

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
EXECUTIVE

held on 8 December 2022

Present:

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

Cllr I Johnson Cllr E Nicholson
Cllr R N Leach Cllr D Roberts
Cllr L S Lyons

Also Present: Councillors A Azad, K M Davis, S Dorsett, P J T Graves, D M C Jordan
and C S Kemp.

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 17 November 2022 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

3. URGENT BUSINESS

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

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Chief Executive, Julie Fisher, 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 Fisher could advise the Executive on those items.

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 – Place, Giorgio Framalitto, 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 Framalitto 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.

5. QUESTIONS

The Chairman welcomed Mr M Peel, who had submitted two questions under Section 3 of the Executive Procedure Rules regarding the Brookwood Lye development. A copy of the questions together with the replies was before the Executive. The Chairman confirmed the replies, supplementary questions were asked and replies given.

The Leader advised that 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 19 January 2023, so the deadline for written questions was 12 noon, 12 January 2023.

6. EMPTY HOMES PLAN EXE22-049

Councillor Johnson, Portfolio Holder for Housing, introduced the report which sought approval of the Executive to recommend to Council the adoption of the Empty Homes Plan 2022 – 2027. It was explained that the Plan set out the Council's three strategic priorities to reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough. The Plan also detailed how the Council would work to prevent properties becoming 'long-term' empty and how it would bring back into use homes that had been previously left empty. Councillor Johnson highlighted that an Empty Homes Working Group had been established in 2021, attended by representatives from teams across the Council, to discuss the top ten cases of concern. It was noted that public consultation had been undertaken and the Housing Task Group had been consulted on the Plan.

Councillor Dorsett, Shadow Housing Portfolio Holder, raised a number of questions regarding the report, including availability of a Ward breakdown of the 729 long term empty homes identified in the report, the number of premium empty homes, the rate of empty home Council Tax premium, success metrics, and use of the Empty Homes Grant. Councillor Johnson responded to the points raised and highlighted that the figures in the report related to October 2021. Councillor Johnson undertook to ask Officers to compile a Ward breakdown of current long term empty homes for circulation to the Executive and Councillor Dorsett. It was noted that lists of empty homes in their own Wards had previously been circulated to Councillors. In regard to success metrics, it was noted that the Green Book set a target of 40 empty homes brought back into use through Council intervention per annum. The Executive heard that the Empty Homes Grant had been very rarely used and therefore, it was proposed that it be removed for 2023/24.

The Executive welcomed the initiatives set out in the report to reduce the number of empty homes within the Borough, such as the Let's Rent Scheme, and acknowledged the work undertaken previously by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the issue. The Leader

encouraged everyone to contact the Council if they had any information on empty homes given the desperate need for housing in the Borough.

RECOMMENDED to Council

That (i) the Empty Homes Plan 2022 – 2027, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report, be adopted; and

(ii) the Strategic Director - Communities be delegated authority to make minor amendments to the Empty Homes Plan in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.

Reason: To provide a transparent framework for the Council to bring empty homes back in to use.

7. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) EXE22-077

Following the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) update provided to the Executive at its meeting on 17 November 2022, the Executive received a further report which set out the actions which needed to be taken for the Finance Director (Section 151 Officer) to be able to provide the necessary statement on the robustness of the budget estimates and adequacy of reserves to set the 2023/24 budget in February 2023. Councillor Barker highlighted that the Council was in Operation Recovery as it sought to secure a balanced budget. Councillor Roberts, Portfolio Holder for Finance, outlined the serious financial position of the Council and informed the Executive that a fundamental review of the Council's budget was required to rebalance service costs within the resources now available post Covid. The report also recommended actions targeted at delivering greater financial resilience, namely actions to identify funds to increase the level of reserves in order to give the Council more time to deliver savings that were sustainable. Councillor Roberts advised that without further action, the Council's expenditure could exceed the resources the Council had at its disposal.

The Executive was advised that an additional MTFS report would be received at its meeting on 19 January 2023. It was proposed that a meeting of Council would be arranged on 23 February 2023 to receive the budget papers.

Attention was drawn to the Draft Strategic Risk Register which identified the risk of not being able to set a balanced budget as the most significant risk to the Council. The Executive noted that difficult decisions would need to be taken, and that it would be important to protect and prioritise services directed at the Borough's most vulnerable residents.

Councillor Davis, Shadow Finance Portfolio Holder, raised a number of points regarding the report, including tax implications in relation to commercial property transfer, the release of development income to revenue, the process for undertaking service reviews, the need to retain staff, and the increase in the Council's senior leadership budget over the past three years. Councillor Barker responded to the points raised. Officers were asked to look into the budget figures for senior leadership and provide a response to Councillor Davis outside of the meeting. The need to invest in qualified staff in order to realise the full potential of Council assets was highlighted.

RESOLVED

That the update to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), including the actions detailed in Sections 4 and 5 of the report, be noted.

Reason: The decision is sought to develop further proposals to ensure the medium-term financial stability of the Council.

8. HOUSING INFRASTRUCTURE FUND (HIF) - UPDATE EXE22-058

Following the report considered by the Executive in July 2022, the Executive received an update on the work progressed to date on the Victoria Arch widening scheme. Councillor Forster, Deputy Leader, explained that the new administration had been concerned about the scale of the budget deficit, risks to the Council and the potential significant road closure involved in the scheme. Councillor Forster informed the Executive that a revised scheme was needed which fitted the £115m budget and which reduced the level of disruption to residents. The Executive noted that it was necessary to make decisions on the scheme based on data and evidence post Covid. Design options for the bridge and transport modelling were currently being undertaken and would be presented to the Executive in the New Year in order for the Executive to make evidence-led decisions on the scheme.

Councillor Forster provided an update on the planning applications for the Day Aggregates temporary and permanent access proposals. The Executive was advised that the temporary access proposals included a HGV ban on the majority of York Road, and all of Montgomery Road and Mount Hermon Road, in order to protect residents. It was noted that the permanent access would revert to its current position along the A320.

Following the Council declaring a Climate Change Emergency in 2019, the Executive expressed unease at the potential inclusion of a dual carriageway under the bridge. Councillor Forster advised that it would be necessary to review the transport modelling data before making a decision. The importance of good pedestrian and cycle access through the bridge was also raised.

The Deputy Leader commented that he valued the contribution of Councillor Kemp as Chair of the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) Task Group and would be working with Councillor Kemp to understand the transport data and bridge options.

The Executive welcomed the update and the positive community engagement around the Day Aggregates goods yard access proposals.

RESOLVED

- That (i) an update on the transport modelling, design options and funding opportunities be presented to the Executive in the New Year 2023;
- (ii) it be noted, the submitted planning applications which seek to secure a temporary access to the aggregates yard from York Road and the use of the current access to the yard from Guildford Road as a permanent access continue to be assessed by the Local Planning Authority and reach a decision to inform the project delivery;

And further to note the resolve made in July 2022:

- (iii) the commitment made by the Council and its partners to deliver a replacement bridge project and the risks accepted by the Council in its agreement with Homes England and that significant work has been progressed to date on the project, be noted;
- (iv) the additional costs associated with the current designed project based on land acquisitions, utility costs, bridge and highway costs and inflation meaning that further and substantial Government funding is needed before further significant expenditure can be undertaken which would be at the Council's risk, be noted;
- (v) the need for the continuation of high level meetings with Homes England and through them with key partners at the Department for Transport and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in order to secure additional funding for the project be supported; and
- (vi) given the likely exposure and scale of risk in committing to further expenditure at this stage, a fundamental review of the project continue in order to:
 - a. conclude discussions on the availability of additional funding to meet the current project design;
 - b. review with partners other design options to reduce the overall costs of the project including any proposals which remove the need to lower the road and / or reduce the road from a dual carriageway to a single carriageway;
 - c. ensure that any redesigned options meet with value for money requirements and achieve sufficient environmental and community benefits envisaged from the project; and
 - d. reassess highway capacity requirements under Victoria Arch through revisiting the transport modelling work previously undertaken to explore whether, through value engineering, a more cost effective bridge design can be achieved.

Reason: In order to complete the review of the project to assess financial risks and opportunities to the Council in progressing with delivering the Housing Infrastructure Fund project, considering in full the alternatives and seek risk sharing with project partners/ opportunities for further funding bids.

9. UPDATE ON THE THAMESWEY BUSINESS PLANS EXE22-078

The Executive received a report which provided an update on the ThamesWey Business Plan 2023-2026. The Leader of the Council, Councillor Barker, explained that it was timely and necessary for a review to be undertaken of the purpose of each Company, particularly as the Council embarked on a period of strategic review, change and improvement. The Council's new company governance arrangements was highlighted and it was noted that the Shareholder Advisory Group (SAG) had considered the draft Business Plan. As the

SAG had requested further exploration of a number of options to minimise risk and improve financial performance, set out in paragraph 2.8 of the report, further work was required before the Plan was presented to Executive and Council for approval in February 2023.

The Executive welcomed work to review the Sheerwater regeneration project, and the exploration of housing association involvement in delivering the project.

Councillor Azad, Shadow Portfolio Holder for Corporate Strategy and Policy, raised questions regarding external opinions sought to ensure sustainability of Group companies, the formation of exit plans for Group companies, and the streamlining of Group companies. The Leader responded to the points raised before moving to the recommendations in the report.

RESOLVED

That the update on the ThamesWey Business Plan 2023 – 2026 be noted.

Reason: To update the Executive on the positive progress being made on the ThamesWey Business Plan, aligning it with the priorities set out in the Woking for All Strategy.

This document was published on Friday 9 December 2022 and the decisions within it will be implemented on Monday 19 December 2022, subject to call-in.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 8.43 pm.

Chairman: _____

Date: _____