

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
BOROUGH COUNCIL OF WOKING

held on 8 February 2024

Present:

Cllr M I Raja (Mayor)
Cllr L Morales (Deputy Mayor)

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

Absent: Councillor A Caulfield

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Caulfield.

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, Digital and Customer, 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.

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor I Johnson declared an interest in item 9b – General Fund Budget 2024-25 and Proposed Savings in respect of the reference to Citizens Advice Woking arising from his wife's employment by the charity. The interest was such that Councillor Johnson would leave the Council Chamber during the determination of the item.

3. MINUTES.

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of the Council held on 30 November 2023 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

4. MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS.

The Mayor reported on recent events he had attended across the Borough. These had included an evening with Grayson Perry at the Lightbox for an exhibition of his artwork, a lunch with the Chobham Rugby Club Supporters Group and the launch of the United Reform House Project, a community interest company created to serve the community. The Mayor had also attended the annual young musician of year competition, hosted at St Johns Church, and the Woking Street Angels Commission Service at the Woking United Reform Church.

Forthcoming events included the Mayor's Ball which would be held on 27 April 2024.

5. URGENT BUSINESS.

No items of Urgent Business were considered.

6. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF PUBLIC.

Two questions had been received from a member of public. The questions, together with the replies from the Leader of the Council, were presented as follows:

Question 1 – Nikki Roberts on behalf of Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

"Many of the proposed service cuts or reductions will have an impact on Disabled People. These proposals will disproportionately affect this population.

Please confirm if Woking Borough Council have asked central government to make up the financial shortfall that disabled people will face by the proposed Woking Borough Council service cuts?

If not, how can we be assured that Disabled People living in Woking won't have to pay the additional costs they potentially face? Surrey Coalition of Disabled People are happy to collaborate with Woking Borough Council to discuss solutions to ensure that Disabled People aren't disproportionately affected."

Supporting Statement

“Disabled People in Woking will be disproportionately affected by the potential threat of closure or changes to the following services:

- community transport scheme
- community centres and pavilions
- swimming pool
- citizen’s advice

Without the community transport scheme which offers a reduced rate of travel, the independence of Disabled People will be significantly reduced as the cost of taxis, in particular wheelchair accessible taxis, are unaffordable for some.

The community centres, pavilions and swimming pool are a lifeline to some, providing social contact and keeping people mobile.

Without citizen’s advice, Disabled People will not be able to access support with completing forms such as PIP. Being unable to access benefits, will have a detrimental impact on finances and wellbeing.

It’s well known that life costs more for disabled people. Disabled households with at least 1 disabled adult or child, face extra costs of £975 - £1122 a month on average. (Source Extra Costs | Disability charity Scope UK) The disability pay gap is 13.8% and has been fairly consistent for a long time Disability pay gaps in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) with only 7% of disabled workers earning over £30,000 in 2022 compared to 54% of non-disabled workers.

Our Cost-of-Living report published last year showed the disproportionate effect that it is having on Disabled People. 76% of Disabled People surveyed didn’t turn on their heating last year as they couldn’t afford to and 45% went without food. <https://surreycoalition.org.uk/cost-of-living-crisis/>”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“I’d like to start by thanking Surrey Coalition of Disabled People for the question and recognising their important work across Woking and beyond.

The Council faces a critical financial shortfall owing to its historic investment strategy. On Wednesday 7 June 2023, our Section 151 Officer issued Woking Borough Council (WBC) with a Section 114 Notice in response to the unprecedented financial challenges facing the authority. The 114 notice sets out how the Council faces a budget deficit of £1.2bn.

The Council is in discussions with Government around the handling of its historic debt, with further detail around these arrangements due for consideration at the next Council meeting. However, a key principle of seeking support from Government is that the Council must take all possible steps to manage budget pressures and restore long term financial stability, and that the Council should, wherever possible, mitigate the impacts on those least able to pay.

Restoring long-term financial stability means that the Council needs to learn to live within its means and that it can no longer fund non-statutory services. However, the Council has been working hard to find alternative solutions for such services which avoids closure wherever possible. For example:

- Pool in the Park – the Council is proposing to increase fees, bringing them in line with neighbouring pools, so that the facility can better cover its costs and remain open.
- Community Centres/Sports Pavilions – the Council is introducing a Community Asset Transfer scheme to enable these facilities to be transferred to local groups, enabling important services to be maintained. The Council has also allocated UK Shared Prosperity Funding to support these transitions.
- Citizens Advice Woking (CAW)– Whilst the Council can no longer grant fund voluntary organisations, funding will still be available for specific projects such as the Court Desk Service and Refugee Hub. The Council has also allocated £30k UK Shared Prosperity Funding to support CAW to change its operating model, supporting its transition away from local authority funding so that it can continue to provide advice services. The Council is also looking at how it can utilise the Government’s Hardship Fund to support signposting to the range of advice services throughout Woking, including those provided by local faith groups.
- Woking Community Transport (WCT) – the Council is working with WCT and Surrey County Council to find a solution where WCT can continue to provide some level of Dial-a-Ride service. The Council will also signpost users to alternative providers, including but not limited to:
 - Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service run by the NHS.
 - A new White bus service that provides services to St Peters and Ashford hospitals.
 - The Good Neighbourhood scheme that provides free transport to St Peters.
 - Local taxi providers that provide wheelchair access.

I hope this response, and the corresponding Equalities Impact Assessments, provides assurance that the Council has looked to mitigate the potential negative impacts of its budget proposals wherever possible. However, the Council does recognise that, in light of the severity of its financial position, it cannot mitigate against all negative impacts.”

Question 2 – Nikki Roberts on behalf of Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

“Following the publication of the Equality Impact Assessments (EIA), will Woking Borough Council be fulfilling its duty under the Care Act 2014 if the proposals are approved?”

The Care Act 2014 states people are entitled to:

1. receive services that prevent their care needs from becoming more serious, or delay the impact of their needs
2. can get the information and advice they need to make good decisions about care and support

3. have a range of provision of high quality, appropriate services to choose from.”

Supporting Statement

“Community Transport

The mitigation in the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) only cites hospital visits and negates to include GP appointments, mental health support, or community/social activities.

The additional cost and difficulty in sourcing wheelchair accessible transport has not been considered. Of those (over 2,000) people who needed extra support to use the transport, there will not be a service to help them. Additionally, will the current community transport users meet the criteria for hospital transport?

Removing the transport (approx. £42 per person per year) will cost more in the longer term. For example, missed medical appointments, reduced footfall in the town centre.

By removing community transport with no direct replacement the council are in jeopardy of not fulfilling their duties under the Care Act 2014.

Citizen’s Advice

The EIA states that 63% of Citizen Advice clients are disabled or have a long-term health condition. Disabled people can not access the information and advice they need to make good decisions about their care as outlined in the Care Act.

The mitigation covers a provision for debt advice but there are other reasons people contact Citizen Advice. For example, housing.

Pool in the Park

Pool in the Park is increasing costs as well as reducing the length of the Disabled Swimming Session will be reduced by 33%.

Many of the mitigations suggest the voluntary sector will provide additional support with less money. This will not be possible particularly as it’s proposed the community grants programme is withdrawn in Woking.”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“Again, I would like to thank Surrey Coalition for the Disabled for this question.

Woking Borough Council continues to meet its statutory obligations. Whilst the Council recognises that leisure services and community centres are highly valued by residents, these are discretionary services. There is also no statutory requirement for District Councils to provide funding to voluntary groups.

The provisions of the Care Act will continue to be met in Woking by Surrey County Council, who have responsibility for the delivery of Adult Social Care in Surrey. Woking Borough Council will also continue to do all it can to support the Act and ensure wellbeing, advice, and preventive services are retained in Woking.

The response to question one details the actions that the Council has taken to ensure that, wherever possible, such services can continue to operate without Council funding. This includes working with local interested parties to enable important assets, such as community centres and sports pavilions, to be transferred to community ownership. The Council is also allocating part of the Government's Hardship Fund to ensuring that advice services are retained for vulnerable people, whether that be through Citizens Advice Woking or other local providers. The Council is also committed to working with Woking Community Transport, so that some provision for Dial-A-Ride services can be maintained across Woking, whilst at the same time signposting residents to alternative provision."

7. PETITION - ST MARY'S COMMUNITY CENTRE, BYFLEET WBC24-010.

The Council was presented with a petition which asked the Council to reject the proposed plan to relocate the Elderly Day Care Facilities and fully consult with local residents on any future proposals regarding to St Mary's Community Centre, Byfleet. The number of signatures exceeded the threshold required for a petition to be referred to a meeting of Council and accordingly the Petitioner had been invited to present the petition at the meeting of Council.

The petition had been submitted in the following terms:

"St Mary's Community Centre in Byfleet has been a haven for our elderly, frail, and vulnerable residents. The day care facilities include care and assistance from support staff, hot drinks and a hot midday meal, social and gentle exercise activities, and a return journey on the accessible Bustler bus.

The services are vital in ensuring their well-being and social integration in our multigenerational community space. In addition, the community centre is more than just a facility; it represents familiarity and comfort for its users who have built relationships with staff members and other users of the building including families and children over the years.

A sudden change in environment can be detrimental especially for those suffering from cognitive and physical impairments such as dementia and visual impairments. We, the undersigned, are opposed to the proposed relocation of the Elderly Day Centre Facilities away from St Mary's Community Centre, Byfleet. We call on Woking Borough Council to:

- 1. Reject the proposed plan to relocate the Elderly Day Care Facilities; and*
- 2. Fully consult with local residents on any future proposals regarding to St Mary's Community Centre, Byfleet"*

The Petitioner spoke in support of the services currently provided at St Mary's Centre, arguing that the plans to relocate services were insufficient and that the users did not want to use other venues. The proposed date of 31 March 2024 for changes to the Centre was considered unreasonable and it was emphasised that the Centre was at the heart of the local community.

The Members of the Council were invited to ask questions of the Petitioner to provide clarification on the concerns and proposals of those who had supported the petition. It was noted that a number of community groups had expressed an interest in running services from the Centre including a café based on the current service. However, it was felt that the

deadline of 31 March 2024 was too short and that a longer transfer period would be needed, allowing time for the community to raise funds and apply for grant schemes.

The Mayor thanked the Petitioner for her presentation.

The Council moved to the debate, with the Portfolio Holder explaining the background to the position the Council was in and the direction that the Authority could not continue to fund non-statutory services, including the Borough's community centres. The Council was seeking to mitigate the impact on residents and was working with partners including Byfleet United Charities and local Churches. Reference was made to the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy which the Council had been quick to draw up and the Portfolio Holder confirmed that funding of £140,000 had been committed to ensure the Centre could remain open while the CAT arrangements were put in place.

A number of Members expressed sympathy with those who would be affected by the proposals, suggesting that the Council should allow more time for the community to develop proposals to retain services at the Centre in the future. With this in mind, Councillor Boote moved and Councillor Brown seconded a motion to have the effect of excluding St Mary's from the proposals before the Council or providing an additional three months from 31 March 2024 onwards to enable the Community to put in place new arrangements. Councillor Boote suggested that the cost of the proposal would be in the region of £25,000 together with utility costs.

The Members debated the motion, with the Leader of the Council drawing attention to the fact that the proposals had been considered at a Member briefing, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Executive, at which concerns had not been raised. The point was made that further information would be required before the Council could make a decision such as retaining the services for an additional three months.

Before moving to the vote, the Chief Executive clarified that the Council would need to vote on whether they welcomed the ambition of the petition. If supported, a proposal would be brought to the next meeting of Council, on 4 March 2024, which would include the implications of extending the services at St Mary's beyond 31 March 2024.

On this basis, the Mayor advised that, in accordance with Standing Order 10.8, the motion to support the petition and bring a proposal to the next meeting of Council would be put to a vote. The names of Members voting for and against were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors H Akberali, T Aziz, A Boote, J Brown, G Cosnahan, K Davis, S Dorsett, S Hussain, A Javid, D Jordan, L Lyons, S Mukherjee, S Oades and T Spencer.

Total in favour: 14

Against: None

Present not voting: The Mayor and Councillors A-M Barker, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, I Johnson, A Kirby, R Leach, C Martin, L Morales, J Morley, E Nicholson, L Rice, D Roberts and M Sullivan.

Total present not voting: 15

The motion were therefore carried by 14 votes in favour and no votes against.

RESOLVED

That the petition be welcomed and a proposal be brought to the meeting of Council on 4 March 2024 exploring the possibility of extending the services of St Mary's Centre beyond 31 March 2024 to provide additional time for local community organisations interested in providing future services at the Centre.

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

The Leader of the Council made an announcement around her decision to become a Councillor, and her desire to support the local communities and residents. The last year had, however, challenged what she and fellow Councillors set out to do as elected Members. The Government intervention and Section 114 statement had led to a series of difficult decisions. Later on the agenda, the Council would be asked to agree the General Fund Budget and savings proposals, recognising that it had been necessary for the Council to reduce services and staffing levels.

Despite the need to find savings of £8.4m, the Council had managed to retain some services and provide some funds for service changes, including funding for Citizens Advice Woking. It was further confirmed that Woking Bustler would be able to provide a limited service in the future and that, subject to the General Fund Budget being agreed, the Pool in the Park would remain open.

The Chairs of the Committees were invited to indicate whether they wished to make a statement. Councillor Brown, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, highlighted the importance of good scrutiny, good governance and transparency. Councillor Brown referred to the decision of the Executive on 18 January 2024 to agree the distribution of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), and advised that both residents and Councillors had expressed questions about the process that had led to the decisions made, including the decision to provide one organisation with funding of £130,000 whilst another organisation only received £30,000, with many organisations receiving no funding. Concern was also expressed that organisations had not been consulted on the opportunity to apply for funds.

In view of these concerns, Councillor Brown advised that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would undertake post-decision scrutiny of the process followed for the distribution of the UKSPF.

Councillor Brown referred to past reports and investigations which had found that the Council had wrongfully agreed policies without effective scrutiny, and expressed concern over an amendment to the General Fund Budget proposals which had only been published on the previous day. Councillor Brown therefore intended to refer the decisions of the Council to support Citizens Advice Woking for post-decision scrutiny.

No further announcements were made.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE WBC24-005.

The Council had before it a report on the recommendations from the Executive, setting out the extracts from the minutes of the meetings of the Executive held on 18 January 2024

and 1 February 2024. In accordance with the Constitution, the recommendations were deemed to have been moved and seconded.

9A. COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER POLICY EXE24-012.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Centres, Councillor Nicholson, introduced the recommendations of the Executive for the adoption of the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) Policy. The CAT Policy had been drafted with support from Local Partnerships and the Local Government Association (LGA).

The policy would enable local community organisations to run facilities which were not considered statutory services by the Government such as community centres and sports pavilions. The measures would enable the Council to create savings whilst retaining those assets for social benefit. Included with the proposals was the creation of a resource to allow the Council to work closely with local groups and help them through the CAT process. The resource would be funded under proposals outlined in a report later on the agenda.

The proposals for the policy were generally welcomed by the Council. The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee advised that the policy would be discussed by the Committee which would seek to monitor the performance of the Centres which had been transferred. In response to concerns raised, the Portfolio Holder explained that only community groups would be able to apply to run the facilities; the policy did not allow for private enterprises to become involved. It was added that a number of community groups had already expressed interest in the opportunities the policy would provide.

RESOLVED

That the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) Policy, as attached at Appendix 1 to the Executive report, be adopted.

9B. GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2024-25 AND PROPOSED SAVINGS EXE24-001.

Councillor Roberts, Portfolio Holder for Finance, introduced the recommendations of the Executive in respect of the General Fund Budget for the coming year which identified service savings of £8.4m. In doing so, the Portfolio Holder drew attention to an amendment by Councillor Forster which had been published on the previous day.

It was noted that, despite the savings, the Council still had a deficit on its business-as-usual services, even before the debt issue was taken into account. The deficit in the coming year was £12.4m, though most of this could be attributed to interest on debt and the deficit on the commercial estate.

Further savings would have to be identified for the remainder of the five-year Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) period and significant work had been undertaken with the Government on how the Council could set a legal budget given the scale of its debt problem. Without the support of the Government, the Council's budget deficit could reach up to £785million. The size and complexity of the debt was such that the Council would have to push back its final decisions on setting the budget and Council Tax to an Extraordinary meeting of Council on 4 March 2024. Details of the Government's support, which would include capitalisation and the treatment of the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP), would be presented to the Council at the Extraordinary meeting.

Following the introduction by the Portfolio Holder, Members discussed the implications of the proposals, noting that the scale of the debt was such that all services of the Council had to be reviewed. The measures proposed would however take the Council to a position where it was able to operate within its means. The Leader of the Council referred to the funding proposal for Citizens Advice Woking which would provide support going forward, and to Woking Community Transport which would continue to provide a transport service to the community centres and a reduced dial-a-ride service. It was further confirmed that the Pool in the Park and the Lightbox would remain open.

Councillor Will Forster moved and Councillor Barker seconded an amendment, details of which had been published on the previous day. The amendment proposed the addition of two new recommendations as set out below:

- “(iv) in accordance with paragraph 12.4, a hardship co-ordinator post is proposed. Subject to final agreement with Citizens Advice Woking the role will be employed by them. This post would be employed by CAW and funded by the Council. It would support the transition of CAW’s business model and create a network of support and advice, utilising the voluntary capacity in other charities and voluntary organisations across the borough. This will be funded to the value of £50,000 for 2024/25 from the provision made for hardship as a result of the level of Council Tax increase proposed.
- (v) this Council agrees to ask residents to voluntarily contribute to the Woking Community Fund to support the Borough’s voluntary sector. The Woking Community Fund is managed independently by the Community Foundation for Surrey and works closely with the Council to understand resident needs. Residents will be asked to indicate whether their donation should go to particular priorities such as hardship advice, transport for the vulnerable or more general priorities.”

Councillor Forster spoke in support of his amendment, highlighting the importance of the role of hardship co-ordinator and the opportunity for residents to contribute to the Woking Community Fund which provided financial support for the Borough’s voluntary sector. The amendment had been discussed with both Officers and Citizens Advice Woking before being submitted.

The amendment was debated by the Council and it was noted that, whilst the proposals would not solve all the issues faced by Citizens Advice Woking, it was an innovative approach which would help both the Charity and residents.

The ambition to support the Charity was welcomed although it was noted that no funding provision had been identified for other key charities such as the York Road Project. Concern was expressed that Members had not been given sufficient notice of the amendment to fully consider the implications and reach a decision. The funding for the post of hardship co-ordinator would be ringfenced and would be provided through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. As part of the debate, it was suggested that the use of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund should be reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Mayor advised that, in accordance with Standing Orders, a vote would need to be taken on whether the meeting should continue beyond 10.30pm. Accordingly, the Mayor invited Members to indicate whether they supported the extension and the names of Members voting were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors H Akberali, T Aziz, A-M Barker, G Cosnahan, S Dorsett, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, S Hussain, A

Kirby, L Lyons, C Martin, L Morales, J Morley, S Mukherjee, E Nicholson, L Rice, D Roberts, T Spenser and M Sullivan.

Total in favour: 20

Against: Councillors A Boote, J Brown, K Davis, A Javaid and D Jordan.

Total against: 5

Present not voting: The Mayor and Councillors R Leach and S Oades.

Total present not voting: 3

The proposal to extend the meeting beyond 10.30pm was therefore carried by 20 votes in favour and 5 votes against.

Before returning to the debate on the amendment, the Mayor advised that a five minute adjournment would be held.

On returning to the debate, the Leader of the Council outlined the background to the amendment and the different options which had been considered. Councillor Forster was offered the right of reply and responded to the many points raised during the debate, highlighting the benefits of the amendment and recognising the role Citizens Advice Woking had in supporting vulnerable residents of Woking.

Following the right of reply, the Mayor advised that, in accordance with Standing Order 10.8, the amendment – to include two additional resolutions (iv) and (v) – would be put to a vote. The names of Members voting for and against the amendment were recorded as follows:

In favour: Councillors T Aziz, A-M Barker, G Cosnahan, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, A Javaid, 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 and S Hussain.

Total against: 5

Present not voting: The Mayor and Councillors A Boote, D Jordan and S Oades.

Total present not voting: 4

The amendment was therefore carried by 19 votes in favour and 5 votes against.

The Councillors returned to the debate on the substantive recommendations before the Council. Further concerns over the extent of the service cuts were raised, highlighting the impact on the most vulnerable residents of the Borough. Reference was also made to the extent of cuts within the Authority, noting that in region of sixty staff were being made redundant.

The Portfolio Holder responded to the points raised during the debate and explained the background to the position the Council found itself in. The proposals before the Council would be a step towards the recovery of the Authority, recognising that substantial ongoing support from the Government would be required for many years.

In accordance with Standing Order 10.8, the substantive recommendations, including the two additional recommendations, were put to a vote. The names of Members voting for and against the recommendations were recorded as follows:

In favour:	Councillors A-M Barker, G Cosnahan, W Forster, P Graves, S Greentree, 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:	18
Against:	Councillors T Aziz, J Brown, K Davis, S Dorsett, S Hussain and A Javid.
Total against:	6
Present not voting:	The Mayor and Councillors H Akberali, A Boote and D Jordan.
Total present not voting:	4

The recommendations were therefore carried by 18 votes in favour and 6 votes against.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the £8.4m of savings set out in Appendix 3b to the report be agreed;
- (ii) the Equality Impact Assessment and public consultation processes on the savings proposals that are summarised in Appendix 5 to the report, with detailed reports on each resident facing saving proposal, be noted as part of the decision-making process;
- (iii) it be noted a further report to Full Council on 4 March 2024 will receive a final report from the Director of Finance to finalise the treatment of the Council's debt and Council Tax in 2024/25;
- (iv) in accordance with paragraph 12.4, a hardship co-ordinator post is proposed. Subject to final agreement with Citizens Advice Woking the role will be employed by them. This post would be employed by CAW and funded by the Council. It would support the transition of CAW's business model and create a network of support and advice, utilising the voluntary capacity in other charities and voluntary organisations across the borough. This will be funded to the value of £50,000 for 2024/25 from the provision made for hardship as a result of the level of Council Tax increase proposed; and

- (v) this Council agrees to ask residents to voluntarily contribute to the Woking Community Fund to support the Borough's voluntary sector. The Woking Community Fund is managed independently by the Community Foundation for Surrey and works closely with the Council to understand resident needs. Residents will be asked to indicate whether their donation should go to particular priorities such as hardship advice, transport for the vulnerable or more general priorities.

9C HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGETS 2024-25 EXE24-002.

Councillor Roberts, Portfolio Holder for Finance, introduced the recommendations of the Executive in respect of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budgets 2024-25. Under the proposals, the rent levels would increase from 1 April 2024 by 7.7% based on September CPI of 6.7% and in line with the advice of the Government. Total rental income was forecast to increase by circa £1.79 million to circa £20 million, excluding void losses.

It was noted that the HRA was forecast to make an estimated surplus of some £960,000 in the coming year, the first step towards the sustainable maintenance of the housing stock. The budget included an increase in interest costs that would be incurred from borrowing an additional £2.5 million to support the capital programme for housing. This would be necessary to fund high risk fire safety remedial works, along with a number of Decent Homes improvements.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Councillor Johnson, spoke in support of the recommendations, highlighting the positive outcomes the proposed measures would deliver. It was noted that a survey of tenants would be sent out on the following day, seeking their views on the level of services provided.

A few concerns were raised during the debate over the company responsible for housing repairs and its response to tenants requiring essential repairs. However it was acknowledged that the historic issues were being addressed and that tenants were starting to see improvements come through. Councillor Johnson responded to the points raised, acknowledging that the new housing repairs team had taken on a large number of issues when awarded the contract.

The recommendations were agreed nem con.

RESOLVED

That (i) the Final Housing Revenue Account budgets for 2024- 25, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report received by the Executive, be agreed; and

(ii) with effect from 1 April 2024, rents be increased by 7.7%.

9D CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2023-24 TO 2027-28 EXE24-003.

The recommendations of the Executive in respect of the Capital Programme 2023-24 to 2027-28 were introduced by the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Councillor Roberts. The programme set out the investments required to deliver the Council's key strategies and objectives over the period, with focus shifting to housing and putting in place a plan of work to address fire safety remedial work in the Council's housing stock.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Councillor Johnson, reiterated the need for the works and the benefits the programme would deliver.

The proposals were welcomed and the recommendations of the Council were agreed nem con.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2027/28 be approved subject to reports on projects where appropriate; and
- (ii) the proposed financing arrangements be approved.

9E FUTURE OF BROCKHILL EXE24-017.

The Executive had considered a report on the future of Brockhill Extra Care Housing which had set out the results of a recent consultation. The Portfolio Holder for Community Centres, Councillor Nicholson, introduced the proposals of the Executive, which recommended the closure of Brockhill in view of the significant capital expenditure required on fire safety remedial works, a full heating system replacement and limited investment over the years. An estimated capital investment of £5.8m was needed over the coming ten years and the building no longer met 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.

Each of the twenty-two residents currently housed at Brockhill would have a bespoke support package as part of the closure and would have opportunities to view and consider alternative accommodation opportunities. Several residents were already in the process of moving to new accommodation.

The recommendations were debated and it was noted that the possibility of Surrey County Council taking on the building had been explored. However, as the Centre did not meet current standards, the County Council had not been able to take on Brockhill.

The Portfolio Holder responded to points raised during the debate, following which the proposals were agreed nem con.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the closure of Brockhill Extra Care Housing be agreed;
- (ii) the residents of Brockhill be offered suitable alternative accommodation which best meets their needs and preferences and be paid Statutory Home Loss and Disturbance payments, where eligible; and
- (iii) authority be delegated to the Strategic Director - Communities, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, to make any further decisions required in respect of the closure.

10. DESIGNATION OF POLLING PLACE - WARD OF HEATHLANDS WBC24-009.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Barker, introduced a report which proposed a change to the designation of a polling place for the Barnsbury polling district (D5) in the Heathlands Ward. The existing polling place – the Lighthouse Barnsbury – was not accessible to electors with a disability and efforts to install a permanent ramp had been unsuccessful.

The Council was therefore asked to agree the designation of Woking Sportsbox as the polling place, to take effect in advance of the 2024 Woking Borough Council, Police and Crime Commissioner and Parliamentary General elections.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the Council's appreciation be expressed to The Lighthouse Barnsbury for its assistance in recent years; and
- (ii) the Woking Sportsbox be designated as the polling place for the Barnsbury polling district (D5) in the Heathlands Ward.

11. APPOINTMENT OF DIRECTOR OF FINANCE AND SECTION 151 OFFICER WBC24-004.

The Council was invited to confirm the appointment of a Chief Finance Officer (Strategic Director for Finance) for the Authority, responsible for a number of statutory duties and the proper administration of the Council's finances. It was noted that a cross-party Member Appointments Panel had been established to oversee the appointment. The Member Appointments Panel had met on Friday, 2 February and had unanimously resolved to recommend to Council that Mr Stephen Fitzgerald should be appointed to the position of Strategic Director for Finance (Section 151 Officer). A summary of Mr Fitzgerald's background was included in the report.

The Members noted the comprehensive appointments process and welcomed the recommendations of the Appointments Panel.

RESOLVED

- That Mr Stephen Fitzgerald is appointed as Strategic Director for Finance (Section 151 Officer)

12. APPOINTMENT OF RETURNING OFFICER WBC24-008.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Barker, introduced a report proposing the appointment of a Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer, roles normally held by the Chief Executive or a member of the Corporate Leadership Team.

In light of the recent resignation of the Chief Executive, Julie Fisher, who currently held the positions, it was proposed that the Director of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer, Gareth John, took on the roles.

RESOLVED

- That (i) Gareth John be appointed Electoral Registration Officer under Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 with effect from 9 February 2024; and

- (ii) Gareth John be appointed Returning Officer for local government elections under Section 35 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 with effect from 9 February 2024.

13. AMENDMENT TO CALENDAR OF MEETINGS WBC24-006.

The Council was invited to agree an amendment to the 2024/25 Calendar of meetings which has been proposed as part of an overall review of the Council's Committee arrangements, the full outcomes of which would be reported to Council in March 2024.

In view of the need to make suitable arrangements in advance of the meeting of Council in March, Councillors were asked to agree that the meeting of Council scheduled for 16 May 2024, at which the Mayor and Deputy Mayor would traditionally be appointed, was cancelled and that the items of business were transferred to the first business meeting of Council at which the appointment of Committees was confirmed. In doing so, the meeting of Council on 20 May 2024 would formally become the 'Annual Meeting'.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the Calendar of meetings for 2024/25 be amended with the removal of the Council meeting on 16 May 2024, with the items of business to be taken at the meeting on 20 May 2024; and
- (ii) the change be incorporated in subsequent calendars of meetings.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 0.35 am

Chairman: _____

Date: _____