

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
EXECUTIVE

held on 11 July 2024

Present:

Cllr A-M Barker (Chair)

Cllr I Johnson

Cllr E Nicholson

Cllr L Lyons

Cllr D Roberts

Absent: Councillor W Forster.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Forster.

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 13 June 2024 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.

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 12 September 2024 so the deadline for written questions was 12 noon, 5 September 2024.

6. GENERAL FUND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) EXE24-031

Councillor Roberts, Portfolio Holder for Finance, introduced the report which established a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for the years 2024-25 to 2028-29 covering General Revenue budget, the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and capital budget. The Portfolio Holder advised that the report was important for developing the financial strategy for the next four years and provided the framework for the work required to prepare for the 2025-26 budget setting.

The Executive was informed that the MTFS set out an approach to deal with two ongoing challenges; the funding gap and the legacy debt. It was noted that, with regard to the £4m funding gap in 2024-25, the Council would continue its work to live within its means and to develop a 'Right Sized Council budget'. The MTFS proposed a strategic approach to address the funding gap by identifying four cross-cutting/strategic workstreams; property, hidden subsidy, procurement, and transformation. Regarding the legacy debt of £2.1bn faced by the Council, the Portfolio Holder reported that the Council would require exceptional financial support until a permanent solution was agreed with the new Government. The Council would continue to work with the Government to develop a longer term solution to the legacy debt challenge.

Regarding the HRA budget, it was noted that HRA reserves had fallen below desirable levels and budget monitoring forecasts indicated further pressures. The Executive heard that a 30 year business plan was being prepared to inform a strategy to deliver sustainable HRA finances whilst improving the standard of decent and safe homes for residents. The Executive welcomed work taking place in relation to historic General Fund recharges which could improve HRA balances brought forward.

Following a question regarding whether the Council would be issued with further S114 Notices, the Executive was informed that the Chief Finance Officer would only issue a S114 Notice if it was unavoidable and would be used as a last resort. Officers advised that the Council was putting in place the necessary processes however further S114 Notices would be issued if deemed necessary.

The Executive thanked the Finance Team for its work on the MTFS which provided a practical approach to financial resilience for Woking, noting that the Council still faced difficult decisions in the future.

RESOLVED

That the report be approved as the financial strategy for the next four years, and the framework leading to budget setting for 2025-26.

Reason: The contents of the report are to ensure open and transparent governance in the financial affairs of the Council by setting a financial strategy for the years 2024-25 to 2028-29.

7. LEISURE SERVICES EXE24-074

Following the expiration of the current leisure management contract with Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL)/Freedom Leisure in November 2025, the Executive received a report which summarised the findings of the options appraisal on future management options undertaken by a specialist public leisure sector consultancy. Councillor Nicholson, Portfolio Holder for Leisure Services, reported that it was recommended that the overall best value option to the Council was to reprocure a new leisure management contract to commence on 1 December 2025 and authority was sought to progress with the procurement process.

Due to the Council's complicated leisure structure, it was highlighted that there was a need to consider Community Asset Transfers (CAT's) in the procurement process. Attention was drawn to the important role of the Communities and Housing Scrutiny Committee in scrutinising decisions on the leisure management contract.

The Portfolio Holder advised the Executive that, despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the current leisure contract with Freedom Leisure had performed well up to and post the pandemic, and significant growth had been achieved with over 1.2 million visits in 2023-24. Attention was drawn to the extensive Active Communities Programme delivered by Freedom Leisure across the Borough.

The Executive welcomed the option to reprocure an external operator, noting that it would include Pool in the Park which had received strong community support to keep open during consultation. It was further noted that reprocurement would offer the most financially sustainable option for the future of the Council's leisure facilities.

RESOLVED

That (i) the Council reprocures an external operator to manage its leisure facilities from 1 December 2025;

(ii) authority be delegated to the Strategic Director - Communities, in consultation with the Director of Legal and Democratic Services and the Portfolio Holder for Living Well, to commence procurement of the Council's leisure management contract; and

(iii) authority be delegated to the Strategic Director - Communities, in consultation with the Director of Legal and Democratic Services and the Portfolio Holder for Living Well, to finalise the services, the contract terms and facilities within the scope of the procurement of the Council's leisure management contract.

Reason: To secure a Leisure Operator for the Council's leisure facilities from December 2025 that offers the Council best value and delivers good customer service.

8. EQUALITIES ANNUAL REPORT 2024 INCLUDING PAY GAP REPORT EXE24-027

The Executive received the Equalities Annual Report 2024 which set out the progress on the equalities agenda and included the Council's annual Pay Gap Report. It was noted that the Council had a statutory obligation to report each year on its Gender Pay Gap and in addition, the Council voluntarily published its ethnicity and disability pay gaps. The Leader highlighted equality achievements during 2023-24 such as the work of the Resettlement Team to help and support refugee families in the Borough, and the Working Together for Working voluntary fair.

It was acknowledged that the Council had a significant gender pay gap due to the distribution of the workforce. The Leader stated that the Council was committed to reducing its gender pay gap and an action plan had been developed for 2024-25. The importance of attracting younger people to the Council was also highlighted. It was confirmed that the Council had a graduate programme with a good retention record. Officers advised that attracting younger people to local government careers was part of the Council's recruitment and retention strategy. In addition, the Council had engaged with Surrey County Council, as lead for economic development, in the County Council's work to reach out to schools.

RESOLVED

That the report be received.

Reason: To meet the requirement to report on annual progress on the equality agenda and report pay gap figures.

9. TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24 EXE24-028

The Executive received a report on Treasury Management performance for 2023-24 in accordance with the Council's policy on Treasury Management. The report provided an update on the Capital Programme, details of borrowing taken in 2023-24, the borrowing strategy and the performance of the economy. The Portfolio Holder advised that the Capital Programme had been restricted to projects meeting a strict set of capital principles. Regarding the borrowing strategy, the main reason for the Council's borrowing in 2023-24 had been for re-financing of existing loans, borrowing to finance the Capital Programme, and borrowing to support the requested Capitalisation Directive.

Following a question from Councillor Johnson about the interest rates at which the Council was currently borrowing, Officers agreed to provide Councillor Johnson with a written note on the Council's current position in terms of interest rates.

It was noted that any borrowing taken by the Council was discussed with both the Commissioners and the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). Due to the Council's financial situation it was no longer able to borrow through inter-authority loans.

RESOLVED

That the annual report on Treasury Management performance for 2023-24 be received, and the compliance with the Council's approved arrangements be noted.

Reason: To receive the annual report on Treasury Management performance for 2023-24 in accordance with the Council's policy on Treasury Management.

This document was published on Friday 12 July 2024 and the decisions within it will be implemented on Monday 22 July 2024, subject to call-in.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 8.03 pm.

Chairman: _____

Date: _____