

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
EXECUTIVE

held on 14 December 2023

Present:

Cllr A-M Barker (Chairman)
Cllr W Forster (Vice-Chair)

Cllr P Graves Cllr E Nicholson
Cllr I Johnson Cllr D Roberts
Cllr L Lyons

Also Present: Councillors A Boote, K Davis, D Jordan and L Rice.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

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 interests were such that Mr Foster could advise the Executive 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 interests were such that Mrs Strongitharm could advise the Executive on those items.

The interest of the Head of Transformation, Digital and Customer, Adam Walther, was referred to in the agenda but it should be noted that Mr Walther was not present at the meeting.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 16 November 2023 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of Urgent Business under Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Barker, advised the Executive that following self-referral to the Regulator for Social Housing, the Regulator had today issued the Council with a regulatory notice for breaching the Home Standard in respect of fire safety. The Leader explained that the notice stated that the Council did not have effective systems in place to manage its health and safety responsibilities, specifically the timely resolution of fire safety remedial actions and compliance with new carbon monoxide and smoke detector installation regulations. The Executive was informed that the Council was developing a plan to promptly complete those actions, noting that some of those actions had already been completed. The Leader acknowledged that Council tenants had been unhappy at requests to remove items from communal walkways and explained that regulations set out that items kept in communal walkways were obstacles to escape in the event of fire, particularly during hours of darkness. Consideration would be given to the tone of future tenant communications.

5. QUESTIONS

No written questions had been submitted under Section 3 of the Executive Procedure Rules. The Leader highlighted that the Executive welcomed questions from members of the public and explained the submission process. The deadline for written questions from members of the public was 12 noon, seven days before the Executive. The next Executive would be held on 18 January 2024, so the deadline for written questions was 12 noon, 11 January 2024.

6. PETITION - BROOKWOOD LYE DEVELOPMENT EXE23-078

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Barker, reported that a petition had been submitted in accordance with the Council's scheme for dealing with petitions, requesting that the Council fully deliver on the long-term vision for Brookwood Lye Road.

The petition contained 215 signatures in the following terms:

"We the undersigned petition the council to fully deliver on the long-term vision for Brookwood Lye Road including the 128 dwellings, 19 pitch Traveller site and road improvements. This vision was widely consulted on and has demonstrable support from local residents. The approved planning application for the Traveller site (PLAN/2017/1307), was agreed at Planning Committee on 23 February 2021. The application for the 128 dwellings (PLAN/2021/0248) submitted by the Council's wholly owned subsidiary Thameswey will deliver 64 dwellings as affordable, which is much needed in Brookwood and the surrounding villages of Knaphill and St. Johns. The A322 Corridor Consultation in July 2017, had the overwhelming support of local residents for the proposed improvements to Brookwood Crossroads."

The Leader welcomed the Petitioner, Mr Mike Peel, to the meeting. The Petitioner spoke in support of the petition highlighting the need for affordable homes including a local first policy, improvements to Brookwood Crossroads, and enforcement of the traveller site. The Executive was advised that the Planning Committee, at its meeting on 12 December 2023, had received an enforcement item concerning the traveller site. The Executive was

hopeful that progress would be made in the New Year whilst recognising the constraints faced by the Council. Discussion ensued on road improvements and the process for approaching Surrey County Council, as the Highways Authority, to consider improvements to Brookwood Crossroads. It was noted that a meeting with residents was being planned in the New Year to provide an update on current progress and to raise awareness. The Leader confirmed that the Council had agreed a “Local First” policy in 2022 following a Motion from Councillor Davis.

The Executive thanked Mr Peel for presenting the petition.

RESOLVED

That the Executive notes the wishes of Brookwood residents on Brookwood Lye Road and is working with the applicant to progress a new planning application that delivers homes on Brookwood Lye. Road improvements are the responsibility of Surrey County Council and they should be contacted on this.”

Reason: To agree a response to the petition.

7. DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) AND GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2024-25 EXE23-059

Councillor Roberts, Portfolio Holder for Finance, introduced the report which set out the strategic financial approach that the Council needed to take to deliver the Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP) and respond to the Council’s serious financial position whilst continuing to meet its statutory duties. The Portfolio Holder explained that the approach included the development of a debt reduction plan and asset disposal strategy, and the commitment to a £12m savings target. The Executive was informed that progress continued to be slowed by poor data, inadequate systems and insufficient capacity, and the Executive welcomed that Commissioners had supported additional resources in the finance team. Benchmarking was being undertaken with neighbouring councils to inform future service provision.

The Portfolio Holder provided an update on the Council’s previously agreed savings target of £12m. The worsening budget gap due to the Council’s historic investments was noted, however the Portfolio Holder confirmed that the savings target of £12m had not increased. The Executive was advised that Commissioners were supportive of addressing the broadening gap through the debt reduction plans.

Discussion ensued on the savings proposals and consultation. Following the public consultation, Officers and Members had worked on a detailed options analysis for Pool in the Park which had indicated that the option to increase fees and charges was potentially a viable recommendation in the final budget report to Council in February 2024 to keep the Pool open. The Executive thanked Officers and Members, in particular the Portfolio Holder for Leisure, and was grateful to the Woking Pool Community Action Taskforce and user groups for engaging with the Council to find solutions.

Attention was drawn to Council tax and it was noted that although the Council Tax referendum limit for 2024/25 was 3%, other councils subject to intervention had implemented increases above the cap as part of dealing with budget gaps. The Executive was informed that discussions had started with Commissioners ahead of February Council.

The Executive recognised the significant challenges ahead and difficult decisions such as proposed staff savings and removal of community grant funding. The Leader was pleased that extensive public and/or service user consultation had been carried out, noting that staff consultation was taking place currently on the proposed staffing structure. The Finance Working Group was thanked for its work to review service savings.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the updated position on the MTFs be noted, including work on public and staff consultation and more detailed work to update the delivery options and costs of the savings proposed in September 2023;
- (ii) whilst significant progress has been made on this work, the scale of the challenges mean that the level of savings is at risk and further options still need to be reviewed and presented to Members of Finance Working Group, Overview and Scrutiny Committee and finally to Executive and Full Council in February 2024;
- (iii) it be noted that following public consultation and further options analysis on Pool in the Park, the option to increase fees and charges is potentially a viable recommendation in the final budget report; and
- (iv) the continued use of Lloyds banking facilities, as set out in paragraph 11.5 of the report, be approved.

Reason: To ensure open and transparent governance in the financial affairs of the Council in balancing the 2024/25 Budget.

8. DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET UPDATE 2024-25 EXE23-060

The Executive received a report which set out the Council's current position in preparing the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budgets for 2024/25 prior to the final report to Council in February 2024. Councillor Roberts, Portfolio Holder for Finance, reported that the HRA would likely be in balance next year with an estimated surplus of circa £1m which could be invested back into much needed capital improvements to HRA stock. Uncertainties remained regarding future capital financing requirements and the Government's rent setting approach. It was noted that the 30-year HRA Business Plan would be updated as part of the budget setting process.

The work taking place to review the charges to the HRA account for the current year and last year was welcomed. Once that work was completed, Councillor Johnson, Portfolio Holder for Housing, asked that recharges to the HRA in previous years be reviewed so that the money could be recovered from the General Fund.

The Executive expressed regret at the proposed closure of Brockhill Extra Care Housing scheme, a much valued and loved facility. Due to the significant capital expenditure required on fire safety remedial works, a full heating system replacement and limited investment over the years, the building was unfortunately considered unviable due to the level of capital investment needed; some £5.8m over the next 10 years. In addition, the design and layout of the building did not meet the current expectations for extra care

housing as set out in Surrey County Council's Accommodation with Care and Support Strategy and national best practice. The Executive thanked Officers for providing support and assistance to Brockhill residents on an individual basis during this worrying time. The Council was working with Surrey County Council to find solutions for those vulnerable residents.

RESOLVED

- That (i) progress in preparing the draft Housing Revenue Account budgets for 2024/25 be noted;
- (ii) Managers, Corporate Leadership Team and Portfolio Holders continue detailed budget preparation for consideration by the Executive in February 2024; and
- (iii) the Council commences consultation with residents, their families and other stakeholders on the proposed closure of Brockhill Extra Care Housing scheme.

Reason: Consideration of these proposals will enable the preparation of the Council's Housing Revenue Account budgets for 2024/25 to proceed.

9. UPDATE TO IMPROVEMENT AND RECOVERY PLAN EXE23-085

The Executive received a report which sought approval to incorporate the Housing Improvement Programme into the Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP) as the fifth theme of the Plan, recognising the need for increased strategic oversight of the work. The Leader advised that although the Council already had a Housing Improvement Programme, given the scale of the challenges faced by the Council to ensure that the Council delivered decent homes for Council tenants, it was proposed to add housing to the IRP. The Executive noted concerns about the Council's ability to maintain homes to the Decent Homes standard and the regulatory notice referred to earlier in the meeting for breaching the Home Standard in respect of fire safety. The Housing Improvement Programme would incorporate the work needed to create a 30-year HRA business plan. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting on 11 December 2023, had been supportive of the proposal.

RESOLVED

That the Housing Improvement Programme be incorporated into the Improvement and Recovery Plan as the fifth theme.

Reason: The strategic importance of the programme requires this additional focus. There are interdependencies with the existing themes that require management across the programme in its entirety.

10. ASSET DISPOSAL EXE23-081

The Executive received a report which sought approval to sell the freehold interest in the front (north) building of CMS House, 45 Poole Road. It was noted that the newly implemented Commercial Protocol had been consulted as part of the decision making process. It was confirmed that the proposed sale achieved best value for the site and was in line with Market Value estimated by a Red Book valuation. The Executive was advised that the proposed disposal would facilitate the relocation of an existing tenant of the Council's Goldsworth Road Industrial Estate which would allow redevelopment of the Estate and improve the Council's financial position. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered the proposal at its meeting on 11 December 2023 and was supportive.

RESOLVED

That the Council dispose of the freehold interest in the front (north) building of CMS House, 45 Poole Road.

Reason: This disposal of the front building of CMS House will generate a capital receipt that is supported by a Red Book valuation and should enable the progression of a redevelopment scheme at Goldsworth Road Industrial Estate by relocating an existing occupier to CMS House.

11. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of item 12 in view of the nature of the proceedings that, if members of the press and public were present during this item, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A, to the Local Government Act 1972.

Paragraph 3 – Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

12. ASSET DISPOSAL EXE23-082

RESOLVED

That the commercially sensitive information, in support of the Asset Disposal report under Part I of the agenda, be noted.

Reason: This disposal of the front building of CMS House will generate a capital receipt that is supported by a Red Book valuation and should enable the progression of a redevelopment scheme at Goldsworth Road Industrial Estate by relocating an existing occupier to CMS House.

<p>This document was published on Friday 15 December 2023 and the decisions within it will be implemented on Thursday 27 December 2023, subject to call-in.</p>
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The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 8.16 pm.

Chairman: _____

Date: _____