

MINUTES  
OF A MEETING OF THE  
**BOROUGH COUNCIL OF WOKING**

held on 12 October 2023

Present:

Cllr M I Raja (Chair)  
Cllr L Morales (Vice-Chair)

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

Absent: Councillors T Aziz, A Boote and G Cosnahan.

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.**

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors T Aziz, A Boote and G Cosnahan.

**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. MINUTES.

The Council had before it the minutes of the meetings held on 22 August and 28 September 2023. Councillor Kirby referred to the meeting held on 28 September and the minute on the Medium Term Financial Strategy. Councillor Kirby noted the decision of some Members to vote against recommendation (vii) and suggested that those Councillors should be offered the opportunity to clarify their reasons for having done so.

The Mayor directed Councillor Kirby to outline any amendments he wished to propose to the minutes to correct any inaccuracies. Councillor Kirby proposed the following amendment (changes highlighted in bold):

Minute 9a – Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), Paragraph 11, 3<sup>rd</sup> sentence to read

“However, some Members expressed concern over the proposed (vii), stating that, **in their personal view**, the Council should be seeking assistance from the Government instead of being prescriptive, without receipt of legal or financial advice or consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.”

In view of the proposed amendment, the accuracy of the sentence would be reviewed and the minutes brought back to the Council at its next meeting.

The minutes of the meeting of Council held on 22 August 2023, deferred from the meeting on 28 September 2023, were agreed as a true and correct record.

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of the Council held on 22 August 2023 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

### 4. MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS.

The Mayor had attended a number of events following the previous meeting of the Council, including a 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert by the Friary Brass Band and a charity walk to raise funds for the Woking Community Hospital, the Mayor's charity for the year. On 3 October 2023 the Mayor had attended a Talk Surrey event, a charity which supported individuals with speech therapy. The Service for the Judiciary had been held at the beginning of October and on the previous day the Mayor had attended an event at the Woking Leisure Centre hosted by the Woking Chamber of Commerce.

### 5. URGENT BUSINESS.

No items of Urgent Business were considered.

**6. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL WBC23-040.**

Copies of questions submitted under Standing Order 8.1 together with draft replies had been published in advance of the meeting. The replies were confirmed by Members of the Executive, supplementary questions were asked and replies given as set out below:

1. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“What discretionary services are we not currently consulting on and why are we not?”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“Whilst the Council launched various service-specific consultations on 2 October 2023, the Council is also inviting comments on the entirety of its Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), including the savings proposals for all services. The service-specific consultations seek to understand the impacts and alternative options in respect of the proposals to remove or reduce direct services to residents.

During the consultation period there are also discussions with affected groups. Any and all feedback on the proposals we are having to make in an attempt to balance the budget is welcome.”

Supplementary Question

No.

2. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“What discretionary services are being cut without consultation even occurring?”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“As described in my response to the previous question, there is the opportunity for residents and stakeholders to give their views on all proposed budget cuts through the Medium-Term Financial Strategy survey.

Service change proposals are in the MTFS and feedback on any of those proposals is welcome.”

Supplementary Question

No.

3. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“The Portfolio holder has in the past stressed that a key exit route from the Council's financial difficulties lays with an improved local economic landscape. Now that this Council gave the CEO permission on 28 September to proceed with cuts to staffing budgets in discretionary roles, to what extent had the business community been consulted on regarding the closure of the Business Liaison function and what impact will closing this vital function have on the economic landscape?”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“As described in the response to the previous question, there is the opportunity for staff, residents and stakeholders (including businesses) to give their views on all proposed budget cuts through the Medium-Term Financial Strategy survey and through internal consultation with staff teams.

I have had conversations with the Chambers of Commerce relating to changes proposed and required as part of the MTFs.

Business Liaison and economic development activity is not solely undertaken from within the Business Liaison Service and therefore there will be a continuation of some activity and attention through other functions and services of the Council.

Discussions are taking place with the County, who have the primary responsibility for Economic Development, relating to its role and support to the Woking area as part of the County’s responsibility and taking on LEP functions.

Furthermore we are exploring the opportunity within external funding (UKSPF) to support a transition from the current to new arrangements.”

Supplementary Question

“Thank you very much, Mr. Mayor. I do have a supplementary and I’m grateful actually to finally get an answer that actually makes sense and even answers the question, even though it’s a bit of a strange one. As we have basically given notice to the staff already for these discretionary services that we are consulting on, is it just utterly pointless to consult with the staff themselves.”

“Thank you very much Mr Mayor.”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“Thank you, Mr. Mayor, thank you, Councillor Davies, for your question.”

“No, it’s, it’s not pointless to consult. Yeah, I also want to recognise the excellent support that the business liaison team provide us. I know you and I have worked very closely with them over the years. I don’t want to lose them.”

“Then again I didn’t make the Council bankrupt and I don’t get to decide what are statutory services. So we can only do with this, what we’re doing with all the other proposals: understand the impact, look for alternatives where there are practical alternatives and pursue mitigations where there aren’t. Thank you, Mr. Mayor.”

4. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“At the Council meeting on 28 September, we were told in a supplementary answer that the Eastwood Centre breaks even and so whilst a discretionary service isn’t costing the Council Tax payer anything. May we see a full evidential breakdown of the operational running costs since the centre opened, the portion related to the pools and what the capital depreciation and interest costs are and projected for the MTFs period?”

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

“Some of the accounts are commercially sensitive to protect and ensure a fair procurement process for future tenders of the leisure contract.

However, the headline figures for Eastwood Leisure Centre are as follows:

Eastwood Total Income = £1.4 million

Eastwood Total Operating Costs = £1.3 million

Therefore, there is a small surplus of circa £100,000 for the running of the Eastwood Leisure Centre which excludes any future capital investment costs relating to the maintenance of the building.”

Supplementary Question

“Thank you very much, Mr. Mayor, I certainly do and I do actually thank Councillor Nicholson for the comprehensive answer. I think it answers my, my question well.”

“My supplementary, I'm sure you've probably guessed what I'm gonna say. As, as basically Eastwood, the Eastwood Leisure Centre is part of a portfolio of leisure assets that we provide to residents in the Borough, should we not be considering using the, the surplus of £100,000 that that Centre is raising to obviously subsidise Pool in the Park which basically on the basis that we know that Eastwood cannot take, doesn't have capacity to meet all of Pool in the Park services.”

“Thank you.”

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson,

“Thank you, Councillor Davis, that's certainly an interesting point. I think, as we are both within the Finance Task Group looking at some of the issues around Pool in the Park in particular and the Leisure Services, I think that's something that we can raise in that, in that arena as a possible, as a possible solution as we move forwards.”

“Thank you.”

5. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“What is the income generated by Pool in the Park?”

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

“Pool in the Park generates £2.02 million income and costs £2.47 million to operate, creating a loss of circa £450,000. This excludes any capital investment costs and interest and financing charges.”

Supplementary Question

“Thank you very much, Mr Mayor, I, I do. I read, I read in some literature that was recently pushed through my door, that actually the, the, the loss is a million pounds for Pool in the Park and I'm, I'm struggling, as I have been struggling for two months now, to really understand the financing arrangements of Pool in the Park. On the one

hand, I get literature in my door that says it's losing a million pounds a year and I come to this Council a few days later and I get a figure of 450,000. One of these things must be misleading and I am wondering whether this answer here is misleading or whether it's the, the literature that came through my door that is misleading. Thank you."

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

"So income is different from cost, Councillor Davis. I'd be interested to see this piece of literature as well, that has been through your door, but the figures that are before us this evening and the answer that's before us this evening is the correct answer and as I said previously in my previous answer we will be working with the Pool in the Park in the Finance Task Group, working through the finances, and this is an ongoing process, so as you know yourself. Thank you."

6. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

"Why has the Council and Mountjoy Ltd agreed to mutually terminate responsive repairs, void refurbishments and gas servicing, is there a cost saving to the new providers undertaking these functions and what is the current status?"

Reply from Councillor Ian Johnson

"Mountjoy sought to terminate due to concerns relating to the commercial viability of the contract in general. Whilst not fully quantifiable, early termination does provide an opportunity for the Council to review the service offer in order to increase the potential of making financial efficiencies and to improve the customer experience. For example, we will be looking to split out gas servicing and repairs from general repairs to ensure that we have specialist trades working on our homes. In addition, the void contractors we will use exclusively from October are operating on a lower percentage uplift against the contract rates than Mountjoy."

Supplementary Question

No.

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

The Leader of the Council took the opportunity to highlight the consultation on service changes which had started in the previous week. A very high response rate had already been received.

The consultation had been promoted widely, with local clubs and groups consulted, particularly those which had been traditionally funded by the Council. It was noted that no decisions had yet been made but that few alternatives existed for the Council.

The Leader had attended local business events to set out the position faced by the Council, taking the opportunity to emphasise that Woking remained open for businesses.

No announcements were made by the Committee Chairmen or the Chief Executive.

**8. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE WBC23-038.**

The Council had before it a report on the recommendations from the Executive, setting out the extract from the minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 5 October 2023. In accordance with the Constitution, the recommendations were deemed to have been moved and seconded.

**8a. Sheerwater Regeneration EXE23-065**

Councillor Forster, Portfolio Holder for Special Projects, introduced the recommendations of the Executive in respect of the Sheerwater Regeneration Scheme. In July 2023, the Council had agreed that the Development Agreement with Thamesway for the delivery of the Scheme should be brought to an end, with no new phases to commence. The Council had submitted a business case to the Government for the release of £57m from pre-approved loans from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) for the completion of the three phases which had started construction – Copper, Red and Yellow.

The Government had subsequently confirmed that funds could be released for the Scheme and a further report would be presented to the Executive in November on the completion of the three phases. For the remaining areas of the regeneration scheme, a public consultation had been held to which a good response had been received. The residents had been clear that a smaller regeneration scheme should be constructed, with fewer existing properties demolished and a greater level of refurbishment carried out. Refurbishment of existing properties would bring 106 homes back into available accommodation.

The proposals were debated by the Council, and a concern was expressed that the business case to the Government had not first been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and that a briefing paper had been solely provided to the Liberal Democrat Group. It was further felt that the report before the Council did not address the controls and milestones that were to be put in place for the Scheme.

Reference was made to the public consultation which had identified the key priorities for the local community – to complete the existing phases and bring homes back into use, priorities which the Council could only achieve with the completion of the part completed phases through the PWLB loan. In considering the consultation results, the Council was advised that, although over 500 responses had been received, the response from the Asian community had been low. Ways of improving the response level from minority communities in future consultations would be explored.

The remaining spend on the regeneration scheme would be carefully monitored, though the decision by the Government demonstrated its confidence in the business cases submitted by the Council. The remaining work would provide essential housing, recognising the shortage in affordable homes in the Borough.

Following the debate, the Portfolio Holder responded to the key points raised, noting that, whilst the business case to the Government had not be brought before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, it had been reviewed by Commissioners. It was further emphasised that the money sought through the PWLB had been previously approved; the request to the Government was to draw down the sum of £57m of the funds following the issue of the S114 Statement.

The Mayor referred the Council to the recommendations before them and, at the request of a Member, took a named vote on recommendation (i) before seeking approval of recommendations (ii) to (v).

In accordance with Standing Order 10.8, recommendation (i) was put to a vote and the names of Members voting for and against were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors A-M Barker, A Caulfield, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, A Javaid, I Johnson, A Kirby, R Leach, L Lyons, C Martin, L Morales, J Morley, S Mukherjee, E Nicholson, L Rice, D Roberts, T Spenser and M Sullivan.

Total in favour: 19

Against: Councillors H Akberali, J Brown, K Davis, S Dorsett, S Hussain and D Jordan.

Total against: 6

Present not voting: The Mayor and Councillor S Oades.

Total present not voting: 2

Recommendation (i) was therefore carried by 19 votes in favour and 6 votes against.

The Mayor referred Members to the remaining recommendations and in accordance with Standing Order 10.8, recommendations (ii) to (v) were put to a vote and the names of Members voting for and against were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors H Akberali, A-M Barker, J Brown, A Caulfield, K Davis, S Dorsett, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, S Hussain, A Javaid, I Johnson, A Kirby, R Leach, L Lyons, C Martin, L Morales, J Morley, S Mukherjee, E Nicholson, S Oades, L Rice, D Roberts, T Spenser and M Sullivan.

Total in favour: 25

Against: Councillor D Jordan.

Total against: 1

Present not voting: The Mayor.

Total present not voting: 1

Recommendations (ii) to (v) were therefore carried by 25 votes in favour and 1 vote against.

#### RESOLVED

That (i) the progress on Red, Yellow and Copper phases be noted;

(ii) the Council retains and refurbishes circa 106 homes within the Sheerwater Regeneration area as set out in Section 5 of the report;



- (iii) the costs of refurbishment, estimated at £2.9 million, be covered by capital receipts and Local Authority Housing Funding (if appropriate);
- (iv) the Strategic Director – Communities, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Key Projects, be authorised to agree proposals to consolidate ownership of vacant housing assets between ThamesWey and the Council; and
- (v) the residual land and properties within the Sheerwater Regeneration area (excluding those to be retained) continue to be vacated and offered to the market for disposal, as set out in Section 4.7 of the report, to maximise the capital receipt.

**8b. 2023 Review of the Woking Core Strategy EXE23-048**

The Council had before it the recommendations of the Executive in respect of the Woking Core Strategy. The Core Strategy, first adopted in 2012, provided the local strategic planning framework for the management of land uses in the Borough for period to 2027. The Strategy had been last reviewed in 2018 and, in accordance with legislation, had to be reviewed every five years.

The recommendations of the Executive, for the review conclusions to be confirmed and for Officers to develop a timetable to produce a new Local Plan for the Borough, were introduced by the Portfolio Holder for Planning Policy, Councillor Lyons. Councillor Lyons responded to the points raised during the debate and welcomed the support for the Core Strategy.

**RESOLVED**

- That (i) the conclusions of the 5 Year Review of the Core Strategy set out in the report be confirmed; and
- (ii) Officers bring forward a timetable and associated outline of the work programme to produce a new Local Plan for the Borough of Woking.

**9. APPOINTMENT OF NEW OFFICER DIRECTOR TO VICTORIA SQUARE WOKING GROUP COMPANIES WBC23-039.**

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Barker, introduced a report which proposed the appointment of Andrew Rowson to Victoria Square Woking Limited, Victoria Square Residential Limited and VSW Hotel Limited. The appointment would replace Kevin Foster, the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources and would ensure that the requisite number of directors had been appointed to the company boards.

Mr Rowson was a property asset management specialist who had worked with a number of local authorities as asset management lead for the East of England Local Government Association. Mr Rowson had a varied background in public sector housing development, local authority management, asset management and consultancy. His appointment followed the decision to replace Kevin Foster on the Boards in view of the increasingly untenable nature of his dual roles.

Several Councillors expressed disappointment in the lack of detail provided in the report and absence of wider Member involvement in the selection process. It was acknowledged, however, that Councillors could not be involved in every such appointment. In this case, it was noted that interviews had been held with the Interim Director of Finance and S151 Officer, the Chief Executive and the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources.

The Leader of the Council responded to the points raised during the debate and offered to provide further details of the appointment outside of the meeting. In view of the reservations expressed by a number of Councillors, the Mayor advised that, in accordance with Standing Order 10.8, the recommendation would be put to a named vote. The names of Members voting for and against were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors A-M Barker, A Caulfield, K Davis, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, I Johnson, D Jordan, A Kirby, R Leach, L Lyons, C Martin, L Morales, J Morley, S Mukherjee, E Nicholson, D Roberts, T Spenser and M Sullivan.

Total in favour: 20

Against: Councillors J Brown, S Dorsett and L Rice.

Total against: 3

Present not voting: The Mayor and Councillors H Akberali, S Hussain and A Javid.

Total present not voting: 4

The recommendation was therefore carried by 20 votes in favour and 3 votes against.

**RESOLVED**

That Andrew Rowson be appointed to the Boards of:

- Victoria Square Woking Limited;
- Victoria Square Residential Limited; and
- VSW Hotel Limited.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm  
and ended at 9.37 pm

Chairman: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_