

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
BOROUGH COUNCIL OF WOKING

held on 22 August 2023

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 D Jordan
Cllr A Boote	Cllr A Kirby
Cllr J Brown	Cllr R Leach
Cllr G Cosnahan	Cllr S Mukherjee
Cllr K Davis	Cllr S Oades
Cllr S Dorsett	Cllr L Rice
Cllr W Forster	Cllr D Roberts
Cllr P Graves	Cllr T Spenser
Cllr S Greentree	Cllr M Sullivan
Cllr S Hussain	

Absent: Councillors A Caulfield, L Lyons, C Martin, J Morley and E Nicholson.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Caulfield, Lyons, Martin, Morley and Nicholson.

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 and Digital, 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.

3. MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS.

The Mayor reported on recent engagements including an event for the Surrey Mayors and Chairmen hosted by the Lord Lieutenant on 26 July 2023. A very generous donation of £1,165 had been received from a local function for the Mayor's chosen Charity for the year, Friends of Woking Community Hospital.

4. URGENT BUSINESS.

No items of Urgent Business were considered.

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

No announcements were made.

6. IMPROVEMENT AND RECOVERY PLAN WBC23-32.

Councillor Barker, Leader of the Council, introduced the Improvement and Recovery Plan report before the Council. The report outlined the Council's response to the Secretary of State's Directions in the form of a single Improvement and Recovery Plan which combined the Fit for The Future programme and the Financial Recovery Plan. The Plan provided a clear direction for the Council's improvement ambitions that would ensure the continued delivery of the strategic priorities in the Corporate Plan.

The Improvement and Recovery Plan included proposed mechanisms for governance and assurance to 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 would be regularly updated to reflect the changing nature of the programme, with changes to be approved through an agreed change control process.

The Leader set out the circumstances that had led up to the creation of the Improvement and Recovery Plan and the work that had been done to-date to address the deficit and budget shortfall faced by the Council. The priority for the Council was to resolve the financial issues and as part of the Plan many staff would face redundancy and services would have to be delivered differently, reduced or stopped altogether. The changes would be delivered through the four themes of the Plan – finance, governance, organisational and commercial – and the Leader spoke of the organisational changes that would come forward.

The Leader reported that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered the draft Plan at its meeting on 14 August 2023 and, following a detailed discussion, had agreed to recommend to Council that recommendation (iv) should be clarified that the authority being given to the Executive was specific to making necessary amendments to the Plan. A paper setting out the recommendation of the Committee had been published in advance of the meeting, together with a position statement drawn up by the Chief Executive.

It was noted that a high response had been received through the public engagement exercise and that a full public consultation on future services would be undertaken from

October 2023. The consultation would be online, with printed copies available for those residents without access to the internet. The consultation would target those directly affected by the proposed changes.

Following the introduction by the Leader, the relevant Portfolio Holders introduced the proposals falling under the remaining key themes. Councillor Roberts outlined the financial recovery theme and the intention to put in place better controls and governance and agreeing a financial support package with the Government. Councillor Forster introduced the theme of commercial strategy, through which the Council would review its assets to identify the most appropriate courses of action going forward. Councillor Johnson spoke about the governance theme and the importance of effective oversight and accountability, noting that in the past risks had not been adequately assessed. The work undertaken to-date was outlined, including the changes to the Constitution and the establishment of the Shareholder Advisory Group.

The matter moved to the debate and, arguing that the recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could be strengthened, Councillor Davis moved and Councillor Hussain seconded an amendment which sought to ensure that the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was provided with the opportunity to see potential changes to the Plan before they were determined by the Executive. The amendment read (proposed new wording highlighted):

“(iv) authority be delegated to the Executive to approve changes to the Improvement and Recovery Plan as part of regular reporting arrangements. **Before any potential changes to the Improvement and Recovery Plan are implemented by the Executive, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are to receive early oversight for purposes of scrutiny.**”

The amendment was debated, with Members arguing for and against the proposed change. Councillor Brown indicated a desire to speak but due to a misunderstanding was not afforded the opportunity to do so. Under the Council’s constitution at Part 4, Section 1, p137, Cl. 17.4 the Mayor has absolute discretion as to whether a Councillor can speak.

The Mayor referred the Council to the wording of the amendment and in accordance with Standing Order 10.8 the names of Members voting for and against the amendment were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors H Akberali, J Brown, K Davis, S Dorsett and S Hussain.

Total in favour: 5

Against: Councillors A-M Barker, A Boote, G Cosnahan, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, I Johnson, D Jordan, A Kirby, R Leach, L Morales, S Mukherjee, L Rice, D Roberts, T Spenser and M Sullivan.

Total against: 16

Present not voting: The Mayor and Councillors T Aziz, A Javaid and S Oades.

Total present not voting: 4

The amendment was therefore lost by 5 votes in favour and 16 votes against.

The Council returned to the substantive recommendations and the proposals set out in the report. Concern was expressed over the level of redundancies and it was suggested that clear, key information on the changes should be made available for residents. Overall the Plan was welcomed, recognised as an essential step in taking the Council forward. Following the debate, the Leader summed up the discussions and responded to points made, emphasising the desire to have scrutiny in public of the Council's changes to the Plan and the actions undertaken going forward. The general support for the Plan was welcomed, and the concerns over the ambitions and timescales of the Plan were noted.

The Mayor directed the Council to the recommendations before it, including the recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Davis requested a named vote on recommendation (iv), as proposed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Recommendations (i), (ii) and (iii) were agreed nem con before recommendation (iv), as amended in light of the recommendation of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, was put to a vote.

In accordance with Standing Order 10.8 the names of Members voting for and against recommendation (iv) were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors H Akberali, T Aziz, A-M Barker, A Boote, G Cosnahan, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, A Javaid, I Johnson, D Jordan, A Kirby, R Leach, L Morales, S Mukherjee, S Oades, L Rice, D Roberts, T Spenser and M Sullivan.

Total in favour: 20

Against: Councillors J Brown, K Davis, S Dorsett and S Hussain.

Total against: 4

Present not voting: The Mayor.

Total present not voting: 1

The recommendation was therefore carried by 20 votes in favour and 4 votes against.

RESOLVED

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 necessary amendments to the Improvement and Recovery Plan as part of regular reporting arrangements.

7. APPOINTMENT OF STATUTORY OFFICER WBC23-033.

Councillor Barker, Leader of the Council, presented a report to Council proposing the appointment of an Interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer). It was noted that the

Council's current Interim Director of Finance and S151 Officer, Brendan Arnold, would be leaving Woking Borough Council at the end of his contract term on 31 August 2023. Under S151 of the Local Government Act 1972, every local authority had to ensure that arrangements were in place for the proper administration of their financial affairs.

A recruitment process had therefore been followed which had resulted in the recommendation to appoint Eugene Walker as the Interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer). Councillor Barker briefly outlined the qualifications and experience of Mr Walker, noting that he had been previously engaged by the Council. The appointment would be for a six month period, during which a permanent replacement would be sought.

Some concern was expressed over the way in which the recruitment process had been undertaken and the absence within the report of details of the reasons behind the recommendation. However, whilst it was acknowledged that the process could have been more transparent, it was noted that the interview panel had consisted of a number of Councillors and the Lead Commissioner. Those Members on the interview panel confirmed that Mr Walker's experience had been impressive and had included serving as the S151 Officer at Sheffield City Council.

The Leader of the Council responded to the points raised during the debate and recognised the concerns over the process followed, lessons from which would be taken forward. The Mayor referred the Council to the recommendation set out in the report and called for a named vote.

In accordance with Standing Order 10.8, the names of Members voting for and against the recommendation to appoint Eugene Walker as the Interim Director of Finance (S151 Officer) were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors H Akberali, T Aziz, A-M Barker, A Boote, G Cosnahan, K Davis, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, S Hussain, I Johnson, D Jordan, A Kirby, R Leach, L Morales, S Mukherjee, L Rice, D Roberts, T Spenser and M Sullivan.

Total in favour: 20

Against: None.

Total against: 0

Present not voting: The Mayor and Councillors J Brown, S Dorsett, A Javaid and S Oades.

Total present not voting: 5

The recommendation was therefore carried by 20 votes in favour and no votes against.

RESOLVED

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

8. POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES REVIEW WBC23-034.

Before the Council was a report which sought approval of plans for a statutory review of polling districts and polling places within the Borough of Woking in accordance with the duties placed on all local authorities by the Electoral Administration Act 2006. It was noted that it would be important to complete the review as soon as possible so the polling districts and places could be agreed in time for the next general election and scheduled local elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections. It was therefore recommended that the review should start on Monday, 2 October 2023, with a degree of preparatory work to be undertaken prior to the review including informal preliminary consultation.

RESOLVED

- 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 meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 9.47 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____