

POLICY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - 18 SEPTEMBER 2024

Present: Councillor Terry (Chair);
Councillors Leng (Vice-Chair), Barnett-Ward, Emberson, Ennis, Gittings, Griffith, McEwan, Rowland, R Singh, Thompson, Williams and Yeo

21. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 July 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

22. CEMETERY PROVISION BEYOND 2030

Further to Minute 33 of the meeting held on 23 September 2021, the Committee considered a report setting out options for burial provision beyond 2030. A confidential annex to the report set out indicative purchase prices for a number of potential sites for a new cemetery as well as estimated development costs.

The report explained that a survey of land suitable for cemetery provision within the Borough and up to five miles from its boundary had been completed by an external company specialising in cemetery development. The survey had not identified any suitable land within the Borough boundary, and efforts to attract interest in a partnership arrangement with a neighbouring local authority for a new cemetery had been unsuccessful. The possible use of land at Caversham Park had been explored but the owner of the site was not willing to discuss selling any part of the estate for an extension of the Henley Road Cemetery.

The report stated that, in the absence of sufficient progress with other options and the timescale and cost of building a new cemetery, the suitability of the Henley Road Allotment site for burial use had been explored. The land had originally been purchased for a future extension of Henley Road Cemetery, and if it was found suitable and reclaimed for cemetery use it would provide up to a further 2,300 graves (circa 14 years supply). Definitive results of site surveys and ground water testing would not be available until June 2025, but initial findings indicated that the site would be suitable. At this stage, it was estimated that the cost of preparing the allotment site for cemetery use was likely to be in the region of £2.8m with the additional graves generating income of more than £8.4m at current prices. The extension would increase maintenance costs by £60,000 per annum, which would continue after the area became full.

The report noted that there was likely to be opposition to the use of the allotments for cemetery purposes, but that the land had always been held in reserve for cemetery use and that the area was needed to enable the Council to maintain service provision and existing income streams. Importantly, the extension would facilitate the long-term strategy needed to take account of potential developments in burial, cremation, and related funeral services over the next 5-10 years. There would be a requirement to compensate existing allotment holders and, potentially, deal with any legal challenges. Due to the amount of investment, strength of attachment and feelings tenants had towards their allotments, the moving or closure of allotments was difficult and could cause distress and anger for allotment holders. It was

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therefore recommended that a consultation be carried out and the outcomes reported to a future meeting of the Committee to inform the final decision.

The report explained that, for longer-term burial provision beyond 2044, the potential purchase of agricultural or pastureland within 10 miles of the Borough Boundary had been explored and that several potential sites had been identified where the owners had indicated a willingness to sell. Indicative figures of the likely land purchase costs were set out in the Confidential Annex attached to the report and the report sought authority for officers to enter into negotiations and report options back to the Committee. Any project would require substantial capital investment of circa £10.5m, with further details and a breakdown of the different elements also set out in the Confidential Annex.

Resolved -

- (1) That the options considered to maintain burial provision in Reading beyond 2030, as set out in the report, be noted;**
- (2) That the preferred option for further burial provision be to utilise the reserve cemetery land at Henley Road to continue providing the service in Reading until 2044;**
- (3) That the Assistant Director for Policy, Performance & Customer Services, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services & Resources, undertake formal consultation with key stakeholders on the preferred option to identify further impacts and mitigating actions;**
- (4) That the results of the stakeholder consultation be submitted to this Committee in January / February 2025 for consideration and final decision on using the allotment site for cemetery provision;**
- (5) That the Committee note the estimated total cost of the preferred option was £2.8m and that further budget provision would need to be approved through the Medium-Term Financial Plan subject to a final decision being made in January / February 2025;**
- (6) That, subject to funding being approved through the capital programme, the Assistant Director for Property and Asset Management, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Corporate Services & Resources, the Director of Finance, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services, and the Executive Director of Resources be authorised to secure any option to procure further land for a new cemetery for future development to meet long-term demand for burial provision beyond 2044 and report back options to Committee.**

23. 2024/25 QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE AND MONITORING REPORT

The Committee considered a report setting out the projected revenue and capital outturn positions for 2024/25 for both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

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as at the end of Quarter 1 and the performance against the measures of success set out in the Council's Corporate Plan. The following documents were attached to the report:

- Summary of the General Fund Budget and Forecast
- Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) Budget Monitoring Report Quarter 1
- Recovery Plan Quarter 1
- Savings Tracker Quarter 1
- General Fund Capital Programme
- Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme
- Corporate Plan Performance Measures Quarter 1
- Corporate Plan Projects Quarter 1

The report noted that the Council was currently experiencing significant financial pressures over and above those provided for as part of the budget setting process. These needed to be managed carefully in order to avoid putting the financial stability of the Council at risk. Net budget pressures totalling £13.068m had been identified during Quarter 1 and the report summarised the main financial pressures in the areas of homelessness, income shortfalls in Planning, Transport & Public Protection, children's social care, corporate budgets and risk of undelivered savings. The Corporate Management Team had taken urgent action to address the situation and work had so far identified £8.081m of in-year mitigations which reduced the overall forecast net pressures to £4.987m. Work was ongoing to identify further savings, however the position remained challenging and a pause on all non-essential expenditure and recruitment had been implemented until the budget had been brought back in line. Further savings proposals requiring Committee approval would be submitted to the meeting of Policy Committee in October 2024 for consideration.

The report explained that the General Fund Capital Programme had an Original Budget of £95.232m approved as part of the 2024/25 Budget. This budget had been revised to £109.005m following approved adjustments as part of the Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 2023/24 Performance and Monitoring Reports. The report sought approval for further adjustments as set out in detail in Appendix 5, includes budget reprogramming between years following a review of schemes by the Capital Programme Board, that would result in a revised approved budget of £96.905m for 2024/25. At Quarter 1, against the revised budget of £96.905m, the current forecast was a positive net variance of £0.136m related to the Delivery Fund. Scheme and spend approval was also sought for an additional scheme for the Bereavement Service to build 50 burial chambers at a cost of £0.080m, instead of building approximately six chambers per year.

The report stated that the approved Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget assumed a drawdown from HRA reserves of £2.582m. At Quarter 1, the forecast revenue outturn position on the HRA was an adverse net variance to budget of £0.162m. Therefore, a drawdown from the HRA Reserve was forecast of £2.744m rather than the originally budgeted £2.582m. The HRA Capital Programme had an Original Budget of £47.760m as part of the 2024/25 Budget, which had been revised to £50.050m following approved adjustments as part of the Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 2023/24 Performance and Monitoring Reports. The report sought approval for further adjustments as set out at in detail in Appendix 6 that would result in a revised approved budget of £45.284m for 2024/25. At Quarter 1, the

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HRA Capital Programme was forecasting to spend to budget against the proposed revised budget of £45.284m.

The report also set out performance against the measures of success published in the Council's Corporate Plan. Of the 24 Corporate Plan Performance Measures monitored monthly or quarterly, 37% were currently at or above target (green), 17% within 10% of the target (amber) and 46% were 10% or more off target (red). Of the 46 Corporate Plan Projects, 7% were currently delivered (blue), 56% are at or above target (green) and 37% within 10% of the target (amber). The full list of Performance Measures was attached at Appendix 7 and Projects as Appendix 8.

Resolved:

- (1) That it be noted that:**
 - a) the forecast General Fund revenue outturn position for Quarter 1 was an adverse net variance of £4.987m (Appendix 1), comprising £13.068m of net budget pressures that were partially offset by £8.081m of identified Officer Decision Recovery Plan mitigations which were summarised in Section 4 and set out in detail in Appendix 3;**
 - b) further Recovery Plan mitigations were in development and those requiring a Member Decision would be brought for consideration via a report to Policy Committee in October 2024;**
 - c) £3.052m (41%) of savings approved as part of the 2024/25 Budget were on track to be delivered by March 2025. £0.656m (9%) of savings were currently categorised as non-deliverable (red) and £3.760m (50%) categorised as at risk of delivery (amber) (Appendix 4);**
 - d) the General Fund Capital Programme was forecasting a positive net variance of £0.136m against the proposed revised budget of £96.905m (Appendix 5);**
 - e) there was a total £3.143m Delivery Fund available for 2024/25 (inclusive of 2023/24 approved carry forwards). At Quarter 1, £3.097m of this funding had been allocated out to approved schemes;**
 - f) the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was projecting an adverse net variance of £0.162m as at the end of Quarter 1, which resulted in a forecast drawdown from HRA Reserves of £2.744m rather than the originally budgeted £2.582m;**
 - g) the HRA Capital Programme was forecasting to spend to budget against the proposed revised budget of £45.284m (Appendix 6);**
 - h) the performance achieved against the Corporate Plan success measures was as set out in Section 11 of the report and Appendices 7 and 8.**
- (2) That the proposed amendments to the General Fund Capital Programme (as set out in Section 8 of this report and Appendix 5), which would result in a revised Capital Programme budget of £96.905m for 2024/25, £59.499m for 2025/26 and £27.302m for 2026/27, be approved;**

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- (3) That Scheme and spend approval be given for the Burial Chambers scheme within the Capital Programme as set out in Section 8;**
- (4) That the proposed amendments to the HRA Capital Programme (as set out in Section 10 of this report and Appendix 6), which would result in a revised Capital Programme budget of £45.284m for 2024/25, £59.136m for 2025/26 and £18.088m for 2026/27, be approved.**

24. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved –

That pursuant to Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), members of the press and public be excluded during consideration of item 24 below as it was likely that there would be a disclosure of exempt information as defined in the relevant paragraphs specified in Part 1 of Schedule 12A to that Act.

25. READING TRANSPORT LIMITED SHAREHOLDER REPORT

The Committee, in its capacity as shareholder of Reading Transport Limited (RTL), considered a report setting out at Appendix 1 a Shareholder Update Report and 2023/24 Annual Review submitted by RTL. Provisional Management accounts were attached to the report submitted by RTL at Annexes 1-3.

The cover report set out key points arising from the Shareholder Update including operational performance, financial performance, government funding, fleet replacement, staffing and the pension scheme. Approval was sought to close the Reading Transport Pension Trustees Limited company once the transfer to a Master Trust was complete.

Resolved –

- (1) That the content of the report and the Shareholder Update Report and 2023/24 Annual Review attached as Appendix 1 be noted;**
- (2) That RTL's provisional management accounts for the year ended 31 March 2024 be noted;**
- (3) That the investment plans for 28 new vehicles in 2024/25 (plus a further three delayed from 2023/24 order) in line with the agreed fleet replacement strategy be noted;**
- (4) That the dividend position as set out in sections 10.13 to 10.15 of the report be noted;**
- (5) That RTL be required to bring forward a Dividend Policy for the Council as shareholder to consider, as part of the interim shareholder report for 2024/25;**

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- (6) That the closure of the Reading Transport Pension Trustees Limited company following the transfer of the Reading Transport Staff Retirement Scheme to a Master Trust be approved.**

(Exempt information as set out in Paragraph 3).

(The meeting started at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.40 pm)