



COUNCIL

22 August 2023

To: The Mayor and Members of
WOKING BOROUGH COUNCIL

SUMMONS TO A MEETING

You are hereby summoned to attend an EXTRAORDINARY MEETING of the COUNCIL to be held in the Council Chamber, Civic Offices, Gloucester Square, Woking on TUESDAY, THE TWENTY-SECOND DAY OF AUGUST 2023 at 7.00 pm to transact the business specified in the agenda overleaf.

JULIE FISHER
Chief Executive

Civic Offices,
Woking

NOTE: Filming Council Meetings

Please note the meeting will be filmed and broadcast live and subsequently as an archive on the Council's website (www.woking.gov.uk). The images and sound recording may also be used for training purposes within the Council. Generally the public seating areas are not filmed. However, by entering the meeting room and using the public seating area, you are consenting to being filmed.



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AGENDA

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST. (Pages 5 - 6)

- (i) To receive declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests from Members in respect of any item to be considered at the meeting.
- (ii) In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Strategic Director - Corporate Resources, Kevin Foster declares a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which he is a Council-appointed director. The companies are listed in the attached schedule. The interests are such that Mr Foster may advise on those items.
- (iii) In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Strategic Director - Communities, Louise Strongitharm, declares a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which she is a Council-appointed director. The companies are listed in the attached schedule. The interests are such that Mrs Strongitharm may advise on those items.
- (iv) In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Head of Transformation and Digital, Adam Walther, declares a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which he is a Council-appointed director. The companies are listed in the attached schedule. The interests are such that Mr Walther may advise on those items.

3. MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS.

4. URGENT BUSINESS.

To consider any business which the Chairman rules may be dealt with under Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

5. ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL, COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN AND THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE.

In accordance with Standing Orders, the Council to receive any announcements from the Leader of the Council (or their nominated spokesperson), Committee Chairmen and/or the Chief Executive.

6. IMPROVEMENT AND RECOVERY PLAN WBC23-32. (Pages 7 - 46)

7. APPOINTMENT OF STATUTORY OFFICER WBC23-033. (Pages 47 - 50)

8. POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES REVIEW WBC23-034. (Pages 51 - 56)

AGENDA ENDS

Date Published - 14 August 2023

Agenda Item 2

Schedule Referred to in Declaration of Interests

Council-appointed directorships

Kevin Foster, Strategic Director – Corporate Resource	
Brookwood Cemetery Limited	Thameswey Guest Houses Limited
Brookwood Park Limited	Thameswey Housing Limited
Energy Centre for Sustainable Communities Ltd	Thameswey Limited
Export House Limited	Thameswey Maintenance Services Limited
Kingfield Community Sports Centre Limited	VSW Hotel Limited
LAC 2021 Limited (Dormant)	Victoria Square Residential Limited
Thameswey Central Milton Keynes Limited	Victoria Square Woking Limited
Thameswey Energy Limited	Woking Necropolis and Mausoleum Limited
Woking Shopping Limited	

Louise Strongitharm, Strategic Director – Communities	
Rutland Woking (Carhouse Lane) Limited	Thameswey Developments Limited
Rutland Woking (Residential) Limited	Thameswey Guest Houses Limited
Rutland (Woking) Limited	Thameswey Housing Limited
Thameswey Limited	

Adam Walther, Head of Transformation and Digital	
Brookwood Cemetery Limited	Thameswey Developments Limited
Brookwood Park Limited	Thameswey Energy Limited
Thameswey Central Milton Keynes Limited	Thameswey Limited
Thameswey Sustainable Communities Limited	Thameswey Solar Limited
Woking Necropolis and Mausoleum Limited	

COUNCIL – 22 AUGUST 2023

THE IMPROVEMENT AND RECOVERY PLAN

Executive Summary

This report sets out the Council's response to the Secretary of State's Directions in the form of a single Improvement and Recovery Plan that combines the previous Fit for The Future programme and the Financial Recovery Plan. Approval of this single Improvement and Recovery Plan is sought from Council to provide the organisation with a clear direction for its improvement journey that will enable the continued delivery of the strategic priorities in the Corporate Plan. As the Improvement and Recovery Plan is a response to the statutory direction of the Secretary of State, it is the responsibility of Council to formally approve the Plan.

Approval of this Plan will also provide the Organisation with a clear direction for its improvement journey that will enable the continued delivery of the strategic priorities in the Corporate Plan and set Woking Borough Council on a path to greater financial sustainability.

The Improvement and Recovery Plan includes proposed mechanisms for governance and assurance. These mechanisms will enable senior officers and Councillors to manage the delivery of the Plan, whilst also providing all staff, Councillors, the public and stakeholders with assurance on progress. The Plan will be regularly updated to reflect the changing nature of the programme. Changes to the Plan will be captured and approved through an agreed change control process.

It is expected that quarterly progress reports will be presented to Council, the Executive and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendations

The Council is requested to:

RESOLVE That

- (i) the Improvement and Recovery Plan be approved;
- (ii) the reporting mechanisms be approved;
- (iii) the first three months' progress since the beginning of the Government intervention on 25 May 2023 be noted; and
- (iv) authority be delegated to the Executive to approve changes to the Improvement and Recovery Plan as part of regular reporting arrangements.

The Council has the authority to determine the recommendations set out above.

The Improvement and Recovery Plan

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Date Published: 14 August 2023

1.0 Government Intervention

- 1.1 On 25 May 2023 the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced an intervention package and a set of Directions (see appendix 1) to ensure that the Council was able to comply with its best value duty under Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999. The basis for the intervention is the following: -
- *“The scale of the financial and commercial risks facing your Authority, which are compounded by the Authority’s approach to financial and debt management, corporate governance, including scrutiny of strategic financial decision making, commercial projects and property management. This has been made clear by the findings of the External Assurance Review that Minister Rowley commissioned in January.*
 - *The failure of the Authority to provide assurance to Ministers and the Department on the adequacy of the actions that it is taking to address the issues or provide assurance of its capacity to take the necessary action, considering the scale and pace of the response required.”*
- 1.2 The intervention package is formed of actions the Council is directed to take, and powers over Council functions to be enacted by Commissioners. The Directions will be in place for five years: that this is a longer duration than in other Councils’ interventions reflects the severity of the challenge at Woking, in comparison to other intervention areas.
- 1.3 The Council is required to report to the Commissioners on the delivery of the Improvement and Recovery Plan after three months, six months and thereafter at six-monthly intervals, or at such intervals as Commissioners may direct.
- 1.4 This report sets out the Council’s response to the Directions in the form of a single Improvement and Recovery Plan that combines the Fit for the Future Plan and the Finance Plan into one plan and one governance structure. Approval of this single Improvement and Recovery Plan is sought from Council to provide the organisation with a clear direction for its improvement journey that will enable the continued delivery of the strategic priorities in the Corporate Plan. As the Improvement and Recovery Plan is a response to the statutory direction of the Secretary of State, it is the responsibility of Council to formally approve the Plan.
- 1.5 The Improvement and Recovery Plan includes proposed mechanisms for governance. These mechanisms will enable senior Officers and Councillors to manage the successful delivery of the Improvement and Recovery Plan, whilst also providing all staff, Members, the public and other stakeholders with assurance on the progress of the Council’s improvement journey.
- 1.6 The Improvement and Recovery Plan will be a living document, one that will need to evolve over time to respond to emerging intelligence and situations. Through the proposed governance arrangements, changes to the Plan will be captured and approved through an agreed Change Control process. To enable the authority to maintain the required pace of its improvement journey, it is proposed that the Executive be delegated the authority to approve changes to the Improvement and Recovery Plan as part of regular reporting arrangements. The Plan will be brought to Council for approval on an annual basis.

2.0 Development of the Improvement and Recovery Plan

- 2.1 The Improvement and Recovery Plan attached at appendix 2 has been built on the specific requirements set out in the statutory Directions and the recommendations from the Review Team. The Plan brings together the various plans and programmes already underway, such as the Fit For The Future Programme and the Financial Recovery Plan.
- 2.2 The Improvement and Recovery Plan contains four themes that bring together the work already underway, along with new activity. The four themes and their strategic aims are:

The Improvement and Recovery Plan

- (i) **Financial recovery:** Sustainable budget management, making difficult decisions whilst delivering against council strategic priorities and safeguarding future capacity.
- (ii) **Organisation and Service Redesign:** Deliver a smaller, data driven organisation, where staff feel empowered, digitally confident, and delivering on key priorities.
- (iii) **Commercial:** Release the Council from unaffordable commitments, whilst protecting the public purse and optimising the value of existing assets.
- (iv) **Governance and Assurance:** Ensure risk is managed and decisions are made transparently and safely, improving future decision-making.

2.3 All themes have interdependencies. For example, a significant dependency is in delivering the savings identified within the Financial Recovery theme within the Medium Term Financial Plan, realisation of the savings will be dependent upon staffing reductions and service changes within Organisational Redesign theme. Interdependencies will be managed through the Programme Management Office (PMO).

2.4 All Directions and recommendations are aligned to one or more of the themes, with progress reported to the Secretary of State as part of the governance arrangements. Each theme has a clear set of objectives, workstreams and activity with milestones which will be used to track progress against expected timescales and achievements.

2.5 A phased approach has been taken to developing the Improvement and Recovery Plan. This recognises that there are elements of activity that require further design and engagement. This is particularly relevant for the Commercial theme.

2.5.1 The Phase One Improvement and Recovery Plan captures the known actions and deliverables to date and provides a foundation for the Council's improvement. This is the Improvement and Recovery Plan that is submitted to Council for approval with this report.

2.5.2 The Phase Two Improvement and Recovery Plan will build on the Phase One Plan, identifying additional areas for improvement and clarifying the delivery plans for certain areas.

2.6 The Plan is a three-to-five-year plan, recognising the journey that the Council needs to progress through and reflecting the intervention timescale. The activity within this Plan focusses on the first year and will be updated periodically as improvement progresses and the Organisation matures.

3.0 Progress since the Intervention

3.1 This section describes the progress that the Council has made since the intervention on 25 May 2023 and will inform the three-month progress letter to the Commissioners to be sent on 25 August. The progress is grouped by theme and is aligned to each of the directions (highlighted grey) and the specific recommendations from the Review Team (listed in boxes).

3.2 Included at appendix 3 is a position statement from the Chief Executive providing their overview of progress that has been made over the last three months. It makes specific comments in respect to a number of overarching areas to the IRP which have been key features within the Commissioners engagement with the council over this period.

3.3 **Direction:** A plan to ensure that the Authority has sufficient skills, capabilities and capacity to deliver the Improvement and Recovery Plan, within a robust Officer structure, including appropriate commercial expertise and capacity (6):

3.3.1 A programme team has been established. A review of the additional expertise required to deliver the Improvement and Recovery Plan has been undertaken. Discussions with other

Surrey Councils have taken place to determine if possible resources can be provided. The Local Government Association has also identified areas where its support can be provided. Additional financial and commercial resources have been commissioned and are now in place, including financial advice and support from CIPFA.

- 3.3.2 A governance structure has been established for the Board which also includes the supporting working groups and boards that will monitor the individual Theme action plans. Interdependencies are being mapped and will be managed across the working groups and boards via the PMO. The governance for the Improvement and Recovery Plan is outlined in Section 4 of this report.

Organisation and Service Redesign Theme

- 3.4 **Direction:** An action plan to reconfigure services (5)

Recommendations:

Design and implement an Organisational Design programme.
Ensure Fit For The Future change programme realises savings and embeds a culture of service redesign.

- 3.4.1 The Gateway process discovery stage identified the minimum viable provision for all services. This was a collaborative process involving teams across the organisation to develop options for savings. The Gateway design stage has concluded and new structures have been proposed to deliver a smaller organisation, focused on the core statutory services. Staff consultation has commenced and phase 2 is planned for the autumn. This process has identified £4m of savings, and further service changes that will result in an additional £4m savings, contributing to the £11m budget shortfall. These savings have been incorporated into the July Medium Term Financial Plan and updated figures will form part of the September revised budget. The savings are subject to consultation with staff and also, in some cases, public consultation.
- 3.4.2 Resident engagement is underway. The engagement is seeking views from residents and businesses of Woking on what discretionary services matter the most. The results will inform the business cases being developed on the options for these services, with the recommended option being presented as part of the revised Medium Term Financial Strategy in September. Formal public consultation will commence in the autumn on the options.
- 3.4.3 Discussions are underway with partners for the possible transfer of services, alongside exploring options available for providing the service on behalf of Woking Borough Council.
- 3.4.4 A discovery review of customer services, revenue and benefits and housing services has provided a baseline of shorter- and longer-term efficiencies and improvements to those service areas. A joint ICT and customer services team has since been formed to make improvements to the website and user journeys, reducing failure demand. A more comprehensive service redesign programme begins early 2024 after the restructures are completed.
- 3.4.5 Orbis procurement (a public sector partnership that provides services to local authorities) has provided a Procurement Business Partner who has now started at the Council. Work can now commence on reviewing and identifying contractual savings as well as implementing changes to how the Council commissions work to ensure greater value for money. Further savings will be identified as a result of this work.

Financial Recovery Theme

3.5 Action plan to achieve financial sustainability (1)

<p><u>Recommendations:</u></p> <p>Implement spending controls. Budget planning timetable. Assessment against Financial Management Code. Close outstanding annual accounting years. Prepare 30-year Housing Revenue Account. Review provision of earmarked reserves.</p>

3.5.1 A Financial Control Panel has been set up and meets twice a week to review all spend. The Panel consists of a mixture of finance and service personnel plus two of the corporate directors. The processes supporting the work of the Panel have been documented and management reporting of the outcomes has commenced to the Corporate Leadership Team. The Team has conducted a review of its activities and amended approaches and techniques. There is evidence that expenditure is being suppressed through the challenge process and existence of same although this has yet to be empirically validated. Each meeting is minuted.

3.5.2 The Medium Term Financial Plan was updated in July. The Budget timetable has been set down in the Medium Term Financial Strategy. An adjusted Revised Medium Term Financial Strategy (incorporating the Medium Term Financial Plan) will be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (11 September 2023), the Executive (14 September 2023) and Council (28 September 2023), with a similar process leading to the meeting of Council on 8 February 2024 when the 2024/25 Budget is scheduled to be approved.

3.5.3 The assessment against Financial Management Code is almost complete (99%) and includes an improvement plan.

3.5.4 The closure of outstanding annual accounting years requires a further breakdown into adjusted and unadjusted accounts within previous prior years. A headline timetable has been produced and is currently under review by the Interim S151. Grant Thornton is currently looking at the value for money assessments for the previous year's accounts.

3.5.5 A consultant has been appointed to prepare the 30-year Housing Revenue Account business plan. Initial focus will be on recharges as this will impact on the Housing Revenue Account and General Fund. Another focus will be on rent collection.

3.5.6 Review provision of earmarked reserves work is needed to inform the plan to balance the 2024/25 Budget and is not expected to be available until October 2023. The first new format Financial Monitoring Report at the end of June 2023 is scheduled for the next meeting of the Executive.

3.6 Action plan to ensure the capital, investment and treasury management strategies are sustainable and affordable (2)

<p><u>Recommendations</u></p> <p>Review Council's position on subsidy/state aid. Assess the impairment risk to Council loans.</p>

The Improvement and Recovery Plan

- 3.6.1 The review of the Council's position on subsidy/state aid in respect of the additional business cases has commenced and will continue in the weeks ahead.
- 3.6.2 The Section 114 Report at 7 June 2023 covered the assessment of the impairment risk to Council loans and the matter is currently being re-assessed so that the overall deficit can be restated during August 2023.
- 3.6.3 A report regarding the Review of Treasury Management has been received and a management briefing was held on 26 July 2023.

3.7 Debt reduction plan (3)

- 3.7.1 The debt reduction plan is being developed. More work is required in the next quarter to accommodate all of the Council's outstanding debt. A revised (draft) Debt Management Policy has been produced.

3.8 Compliance with financial management guidelines (updated Minimum Revenue Provision policy) (4)

Recommendations

Implement the expert advice on Minimum Revenue Provision treatment and loan impairments. Ensure correct accounting treatment for Minimum Revenue Provision.

- 3.8.1 Work is underway to implement the expert advice on Minimum Revenue Provision treatment and loan impairments following on from receiving the report from the independent consultant by end August 2023. Implementation of recommendations will follow after.

Commercial Theme

- 3.9 **Direction:** An action plan to strengthen financial and commercial functions (7)

Recommendations

Develop a long-term commercial strategy.
Review decisions to acquire land during 2015-19.

- 3.9.1 Resources recruited and deployed to develop a clear plan to improve capacity and capability as part of the Commercial Workstream of the overall IRP, the aim of which is "Release the Council from unaffordable commitments, whilst protecting the public purse and optimising the value of existing assets."
- 3.9.2 The immediate focus of this Theme has been on the capital investment required to complete the Victoria Square and Sheerwater housing regeneration scheme (part of Thamesway Housing). Business cases to justify further funding in the context of the s114 are an urgent requirement to ensure that the value of the assets is maintained and that the companies remain solvent. This short-term priority will allow a longer-term plan for a rationalisation of assets at best value, in line with the above aim. A clear approach that avoids an insolvent run off and

The Improvement and Recovery Plan

asset disposal that would incur further loss to the public purse has been agreed with Commissioners and a detailed plan to implement this is being developed.

- 3.9.3 Approach agreed to develop the long-term commercial strategy and objectives being set for each of the key asset categories i.e. 1. Victoria Sq./town centre. 2. Thamesway Housing 3. Thamesway Energy Network 4. the wider Commercial estate.
- 3.9.4 External auditors are reviewing decisions to acquire land during 2015-19 as part of the annual Value for Money (VFM) work on the accounts.
- 3.10 **Direction:** An action plan to secure value for money in dealing with and financing of and strategies for companies (8)

Recommendations

Develop a small client team to oversee VS and others.
Strengthen SAG with independent external advisors.
Develop reporting content from the SLS with emphasis on commercial risk.
See tax advice on company structures.
Review the 24 Council-owned companies.

- 3.10.1 Resources for Commercial Theme have been recruited and a clear plan and approach is being developed for oversight and governance. The Review Team recommendations will be developed as part of this plan.
- 3.10.2 An initial data collection exercise and review has been conducted to do a basic risk assessment of priorities. The urgent tasks undertaken are to support the Company Boards and the Council in ensuring solvency of Victoria Square and Thamesway in order to maintain the value of their assets and the Kingfield internal audit.

Governance and Assurance Theme

- 3.11 **Direction:** An action plan to strengthen financial and commercial functions (7)

Recommendations

Review the scrutiny function.
Continue the review of the constitution.
Strengthen staffing capacity and capability across the council particularly in Finance, Legal and Commercial.

- 3.11.1 The Local Government Association has been commissioned to support the Council to review the approach to elections. Discussions with other authorities who have implemented this change are underway.
- 3.11.2 The Local Government Association is also supporting the Council in the review of its scrutiny function. This work includes provision of mentoring for the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 3.11.3 The commercial capability has been increased in the short term with additional temporary resource for company governance work. This is in place pending establishment of permanent support based on the number and nature of retained companies.
- 3.11.4 To support the Commercial Theme (specifically the companies governance), changes have been made to the Boards and Articles of Association to reduce conflicts of interests. Work is

The Improvement and Recovery Plan

underway to strengthen the cash draw down processes with companies. The Strategic Advisory Group is being updated with regards to the position of companies.

4.0 Governance Mechanisms for the Improvement and Recovery Plan

- 4.1 Effective programme management arrangements, robust monitoring processes, and clear roles and responsibilities will be key to Woking's successful delivery of this Improvement and Recovery Plan and achievement of sustainable change.
- 4.2 A Programme Management Office is already in place and will manage the delivery of the programme on a day-to-day basis, with a dedicated Programme Manager responsible for the delivery of the programme and managing the dependencies between themes. The team will draw on the key skills and expertise available across the organisation, such as communications, employee engagement, risk management, democratic services and financial management.
- 4.3 Progress will be monitored monthly by the Improvement and Recovery Board through considering progress of the actions and milestones within the delivery plan, and management of risks, issues, and dependencies. A focus on embedding sustainable improvement will be maintained through capturing evidence of success.
- 4.4 Councillors will have oversight of progress through quarterly reports to the Executive. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will scrutinise progress ahead of reporting to the Executive. This will continue until all actions within the Plan have been completed and Government intervention has been lifted.
- 4.5 The Improvement and Recovery Plan is intended to be a live document updated to take account of progress and relevant changes. These changes will be tracked through the programme management mechanisms and may include the addition of new workstreams or objectives, or the amendment of timescales for delivery of actions. The Executive will retain oversight of these changes through the regular reporting of progress.

5.0 Resource Allocation

- 5.1 In the development of the Improvement and Recovery Plan, a review of the resources available to deliver the Plan has been carried out.
- 5.2 Where existing capability exists, resources from within the Council will be reallocated or reshaped to deliver the actions in the Plan. However, the resourcing review identified gaps in areas, such as project management and additional specific finance expertise that, if filled, will provide the capacity for the organisation to focus on improving performance and deliver transformation of services now and in the future. Additional temporary resources have therefore been identified and will be brought in to support the delivery. In some cases, other Councils are able to provide support or advice. In some cases, additional expertise will be provided by contractors and consultancy support. These will be funded from the Transformation Fund rather than the General Fund.
- 5.3 Over time, the reliance on external contractors and agencies will reduce and the capability required to sustain the progress will be developed internally.

6.0 Corporate Strategy

- 6.1 The deliverables set out in this Improvement and Recovery Plan will achieve long-term sustainable improvements in how the Council operates and is able to make effective decisions focused on improving outcomes for residents and experiences of service users. This impacts on the Council's ability to deliver all the objectives in the Corporate Plan, which will have objectives and actions revised following agreement of the Improvement and Recovery Plan.

7.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 7.1 If the Council fails to take appropriate action to meet the requirements set out in the Government Direction, or the Commissioners appointed by the Secretary of State do not have sufficient confidence that appropriate actions are being taken to implement and sustain the required improvements, then the Council risks not having appropriate arrangements in place to comply with its best value duty under Part 1 of the 1999 Act. This could lead to further Government intervention, increased costs and damage to reputation.
- 7.2 An Improvement and Recovery Plan Risk Register will be maintained which will underpin the Council's Strategic Risk Register. This will be reported monthly to the Corporate Leadership Team and quarterly to the Executive.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 7.3 The successful delivery of this Improvement and Recovery Plan will require the development and review of many of the Council's services. These will include an Equality Impact Assessment where appropriate prior to decisions being made.
- 7.4 The staffing changes as a result of the Organisational Redesign are being carefully managed and a formal consultation approach is being taken. Full equality impact assessments are being carried out as part of this process.

Legal

- 7.5 The Monitoring Officer reiterates the guidance provided by the Section 151 Officer under the Finance heading of this report as well as highlighting that the Council is still obliged to meet its statutory duties and continue to make decisions in accordance with public law principles. It is anticipated that the Improvement and Recovery Plan outlined in this report will support the Council to rationalise and deliver its statutory obligations.

8.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 8.1 The Improvement and Recovery Plan will be published on the Council's website. The progress reports that will be produced quarterly to the Commissioners will also be published on the Council's website. A communications plan to keep staff, residents, partners, businesses and stakeholders informed is also in development.

Staff and Members

- 8.2 It is vital that the Council effectively engages staff and Members to drive organisational changes. The Council is having an open conversation with staff and Members about the values the Council needs to adopt and embed going forward. The Council has around 350 members of staff, many of whom work on the frontline, and internal communications will support staff to understand the relevance of the Improvement and Recovery Plan to their day-to day work, alongside the Council's Corporate Plan and priorities for residents.
- 8.3 The Council is communicating with staff in a variety of ways, including regular video and email messages, staff Q&A sessions and manager briefings. This is a two-way conversation with the intelligence gained from staff throughout the organisation used to inform the Improvement and Recovery Plan.

Residents

The Improvement and Recovery Plan

- 8.4 The Council is committed to becoming a listening, responsive Council that enables residents to influence the design of services. The Council is conducting a residents' survey that will inform priorities and future communications with the community, to ensure that focus on the issues residents care about.

Partners and stakeholders

- 8.5 The Council is reviewing ways of working and partnership arrangements as it continually strives to provide the best possible services. The Council wants to build on the operational relationships with partners that have been strengthened during the pandemic and will keep them informed of progress against the Improvement and Recovery Plan.

REPORT ENDS

The Secretary of State Directions and Review Recommendations

The Directions include requirements for the following:

- a. An action plan to achieve financial sustainability and to identify and close any short and long-term budget gaps across the period of its Medium Term Financial Strategy, including a robust multi-year savings plan.
- b. An action plan to ensure the Authority's capital, investment and treasury management strategies are sustainable and affordable.
- c. A strict debt reduction plan, demonstrating how overall capital financing requirement and external borrowing will be reduced over a realistic but expedient timescale, reducing debt servicing costs.
- d. An action plan to ensure the Authority is complying with all relevant rules and guidelines relating to the financial management of the Authority. An updated Minimum Revenue Provision policy in line with all relevant rules and guidelines. MO to be involved in implementing
- e. An action plan to reconfigure the Authority's services commensurate with the Authority's available financial resources.
- f. A plan to ensure that the Authority has sufficient skills, capabilities and capacity to deliver the Improvement and Recovery Plan, within a robust officer structure, including appropriate commercial expertise and capacity.
- g. An action plan to strengthen the Authority's financial and commercial functions, and to secure improvements in risk management and governance.
- h. A plan to secure value for money during any exit from the Authority's arrangements with its companies, and the revolving lending arrangements between them, including a plan on how to mitigate associated risks and an appropriate timescale for doing so.
- i. Actions to secure continuous improvement in all services

Review Recommendations

- [S] short term 6 months
- [M] medium term 12 months
- [L] long term 2 years

The Finance Sustainability Plan is designed to address the points in bold from the review recommendations. The only one it does not specifically mention is the reserves which will fall out of the final accounts work.

46. Based on the report findings, that the Secretary of State considers the appropriate mechanism to support and challenge the council to give it the best opportunity to resolve its financial and commercial position. [S]
47. That the council consolidate the recently introduced spending controls with rigour. [S]
48. Develop a long-term commercial strategy to consider external partnering which could include all council assets. [S to L]
49. Implement the planned redesign of the system for management information to better inform decision making. This should include asset management, ICT, financial information and reporting, the integration of finance information and performance reporting. There is a need to streamline reporting to avoid constant updates to the Medium-Term Financial Plan. [S]
50. Develop a clear budget planning timeline that aligns the work on service redesign, savings, consultation timescales and implementation. [S]

The Improvement and Recovery Plan

51. Review the scrutiny function and establish a regeneration scrutiny panel which would discuss regeneration schemes in public (on the understanding that some commercial information may need to be restricted to the public). Review the number and function of the member-only working groups and reduce the number of meetings overall. [L]
52. Review and agree an approach to implement the expert advice on Minimum Revenue Provision treatment and the approach to any potential loan impairments. [S]
53. Develop a small client team to oversee Victoria Square and other strategic developments. [M]
54. Conduct the planned assessment against the Financial Management Code [S]
55. Review the council's position on subsidy/state aid and best consideration with regard to its wholly owned companies and review and reassess the legal position of the structure of company financing arrangements. [S]
56. Seek tax advice on company structures and financing and to ensure best consideration duties are met. [S]
57. Ensure the accounting treatment is correct for Minimum Revenue Provision, the treatment of receipts in the capital adjustment account and impairment. [S]
58. Further assess the impairment risk to the council loans. [S]
59. Continue the review of the constitution and pay particular attention to the content of reports to inform decision making, in particular the appropriate management of risk. Ensure that future reporting includes detail on alternative options, external tax and legal advice and appropriate commercial risk analysis. [L]
60. Work to close the several outstanding annual accounting years as soon as possible. This will require high level discussion between DLUHC, the external auditors BDO and the council. [S]
61. Review the decisions to acquire land during the period 2015-2019 regarding valuation, shareholder direction, legal advice, Value for Money and general governance of such decisions. [M]
62. Prepare a 30 year Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and takes steps to ensure the current Housing Revenue Account is in balance. [S]
63. Define and implement an organisational design programme to support new ways of working and the Fit for The Future change programme. Ensure the change programme includes an analysis of skills and capability for the future needs of the council. [M]
64. Ensure that the Fit for The Future change programme urgently realises savings and embeds a culture of service redesign. [S]
65. Strengthen staffing capacity and capability across the council particularly in Finance, Legal and Commercial as part of the Fit for The Future change programme. [M]
66. *Review the provision of earmarked reserves and update the earmarked reserves for the current planned use of reserves.* Ensure Housing Revenue Account reserves are separately accounted for and not included in the General Fund balance and that the Housing Revenue Account earmarked reserves do not fall into a negative position. [S]
67. Continue to review the 23 council-owned companies to evaluate fitness for purpose. [S to L]
68. Strengthen the Shareholder Advisory Group with independent external advisors. [S]
69. Develop the reporting content from the Shareholder Liaison Service to the Shareholder Advisory Group with particular emphasis to commercial risk analysis. [S]

Improvement and Recovery Programme

August 2023

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Shaping the *future*
of our borough



Foreword



Councillor Ann-Marie Barker
Leader of Woking Borough Council

Please find before you Woking Borough Council's first Improvement and Recovery Plan.

My administration is very clear about the huge challenges that face the council due to its legacy of extraordinarily high and disproportionate levels of debt and the past financial practices. However uncomfortable the future will be, we are focused on delivering this plan, which we know, is necessary to achieve financial stability and secure services for the future.

Our Improvement and Recovery Plan aligns with the expectations detailed in the Secretary of State's Directions published on 25 May 2023 and draws upon the recommendations of the non-statutory external assurance review into the council's finances, investments, and related governance.

I am in no doubt that it will take a significant collective effort from councillors and officers to address these challenges and achieve a sustainable position.

We have not rested on our laurels and action has already happened. Steps have been taken to control borrowing and improve the governance of our commercial investments and to address the past actions that led us to this position.

I have asked our new auditor to bring forward their value for money review which includes a review of all of the council's borrowings and investments.

There will be substantial change over the next five years to the services the council delivers to residents as it becomes a smaller, leaner council focused on delivering core services. Nonetheless we will not lose our ambition, values and commitment to residents. We are committed to becoming a council that lives within its means.

We will work closely with government, commissioners, partners, businesses and residents, to take the necessary actions at pace to deliver the fundamental changes needed.

Foreword



Julie Fisher
Chief Executive

Our Improvement and Recovery Plan provides the necessary assurance to government that Woking Borough Council is committed to delivering the changes needed to meet our best value duty and tackle the significant financial challenges we face.

The plan details the actions we will undertake, together with milestones and delivery targets against which to measure performance in order to deliver rapid and sustainable improvements in governance, finance and commercial functions, and organisational effectiveness.

It incorporates the support, oversight and expertise of the government appointed commissioners to establish realistic and deliverable improvements fundamental to change.

Continuing to strengthen our commercial and financial capability will be fundamental to our success.

Through transparent, effective and efficient decision-making, our plan for recovery will be delivered with pace and urgency.

The plan will also play an integral role in regularly informing the Secretary of State of our progress against the identified actions and informing the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

With the support of the commissioners, councillors and partners, I am confident that we will deliver the change needed and achieve best value for taxpayers.

Section 1: Introduction

Located in the heart of Surrey, 30 miles south-west of London, Woking is a modern and vibrant borough containing a thriving town centre, attractive waterways and beautiful countryside dotted with charming villages.

The town centre benefits from convenient high-quality and accessible shopping, the latest entertainment facilities, special cultural events and a superb range of dining options across a world of cuisines.

Excellent transport and infrastructure links, strong communities, and a healthy and economically active population make Woking a desirable and attractive borough to live, work and play.

Context

Woking Borough Council (WBC) is in a challenging financial position. This is due to historical commercial and regeneration investments leading to unsustainable levels of borrowing. Insufficient provision has been made by WBC to repay the debt and the level of service provision historically enjoyed has become dependent on the use of reserves and

commercial income which are no longer available.

This is now compounded by a) national factors - the impact of Covid-19, the energy crisis and historically high inflation, and b) local factors - commercial income from parking and commercial rents has reduced dramatically since the pandemic. This reflects changing life and workstyles and is considered a long-term change to the council's revenue. WBC is now facing a deficit of at least £1.2bn.

These national and local factors combined with reduced valuation of our assets, mean that we cannot continue to operate as we have.

In order to balance the books, WBC needs to:

- significantly reconfigure services, taking 25% out of the revenue budget to live within the resources available
- rationalise the assets held to reduce the £1.8bn debt WBC holds and make sufficient provision for the repayment of that debt

- consider the future of commercial ventures, particularly Victoria Square Woking Ltd and the Thameswey group of companies, in a way that best protects the public purse
- ensure all the steps are in place to deliver sound commercial governance and financial management and to deliver the scale of organisational change required
- negotiate a substantial package of government support.

Statutory Notice

On 25 May 2023, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities exercised his powers under the Local Government Act 1999 to intervene in WBC.

The Secretary of State has done this because he considers that the council failed to meet its 'best value duty' and needs to secure continuous improvement in how it delivers its functions.

The intervention is formed of a set of actions which the council is directed to take, and the appointment of commissioners who have been given powers over certain functions. The range of functions which the commissioners will exercise is broad, relating to financial and commercial governance, strategic decision-making and the council's operating model, as well as other functions.

The Secretary of State's intention is that the powers he is providing to the commissioners be used to ensure that the council takes the necessary steps to achieve the best possible outcome for Woking residents and the public purse. The exercise of these functions should enable the commissioners to make sure that the council has made sufficient improvement within the next five years to be able to comply with its best value duty on a sustainable basis.

Section 114

On 7 June 2023, the Section 151 Officer issued WBC with a Section 114 Notice in response to the unprecedented financial challenges facing WBC.

The notice was required because the council's expenditure was likely to exceed

the financial resources available, and therefore it could no longer balance its budget for the remainder of the financial year and subsequent years. The council faces an extremely serious financial shortfall owing to its historic investment strategy that has resulted in unaffordable borrowing, inadequate steps to repay that borrowing and high values of irrecoverable loans.

A Section 114 Notice stops all but essential spending, making sure the council can continue to provide vital services to its most vulnerable residents.

The Section 114 Notice lays out the stark financial position facing WBC. Against available core funding of £16m in the 2023/24 financial year, WBC faces a deficit of £1.2bn. The scale of the deficit is unprecedented and will require both immediate and ongoing concerted action by officers and councillors over a number of years to return WBC to a path of financial and operational sustainability and recovery. This will include an ongoing framework of intervention from government.

Whilst the Section 114 Notice focuses on WBC's borrowing and investments due to the size of their impact, confidence in the

council and its governance and decision-making will not be established unless it is seen and evidenced that it has taken all steps to deliver a balanced budget and has a strategy and plan to manage within the resources available and bridge the £11m savings gap from 2024/25.

Chief Executive's Response

It is recognised that the previous savings plans required significant review to ensure sufficient capacity and pace, with support and engagement of the Commissioning Team, to address the issues as represented by the Section 114 Notice and the intervention directed by the Secretary of State relating to WBC's failure in meeting its best value duty.

This updated Improvement and Recovery Plan is a requirement of the intervention from the Secretary of State. The Commissioning Team has played a critical role in supporting the designing of this plan and will provide oversight and assurance on its delivery.

The Improvement and Recovery Plan will need to be jointly owned by officers and councillors and be the primary focus moving forward no drive the transformational change required to support recovery.

Improvement and Recovery Plan

In line with the Secretary of State's Directions, and in recognition of the scale of the task faced, WBC has developed this Improvement and Recovery Plan around four key themes, each with a strategic aim.

1. **Financial recovery**

Sustainable budget management, making difficult decisions whilst delivering against strategic council priorities and safeguarding future capacity.

2. **Commercial**

Release WBC from unaffordable commitments, whilst protecting the public purse and optimising the value of existing assets and rationalising.

3. **Governance and assurance**

Ensure risk is managed and decisions are based on data and evidence and scrutinised.

4. **Organisation and Service redesign**

Deliver a smaller, data driven organisation, where staff feel empowered and digitally confident and are delivering on key priorities.

And enablers that cut across all the themes to support their delivery.

a) **Communication and engagement**

b) **Digital, data and management information.**

All Directions and recommendations are aligned to one or more of the themes and will be monitored and progress reported to the Secretary of State, as part of regular reporting. Each theme has a clear set of objectives, workstreams and activity with milestones used to track progress against expected timescales and achievements.

In recognition that there are elements of activity that require more design before confirming the council's approach, other issues arising that will feed into the Improvement and Recovery Plan, and the need for more detailed engagement, a phased approach has been taken to developing the plan. This is particularly relevant for the Commercial theme.

- **Phase one** - captures known actions and deliverables to date and provides a foundation for the council's improvement. This is the Improvement and Recovery Plan that is submitted to council for approval with this report.
- **Phase two** – will build on phase one and identify additional areas

for improvement that arise and clarify the delivery of certain areas.

The activity within each theme cannot be delivered in isolation. There are multiple dependencies between activities, which is why the plan will be delivered using a programme management approach.

The plan is a three to five year plan, recognising the journey that WBC needs to progress and reflects the intervention timescale. The activity within the plan focusses on the first year and will be updated periodically to update as improvement progresses.

The 3 year vision for the organisation is:

We will be known as one of the most improved councils in the country. We will be financially resilient, driven by data and effective and efficient in everything we do. Trusted by residents, guided by councillors, supported by businesses and partners with staff who are proud to work here.

There are stages of development for each of the Themes, to drive toward this vision, shown here. This represents the progress of the improvement journey. In the short term the focus is on Recovery – ‘fixing the plumbing’, making significant savings and efficiencies, at pace.

The medium-term focus will be on improvement, the council operating effectively as a smaller organisation with strengthened financial and legal capability and capacity.

The ambition over a longer term is to be a council managing finances with sustainable budget. Services that are largely digital and improved customer satisfaction. The commercial estate will be smaller and the debt reduced. A council driven by data and evidence to inform better decision-making. Rebuilt trust from residents and confidence regained from government.

Phased approach

	Short-term	Medium-term	Ambition
Financial recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fix the plumbing / the mechanics. Review of budgets, reducing complexity, budget lines budget codes. Increasing short-term capacity. Reduce the cost base. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refine the nature of central gov financial support. Strengthen long-term capability, capacity. Clear budget position, controls and monitoring. Accounting treatment for MRP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balanced budget set annually. Clear, transparent, accurate budgets and forecasts.
Organisation and service redesign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organisation restructure. Discover and baseline: understand value for money. Design, deliver: quick wins, cost/benefit analysis. Align customer services and ICT. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organisation and service redesigns. Organisation development and ways of working investment. Key technology investments to drive out cost and improve services: website, telephony, ways of working. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efficient, lower cost council, high levels of collaboration. Employer of choice. 80% of transactions online. High resident services. satisfaction levels.
Commercial strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review assets including Sheerwater. Develop commercial land asset disposal strategy. Review the 24 council-owned companies. Strengthen SAG. SLS reviewed, emphasis on commercial risk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthened governance and constitution. Property reviewed, upgraded, disposed Companies reviewed, disposed, restructured.. Effective risk management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Right-size the estate to be financially and operationally more efficient. Fewer companies, better risk management, reduced debt.
Governance and assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Councillor mentoring to support member-led scrutiny. Audit and Standards committee work programme. Annual governance statement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scrutiny of budget setting. Member training. Regeneration scrutiny panel. Constitution updated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions made based on evidence.

Shaping the *future* of our borough



Section 2: Communications and engagement

Woking Borough Council will become a much smaller, more efficient council focussed on core services. It is important that WBC sets out a clear vision for what will be delivered and what this means for residents, stakeholders, councillors and staff.

The council will regularly report on the progress in delivering this Improvement and Recovery Plan and will complement this with a communications plan to keep staff, residents, partners, businesses and stakeholders informed.

Residents

WBC is committed to becoming a listening, responsive council that enables residents to influence the design of services. It is conducting a residents' survey that will inform priorities with the community to ensure that the council is focussed on the issues that residents care about most.

Partners and stakeholders

WBC is changing the way it works as a council, and in some cases reviewing partnership arrangements as it continually strive to provide the best possible services. It wants to build on the operational relationships with partners that have been strengthened during the pandemic, and it is crucial to keep them informed of progress throughout the improvement journey.

Councillors and staff

It is vital that WBC effectively engages staff and councillors in its improvement journey to create and drive organisational cultural change. The council wants to have an open conversation with staff and councillors about the values it needs to adopt and embed to take the council forward. With over 350 employees, many of whom are resident-facing, internal communications must support staff to understand the relevance of the

Improvement and Recovery Plan to their day-to day work, and the connection it has to the Corporate Plan and priorities for residents.

The council will communicate with staff in a variety of ways, including email messages, staff Q&A sessions, manager and full staff briefings. This is a two-way conversation with the intelligence gained from staff throughout the organisation used to inform the Improvement and Recovery Plan.

Briefings will be held to update councillors on progress and key areas. Training and support will be provided to ensure they are well informed and make better decisions. Councillors will have oversight of progress through quarterly updates to Executive. Overview and Scrutiny Committee will scrutinise progress.

Section 3: Programme governance

Role of the commissioners

In his Directions to the council, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities appointed three commissioners to provide the council with “rapid and extensive support in its commercial and finance functions”.

The Secretary of State considers that most decisions should continue to be made by WBC. Commissioners will uphold proper standards and due process and recommend action. The Secretary of State’s intention is that the powers he is providing to the commissioners be used to ensure that WBC takes the necessary steps to achieve the best possible outcome for Woking residents and the public purse.

The commissioners will be providing three-monthly reports to the Secretary of State on the council’s progress in addressing the matters highlighted by the external reviews. There are several factors that will inform any decision by the Secretary of State to end the period of government intervention which will be based on reports received from the commissioners.

Ownership and accountability

The Improvement and Recovery Plan has four themes, each with clear objectives, milestones and deliverables. Supporting each theme will be a detailed action plan setting out activity to achieve the deliverables, the responsible officer, timescales and measures of success.

These action plans will also set out how specific actions address the recommendations. Working groups or project boards have been established to monitor the actions within the plan and to manage risks. Progress will be reported to the Improvement and Recovery Board, via the Programme Management Office.

Progress will be monitored monthly by the Improvement and Recovery Board through considering progress of the actions and milestones within the delivery plan, and management of risks, issues, and dependencies. A focus on embedding sustainable improvement will be maintained through the ongoing capture of evidence of success.

Councillors will have oversight of progress through formal quarterly reporting to

Council. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will scrutinise progress ahead of reporting to Council. This will continue until all actions within the plan is completed and government intervention has been lifted.

The Improvement and Recovery Plan is intended to be a live document updated to take account of progress and relevant changes. These changes will be tracked through the programme management mechanisms and may include the addition of new workstreams or objectives, or the amendment of timescales for delivery of actions. The Executive will retain oversight of these changes through the regular updates and reporting of progress.

Programme management approach

Effective programme management arrangements, robust monitoring processes and clear roles and responsibilities will be key to the council’s successful delivery of this Improvement and Recovery Plan and achievement of sustainable change.

A Programme Management Office is already in place and will manage the

delivery of the programme on a day-to-day basis, with a dedicated Programme Manager responsible for the delivery of the programme and managing the dependencies between themes.

The programme management office will provide assurance that the plan is being delivered, identify variances to the agreed

deliverables at the earliest opportunity and work with lead officers to ensure mitigating action is designed and implemented as appropriate.

It will draw upon key skills and expertise available across the organisation as necessary, such as communications, organisational development, employee

engagement, risk management, democratic services, and financial management. By engaging with and involving staff in the development and delivery of this plan, the council will build the necessary skills and experience to ensure improvements are sustainable.

Section 4: Risk management

Risk approach

This plan has a distinct set of objectives, and the risks that might impact these will need to be managed.

Initial risks have been identified. As the plan progresses risks will be identified within the theme working groups and boards and managed. Risks requiring escalation will be reported and captured in the programme risk register.

The programme risk register will be reviewed monthly at the Improvement and Recovery Board meeting. In addition, risks will also be shared as part of quarterly programme updates to the Executive.

The Improvement and Recovery Plan programme governance and risk register will align to existing corporate reporting arrangements through the following means:

- all council projects and major programmes, including the Improvement and Recovery Plan, are subject to performance monitoring with quarterly reports prepared and submitted to the Executive.

- the council's strategic risk register, on which risks relating to the Improvement and Recovery Plan reside, is owned by Corporate Leadership Team, and reviewed every three months.
- the strategic risk register is reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny and Executive Committees on an annual basis.

A risk register will be maintained for the duration of the Improvement and Recovery Plan. This risk register will underpin the entry on the strategic risk register relating to the plan. An initial risk register has been populated with key risks and an assessment of their impact and severity. This will guide the development of action plans to provide further mitigation, where required.

Risk monitoring

Monthly report of the risk register will be made to the Recovery and Improvement Board meeting and quarterly to the Executive.

Key risks

1. **Resources** – delivery of key areas of activity required for the first year of the plan, such as financial management, commercial expertise and project management. Resource requirements have been identified and will be put in place, subject to approval at the Financial Control Panel.
2. **Pace of change** – the council is required to change at considerable pace. Impact of change on staff delivering services requires considerable management to ensure morale is maintained, key staff retained and service levels are maintained.
3. **Reliance on external expertise** – finance and commercial themes are being delivered by consultants and contractors. Up-skilling of existing staff, where possible, is underway and medium-term plans are in place to establish capability

and capacity required to sustain the improvement.

Section 5 – Theme Plans



Theme 1: Financial recovery

Introduction

The financial recovery theme is core to this plan. Accurate and timely financial information is key to the delivery of the recovery plan priorities and it is essential that WBC manages its finances in a sustainable way.

Budget process will be designed to deliver the savings and increased income required alongside developing a clear

vision for the outcomes a much smaller and efficient council will deliver for residents, visitors and businesses.

WBC will reduce its levels of debt through rationalisation of assets and restrict future borrowing to what is essential. Sufficient provision will be made for the repayment of debt. Building on the revised Medium-Term Financial Strategy will establish a planned and sustainable budget framework to live within its means.

The council will ensure that it has a finance team structure that delivers the skills, experiences and competencies required for the challenges ahead.

Strategic aim: Sustainable budget management, making difficult decisions whilst delivering against council strategic priorities and safeguarding future capacity.

Directions and Review Team recommendations

Action plan to achieve financial sustainability

- Implement spending controls.
- Budget planning timetable.
- Close outstanding annual accounting years.
- Prepare 30 year HRA.
- Rebuild the balance sheet.

Action plan to ensure the capital, investment and treasury management strategies are sustainable and affordable

- Reduce future council investment and borrowing to the minimum.
- Produce accurate cashflow and borrowing schedule.
- Review council's position on subsidy control/state aid.
- Assess the impairment risk to council's loans.

Debt reduction plan

Compliance with financial management guidelines (updated MRP policy)

- Ensure MRP correctly accounted for and sufficient for the level of debt held.

Objectives

1. Ensure basic governance in place to underpin financial decision making.
2. Confirm the scale of the deficit, ensure loans correctly impaired and sufficient MRP made.
3. Reduce levels of outstanding debt – support asset rationalisation and commercial strategies.
4. Limit future borrowing to refinancing and essential / committed capital spend.
5. Delivery of MTFP and savings – to close budget gap.
6. Improve financial reporting to aid decision-making and performance management.
7. Deliver a balanced HRA.
8. Ensure there is a clear financial workplan and capability and capacity to deliver the above.
9. Agree a package of financial support from central government.

Activity workstreams

2023/24

Financial workplan and capacity

Borrowing and cashflow

Reduction of the level of outstanding debt

Financial reporting

Engagement with DLUHC

Assurance and expenditure controls

Annual accounts and crystallisation of debt

Delivery of MTFP

HRA plan

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Financial recovery workstream action plan

The actions set out below are designed to ensure all the building blocks are in place to deliver the recovery plan priorities at the required pace and scale.

Workstream	Workstream aim	Actions	Due
Financial workplan and capacity	Support a longer term finance function with the right skills and capacity in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand expertise and capacity gaps in finance structure with recommendations for a resource/recruitment/retention plan and agree an interim Finance structure for the Finance Team until March 2024. 	March 2024
Assurance and expenditure controls	Ensure basic governance is in place to underpin financial decision-making and rebuild commercial decision-making frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expenditure control process updated and evaluated. Establish Commercial Governance Board to oversee all commercial decision-making. Annual Governance Statement and Financial Management Code assessments drafted and implemented. Agree with Internal Audit an audit plan and assurance framework. Understanding the legal position on subsidy control and best consideration compliance. Ensure company accounts for companies' portfolio are filed consistent with Companies House rules. 	July August August August Ongoing
Borrowing and cashflow	Minimise and confirm borrowing requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baseline cashflow requirements understood and agreed with DLUHC including 'what if?' analysis. Complete work on loan register and Public Works Loans Board documentation. Business cases for the future of the Thameswey and Victoria square Woking Ltd companies completed and financing requirements understood. Agreed position on future borrowing requirements and approach with DLUHC and HMT. 	August September September
Annual accounts and crystallisation of deficit	Meet statutory reporting requirements, confirm the deficit relating to Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) and impairment and deliver updated MRP policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Next phase MRP work commissioned and modelling undertaken against agreed scenarios (leading to MRP policy and financial implications understood and agreed). Agreed approach to valuations for strategic asset management plan, accounts and companies work and work commissioned. Draft options for potential government support. Agree headline options for government support internally and with commissioners. Draft 2022/23 accounts produced. Impairment position for 2022/23 understood and agreed. Update prudential indicators. Clear outcomes from government on what support will be made available to WBC. 	August July August September September September

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete closedown of 2023/24 accounts. 	September
Reduction of the level of outstanding debt		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map interdependencies with asset rationalisation work to release capital receipts. • Undertake valuation work required to revalue the assets. • Capital strategy completed alongside data quality exercise and asset register build. • Initial estimate of realisable receipts produced. • Review output of the asset valuation work. 	September September September October October
Delivery of Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and support delivering of the required £11m savings	Close budget gap as per first priority in the Directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updated MTFP produced with approach to savings proposed. • Updated MTFP: full deficit understood and includes impairment and MRP. Savings options for consultation and engagement clearly set out with consultation materials. • Phasing of service change and any remaining gap well understood. • Review grants to third parties (where grants are self-funded by WBC). • Consultation complete and final MTFP ready for budget setting. • Draft suite of budget documents: MTFP, capital strategy, treasury management strategy. 	September September October December December January 24
Financial reporting	Support production of meaningful financial monitoring information that supports effective decision-making and meet requirements for government returns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2022/23 capital and revenue outturn position reconciled and confirmed. • Review and update ledger coding structure and ensure in compliance with the Statement of Recommended Practice (Financial Reporting Council). Undertake data integrity and sample testing next year. • Review of financial monitoring reporting and propose changes to simplify process. • Process for completing and signing off revenue account and revenue outturn forms agreed August. • Grants register in place. • Review process and update policies for debt collection and write-off. • Agree terms of reference for and commence a review of revenues and benefits processes. • Finance and budget manager roles and responsibilities clearly defined, agreed and communicated to the organisation with support from re-engineered finance business partner approach and budget manager training. 	August September July September September December
Housing Revenue Account (HRA)	Deliver a balanced HRA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update HRA position as part of MTFP refresh. • Review and update for achievable savings and ensure all recharges are correct and justifiable. • Produce draft 30 year business plan. 	September September November

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and update HRA asset valuations. HRA report finalised as part of suite of budget reports. 	October December
Set balanced budget for 2024/25		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dependent on government support, create the shadow 2024/25 budget. Update 2024/25 shadow budget in line with local government settlement for next fiscal year. 	October December

Theme 2: Commercial

Introduction

The purpose of this theme is to generate greater yields from retained assets and optimum capital receipts from disposal of assets that are surplus to WBC requirements.

Historically the council embarked on an ambitious regeneration programme, funded through Public Works Loan Board borrowing. This was used to fund the acquisition commercial properties within the borough, to support the regeneration of Woking Town Centre and through its wholly owned Thamesway subsidiaries to fund sustainable energy and housing (including Sheerwater regeneration). Financing these schemes accounts for the majority of the council's debt.

The focus is a major review of company-owned and council-owned assets to determine how rationalisation can be delivered (taking into account valuation). In light of this a review of the 24 companies is required and a significant asset rationalisation (dispose, retain, develop property) will be managed.

A major review of commercial and company governance will be undertaken. Focus being on resolving undeliverable commitment in an ethical and fair way.

Strategic aim: Release the council from unaffordable commitments, whilst protecting the public purse and optimising value of existing assets.

Directions and Review Team recommendations An action plan to strengthen financial and commercial functions

- Develop a long-term commercial strategy.
- Review decisions to acquire land during 2015-19.

An action plan to secure value for money in dealing with and financing of and strategies for companies

- Develop small client team to oversee VS and others.
- Seek tax advice on company structures.
- Review the 24 council-owned companies.
- Strengthen SAG with independent external advisors.
- Develop reporting content from the SLS with emphasis on commercial risk.

Objectives

1. Develop a commercial strategy and ensure that effective governance is in place to deliver this strategy. To include:
 - a) Review of all 24 companies and their assets to determine a company restructure programme, aligning them to council objectives and ensuring best value in reducing costs and risk to the council
 - b) Engagement with the companies on options for the future to ensure revised business plans are in place to deliver the commercial strategy.
 - c) Implement improved governance, decision making and risk management frameworks for remaining companies.
2. Develop a strategic options plan for the Thamesway Group:
 1. Strategic options plan for TW Housing (incl completing the regeneration of Sheerwater, but also for the whole housing portfolio).
 2. Strategic options for Thamesway energy including TCMK disposal.
3. Develop a strategic options plan for Victoria Place and related town centre assets.
4. Develop a strategic options plan for the council's wider commercial estate, assessing disposal and retention options.
5. Ensure that the resources and information requirements to deliver the commercial strategy are in place. To include developing the capacity and skills necessary to drive a profit centre approach to management of the asset portfolio.

Activity workstreams

2023/24

Commercial strategy and governance

Thamesway and subsidiaries

VSWL and subsidiaries

Commercial estate strategic options and implementation

Resourcing, requests and data room

Commercial workstream action plan

The actions set out below are designed to ensure all the building blocks are in place to deliver the recovery plan priorities at the required pace and scale.

Workstream	Workstream aim	Actions	Due
Commercial strategy and governance	Develop a long-term commercial strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking into account commissioners' directions and council's high level strategic aims, draft first outline version of the commercial strategy, including Subsidy Act requirements. Distribute draft to key stakeholders for feedback. Taking into account feedback, produce final draft of strategy. 	September
Commercial strategy and governance	Implement appropriate governance framework for each company and within the council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess each company against the council's Companies Governance Handbook and UK Corporate Governance Code (including risk, conflicts of interest, business planning and board effectiveness) and ensure compliance ASAP. Review current governance arrangements within the council, including Subsidy Act obligations, are fit for purpose. Implement a Commercial Governance Board to ensure all commercial decisions taken by officers, or put to the Executive, are founded on high quality, complete information with clear, rationale and evidenced recommendations. 	October
Commercial strategy and governance	Review the 24 council-owned companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With reference to the relative size, assets held and risk, prioritise company reviews. Assess the contribution to, and alignment with, each company to the council's key strategic outcomes. Evaluate the companies' performance against best value requirements. Make recommendations for each company based on 'Hold, invest or dispose'. 	January
Thameswey and subsidiaries	Develop strategic options for Thameswey Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define and commission high level financial, tax and legal advice to help inform strategic options. Generate longlist of disposal /refinancing options. Establish options review team with stakeholders (company boards and DLUHC). 	October
Victoria Square Woking Ltd (VSWL)	Develop strategic options for Victoria Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish WBC baseline for loan repayments position for VWSL loans. Generate long list of disposal /refinancing options. Options need high level financial, tax and legal implications to be set out clearly with appropriate external advice. 	July November

Workstream	Workstream aim	Actions	Due
Resourcing, requests and data room	Ensure resourcing and information requirements are in place, including skills and capacity for a profit centre approach to asset management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In tandem with the commercial strategy, propose resourcing requirements to operate the strategy, and governance requirements effectively. Assessment of existing commercial asset information, and creation of rectification plan as required to ensure complete asset information is available. Following the identification of strategic options for the council's wider commercial estate, propose resourcing requirements to manage these appropriately based on sector norms through benchmarking vs performance. 	September January 24 April 24
Commercial estate and commercial options	Develop strategic options for the council's wider commercial estate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysis of contribution (and potential contribution) of each asset to council's strategic aims, including the commercial strategy, financial, social, environmental and local economic terms. Analysis of revenue and capital impacts of disposal, development or repurposing. Create subsequent options for each asset. Make recommendations for each asset based on 'keep, hold or dispose'. 	April 24
Contracts best value	Review contracts of council and commercial property portfolios to ensure best value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan to be developed 	September

Theme 3: Governance and assurance

Introduction

The purpose of this theme is to strengthen and radically improve how decisions are made, improving the scrutiny and transparency of the processes.

This will include reviewing the approach to reporting and the content of reports to ensure decisions are based on evidence and are scrutinised.

The legal and commercial capability review will be right-sized to fit the future commercial operations of WBC once clear.

The legal team will work closely with the commercial theme to improve the governance linked to the companies, including the Shareholder Advisory Group and the Shareholder Liaison Service.

Strategic aim: Ensure risk is managed and decisions are made transparently and safely, improving future decision-making.

Directions and Review Team recommendations

An action plan to strengthen financial and commercial functions

- Review of the constitution.
- Review the scrutiny function and establish a Regeneration Scrutiny Panel.

Objectives

- Strengthen the role of scrutiny within the organisation and ensure companies are aligned to WBC priorities.
- Improved standards and audit to ensure greater scrutiny of the audit and governance functions and avoid past mistakes recurring.
- Develop a legal and commercial function to support the future commercial activity with the right skills and capacity in place.
- Work with the commercial theme to ensure enhanced oversight as a shareholder in the remaining companies in line with best practice.
- Undertake the improvements to the constitution in order to ensure the constitution remains effective fit for purpose in the light of changing circumstances.
- Review the election format to aid the long term strategic decision making within the council.

Activity workstreams

2023/24

Company governance

Overview and scrutiny function

Standards and audit

Legal and commercial capability

Elections review

Shaping the *future* of our borough



Governance and assurance workstream action plan

The actions set out below are designed to ensure all the building blocks are in place to deliver the recovery plan priorities at the required pace and scale.

Workstream	Workstream aim	Actions	Due
Documentation review	Complete review of historic Part 2 documentation (agenda papers and minutes) dating back to 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify quantity of material. Review all documentation and determine whether it is suitable for release. Make any necessary redactions and release into public domain in consultation with Marketing and Communications Team. 	August September [November]
Overview and Scrutiny function	Review and implement improvements to Overview and Scrutiny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LGA mentoring in place for OSC chair and vice chair. Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) will conduct a rapid review action plan. Agree Member training programme with LGA/CfGS Review need for ongoing support and training requirements. 	August November November 2024/25
Standards and Audit Committee	Review and implement improvements to Standards and Audit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standards and Audit Committee - technical advice to support the recruitment and selection of a new independent chair of the committee/ consider restructure based on non-independent chair and two independent committee members assurance mapping exercise carried out and plan for annual work programme. New chair to attend LGA's Leadership Essentials training for Audit Committee chairs. Review need for ongoing support and training requirements. 	November March 24 2024/25
Legal and commercial capability	Right-size the legal and commercial capability and capacity following commercial review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review legal and commercial requirements following initial review of companies and development of asset disposal strategy. Implement new 'right-sized'/skill matched legal and commercial team 	March 24 2024/25
Company governance	Review and implement improved governance and reporting standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes made to boards and Articles of Association to reduce conflicts of interests. Strengthen cash draw down processes with companies. Updating SAG with regards to position of companies. 	August

Workstream	Workstream aim	Actions	Due
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of legal implications and any requirement for external legal advice with regard to companies and their shares and assets. • The direction and future of the companies identified and preparation for reports to Council. Refresh of the council's Company Governance Operating Manual and any changes to the Constitution Part 6. • Continue to implement strengthened governance procedures over remaining companies. 	<p>August</p> <p>November</p> <p>2024/25</p>
Elections	Review election format and approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commence a review of the election format and process to aid the long term strategic decision-making within the council. 	August 24

Theme 4: Organisation and service redesign

Introduction

The organisation and service redesign theme is focussed on identifying and delivering a smaller, more efficient, more resident focussed council with lower expenditure and a smaller budget. Driving us to become the most improved in the country

Resident services online by default with support for those who need it; better insights to drive improvement; and modernising staff tools and processes increasing efficiency and collaboration.

The council will be a smaller organisation focused on essential services.

Discretionary service areas must have a strong rationale for being delivered by WBC and need to be cost neutral. This means fees and charges may need to be increased if it allows the service to continue. WBC will look to partners and the voluntary sector for delivery where appropriate.

Throughout the change, the council will treat staff and residents fairly and compassionately.

Strategic aim: Deliver a smaller, data driven organisation, where staff feel empowered, digitally confident, and delivering on key priorities.

Directions and Review Team recommendations

An action plan to reconfigure services

- Design and implement an organisational design programme.
- Ensure FFTF change programme realises savings and embeds a culture of service redesign.
- Strengthen staffing capacity and capability across the council particularly in finance, legal and commercial.

An action plan to secure continuous improvement (9)

- Redesign systems for management information.

Objectives

1. Collaborate with staff to identify the minimum viable provision for services to ensure robust information on implications.
2. Deliver the revised structure and smaller organisation to achieve the revenue budget savings.
3. Consult with staff on changes to staffing structures in a fair and transparent way.
4. Engage with residents and partners on potential service changes to inform decisions.
5. Deliver an improved procurement service to ensure value for money on contracts and commissioning.
6. Implement savings from tail end spend and major contracts.
7. Move customer-facing services online to deliver further efficiencies and improved customer service.
8. Develop a culture to ensure the workforce are empowered and digitally confident.

Activity workstreams

2023/24	Service review – staffing restructure	Resident engagement and public consultation	Financial benefits tracking	Digital services
	Insights and data: raise profile, build capacity	Staff tools and ways of working	Procurement services improvement	

Shaping the *future* of our borough



Organisation and service redesign workstream action plan

The actions set out below are designed to ensure all the building blocks are in place to deliver the recovery plan priorities at the required pace and scale.

Workstream	Workstream aim	Actions	Due
Service review - staffing restructure (Fit For the Future)	Staffing restructure to reduce the size of the organisation focusing on statutory and critical services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phase one staff consultation concludes. Proposed service changes and public consultation material developed. Initial savings firmed up and inputted to MTFS. Phase two staff consultation concludes and new structure (and savings firmed up). Executive decision on service changes. Additional savings clarified. Benefits tracker developed and in place to monitor all financial and non-financial benefits. Staffing savings implemented and budgets adjusted. Services transferred to partners (where planned). 	August August August January January November November April 24
Service review - resident engagement and public consultation	External engagement and consultation on the reduction and stopping of services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resident engagement completed and results analysed to feed into MTFS. Public consultation on proposed service changes commences. Public consultation results analysed. Executive decision on service changes. 	August October December January
Financial benefits racking	Working with teams to ensure committed savings and benefits are being delivered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect and monitor previously committed savings offered since April 2022. Monitor committed savings. 	June Ongoing
Procurement services improvement	Reviewing contracts to ensure value for money and embedding improved procurement and commissioning process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation plan for tail-end spend. Objectives and plan for the workstream developed. Tail-end spend review complete. Contracts register updated. Procurement and commissioning processes embedded into organisation. Major contracts renegotiated to deliver savings. 	September September November March March 2024/25
Digital services	Moving customer facing services online where it results in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligning ICT, Customer Services and Revenue and Benefits teams. Develop list of website improvements and begin quick wins. Telephony review. 	July August September

Workstream	Workstream aim	Actions	Due
	better, cheaper services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal restructure of ICT, Transformation, Business Improvement, Customer Services and Revenue and Benefits teams to improve customer contact internally and externally. • Discovery and design of council 'single experience' to aid customer contact. • Telephony provider commissioned. • Channel shift partner commissioned 	November - December February February March
Staff and councillor tools and ways of working	Support staff with the tools and culture they need to deliver high quality services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review use of council offices and working environment. • Adoption of modern tools and rollout of Bring Your Own Device to enable more mobile working. 	August September

COUNCIL – 22 AUGUST 2023

APPOINTMENT OF STATUTORY OFFICER

Executive Summary

Under S151 of the Local Government Act 1972, every local authority shall make arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs and shall secure that one of their officers has responsibility for the administration of those affairs.

The Council's current Interim Director of Finance and S151 Officer, Brendan Arnold, will be leaving Woking Borough Council at the end of his contract term on 31 August 2023. Replacement management arrangements will therefore need to be put in place.

These matters include the appointment of an interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer) whilst the appointment of a permanent Director of Finance is taken forward.

The appointment of an interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer) will bring additional strategic finance capacity to the Council to lead the Medium Term Financial Strategy work and lead the Financial Recovery workstream in the Improvement and Recovery Plan that is on the agenda of this Council meeting.

Recommendations

The Council is requested to:

RESOLVE That Eugene Walker be appointed as Interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer) with effect from 1 September 2023.

The Council has the authority to determine the recommendation set out above.

Background Papers:	None.
Reporting Person:	Julie Fisher, Chief Executive Email: julie.fisher@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3333
Contact Person:	Julie Fisher, Chief Executive Email: julie.fisher@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3333
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Ann-Marie Barker Email: cllrann-marie.barker@woking.gov.uk
Date Published:	14 August 2023

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 requires that the Council appoints a Chief Finance Officer (Director of Finance). The Chief Finance Officer has a number of statutory duties and responsibilities relating to the proper administration of the Council's finances, assets and resources and be responsible for those arrangements including managing the relationship with the Council's Internal and External Audit functions, submission of Government returns.
- 1.2 The Council's current Interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer), Brendan Arnold, will be leaving Woking Borough Council at the end of his contract term on 31 August 2023. Replacement management arrangements will therefore need to be put in place.
- 1.3 These matters include the appointment of an interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer) whilst the appointment of a permanent Director of Finance is made.
- 1.4 The appointment of an interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer) will bring additional strategic finance capacity to the Council to lead the Medium Term Financial Strategy work and lead the Financial Recovery workstream in the Improvement and Recovery Plan that is on the agenda of this Council meeting.
- 1.5 It is recommended that Eugene Walker be appointed as Interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer) with effect from 1 September 2023.

2.0 Role of the Section 151 Officer

- 2.1 The rules governing the authority's financial administration are set out in the Council's Standing Orders, Contracts Procedure Rules and Financial Procedure Rules. These require, amongst other things, that the S151 Officer be responsible for many of the obligations under the rules, including, for example, arrangements for the banking and drawing of cheques in the Council's name, which must bear the name of the S151 Officer.
- 2.2 There are also other statutory requirements for the S151 Officer under:
 - 2.2.1 S113 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 (the "1988 Act"), in that the S151 officer must be a member of one of a number of specified accountancy bodies.
 - 2.2.2 S114 of the 1988 Act in that the S151 Officer must make a public report in specified cases of actual or anticipated financial misconduct.
 - 2.2.3 S2(1) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, the effect of which is to make the S151 Officer a statutory chief officer and, therefore, a politically restricted post.
 - 2.2.4 S5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 whereby the post of Monitoring Officer cannot also be held by the S151 Officer.

3.0 Conclusion

- 3.1 The reasons for the recommendation:
 - 3.1.1 To comply with the provisions of Section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 in respect of the requirement to designate one of its Officers as the Section 151 Officer.
 - 3.1.2 To ensure that the Council is operating appropriately in accordance with statutory requirements and the necessary advice and guidance required through a Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer).

4.0 Corporate Strategy

4.1 Appointment to the statutory role shall ensure that the Council continues to deliver its priorities.

5.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

5.1 The interim arrangements will ensure the Council's financial recovery and savings programme will continue to receive due focus and attention.

Equalities and Human Resources

5.2 There are no specific implications which arise from this report.

Legal

5.3 Making the appointment recommended in this report will ensure that the Council complies with its legal obligations.

6.0 Engagement and Consultation

6.1 Not applicable to the content of the report

REPORT ENDS

COUNCIL – 22 AUGUST 2023

POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES REVIEW 2023

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to seek a recommendation from Council for approval of plans for a statutory review of polling districts and polling places within the Borough of Woking.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That:

- (i) the compulsory polling district and places review commences on Monday, 2 October 2023;
- (ii) the outline timetable for the review be approved; and
- (iii) approval be granted to follow the review process described in the report.

The Council has the authority to determine the recommendations set out above.

Background Papers: None.

Reporting Person: Councillor Ann-Marie Barker, Leader of the Council
Email: ann-marie.barker@woking.gov.uk

Contact Person: Emera Chown, Electoral Services Manager
Email: emera.chown@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3215

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Ann-Marie Barker, Leader of the Council
Email: ann-marie.barker@woking.gov.uk

Date Published: 14 August 2023

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Under the Representation of the People Act 1983, the Council has a duty to divide its area into polling districts and to designate a polling place for each district.
 - Polling districts are geographical electoral areas into which wards and constituencies may be sub-divided.
 - Polling places are the building or areas designated by the Council where electors in a polling district go to cast their vote in person.
 - Polling stations are the number of issuing desks in the building or area that is the designated polling place.
- 1.2 The Electoral Administration Act 2006, as amended, introduced a duty on all local authorities in Great Britain to review their polling districts and polling places at least once every five years.
- 1.3 Under Section 18C of the Representation of the People Act 1983, the next compulsory review must be undertaken within a 16 month period between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025.
- 1.4 The intention of the legislation was reviews would be completed by the January before a UK parliamentary general election. However, since the repeal of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011, there is no longer any certainty as to when the next general election will be.
- 1.5 The Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022 means:
 - the UK Parliament can be dissolved by the King on request of the Prime Minister, at any time within the 5 years of the life of the Parliament
 - the next general election must take place before Tuesday 28 January 2025, but it could happen at any point before then
 - there is no longer a link between the timing of the compulsory polling district and places review falling in a 16 month period ending 3 months before a scheduled general election.
- 1.6 In addition, the Boundary Commission for England is currently undertaking a review of parliamentary constituency boundaries. The Commission has now published its final recommendations, and Orders for the new parliamentary constituency boundaries will be made by 1 November 2023.
- 1.7 Once the Orders for new parliamentary constituencies have been made, the new boundaries will be used for the next general election.
- 1.8 If a parliamentary by election is called in the meantime, it would be run on existing boundaries.
- 1.9 These issues mean it is important that the polling district and places review is carried out as early as possible, so that Woking Borough Council has agreed polling districts and places to be used for the next parliamentary election as well as the scheduled local elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in May 2024 and has a polling scheme in place which reflects the new constituencies.

2.0 Timing of the Polling District and Places Review

- 2.1 It is important to complete the review as soon as possible, so the polling districts and places for future elections can be agreed in time for the next general election and scheduled local elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

Polling Districts and Polling Places Review

2.2 Section 18C of the Representation of the People Act 1983 does not allow the review to commence before 1 October 2023. It is therefore recommended that the compulsory polling district and places review commences on Monday, 2 October 2023.

3.0 Review Timetable

3.1 Although the review itself cannot commence until 1 October 2023, there is a degree of preparatory work which can be undertaken prior to the review, as well as informal preliminary consultation.

3.2 It would be desirable for any changes in polling districts to be reflected in the electoral register published on 1 December 2023. This therefore requires a compact timetable.

3.3 The proposed timetable for the review is as follows:

Review of Polling Districts and Places 2023	
Preparatory work	Commenced 7 August 2023
Resolution from Council providing for commencement of review	22 August 2023
Preliminary review – including informal consultation	August to 1 October 2023
Notice of review published	Monday 2 October 2023
Council proposals published	Monday 2 October 2023
Commencement of formal consultation	Monday 2 October 2023
End of formal consultation	Monday 6 November 2023
Consider responses	7 - 21 November 2023
Final proposals published via Council agenda papers and Council website	Wednesday 22 November 2023
Council Meeting	Thursday 30 November 2023
Conclude review	Thursday 30 November 2023
Publish electoral register (including any new or amended polling districts)	1 December 2023
Scheduled elections on new polling districts, places and stations scheme	Thursday 2 May 2024

4.0 Review Process

4.1 The process for a polling district and places review is set out in Schedule A1, Representation of the People Act 1983.

4.2 The Council must:

- publish a notice of the holding of a review;

Polling Districts and Polling Places Review

- consult the (Acting) Returning Officer ((A)RO) for every parliamentary constituency which is wholly or partly in its area;
- publish all representations made by an (A)RO within 30 days of receipt by posting a copy of them at the local authority's office and in at least one conspicuous place in their area and, if the authority maintains a website, by placing a copy on the authority's website; and
- seek representations from such persons as it thinks have particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability. Such persons must have an opportunity to make representations and to comment on the representations made by the (A)RO(s).

4.3 On completion of the review, the Council must give reasons for its decisions and publish:

- all correspondence sent to an (A)RO in connection with the review;
- all correspondence sent to any person whom the authority thinks has particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disability;
- all representations made by any person in connection with the review;
- the minutes of any meeting held by the council to consider any revision to the designation of polling districts or polling places within its area as a result of the review;
- details of the designation of polling districts and polling places within the local authority area as a result of the review; and
- details of the places where the results of the review have been published.

5.0 Preparatory Work

5.1 Although the formal review cannot commence until 2 October 2023, there is a range of preparatory activity which the Electoral Services Team is already carrying out. This includes:

- Analysing the final proposals published by the Boundary Commission on 1 July 2023 and understanding the impact for the area of Woking.
- Liaising with eXpress, the Council's electoral software supplier, about structuring the electoral register to accommodate boundary changes.
- Preparing data for the start of the review (electorate figures, turnout from previous elections, information about new housing developments in the next 5 years).
- Liaising with the Council's GIS Officer to obtain detailed up to date maps to enable accurate designation of polling district boundaries.
- Identifying organisations with a special interest/expertise in disabled access to consult.

6.0 Preliminary Review

6.1 Electoral Services and other relevant Council Officers are also carrying out a preliminary review of the current polling districts and places in the Borough to assess their suitability. This involves:

Polling Districts and Polling Places Review

- Compiling details of current polling places with a summary of their suitability.
- Checking the continued availability of polling places.
- Reviewing feedback from stakeholders at previous elections.
- Identifying potential alternative buildings where appropriate.
- Ensuring that polling places can support the requirements of the Elections Act, for example with sufficient space to undertake Voter ID checks, and to accommodate equipment to assist disabled voter.
- Seeking advice and guidance from local disability groups and local authority experts around accessibility.
- Preparing council proposals and drafting (A)RO comments, including explanations for “no changes”.

7.0 Informal Consultation

7.1 The Elections Team is also planning to carry out informal consultation with interested groups in preparation for the review. This involves:

- seeking the views of organisations with a special interest/expertise in disabled access;
- informal consultation with group leaders/local political parties;
- getting advice from relevant Council Officers (for example Planning, Property Services, and the Equalities Officer); and
- inviting comments from Deputy Returning Officers and Presiding Officers.

7.2 It will be important to do as much preparatory work as possible before the official commencement of the review.

8.0 Corporate Strategy

8.1 The Woking for All strategy commits the local authority to a set of strategic objectives between 2022 and 2027 that give clear direction to residents, businesses, partner organisations and council staff, based around four community-based themes. These objectives include:

- Healthier communities;
- Engaged communities;
- Greener communities; and
- Prospering communities

8.2 The review of polling districts and places will seek to ensure that residents are provided with the opportunity to engage with the Council, and are provided with all the details necessary to ensure that they remain fully informed. Feedback received will be used to ensure that the review provides the best possible outcomes for the residents.

9.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

Polling Districts and Polling Places Review

- 9.1 The review will be undertaken by Officers and any financial costs will be kept to a minimum. Whilst it is not anticipated that it will be necessary, any requests for funding over £500 will first need to be agreed by the Council's Financial Control Panel.
- 9.2 The proposals will ensure that the Council's polling districts and places have been reviewed in time for the next general election, the scheduled local elections and the Police and Crime Commissioner elections. No significant risks have been identified, noting that the review will ensure all of the Borough's polling stations are fully accessible and local to the residents they serve.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 9.3 Over the past year, the Elections Teams has worked hard to ensure that no electors, regardless of disability, face barriers to casting their vote at a polling station. As such the Officers have worked closely with the Woking Access Group to introduce positive changes to the layout of polling stations, the facilities provided and the information available at both the Polling Stations and on the Council's website. As part of this review, Officers will again engage with the Access Group, and other bodies to identify any improvements that can be made to accessibility.
- 9.4 The work will be undertaken by the Elections Team, though support will be sought from several Teams including Marketing and Communications, Property Services and the Council's Equalities Officer.

Legal

- 9.5 The Council is legally obliged to undertake a 5 yearly review of polling districts and polling places pursuant to the Electoral Administration Act 2006. Undertaking the review in accordance with the timetable set out in this report will ensure that the Council is compliant with these obligations.

10.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 10.1 Section 7.0 of this report outlines the approach to be adopted by the Council in consulting residents, and other stakeholders as part of the review of the current polling districts and places. All responses received will be published as part of the final report.

REPORT ENDS