

POLICY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - 11 MARCH 2024

Present: Councillor Brock (Chair);
Councillors Terry (Vice-Chair), Barnett-Ward, Ennis, Gittings, Hoskin, Leng, McEwan, Robinson, Rowland, Thompson and White

Apologies: Councillor Mitchell

56. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings held on 22 January and 19 February 2024 were agreed as correct records and signed by the Chair.

57. QUESTIONS

Questions on the following matters were submitted by Councillors:

	<u>Questioner</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Reply</u>
1.	Cllr White	Improving Reading's Teeth	Cllr McEwan

(The full text of the question and response was made available on the Reading Borough Council website).

58. THAMES VALLEY POLICE

Matthew Barber, Thames Valley Police (TVP) Police & Crime Commissioner (PCC), Jason Hogg, TVP Chief Constable and Superintendent Steve Raffield, Reading LPA Commander attended the meeting to give presentations and answer questions from members of the Committee.

The PCC summarised his areas of focus for 2024 which included improving contact channels, recruitment, Project Vigilant for preventing sexual violence in the night-time economy, work to target shoplifting, and a youth element of Operation Deter which was a zero-tolerance approach to tackling knife crime. The presentation by the Chief Constable covered subjects including the new Local Command Unit Structure, Neighbourhood Policing, Contact Management and Digital 101, Violence Against Women and Girls, and a summary of TVP Force Activity for 1 April – 31 December 2023. The presentation by the LPA Commander covered crime statistics for the Reading Local Police Area (01/04/2023 – 04/03/2024), local work to tackle neighbourhood crime (robbery, theft from the person, vehicle offences and dwelling burglary), community engagement, retail crime and tackling organised crime.

The Committee asked questions on subjects including keeping young people out of the criminal justice system, Neighbourhood Policing officer numbers, engagement with retailers on shoplifting, vetting of recruits following the murder of Sarah Everard, prioritising violence against women and girls, road safety on King's Road, theft from commercial vehicles, officer retention, and avoiding a blanket approach to referrals to Children's Social Care.

Resolved –

That the Thames Valley Police PCC, Chief Constable and LPA Commander be thanked for their presentations.

59. BRIGHTER FUTURES FOR CHILDREN BUSINESS PLAN

The Committee, acting in its capacity as sole member of Brighter Futures for Children Limited (BFfC), considered a report seeking approval for the BFfC 2024/25 Business Plan and contract sum. The Business Plan was attached to the report at Appendix 1.

The Business Plan set out the national and local context, the immediate challenge and focus for BFfC and the company's strategic objectives for 2023 – 2026, key priorities and enablers for 2024-25. In 2024-25 the priority would be the delivery of a transformation programme to better manage demand at the front door, the increasing number of children in care and the lack of local care placements for children. The programme would include:

- Development of family hubs: Working with the partnership to develop and define a combined early help offer, delivered through family hubs. Targeting the areas of greatest need, family hubs would meet need at the right time in the right place and prevent escalation and the need for statutory services, including children's social care.
- Creation of an edge of care offer: Preventing children entering care; ensuring that when children did enter care it was for the shortest possible time; stepping children down to family-based care; preventing placement breakdowns and returning children home where it was right for the child. This would reduce the number of children in care and the number of children in residential care.
- Increasing the number of internal foster carers: Implementing the DfE-funded regional fostering recruitment hub in partnership with other LAs across the South East to increase applications and approvals of foster carers; developing a Mockingbird carer support hub to improve retention of foster carers and commissioning local foster placements. This would increase the number of children who could remain living in family-based care in their local communities and reduce reliance on residential and out of borough care.
- Development of an in-house residential offer: Exploring the development of an assessment home and a children's home in Reading. Closely aligned with the developing edge of care offer and in-house foster carers, this would support the ambition to ensure that when children entered care it was for the shortest possible time and that children remained living in Reading wherever possible.

The Business Plan set out the company's financial plan for 2024/25 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy. It noted that there was a forecast overspend of £8.3m in 2023/24 on activities funded by the contract sum provided by the Council. This overspend was wholly attributable to demand and cost pressures in placement costs for children looked after and school travel costs which reflected national issues. The costs were forecast to continue in the medium term and so the company had submitted business cases for a significant growth in the contract sum for 2024-25. Alongside the request for growth, BFfC had submitted plans to mitigate some of the costs and to deliver efficiency savings across the next three years. The proposed contract sum for 2024/25, including SLAs and Property, was £58.839m.

Resolved –

That the Committee, in its capacity as sole member for BFfC, approve the proposed contract sum for 2024/25 of £58.839m and the company's business plan as set out in Appendix 1 of the report.

60. 2023/24 QUARTER 3 PERFORMANCE AND MONITORING REPORT

The Committee received a report setting out the projected revenue and capital outturn positions for 2023/24 for both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account as at the end of Quarter 3 (December 2023), as well as performance against the measures of success published in the Council's Corporate Plan. The following documents were attached to the report:

- Appendix 1 - Recovery Plan Quarter 3 (2023/24)
- Appendix 2 - Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) Budget Monitoring Report Quarter 3 (2023/24)
- Appendix 3 - Savings Tracker Quarter 3 (2023/24)
- Appendix 4a - Capital Programme Quarter 3 (2023/24)
- Appendix 4b - Capital Programme Quarter 3 (2023/24 to 2025/26)
- Appendix 5 - Corporate Plan Performance Measures (Monthly & Quarterly) Quarter 3 (2023/24)
- Appendix 6 - Corporate Plan Projects and Initiatives Quarter 3 (2023/24)

The report explained that the General Fund Revenue Budget was forecasting an overall adverse net variance of £5.117m as at the end of Quarter 3, consisting of £12.741m of net pressures within service expenditure budgets which was partially offset by a positive net variance of £7.624m across Corporate Budgets. The overall forecast variance was an adverse net movement of £1.432m from Quarter 2. This included £1.889m of additional recovery plan mitigations that had been identified or delivered since Quarter 2. £1.889m of newly identified recovery plan mitigations were set out individually in Appendix 1.

The report noted that Children's Services delivered by Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) was now forecasting an overall adverse net variance of £8.869m; an increase of £1.850m from Quarter 2. The majority of the movement from Quarter 2 related to increased pressures within children's social care placements, which included a net increase of 22 in the number of Looked After Children. Detail was set out in Appendix 2.

Non-delivery of savings continued to be a concern with only 46% of savings currently showing as on track or delivered. The impact of the 2024/25 budget proposals had removed, reduced or re-profiled £2.792m of the £3.067m of red rated savings. The Savings Tracker which listed progress against each individual saving was attached as Appendix 3.

The report explained that the provisional General Fund Capital Programme outturn was forecasting a positive net variance of £1.407m against a proposed revised budget of £50.129m in 2023/24. This variance entirely related to the Delivery Fund. The Capital Programme was set out in more detail in Appendices 4a and 4b. The report sought approval for a total of £1.460m of additional budgets across five schemes, that were fully funded by

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grants and contributions, to be formally added into the Capital Programme: £0.866m for the Electric Vehicle Charging Points scheme following the award of Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) capital funding, £0.350m for playground works in Emmer Green as part of the Playground equipment and Refreshment: Boroughwide scheme, £0.178m for capital expenditure directly incurred by schools and funded by devolved formula capital grant funding, £0.040m for additional works to improve the boundary security as part of the Victoria Rec scheme, and £0.026m for the final works for the New Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) funded schools – Phoenix College replacement scheme. In addition a net total of £18.421m of budgets were proposed to be reprogrammed between 2023/24 and future years of the Capital Programme

The approved Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget assumed a drawdown from HRA reserves of £2.499m. At Quarter 3, the forecast revenue outturn position for the HRA was a positive net variance of £0.030m. Therefore, a drawdown from HRA Reserves was forecast of £2.469m rather than the originally budgeted £2.499m. The HRA Capital Programme was forecasting to spend to budget against the approved budget of £33.564m in 2023/24. The HRA Capital Programme was set out in detail in Appendices 4a and 4b. The HRA Capital Programme budgets for 2024/25 and 2025/26 had been updated to align them with the budgets approved by Council and approval was sought for the amended budgets.

The report also set out performance against the measures of success published in the Council's Corporate Plan. Of the 26 Corporate Plan Performance Measures monitored monthly or quarterly, 38% were currently "green", 31% "amber" and 31% "red". 54% had improved since Quarter 2 of 2023/24, whilst 38% had worsened. Of the 47 Corporate Plan Projects, 66% were currently "green" and 34% "amber".

Resolved –

(1) That it be noted that:

- a) the forecast General Fund revenue outturn position for Quarter 3 was an adverse net variance of £5.117m which was an adverse net movement of £1.432m from Quarter 2;**
- b) £1.392m (17%) of savings had been delivered (blue) to date in the current financial year, with a further £2.368m (29%) of savings on track to be delivered (green) by March 2024; £3.067m (38%) of savings were currently categorised as non-deliverable (red) and £1.291m (16%) categorised as at risk of delivery (amber);**
- c) the General Fund Capital Programme was forecasting a positive net variance of £1.407m against the proposed revised budget of £50.129m;**
- d) there was a total £4.790m Delivery Fund available for 2023/24 (inclusive of 2022/23 approved carry forwards) of which £0.195m had been brought forward from 2024/25; at Quarter 3, all of this funding had been allocated out to approved schemes;**
- e) the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was projecting a positive net variance of £0.030m as at the end of Quarter 3, which resulted in a forecast drawdown from HRA Reserves of £2.469m;**

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- f) the HRA Capital Programme was forecasting to spend to budget against the approved budget of £33.564m;
 - g) performance achieved against the Corporate Plan success measures was as set out in Section 12 of this report and Appendices 5 and 6;
- (2) That the proposed amendments to the General Fund Capital Programme (as set out in Section 8 of the report and Appendices 4a and 4b), which would result in a revised Capital Programme budget of £50.129m for 2023/24, £108.809m for 2024/25 and £53.576 for 2025/26, be approved;
 - (3) That the proposed amendments to the HRA Capital Programme (as set out in the report and Appendices 4a and 4b), which would result in a revised Capital Programme budget of £33.564m for 2023/24, £47.985m for 2024/25 and £54.370 for 2025/26, be approved.

61. ALLOTMENT RENT REVIEW CONSULTATION UPDATE

Further to Minute 8 of the meeting of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee held on 6 July 2023, the Committee considered a report setting out the findings of an Allotment Survey and proposing changes to allotment rents and discounts. Attached to the report at Appendix A was a summary and analysis of responses to the Allotment Survey.

The report explained that the Survey had been conducted in November and December 2023. Respondents had been strongly supportive of Option B, which was to remove the 10% Your Reading Passport (YRP) General Discount, reduce the 84% YRP Concessionary Discount to 40% and increase rents by approximately 20% to align to benchmarked rent for 2025. The report set out the effect of the proposed changes for plots of 125sqm in the three different categories of site, for which rents varied depending on coverage of water supply. The proposed changes would see rents and discounts on the Council's allotment sites align with levels within other Local Authorities as determined through a benchmarking exercise. It was proposed to write to all current tenants giving 12 months' notice of the changes to be implemented from April 2025.

Resolved –

- (1) That the findings of the Allotment Survey 2023 be noted and the proposed increases in allotment rents and reductions in discounts be approved as follows:
 - Removal of the 10% YRP General Discount
 - Reduction of the 84% YRP Concessionary Discount to 40%
 - Increase in rents of approximately 20% to align to benchmarked rent for 2025;
- (2) That plotholders be given 12 months' written notice of the changes in March 2024 and the changes be implemented in April 2025;
- (3) That the proposed Allotment Rent pricing structure be approved.

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(The meeting started at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.22 pm)