribution to the Council’s debt.”

Mr Clarke was thanked for his question and invited to ask a supplementary question.

Supplementary Question from Mr Brian Clarke

“It is regarding Victoria Place. To try and describe this, if you were standing outside Marks and Spencer and looking down towards the little escalators and the waterfall, there is a large area on the first floor level of just blank brownish paneling. What I was thinking was whether a large advertising display, similar to what is opposite to us here in The Ambassadors, could be put on that huge blank space to try and create some revenue and brighten it all up as well at the same time?”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“Thanks very much Mr Clarke. We can put that through, Victoria Square is part of a company owned by the Council in part, Victoria Square Woking Limited. It is definitely a suggestion we could put to them as a way to bring some income in so definitely something to be considered, thanks for the thought.”

The deadline for written questions from members of the public was 12 noon, seven days before the Executive. The next Executive would be held on 1 February 2024, so the deadline for written questions was 12 noon, 25 January 2024.

6. COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER POLICY EXE24-012

The Executive received a report which recommended to Council the adoption of the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) Policy. The Executive was advised that the Council was looking to local community organisations to run facilities such as community centres and sports pavilions, to enable the Council to create savings whilst retaining those assets for social benefit. The Leader highlighted that as community centres and sports pavilions were not considered statutory services by the Government, the Council would need to consider alternative ways to offer those facilities. It was noted that the CAT Policy had been drafted with support from Local Partnerships and the Local Government Association (LGA). The report also proposed a resource to allow the Council to work closely with local groups and help them through the CAT process, to be funded under proposals contained in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) item later on the agenda.

During the autumn public consultation on proposed service reduction, a number of community groups had expressed interest in the running of sports pavilions and community centres and discussions with those groups were ongoing. Examples of facilities being successfully run by the community in the Borough were highlighted, such as Old Woking Community Centre.

It was noted that a CAT Board would be established, consisting of appropriate Officers, which would identify assets for CAT and make decisions on expression of interest and business cases. Final decisions would be signed off by an Executive Member on an evidence basis.

The Executive welcomed the proposed Policy which would sustain valuable community assets, empower community enterprises and provide social and economic benefits for local areas. Due to the Council’s financial situation, it was hoped to start CATs within the next year. The Executive thanked the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Nicholson, and Officers for their hard work on drafting the CAT Policy.

RECOMMENDED to Council

That the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) Policy, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be adopted.

Reason: The Council has a number of assets that have the potential to be run by community organisations (referred to as community enterprises). This would enable the Council to create savings whilst the asset is retained for social benefit. Community Asset Transfers (CATs) also have the opportunity of supporting the

Borough's voluntary and community sector in their development and economic growth.

7. UK SHARED PROSPERITY FUND (UKSPF) EXE23-084

The Executive received a report which sought approval to the priority projects which would be replacement projects for UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) funding in light of the Digital Centre of Excellence not proceeding. Councillor Roberts, Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, explained that the Council had received £1m of UKSPF funding with the aim of helping local places to build pride in place and increase life chances. Due to the Digital Centre of Excellence not proceeding, it was necessary to consider how those uncommitted funds of £601,000 could be used in 2024/25. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the proposed projects in the report were in alignment with the overriding purpose of the UKSPF and related to transformation. It was noted that the funding could not be used for revenue purposes, however it could be given to groups moving towards new operating models.

Discussion ensued on the priority projects which included supporting Citizens Advice Woking to move to a more sustainable business model, and enabling the establishment of a new community based model for The Lightbox. The Executive was hopeful that the UKSPF funding would help both organisations to transform and not be dependent on Council funding. Priority projects also included funds for urgent repairs to parks and play areas, and supporting economic growth and local businesses including through a Place Board.

The Executive welcomed the proposals which would provide alternative ways of delivering some of the valued discretionary services impacted by some of the savings required for the Council to live within its means.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the priority projects listed in the report be confirmed;
- (ii) on the basis of the agreed projects, a change request be submitted to DLUHC; and
- (iii) authority be delegated to the UKSPF Group, in consultation with the S.151 Officer, to authorise the reallocation of funding to the additional projects listed in the report should the priority schemes not be bought forward within the required timeframe.

Reason: The priority projects meet the UKSPF criteria for the funding available, which, in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding with DLUHC, required the local authority must have been spent within this funding period.

8. DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL PLAN EXE24-014

The Executive received a report which set out a timetable and associated outline of the work programme in order to produce a new Local Plan for the Borough. It was noted that further detail was expected to come forward from central government. The government's recent plan-making reforms consultation set out a new timeline for preparing a local plan of

30 months from start to finish. Councillor Lyons, Portfolio Holder for Planning Policy, highlighted concerns regarding deliverability within the relatively short timeframe. It was proposed that the Council would formally give notice of its intention to start plan making in Autumn 2024 in order to allow Officers time to digest details from government and to start preliminary work. The Portfolio Holder explained that there would be an opportunity to incorporate evidence already collected through consultation on the Town Centre Masterplan. It was hoped that the new Local Plan would address concerns of residents, such as the nature of town centre development, the overturning of Planning Committee decisions by the Planning Inspectorate, and provision of affordable homes.

The Executive welcomed that the Council was working to the same timescale as expected to be followed by the front runners, noting that the Council would likely receive support from DLUHC by volunteering for pilot status.

RESOLVED

That the timeline set out in the report be noted with the caveat that it is subject to minor change as the details for the new system of plan-making are published.

Reason: To set out a timetable and associated outline of the work programme in order to produce a new Local Plan for the Borough of Woking.

9. PROPERTY MANAGEMENT EXE24-015

The Executive received a report which sought approval for the Council to accept a surrender from McLaren of its occupational leasehold interest in Victoria Gate, Chobham Road, for a payment to the Council. In addition, approval was sought for a simultaneous sale of the Council's Freehold interest in Victoria Gate with full vacant possession to Surrey County Council (SCC). The Executive was advised that payments exceeded the open market value and represented the beginning of an asset rationalisation programme. It was noted that SCC proposed to transfer some 600 staff to the building which would generate additional Town centre footfall and spending. It was highlighted that the Council had secured an option to occupy the 4th and part of the 5th floors of Victoria Gate, subject to it being a cost effective solution following a review of the Civic Town Centre Campus. Following a question regarding timescales for the transaction, Officers reported that it was achievable within the next month if all parties were willing and motivated.

The Executive was supportive of the proposal and thanked Officers for working on the transaction, noting that the Town Centre remained economically strong.

RESOLVED

That the Council agrees to accept a surrender of the occupational leasehold interest with a simultaneous sale of the freehold interest within Victoria Gate.

Reason: The combined disposal and lease surrender receipts will generate a return that exceeds the recent market sale valuations of Victoria Gate as either a standing investment or with full vacant possession.

10. MONITORING REPORTS - PROJECTS EXE24-005

The Executive received a report which provided an update on progress in relation to the Council's project management arrangements, assurance and processes. The report included the status of projects as at the end of October 2023. Attention was drawn to the projects highlighted red in the report; Rainwater Gardens, Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF), Victoria Place, and Redevelopment of Garages 1 to 12 Bonsey Lane Westfield.

RESOLVED

That (i) the report be received; and

(ii) the detailed project monitoring recorded in Appendix 1 to the report be approved.

Reason: To monitor progress on development to the Council's project management approach.

11. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of item 12 in view of the nature of the proceedings that, if members of the press and public were present during this item, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A, to the Local Government Act 1972.

Paragraph 3 – Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

12. PROPERTY MANAGEMENT EXE24-013

RESOLVED

That the commercially sensitive information, in support of the Property Management report under Part I of the agenda, be noted.

Reason: The combined disposal and lease surrender receipts will generate a return that exceeds both the recent valuations of Victoria Gate as a standing investment and with full vacant possession.

This document was published on Friday 19 January 2024 and the decisions within it will be implemented on Monday 29 January 2024, subject to call-in.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 8.31 pm.

Chairman: _____

Date: _____