

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
BOROUGH COUNCIL OF WOKING

held on 4 March 2024

Present:

Cllr M I Raja (Mayor)
Cllr L Morales (Deputy Mayor)

Cllr H Akberali	Cllr A Javaid
Cllr T Aziz	Cllr I Johnson
Cllr A-M Barker	Cllr A Kirby
Cllr A Boote	Cllr R Leach
Cllr J Brown	Cllr L Lyons
Cllr G Cosnahan	Cllr C Martin
Cllr K Davis	Cllr S Mukherjee
Cllr S Dorsett	Cllr E Nicholson
Cllr W Forster	Cllr S Oades
Cllr P Graves	Cllr L Rice
Cllr S Greentree	Cllr T Spenser
Cllr S Hussain	Cllr M Sullivan

Absent: Councillors A Caulfield, D Jordan, J Morley and D Roberts.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Caulfield, Councillor Jordan, Councillor Morley and Councillor Roberts.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

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

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

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Head of Transformation, Digital and Customer, Adam Walther, declared a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which he was a Council-appointed director. The companies were listed in an attached schedule. The interests were such that Mr Walther could advise on those items.

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor I Johnson declared an interest in items 5 – Questions from Members of Public, 7 – General Fund Budget and Council Tax Setting 2024/25 and 9b – Notices of Motion – Councillor Hussain in respect of the reference to Citizens Advice Woking arising from his wife's employment by the charity. The interest in items 7 and 9b was such that Councillor Johnson would leave the Council Chamber at point item 7 was reached and would not return to the meeting.

3. MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS.

The Mayor had attended numerous functions following the previous meeting of the Council. These had included an event for young performers and an invitation by the Horsham Hospital Welfare Trust. The annual charity pancake race organised by Woking ShopMobility had been held in Jubilee Square and there had been a celebration of the Chinese New Year in Woking Town Centre.

Future engagements included the Mayor's Ball on 27 April and the Mayor's bowling tournament on 5 May 2024.

4. URGENT BUSINESS.

No items of Urgent Business were considered.

5. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF PUBLIC.

Six questions had been received from members of public. The questions, submitted by Ellie George and Kay Riley, together with the replies from the Leader of the Council and the Deputy Leader of the Council, were presented as follows. The Mayor welcomed Ellie George to the meeting and advised that Kay Riley had been unable to attend.

Question 1 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

“A huge amount of my work at CAW goes towards preventing and dealing with homelessness. We help clients with housing benefit applications, negotiate repayments for rent arrears to avoid evictions and navigate those facing or experiencing homelessness through the process of securing new accommodation. This includes a large number of vulnerable clients who struggle to engage with their landlord and relevant authorities. How will the council deal with increased demand for housing and homelessness support with the likely reduction in the services CAW will be able to offer?”

Supporting Statement

“From November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking helped 146 clients either threatened with homelessness or experiencing actual homelessness and 46 clients going through the Local Authority Homelessness process. Furthermore, we advised 65 clients on dealing with rent arrears. We also assisted 54 clients with Housing Benefit issues and applications, with 35 of those cases specifically related to Local Authority housing.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“Firstly, I’d like to thank volunteers from Citizens Advice Woking (CAW) for their questions. The Council has worked in partnership with CAW for many years and value the important services that their staff and volunteers provide.

I want to begin my response by reiterating Woking Borough Council’s (WBC) financial position and the reasons why we’ve needed to review funding to CAW.

The Council is in an extremely vulnerable financial situation which is so significant that it will need substantial and ongoing support from the Government in 2024/25 and for the foreseeable future. It is in this context that the Council has had to agree significant service savings for 2024/25 of over £8.5m.

Going forward, the Council will only be able to provide non-statutory services (discretionary services) where they can be provided without any subsidy from the Council. Unfortunately, grant funding to voluntary organisations is a non-statutory service.

The Council has been working with CAW since September 2023 to understand the potential impact of its proposed funding reductions and to discuss what mitigations could be put in place. This has included support to find alternative funding streams, with WBC brokering a meeting between CAW and the National Lottery.

Whilst the Council is no longer able to provide core funding to CAW, through these discussions, we have been able to agree several areas where we will continue to work in partnership and provide alternative funding streams. They include:

- £10,000 funding to provide the Court Desk Service from the Government’s Homelessness Prevention Grant.
- £24,500 funding for the Ukrainian Hub and Syrian and Afghan Refugee Support.
- £30,000 funding from UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK SPF) to support CAW to transition to a new business model.
- £50,000 from the Council’s Hardship Fund for a Hardship Support co-ordination package. The full details of what will be delivered under this funding have been agreed with the CEX of CAW and are included within this meeting’s [budget papers](#).
- WBC will also continue to allow CAW to use office space at Provincial House, alongside covering service charges and providing discretionary business rates.

I hope that this package of funding (which totals approximately £229,000) combined with CAW’s alternative fundraising efforts, will enable the organisation to continue to offer much valued services to Woking residents.

The Council is confident that CAW will be able to adapt its business model, supported by UK SPF and alternative funding streams, and continue to provide some volunteer-led housing advice services. In recognition of the preventative work of CAW, the Council will also continue to fund CAW to provide the Court Desk service from its Government Homelessness Prevention Grant. Our Housing Options Team will continue to offer a statutory Homelessness service. The Council has a performance management system where we monitor performance against spend and we take decisions regarding our

statutory responsibilities in the context of our financial position, to ensure that our resources continue to be allocated towards our strategic priorities.”

Supplementary Question

“If we don't, if citizens advice Woking, don't find alternative funding streams in a short period of time and Woking Borough Council officers and team members find themselves overwhelmed with people coming for support, how would you propose we pick up again how to offer support for our vulnerable without delay.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“Thank you Ellie for your supplementary question. If I may, I will take it in two parts. This Council is working very hard with Citizens Advice Woking to ensure you do get alternative funding, whether that's putting a request in with our Council Tax demand to encourage people to donate to good causes, whether that's supporting citizens advice on crowdfunding, whether that's setting up the National Lottery meeting, so I have a lot of confidence that we will raise money and help to raise money for Citizens Advice, but setting that side this Council will continue to meet its homelessness statutory responsibilities.

“We've put in motion support and training to Council staff to ensure that they can signpost people that are vulnerable straightaway without relying on Citizens Advice advice going forward.”

Question 2 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

“Much of my volunteer work involves housing issues directly related to Local Authority properties which Council employees manage. I help a range of vulnerable clients, who find it difficult to engage with relevant parties, to address a range of problems with their Local Authority housing – arrears, mould, repairs, emergency heating and more. What is the council's plan to address some residents' additional needs for support with Local Authority housing given Citizens Advice Woking's future diminished service provision?”

Supporting Statement

“In the period November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking helped 94 clients to solve issues specifically related to Local Authority housing.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“As set out in the answer to question one, the Council has still committed significant funding to Citizens Advice for 2024/25, even though there has been a reduction from previous years. As part of the Hardship Support co-ordination package, the Council and CAW will look to strengthen the advice offer offered by alternative voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS) providers (such as Christian's Against Poverty, The Lighthouse etc). If alternative organisations can increase their capacity for providing general advice services, it is hoped that this could allow CAW to continue to deal with more complex queries. The Council also trusts that CAW will be able to prioritise its services so that the most vulnerable residents with additional needs can still access support. As a Council, we are implementing a comprehensive Housing Improvement Programme, which we expect to make the service more customer-focused and proactive in dealing with the issues you have mentioned.”

Supplementary Question

“Thank you, Councillor Forster. You mentioned that the aim is to strengthen the advice offer with other voluntary organisations, what indication do you have at the moment that they are able to increase their offer?”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“So particularly the Churches in Woking have been very enthusiastic about stepping up to the plate and helping the most vulnerable in our community, particularly on this issue. There's been several meetings, some of which I've attended, that the Council is facilitated between the Churches and the Council about wider Council matters, but particularly about Citizens Advice and debt issues. So I'm confident these organisations are willing to step up to the plate.”

“I do think, as I said in my answer, that the future, I think, the most vulnerable, the most detailed advice queries, I think, should and would be handled by CAW, but more basic level advice, I think, can be handled by other organisations stepping up to the plate and we can work with them to improve their capacity.”

Question 3 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

“Many of my clients, coming to Citizens Advice Woking, require additional support with ensuring they pay their Council Tax, reducing the number of lengthy Court processes that the Council is required to initiate. I negotiate payment plans for my clients to pay back their Council Tax arrears, and many of them need help applying for Council Tax Reductions, Discounts and Exemptions. How does the Council plan to mitigate an increase in Council Tax queries and arrears that will inevitably come as a result of Citizens Advice Woking's expected limited service provision?”

Supporting Statement

“In the period November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking advised 73 clients on their Council Tax arrears and 80 clients regarding a Council Tax Deduction.”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“The Council's 100k Hardship Fund will provide support to those residents who may have difficulty paying their Council Tax. For those who are able to go online, we have redesigned Council Tax pages. Descriptions and guidance are now easier to understand and supports personal budgeting. Residents can more easily set up payment plans, choose payment methods and make payments online than they were previously. We have already seen increased use and more upgrades to the website and Council Tax services are planned to improve accessibility. We realise some residents cannot use online services, or need additional advice and support. This is why staff members in the customer services team are being given additional training to deal with Council Tax queries, in order to advise and resolve queries more effectively.”

Supplementary Question

“It's a tricky one because, as you say, Councillor Barker, there are many residents in Woking that are digitally excluded.”

“What’s the plan in the reception area of Woking Borough Council if people come knocking on the door for that kind of support because they physically can’t get themselves online or understand what is available online?”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“We do find that the majority of the support the Council is asked for currently does tend to be an online option or a telephone, obviously lots of telephone calls. Clearly, if there are more people coming into the Council offices, then we would have to work to deal with that, and that will be done via the customer service staff who’ve had the additional training who will get that support.

“But I guess the aim of having more online is that those that cope with that can go and do that. It’s easier, hopefully, more of a proactive approach for some people, realising they can set up their budgeting plans so that reduces down the workload overall, but do recognise that there may be, there will be a group who are still struggling very much and that might be impacted because, sadly, we just can’t fund Citizens Advice to the same level any more, which is hugely disappointing, but that’s the situation we’re in.”

Question 4 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

“A major concern of mine is the additional support required by a considerable proportion of CAW clients. Our clients often have language issues, literacy issues, limited digital skills, mental health conditions or learning disabilities. They need help understanding their situation, engaging with relevant authorities, and taking action to improve their circumstances. The most vulnerable clients require home visits as, due to severe disability and lack of support, they are unable to leave their homes. What plan does the Council have in place to accommodate the complex additional needs of so many of CAW’s clients if CAW must limit its services?”

Supporting Statement

“Between April and September 2023, 63% of people CAW saw had a disability or long-term health condition. 20% of these clients also have a long-term mental health condition. CAW’s specialist caseworkers and trained volunteers undertake a range of actions for vulnerable clients, including negotiating and advocating for clients with relevant authorities, filling in forms and working closely with support and social workers. Critically, many of our advisers have developed the long-term, trusting relationships with vulnerable clients that are needed for these clients to engage openly. Additionally, approximately 25% of our clients do not have English as a first language and cannot read or write in English. Citizens Advice Woking are able to provide face to face support in 15 different languages, often at the first visit from the client.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“As stated above, as part of the Hardship Support co-ordination package, the Council and CAW will look to strengthen the advice offer offered by alternative VCFS providers (such as Christian’s Against Poverty, The Lighthouse etc). If alternative organisations can increase their capacity for providing general advice services, the Council is confident that this could allow CAW to continue to deal with more complex queries. The Council also trusts that CAW will be able to prioritise its services so that the most vulnerable residents with additional needs can still access support. The Council continues to offer floating support to homeless clients as well as supporting digital inclusion for the most vulnerable.”

Question 5 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

“Anticipating a reduction of services at Citizens Advice Woking after 1st April, what plans do the council have to provide extra staffing for the increased footfall to the council offices? Council Staff often direct residents over to Citizens Advice Woking for help. What plans have the Council put in place if this option is not open to them?”

Supporting Statement

“Citizens Advice Woking currently opens to the public from 10am to 4pm for drop in clients. For many this is the first point of contact as many clients are unable to go on-line to use the on-line enquiry form and prefer face to face engagement. Many bring in forms for completion, letters from the council that they are unable to read or understand. Receptionists are on duty throughout that period, often able to support clients for whom English is not their first language. There is often a queue even with two receptionists and if CAW have to adopt a no drop in service clients will see the council offices as the place to go too for help in the first instance.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“Whilst the Council is focussed on continuing to improve its customer services offer, it does not have any plans to increase staffing numbers. Footfall currently makes up less than 1% of the queries WBC gets a month, the vast majority being online or over the phone. WBC offices will remain open to residents with access to relevant staff members, as is the case today. We recognise that CAW may not be able to offer the same level of provision as in the past. We anticipate the Hardship Support co-ordination package will develop the capacity of other organisations to provide alternative advice.”

Question 6 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

“At the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Monday 29th January, the Council set out a New Council Vision in the accompanying slides. The Council has stated unambiguously that it is unable to spend money on services that residents value and want to keep, (e.g. Citizens Advice, Bustler, St Mary’s day care centre) and is unable to spend on anything other than essential services. Will the Council be amending the new Vision and Mission to clarify that it cannot in fact deliver any new services that make a difference to people?”

Supporting Statement

“Vision Statement: A financially and environmentally sustainable Council, delivering services that residents value in every part of the borough.

Mission Statement: A trusted and transparent Council that:

Lives within its means

Is focused on services that make a difference to people in the Borough

Works in partnership with the community to deliver positive outcomes

Continually engages with residents to design more efficient and effective services

Invests in talent to deliver for Woking’s future”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“In 2024/2025 the Council will continue to spend money on some non-statutory services, such as careline, community meals, leisure services, Bustler and Citizens Advice but these services must be self-financing in future. This is in line with the Council’s draft vision and mission which outlines that, in future, the Council will live within its means.”

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

The Leader of the Council provided an update on a number of issues affected by the Council’s financial situation. This included land at Brookwood Lye, on which the Leader had recently chaired a public meeting for the residents of Brookwood and Knaphill. The long-standing intention had been to provide Traveller pitches and new homes with a high proportion of affordable homes. Enforcement action had now been taken against those illegally living on the traveller site, ensuring that only those legally entitled to live on the site were there. In addition, Thameswey Housing had presented plans for 65 homes on the site half of which would be affordable with the potential to add more homes in future if land became available.

A further development was proposed at West Hall in West Byfleet. It had been agreed that the site would be removed from the Green Belt and developed to meet local housing need. Developers were now proposing the construction of 461 homes at West Byfleet, with half being affordable, and fifteen Traveller pitches. In recognition of residents’ concerns over traffic levels and the infrastructure necessary for developments of such a size, an infrastructure study had been carried out with a focus on the east of Woking. In addition, Surrey County Council had a project for active travel improvements which would seek to make improvements to safety and congestion. Though the project had not progressed for a number of years, the Leader advised that she would encourage them to move the scheme up their priority list.

In regard to Sheerwater, the Government had enabled the Council to borrow money to complete the phases of the development that were currently underway. In addition, around 100 homes which had been due to be demolished were now to be brought back into use following refurbishment.

Other areas covered included the review being undertaken by Grant Thornton which was currently being finalised in advance of being published. The cladding repairs to the Victoria Square Hotel development were due to be completed in the summer, and 98% of the apartments in The Marches had now been rented. Finally, it was reiterated that the Pool in the Park would remain open.

Following the statement by the Leader, the Chief Executive made a statement in respect of the business appearing later on the agenda to ensure the debate led to decisions that had due consideration of the legal and financial implications. In preparation of the debate, Members had been invited to submit any proposed amendments in advance of the meeting to enable the statutory officers to fully consider the implications and risks.

The Chief Executive emphasised that the budget proposed later in the evening had only been balanced with the Government’s package of support which came with an expectation of a 10% increase in Council Tax. The Council was under a legal obligation to set a lawful, balanced budget and failure to do so would have significant financial, legal, reputational

and operational impacts on the Council and its residents, threatening the Council's ability to perform its statutory responsibilities.

7. GENERAL FUND BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2024-25 WBC24-002.

Councillor Forster, Deputy Leader of the Council, introduced the report on the General Fund Budget and Council Tax for the coming years, noting that the Portfolio for Finance, Councillor Roberts, who had led on the work, had unfortunately been unable to attend. The exceptional support recently confirmed by the Government, without which the Authority would not have been able to achieve a balanced budget, was highlighted. The support represented a package of up to £785million for the following year.

Attention was drawn to a recent letter from the Minister for the Department of Housing, Levelling Up and Communities (DHLUC) which provided additional context around the proposals before the Council. A copy of the letter had been published on the Council website. It was clear that the Council's assets were not worth more than the debts held by the Authority.

In regard to Council Tax, the budget proposed an increase of 10% on the Borough Council's element of Council Tax bill for residents, a level that was to be expected of a Council under Government intervention. Efforts to negotiate a lower increase had been made with the Government but the Council's arguments had not been supported. Although the Borough Council's element of Council Tax would increase by 10%, the impact on the overall Council Tax level would be 1%, representing approximately 50p per week increase for a Band D property.

Support would be provided to residents hardest hit and the sum of £50,000 had been set aside to provide hardship advice in the community. A further £25,000 would be available through the household support fund.

Reference was made to second and empty homes. Within the report, it was noted that, under the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, from 1 April 2024 the Council would be able to apply a 100% premium (i.e. double charge) on unoccupied and unfurnished (empty) properties after one year, updated from two years. This was estimated to generate an additional £42,000 in the coming year. The same Bill, from 1 April 2025, would allow the Council to apply a 100% premium to unoccupied and furnished properties second homes, generating an additional £68,000 each year.

The Housing Infrastructure Fund project, which would have required additional borrowing of £55m, had been ended, and the Sheerwater Regeneration Scheme had been revised and would be aimed at delivering what the residents wanted.

The Mayor thanked the Deputy Leader for his introduction and invited comments from Members of the Council. Although it was noted that efforts had been made to negotiate a lower increase in Council Tax, concern was expressed over the impact the increase would have on local residents. However, the Council was advised that the support package from the Government hinged upon the Council agreeing a 10% increase in Council Tax. Despite this, a number of Councillors advised that they would not be able to support the proposed Council Tax increase.

The Leader of the Council took the opportunity of the Right to Reply to thank the Councillors for the debate around the proposals, and recognised that some people would struggle with the increase in Council Tax. The increase, however, was part of a package of

measures offered by the Government to enable the Authority to achieve a legal budget for the coming year. The package was the best option the Council had and the Authority was not in a position at this stage to agree a lower level of increase.

Questions around the sale of assets were responded to, and the Leader explained that the Council was not undertaking a fire sale; a couple of developments had been sold recently, including Victoria Gate which had been purchased by Surrey County Council.

Before moving to the debate, the Leader reiterated the importance of the recommendations before the Council and the consequences of not supporting the proposed increase in Council Tax.

In accordance with Standing Order 10.8, the recommendations, including the addition of the words 'per annum' to recommendation (xviii), were put to a vote. The names of Members voting for and against the recommendations were recorded as follows:

In favour:	Councillors A-M Barker, G Cosnahan, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, A Kirby, R Leach, L Lyons, C Martin, L Morales, S Mukherjee, E Nicholson, L Rice, T Spenser and M Sullivan.
Total in favour:	15
Against:	Councillors H Akberali, T Aziz, J Brown, S Dorsett, S Hussain and A Javid.
Total against:	6
Present not voting:	The Mayor and Councillors A Boote, K Davis and S Oades.
Total present not voting:	4

The recommendations were therefore carried by 15 votes in favour and 6 votes against.

RESOLVED

- That (i) Council considers and acknowledges the Section 151 Officer's s25 report on the robustness of the proposed budget and the adequacy of the Council's reserves, as set out in Appendix 8 to the report, including the factors which underpin the budget and specifically the need for exceptional financial support to balance the budget;
- (ii) it be noted that the financial position has been based on the final Local Government Finance Settlement announced on 5 February 2024 together with any further announcements at that date;
- (iii) it be noted that the Council was granted permission to raise council tax by an extra 9.99% without the need for a local referendum and that the report assumes a council tax increase of 9.99%;
- (iv) it be noted that the net cost of services position includes previously agreed savings and pressures included in the

'Business as Usual Budget' approved by Council on 8 February 2024, as updated in the report (link provided in background papers);

- (v) the final changes to the budget set out in paragraphs Section 5 and Table 4 of the report, be approved;
- (vi) the flexible use of capital receipts to support transformation activity under the Improvement and Recovery Plan set out in Appendix 7 be approved;
- (vii) the position of the Business Rates and Council Tax Collection Fund, and the Council Tax and Business Rates bases for 2024/25 as set out in Section 11 be noted;
- (viii) it be noted that Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) is required to balance the 2023/24 budget and that discussions with Central Government are ongoing, as per Appendix 2 to the report;
- (ix) it be noted that the budget has been set based on the assumption that the request for Exceptional Financial Support in respect of the 2024/25 budget deficit is granted;
- (x) it be noted that the projected revenue impact of the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) historic and 2024/25 requirements under the revised MRP policy agreed as part of the Treasury Management report elsewhere on the agenda and that the draft MRP guidance has been applied to the treatment of MRP in the report as set out in Appendix 2;
- (xi) the Council's position on Reserves, recognising the unique situation the Council faces, be noted;
- (xii) it be noted that work on the budget will continue during 2024/25 on a medium-term financial position, with more savings likely to be required to Council services;
- (xiii) the full net cost of services requirement for 2024/25, including the impact of the historic borrowing position is £189m as per Table 3, be agreed;
- (xiv) the revised Business Rates Discretionary Policy and its application for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 4 to the report, be approved;
- (xv) the overall Hardship Policy and associated costs as set out in Appendix 5 to the report, including the revised Council Tax Hardship scheme, which is set out in Appendix 6 to the report, be approved;
- (xvi) the changes to the level of council tax premium applied to second and long-term empty homes as set out in paragraphs 11.21 and 11.22 of the report, be approved;

- (xvii) it be noted that a Council Tax Base of 42,255.5 is the amount calculated by the Council, in accordance with the Regulations;
- (xviii) the Council increases its share of Council Tax for a Band D household by £26.31 per annum (9.99%), with other bands increased in line with the formula, be agreed;
- (xix) an amount of Council Tax be set for each valuation band in accordance with Section 30 of the Local Governance Finance Act, 1992 as set out in the Council Tax Resolution in Appendix 10 to the report, be agreed; and
- (xx) quarterly updates on progress against the delivery of the Improvement and Recovery Plan including the budgeted savings on the revenue and capital monitoring position be required.

8. CAPITAL, INVESTMENT AND TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND MRP STATEMENT WBC24-001.

The Deputy Leader of the Council introduced the report on the Capital, Investment and Treasury Management Strategies and MRP Statement. The Council was advised that local authorities were required by statutory guidance and under the CIPFA Prudential and Treasury Management codes to produce a series of reports as part of their annual budget approval. The reports included a Capital Strategy setting out the overall strategy for capital expenditure and finance for the coming year, an Investment Strategy for all investments other than those held for treasury management purposes, a Treasury Management Strategy on borrowing needs, and a Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy Statement.

The reports provided a comprehensive picture of the Council's capital, borrowing and investment position and included the prudential indicators, limits and investment indicators required under the respective codes and guidance.

The Leader of the Council summed up the proposals following a brief debate before the Council unanimously agreed to support the recommendations outlined in the paper.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the Capital, Investment and Treasury Management Strategies for 2024/25, including the prudential indicators, be approved;
- (ii) the 2024/25 MRP policy statement set out in Appendix A to the Treasury Management Strategy be approved;
 - (iii) the 2023/24 MRP policy be amended to align it with the MRP approach for 2024/25 in order to comply with MRP guidance in the current financial year (i.e. 2023/24); and
 - (iv) the Debt Reduction Plan Principles set out in Appendix E to the Treasury Management Strategy be approved.

9. NOTICES OF MOTION.

9A. Councillor Anila Javaid - Taxi Licensing.

The following motion had been submitted by Councillor Javaid.

“The motion is being raised to consider and update the current licensing practice for service providers that facilitate the taxi sector.

These companies provide licensed taxis that are maintained and insured and are ready to be driven by licensed taxi drivers to rent or as replacement courtesy vehicles. The public hire vehicle license is usually issued in the company name, which then assigns a licensed taxi driver to that vehicle, which is then informed to the council. This practice helps taxi drivers and the taxi business/trade.

Over the last few years, the council (Local Licensing team) has been insisting that only a licensed taxi driver can hold the vehicle license, which is causing multiple issues for drivers and service providers.

This practice is not well thought out and is limiting the options for our local drivers to work. We host a large number of taxi drivers who live in our borough and work in the neighbouring borough.

I propose the council to look into some of the highlighted issues created due to this practice and consider this matter from all angles and conclude a workable solution for service providers by letting them have the licenses in the company name (Service Provider). This update will make the process practical for such operators/service providers.”

The Mayor advised the Council that Councillor Javaid and Officers had discussed the motion and, in view of the technical nature of the motion, it had been agreed that the issue would benefit from further discussions with Officers. If any reconsideration of the Council’s current Licensing Policy was considered appropriate, a meeting of the Licensing Committee would be convened. Councillor Javaid had therefore agreed to withdraw the motion.

RESOLVED

That the motion be withdrawn.

9B. Councillor Saj Hussain - Funding for Non-Statutory Services.

The following motion had been submitted by Councillor Hussain.

“Council urges the commissioners to negotiate with The Public Works Loans Board or such bodies that the interest payments on WBC repayment be deferred for one week, together with the drastic cuts already achieved this will enable Woking Borough Council to continue to provide much needed funding to the Non-statutory services to our residents such as Citizen Advice Woking, Community Transport and other essential community organisations which support the most vulnerable residents of Woking, the deferment will also give those organisations breathing space to plan for the future.”

Councillor Hussain moved and Councillor Akberali seconded the motion. Councillor Hussain spoke in support of the motion, advising that he was seeking to protect the most vulnerable residents in the local community.

Concern was expressed that the motion would give false hope to voluntary organisations, recognising that the Council had earlier in the meeting set a legal and robust budget. It was explained that the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB) did not enter into negotiations with Authorities, and that all discussions to-date had taken place with the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities (DHLUC). DHLUC would not allow the Council to renegotiate the arrangements. At the request of the Mayor, the Council's Section 151 Officer confirmed that the Council's negotiations had been with DHLUC and that it would not be realistic to open discussions with the PWLB.

Several Councillors suggested that the motion had some merit in seeking to identify ways in which non-statutory services could be funded going forward, supporting both charities and residents.

Following the debate, Councillor Hussain responded to the points raised and urged the Council to support the motion, simply to explore the potential of the proposal outlined in the first instance.

In accordance with Standing Order 10.8, the motion was put to a vote. The names of Members voting for and against the motion were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors H Akberali, T Aziz, A Boote, J Brown, S Dorsett, S Hussain, A Javaid and S Mukherjee.

Total in favour: 8

Against: Councillors A-M Barker, G Cosnahan, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, A Kirby, R Leach, L Lyons, C Martin, L Morales, E Nicholson, L Rice, T Spenser and M Sullivan.

Total against: 14

Present not voting: The Mayor and Councillors K Davis and S Oades.

Total present not voting: 3

The motion was therefore lost by 8 votes in favour and 14 votes against.

RESOLVED

That the motion be not supported.

10. DEPUTY MAYOR.

The Leader of the Council announced that Councillor Amanda Boote had been nominated for the position of Deputy Mayor for the coming year. The appointment would be confirmed by Council on 20 May 2024.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 9.52 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____