

Runnymede Borough CouncilFull CouncilThursday, 24 October 2024 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Council present: Councillors E Gill (Mayor), M Harnden (Deputy Mayor), A Berardi, D Clarke, MK Cressey, S Eldridge, J Furey, P Gahir, T Gates, L Gillham, T Gracey, K Graham, J Hulley, S Jenkins, E Kettle, A King, R King, K Lee, S Lewis, J Mavi, P Mehta, R Milstead, G Moudgil, I Mullens, M Nuti, C Parry, S Ringham, K Rowsell, S Saise-Marshall, M Smith, P Snow, P Tucker-Brown, D Whyte, S Whyte and M Williams.

37 Councillors Jonathan Wilson and Malcolm Cressey

The Council observed a minute's silence in memory of Councillors Jonathan Wilson and Malcolm Cressey, both of whom had recently passed away.

[The meeting adjourned between 8.25pm and 8.35pm.]

38 Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor provided an update on the events and engagements that she had attended since the last Council.

39 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 July 2024 were confirmed and signed as a correct record, subject to the following amendment:

Item 32a (Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order 13)

The supplementary question attributed to Councillor Tom Gracey being corrected to Councillor Trevor Gates.

40 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cunningham, Davies, Howorth, Mann and Singh.

41 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

42 Speaking or Questions from Members of the Public under Standing Order 12

a) Adam Bryant asked the Co-Leaders of the Council:

"Addlestone One apartments were built 7 years ago and my question is why is the WiFi in the building not fit for purpose and what is being done to improve the service?"

Councillor Ringham replied in the following terms:

"As someone who previously worked in IT Support, I know that one person's Wi-Fi problem is not always the same as the next person's. There are several touch points in the chain between your device and the internet and any of these can be the root of the problem.

Plus, people are inclined to use “Wi-Fi” and “the internet” interchangeably when they are fundamentally not the same thing.

However, from my conversations with officers, it is clear that this is a systemic problem with the buildings. The problem stems from the specification and subsequent installation of a copper-based backbone in the buildings. Officers have been, and continue to, work closely with BT Openreach on how to upgrade the existing wiring to full-speed fibre. We can report that we are currently in the legal due diligence phase with regard to the necessary wayleaves – these are the temporary rights extended to a third party when access to property is needed. Updates will be provided to residents as and when work is scheduled to commence. Ultimately we are dependent on BT Openreach to actually carry out this work and I am presently unable to give any definitive timeline for commencement and completion of these upgrades.

I would like to add as a footnote that this situation is indicative of a lack of forethought and poor decision making that has plagued numerous decisions made by this council previously. Like most of us here today, I rely heavily on robust and performant internet connections - at work, on the move and at home. Especially at home when it is often a place of work as well. So while this current administration is committed to improving how we make our decisions, I would like to apologise to Mr Bryant and the other residents of Addlestone One for the extended inconvenience this is causing you. As an Addlestone councillor, I will take it upon myself to stay abreast of the planned upgrades and make sure they happen as soon as is possible.”

There was no supplementary question.

43 **Petitions**

There were no petitions.

44 **Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order 13**

a) Councillor Tucker-Brown asked the Co-Leaders of the Council:

“Living Well Week has been a celebration of social prescribing through being active and creative, making friendships and combatting loneliness. I’d like to ask the Co-Leaders if they agree that this week is essential to the overall wellbeing of the community; how they supported it and how they highlighted the work of the people – a large number of whom are volunteers - that are behind all the activities that give shape and meaning to the lives of many?”

Councillor Gillham replied in the following terms:

“Living Well Week has been a longstanding activity within the Community Development/Leisure team within Community Services, with the intention of promoting the opportunities for leisure, recreation, opportunities to socialise, self-care etc. to residents of the borough through a range of events and taster sessions. In planning Living Well Week, officers have been able to work closely with and in support of social prescribing, to be able to link patients with non-medical support needs with opportunities available in the borough.

Promoting community activity and the opportunity for residents to engage directly, as part of taking control of their individual health and wellbeing, is seen as an important part of working to tackling health inequalities locally, in particular issues around isolation and loneliness, and therefore the council is pleased to be delivering this programme in 2024-2025.

In terms of my own involvement, I was pleased to join the Mayor and yourself on the

community litter pick which involved local families out to improve their immediate environment.

I was delighted to welcome 40 residents from across the borough to the first citizens' panel consultation exercise on design in planning. This was a great piece of work which will help to ensure our borough includes all elements of "wellness" in its future development.

Councillor Robert King and I met with Ronnie Kendall and Annie Moore to explore how the borough can support the future of Holme Farm which as we have heard plays such an important part in promoting health and wellbeing locally.

Finally, last week I presented my paper on the Circular Economy in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. This was received with unanimous approval but more importantly representatives from all 46 countries wanted to tell us about what they are doing to improve their environment and enhance health. An innovative idea from Turkey was to put solar panels over the reservoirs. Not only to produce electricity but to shade and reduce evaporation from precious water that has often been produced through desalination.

This is truly a global issue."

Councillor Tucker-Brown asked whether the co-leaders would like to take up a previous offer of finding out about her personal involvement in Holme Farm? Councillor Ringham disputed Councillor Tucker-Brown's recollection of a discussion at a past event they had both attended, but said that he would be pleased to learn more about the work at Holme Farm, in anticipation of offering his time as a trustee.

b) Councillor Hulley asked Councillor Robert King (as chair of the Corporate Management Committee):

"How much this Council has received from the Household Support Fund since 2021/22 and the breakdown of Household Support Fund spend from 2021 to end September 2024?"

Councillor R King said that the first tranche of funding had been delayed to the point that it was combined with the second. He undertook to make available a spreadsheet of expenditure outside the meeting.

Councillor Hulley asked whether the co-leaders would commit to setting aside funding from the Household Support Fund to help those impacted by the government's withdrawal of winter fuel payments for many pensioners? Councillor R King said that he would be bringing forward proposals for an underspend that he had identified in due course.

c) Councillor Jenkins asked the Co-Leaders of the Council:

"Under the Equality Act, people with disabilities who are accompanied by their working assistance dogs, including guide dogs, have the right to access taxis, shops, restaurants, and other places open to the public. It is also unlawful to provide an inferior level of service because of a guide dog, for example, excluding guide dog owners from parts of a restaurant, café or bar, or restricting them to an area where pet dogs may ordinarily be allowed. Access refusals can be an upsetting and humiliating experience for people, which can have a significant impact on guide dog owners' confidence and independence. Can the Co-Leaders please confirm if businesses operating from RBC-owned units can face enforcement action under the terms of their leases if they fail to comply with Equalities legislation?"

Councillor Ringham replied in the following terms:

"I thank Cllr Jenkins for his question and commend him on his continued support and

promotion of the work done by the Runnymede Access Liaison Group.

All businesses operating in public spaces, including those within RBC-owned units, are required to comply with the aforementioned legislation. Most commercial leases are governed by the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954 and as such do not typically include explicit provisions for specific legislation. But it is standard practice to include a general obligation to comply with all applicable laws and regulations when conducting their business.

So a tenant who refuses access for assistance dogs could be deemed to be in breach of their lease. If this was brought to RBC's attention, we might initially issue a guidance reminder. This could be followed by a warning that would require rectification. The next step would be a Section 146 notice to remedy a breach of the lease. Leases contain what options are open to the landlords in the forfeiture provision section, but these may require "material" or "substantial" breach before the rights can be exercised.

While this remains the ultimate sanction, the Council would want to consider the bigger picture with regard to loss of income and costs incurred for a void property. Ultimately we take this legislation seriously and that is reflected across our internal and external policies. At the end of the day, we would sooner have compliant tenants rather than empty shops. Similarly, we work hard to safeguard the rights and dignity of guide dog owners and all groups covered by this legislation."

Councillor Jenkins asked whether it was possible for the Council to promote the materials produced for businesses by the Guide Dogs Association? Councillor Ringham agreed that the guidance referred to was useful and invited Councillor Jenkins to contact him outside the meeting.

d) Councillor Snow asked Councillor Robert King (as chair of the Corporate Management Committee):

"Our role as Councillors is to request information from the paid officers via the CEO.

Could you tell us why it is then necessary for the Chair and Vice Chair of the Corporate Management Committee to re-examine the financial statements of the Local Authority when that role is carried out by the financially qualified staff in the Section 151 Office?"

Councillor R King replied in the following terms:

"The role of councillors is also to scrutinise and review policies and proposals to ensure members are comfortable with the direction of travel of the Council. On financial matters members are also here to ensure that the decisions they make on reports or substantive activities by the authority are being taken in accordance with the level of risk, what is legal, policy direction and political priorities that members of the administration of the Council deem fit. Developing a budget, and indeed the direction of travel within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy is a partnership, where an administration sets out the direction of travel and assures reports, where decisions are made, fit with the criteria they set out to officers. Officers are then held accountable to deliver those policies in line with prudential codes and local government legislation.

An example in Runnymede would be where the administration of this authority, since May, has supported the decision to use 141 monies to purchase new Council homes. This was a positive step for our residents, and a prudent one in order to replace stocks which had been purchased under right-to-buy whilst providing valuable new homes for the citizens of this Borough.

It is regrettable the previous Conservative administration had failed to set the political priority in the past to do this, and instead when the gift of millions of pounds had previously

been provided by central government in 141 contributions, they went unspent. The deadline to spend those monies expired and funds were returned, unspent and with no homes purchased or built, to the government. A great loss to those on Runnymede's housing register.

Another example we can see is in the financial risk appetite which was set out by the previous administration when it embarked on commercial asset purchases. I offer some praise for Conservative members who set and approved the priority to secure Public Works Loan Board bonds at fixed rates, and not at variable rates like some other Councils, when lower interest rates made borrowing cheaper. Indeed, a prudent approach to borrowing. The risk of putting such a large amount of the investment pool into commercial office real estate, and the acceptance that the purchase price of assets reflected their long-term value to taxpayers and this Council, in my mind and this new administration's was not a prudent one. As members will note in the recently commissioned set of reports, this administration requested through the Corporate Management Committee as a regular item, details of the value of those investment assets are now to be shown. They are now worth over £173 million less than the previous administration approved them to be purchased for. A loss of value than the entire revenue receipt on those assets thus far.

I'd like to reassure members that this administration recognises the seriousness and importance of proper financial agenda setting and the corresponding level of acceptable risk members should and should not approve and that we are setting out the new deal, of a new administration, to get Runnymede back on a sustainable financial track."

Councillor Snow asked where, specifically, the unallocated funds to increase the allowances for the chair and vice-chair of the Corporate Management Committee had been found? Councillor R King said that the funding was within the budget for members' allowances and that he welcomed the opportunity to provide more detail on this and previous claims made by all members including those in receipt of special responsibility allowances.

e) Councillor Saise-Marshall asked the Co-Leaders of the Council:

"Can the Co-Leaders confirm that RBC has no plans to close Chertsey Museum and that no such idea has or will be discussed."

Councillor D Whyte replied in the following terms:

"The Community Services, Service Area Plan, approved by the Community Services Committee in March 2024, set out primary and secondary objectives for the year ahead. Within this plan, an objective relating to undertaking a service review of Chertsey Museum is included. Chertsey Museum is therefore currently subject to a service review. Once complete, the outcome of the review and future options for the delivery of the service will be presented to the relevant service committee for consideration, in the same way that the recent Community Transport Review was presented. All reviews are approached with an open mind and all options considered will be set out in the report."

Councillor Saise-Marshall asked for clarity over the language used in paragraph 10 of the recent Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee's report (Approach to Financial Sustainability - Progress Update (2)). Councillor D Whyte referred Councillor Saise-Marshall to his previous answer, stating that it would be improper to predict the outcome of any of the service reviews currently being undertaken.

Councillor Nuti asked whether Councillor Whyte was stating that Chertsey Museum should be operated more efficiently and not closed, whilst emphasising its importance to the local community? Councillor D Whyte re-emphasised his earlier remarks about awaiting the outcome of the service review.

Councillor Mavi asked whether Councillor Whyte was aware of any internal discussions about the closure of Chertsey Museum? Councillor D Whyte stated that he was not undertaking the service review and therefore would not be aware of whether any such discussions had taken place.

f) Councillor Parry asked the Co-Leaders of the Council:

“Would the Co-Leaders of the council confirm that the council will always act to prosecute those involved in criminal acts which result in a cost to the council and its residents when clear evidence exists to support this?”

Councillor R King replied in the following terms:

“As many members may know acts of vandalism and graffiti blight our communities and cost this Council vital resources that should be used for other important services. One example was seen over the previous months in Addlestone One, where vandalism occurred over multiple floors of Addlestone one car park in the form of graffiti. I’m reassured by the Chief Executive and his officers that the Council is doing everything it can to bring the culprit, when identified, to justice.”

Councillor Parry asked whether the chair of the Crime and Disorder Committee would like to support Councillor R King’s remarks? Councillor Saise-Marshall supported Councillor R King’s remarks and said that she would welcome an opportunity to be consulted in replying to questions where they were relevant to her role as a committee.

Councillor Jenkins asked whether Councillor R King’s remarks also extended to addressing economic crimes. Councillor R King said that they did.

g) Councillor Davies was not present to put his question to the Co-Leaders of the Council.

h) Councillor Howorth was not present to put his question to the Co-Leaders of the Council.

[The meeting adjourned between 9.00pm and 9.28pm.]

45 **Recommendations from Committees**

45a **Medium Term Financial Strategy - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee**

It was proposed (by Councillor R King), seconded (by Councillor Gillham) and resolved that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy including the following be agreed:

- 1) The growth items as set out in Appendix 4 of the officer’s report, for inclusion in the budget for 2025/26, to be presented to the January 2025 Corporate Management Committee, subject to the processes set out in section 5 of the report being undertaken.
- 2) The transfer of £337,000 to the Local Plan Reserve to support preparation of the Local Plan review over the next 3 years.

45b **Calendar of meetings - 2025/26 municipal year - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee**

It was proposed (by Councillor Gillham), seconded (by Councillor R King) and **resolved** that the calendar of meetings for the 2025/26 municipal year be approved.

45c **Update on recruitment for an Independent Remuneration Panel and Members'**

Allowances Scheme for 2025/26 - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee

It was proposed (by Councillor R King), seconded (by Councillor Gillham) and **resolved** that the Council:

- 1) Withdraw the existing Members' Allowances Scheme with an end date of 31 March 2025 inclusive.
- 2) Agree the provisions of the current Members' Allowances Scheme (subject to any subsequent necessary and practicable amendments that may come forward in the intervening period), including an uplift to basic and special responsibility allowances commensurate with the staff pay award (but not including any lump sum provisions or similar), for 2025/26 with an implementation date of 1 April 2025 inclusive.
- 3) Delegate authority to the Corporate Head of Law and Governance to implement the 2025/26 Members' Allowances Scheme to give effect to the above, and undertake any necessary measures to do so (such as advertising it in a local newspaper, authorising the recovery of payments made, etc).
- 4) Request officers bring forward, for members' consideration, a revised financial offer and recruitment process for an Independent Remuneration Panel.

45d **Member Working Parties - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee**

It was proposed (by Councillor Ringham), seconded (by Councillor R King) and **resolved** that:

- 1) The proposals put forward by the co-leaders, as detailed in the officer's report and subsequent amended excerpt from document 3a (committee responsibilities) of the Council's constitution, be agreed.
- 2) Politically proportional membership arrangements for the member working parties be agreed, on the basis of seven members per working party (21 seats in total), in accordance with the calculations supplied in the supplementary summons i.e. Runnymede Council Alliance group – 13 seats; Conservative group – 7 seats; Independent group – 1 seat.
- 3) The Corporate Head of Law and Governance be authorised to make further changes to Runnymede's provisions in relation to member working parties, in consultation with the chair and vice-chair of the Corporate Management Committee, should unforeseen matters arise during the course of the remainder of the municipal year.
- 4) The Chief Executive be delegated authority, in consultation with the Corporate Head of Law and Governance, to agree the allocation of seats on member working parties, in pursuance of the calculations detailed in 2) above, at the conclusion of discussions between co/group leaders.
- 5) It be noted that group leaders can make appointments to member working parties, once seats are allocated to political groups.

46 **Updates to Committees**

46a **Allocation of seats to political groups**

It was proposed (by Councillor S Whyte), seconded (by Councillor Jenkins) and **resolved**

that consideration of this item and the following item (appointment of members to committees and sub-committees) be deferred until the meeting of the Council scheduled to be held on 19 December 2024.

46b **Appointment of members to committees and sub-committees**

[See item 46a above.]

47 **Notices of Motion from Members of the Council under Standing Order 15**

Councillor Gracey withdrew his motion in accordance with Standing Order 17.11, citing that amendments he was expecting to be proposed were not in the spirit of his proposed motion, and his belief that they did not comply with Standing Order 17.6.

48 **Minority Group Priority Business**

There was no minority group priority business.

49 **Press and Public to be Excluded by Resolution**

By resolution of the Committee, the press and public were excluded from the remainder of the meeting during the consideration of the remaining matters under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussion would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information as set out in Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

50 **Recommendations from Committees**

50a **Addlestone One Update - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee**

It was proposed (by Councillor R King), seconded (by Councillor Gillham) and **resolved** that:

- 1) A new lease, on the terms set out in the officer's report, be granted subject to the Assistant Chief Executive (Section 151) being satisfied with the trading estimates and other financial data they require being presented by the tenant detailed in the officer's report.
- 2) A capital contribution for the amount set out in the officer's report be agreed, to be drawn from the existing capital provisions, to facilitate the transaction subject to necessary permissions being obtained.
- 3) Authority be delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive (Section 151), in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair of Corporate Management Committee, to agree various terms outlined in the officer's report, to enable the transaction to be delivered.
- 4) Authority be delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive (Section 151), in consultation with Chair and Vice Chair of the Corporate Management Committee, to vary the terms of the new lease for the area shown in Appendix C, in line with the Heads of Terms outlined in the officer's report, subject to ensuring that it achieves best consideration reasonably obtainable in accordance with Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972.

