

DIRECTIONS UNDER SECTION 15(5) AND (6) OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1999

1. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (“the Secretary of State”) has carefully considered the following in respect of Woking Borough Council (“the Authority”)
 - i. The external assurance review commissioned by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Local Government and Building Safety and published on 25 May 2023.
 - ii. The Authority’s exceptional level of external borrowing and approach to managing this borrowing and the Authority’s finances more widely.
 - iii. Discussions between Officials of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Officers of the Authority.
2. The Secretary of State is satisfied that the Authority is failing to comply with the requirements of Part I of the Local Government Act 1999 (“the 1999 Act”).
3. The Secretary of State considers the matter sufficiently urgent to forego the period of representation in section 15(9) of the 1999 Act. He considers it necessary and expedient, in accordance with his powers under section 15(5) and (6) of the 1999 Act, to immediately direct the Authority as set out below in order to secure the Authority’s compliance with the requirements of Part I of the 1999 Act, in particular:
 - To deliver financial sustainability by closing any short- or long-term budget gaps and reducing the Authority’s exceptionally high level of external borrowing.
 - To ensure compliance with all relevant rules and guidelines relating to the financial and debt management of the Authority.
 - To rebuild the commercial decision-making, regeneration, property management, procurement and management of commercial projects functions of the Authority to address the serious failings in these areas over recent years and ensure conformity with the best value duty, thereby delivering improvements in outcomes for the people of Woking and the public purse.
 - To agree as necessary any changes needed to the Authority’s operating model and redesign of council services to achieve value for money and financial sustainability.
4. Pursuant to his powers under section 15(5) and (6) of the 1999 Act, the Secretary of State directs:
 - i. The Authority to take the actions set out in Annex A to these Directions.
 - ii. That the functions of the Authority specified in Annex B to these Directions shall be exercised from the date of these Directions by the Commissioners acting jointly or severally; the Commissioners being

persons nominated by the Secretary of State for the purposes of these Directions as long as those nominations are in force.

- iii. That, from the date of these Directions, the Authority shall comply with any instructions of the Commissioners in relation to the exercise of the functions specified in Annex B, and shall provide such information and assistance as the Commissioners may require for the purpose of exercising the functions specified in Annex B.

5. These Directions shall remain in force until 25 May 2028 unless the Secretary of State considers it appropriate to amend or revoke them at an earlier date.

Signed on behalf of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Suzanne Clarke

Senior Civil Servant in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Date: 25 May 2023

ACTION THE AUTHORITY IS REQUIRED TO TAKE

In this Annex, the following expressions have the following meanings – “The Authority” includes the Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members, any committee or sub-committee; and any other person who has responsibility for the matter in question.

The actions to be taken by the Authority are:

1. Prepare and agree an Improvement and Recovery Plan to the satisfaction of the Commissioners, within 6 months, with resource allocated accordingly. This should draw upon the contents and recommendations of the External Assurance Review published on 25 May 2023. The plan is to set out measures to be undertaken, 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, thereby securing compliance with the best value duty. The Improvement and Recovery Plan should include at a minimum:
 - 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 (MTFS), 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 (MRP) policy in line with all relevant rules and guidelines.
 - 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
2. 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.

3. To undertake in the exercise of any of its functions any action that the Commissioners may reasonably require to avoid, so far as practicable, incidents of poor governance, poor financial governance or financial mismanagement that would, in the reasonable opinion of the Commissioners, give rise to the risk of further failures by the Authority to comply with the best value duty.
4. To allow the Commissioners at all reasonable times, such access as appears to the Commissioners to be necessary:
 - a. to any premises of the Authority;
 - b. to any document relating to the Authority; and
 - c. to any employee or member of the Authority.
5. To provide the Commissioners, at the expense of the Authority, with such reasonable amenities and services and administrative support as the Commissioners may reasonably require from time to time to carry out their functions and responsibilities under these Directions.
6. To pay the Commissioners reasonable expenses, and such fees as the Secretary of State determines are to be paid to them.
7. To provide the Commissioners with such assistance and information, including any views of the Authority on any matter, as the Commissioners may reasonably request.
8. To co-operate with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in relation to implementing the terms of these Directions.

FUNCTIONS OF THE AUTHORITY TO BE EXERCISED BY THE COMMISSIONERS

In this Annex, the following expressions have the following meanings –

“The Authority” includes the Leader, Cabinet Members, any committee or subcommittee; and any other person who has responsibility for the matter in question.

“Statutory Officer” means any of: the Head of Paid Service designated under section 4(1) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989; the Chief Financial Officer designated as having responsibility for the administration of the Authority’s financial affairs under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972; the Monitoring Officer designated under section 5(1) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989; and the Scrutiny Officer designated under section 9FB of the Local Government Act 2000 (and the expressions “statutory officer” and “statutory office” are to be construed accordingly).

“Senior positions” are defined as the Chief Executive, direct reports to the Chief Executive and their direct reports, and their Group Managers – tiers one, two and three.

The Commissioners shall exercise:

1. All functions associated with the financial governance and scrutiny of strategic financial decision making by the Authority.
2. The requirement from section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 to make arrangements for the proper administration of the Authority’s financial affairs, and all functions associated with the strategic financial management of the Authority, to include:
 - a. providing advice and challenge to the Authority on the preparation and implementation of a detailed action plan to achieve financial sustainability, and to close any short and long-term budget gaps identified by the Authority across the period of its medium-term financial strategy (MTFS), including a robust multi-year savings plan;
 - b. providing advice and challenge to the Authority in the setting of annual budgets and a robust medium term financial strategy (MTFS) for the Authority, strictly limiting future borrowing and capital spending;
 - c. scrutiny of all in-year amendments to annual budgets;
 - d. the power to propose amendments to budgets where Commissioners consider that those budgets constitute a risk to the Authority’s ability to fulfil its best value duty;
 - e. providing advice and challenge to the Authority on the preparation of sustainable and affordable capital, investment and treasury management strategies; a strict debt reduction plan; and a revised minimum revenue provision (MRP) policy;

- f. providing advice and challenge to the Authority on a suitable scheme of delegations for financial decision making;
 - g. ensuring compliance with all relevant rules and guidelines relating to the financial management of the Authority.
- 3. All functions associated with commercial decision-making, regeneration, property management, procurement and the management of commercial projects by the Authority.
- 4. All functions associated with the governance, scrutiny and transparency of strategic decision making by the Authority.
- 5. All functions associated with the Authority's operating model and redesign of the Authority's services to achieve value for money and financial sustainability.
- 6. All functions relating to the appointment and dismissal of persons to positions the holders of which are to be designated as senior officers and statutory officers, and the designation of those persons as statutory officers, to include:
 - a. The functions of designating a person as a statutory officer and removing a person from a statutory office.
 - b. The functions under section 112 of the Local Government Act 1972 of:
 - i. appointing and determining the terms and conditions of employment of an officer of the Authority, insofar as those functions are exercised for the purpose of appointing a person as an officer of the Authority principally in order for that person to be designated as a statutory officer; and
 - ii. dismissing any person who has been designated as a statutory officer from his or her position as an officer of the Authority.
- 7. All functions to define the officer structure for the senior positions, to determine the recruitment processes and then to recruit the relevant staff to those positions.
- 8. All functions pertaining to the development, oversight and operation of an enhanced performance management framework for officers holding senior positions.