



Minutes of the **ORDINARY MEETING** of the Council of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough held on **Monday 4 November, 2024 at 6.00 p.m.** at the Council House, Walsall.

Present

Councillor A. Harris (Mayor) in the Chair

Councillors: G. Ali
A. Andrew
H. Bashir
M.A. Bird
C. Bott
P. Bott
R. Burley
J. Chapman
S. Cheema
S.J. Cooper
M. Coulson
S.K. Ditta
S. Elson
K. Ferguson
G. Flint
M. Follows
N. Gandham
A. Garcha
P. Gill
N. Gultasib
L. Harrison
A.J. Hicken
A. Hussain
I. Hussain
K. Hussain
S.B. Hussain
T. Jukes
P. Kaur
N. Latham
E. Lee
K. Margetts
R. Martin
R. K Mehmi
E. Morgan
J. Murray
L. Nahal
A.A. Nawaz
K. Pedley
G. Perry
W. Rasab
L.J. Rattigan
E. Russell
S. Samra
K. Sears
G. Singh Sohal
P. Smith
C.A. Statham
M.A. Statham
C.D.D. Towe
M. Ward
V.J. Waters
J. Whitehouse

49. Apologies

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors Bains, Hassan, Larden, Murphy, Nasreen, Parkes, and Wilson.

50. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 September, 2024, a copy having been sent to each member of the Council, be approved as a correct record.

51. **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

52. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985 (as amended)**

Resolved

There were no items in private session.

53. **Mayor's announcements**

The Mayor advised Members that there would be a full screening of 'It Takes a Village' which would take place in the Chamber on 26 November, 2024 at 6.00pm. As Corporate Parents, he encouraged Members to attend as the film provided a powerful insight into the lived experiences of young people leaving the social care system in Walsall and the barriers they faced.

54. **Petitions**

None submitted.

55. **Questions**

(a) From the public: None

(b) From members of the Council:

Councillor Smith

Given that there is a housing crisis in Walsall and beyond, that Whg, with already around 18,000 on its waiting list has effectively closed its books on new applicants and that Walsall Council, despite having no properties of their own, has opened a waiting list of its own which runs in to many thousands and is growing week by week, with very little prospect of ever meeting the demand,

and given further that the Council, over 2 decades ago legally transferred ownership of its housing stock to a wholly independent registered social housing provider (Whg) through a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT), and that the legislation, whilst providing for an LSVT, does not provide for a reversal of that arrangement, and given that legally Walsall Council still has the power to provide Council housing,

and finally given that the new Government has indicated a commitment to provide extra finances to build more Council homes in the future towards its national target of building 1.5 million new homes over the next 5 years,

would the appropriate Portfolio holder explore the future possibility and feasibility of Walsall Council, venturing into building homes for letting at affordable rents, under Council ownership?

Councillor Andrew gave the following response:

Walsall Council is developing a new housing strategy coupled with the Walsall Borough Local Plan which will consider all options to support and accelerate housing delivery. This will include considerations on the Council's role in both facilitating with partners and potentially in the direct delivery through joint venture companies. We are not considering becoming a social landlord again and would not consider the reversal of a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT).

Through development of our Place Based Strategy, Walsall has a clear pipeline of housing sites and works closely with key partners including the West Midlands Combined Authority and Homes England, along with other developers and investors to drive delivery. This includes other housing associations including Whg, Watmos, Midland Heart, GreenSquareAccord, Longhurst and Bromford, to name but a few, and we will be working with them to deliver more housing. We are currently seeing the benefits of this approach with over 1000 new homes being delivered on key sites such as Goscote Lane, Lockside and Hollyhedge Lane, and Harden Road.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

If Walsall Council is to rely on social landlords, some of the ones you have mentioned, which is beyond the control of the democratically elected bodies such as Walsall Council, to be the main providers of social housing in an environment where demand far exceeds supply and is likely to for many years to come. What powers does the Council have to prevent social landlords like one you have mentioned, GreenSquareAccord, auctioning off blocks of flats like Jervis Court in the town centre, to the private sector for over £1 million.

Furthermore, what powers are there to prevent the Borough's main social landlord Whg and others from similarly auctioning off many of its void properties which then become lost as social housing units. They are then placed more often than not, in the hands of private landlords who then have the freedom to rent them out at levels that are in far excess of normal amounts.

Councillor Andrew gave the following response:

We have no power to intervene with registered social landlords to stop them and prevent them purchasing property. As you are aware with GreenSquareAccord, that came to nothing. In terms of void properties and organisations selling off void properties, you will find that with many of these, it is more cost effective for the registered social landlord to sell off these properties that are irreparable in order to invest in new properties and repair properties that can be repaired.

Councillor Smith

Given that once again this Council is on the “same old tripple-whammy merry go-round” of a further £28million cuts to front line services, increases in many service charges AND the maximum Council tax rise allowed (4.99%)

and further given that some of the cuts under consideration for the next financial year include: the phasing out of most school crossing wardens, the removal of Council funding for festive lights across the Borough, even less frequent grass cutting, increased charges for the collection of bulky items, increases in Council car park charges, reduced cleaning for Council owned buildings, a massive £7.4 million cuts/increased charges to Children’s Services and an even bigger £8.7 million cut/increased charges to Adult Care and Public Health services

and finally given that present projections seem to promise similar cuts to services, increased charges for many services and maximum Council tax rises, year on year at least up to 2028/29, can the Portfolio holder convince me, this Council and the public that the so called public consultation exercise on the Budget proposals commencing October 17 and ending 29 November is nothing less than a necessary but meaningless exercise that will make very little difference to the proposals already “oven baked” and ready to serve and furthermore can he suggest an answer to this on going annual ritual of more cuts, more service charges and maximum Council tax rises?

Councillor M. Statham gave the following response:

We recognise that the current financial situation is very challenging not just for Walsall but for councils over the United Kingdom

We have to make difficult decisions to ensure our financial sustainability and to meet growing demand, particularly in children’s and adult social care. Children’s placements costs have risen by 173% in the past four years in Walsall. Adult Social Care packages and placements costs have also risen to almost £120 million this year – an increase of 74% in the last 6 years, against a backdrop of continued growth in demand.

It is noteworthy to mention that 66 pence of every pound that Walsall Council spends on children’s services and adult social care.

To meet the increasing demand in social care the draft budget includes substantial additional investment:

- Children's Services - £10 million (£27m over the next 4 years)
- Adult Social Care - £23.8 million (£53m over the next 4 years)

Other investment includes:

- Economy, Environment and Communities £4.2million (£7.3m over the next 4 years)
- IT and cyber security - £750k

We have worked extremely hard to transform our services to improve outcomes for our residents and to ensure that this Council provides cost effective, quality services that offer Walsall tax payers excellent value for money.

We are and have called on the new Government to address funding for local councils to enable us to meet rising cost and demand pressures, particularly in social care.

We are required by law to set a balanced budget and have a statutory duty to consult with non-domestic rate payers. But we are going above and beyond this legal requirement, ensuring we adhere to the Gunning Principles which put simply are

1. Consult before any decisions have been made
2. Provide sufficient information to allow for meaningful comment
3. Allow sufficient time for respondents to absorb the information and respond
4. Ensure decision makers can contentiously consider the results in advance of the final decision being made

As the current budget proposal leaves an £11m gap, the public consultation is more important this year. We want and need to hear what our residents want us to prioritise so we can provide the best possible service and make the best use of our collective assets.

Therefore, we made sure the consultation takes place before any decision taken and allowed sufficient time for residents to absorb the information and respond. We designed the process to reach a wide audience and be accessible for all. We will consider the responses before Cabinet puts forward its proposal for a balanced budget in February 2025.

It is pleasing to note that to date, the public consultation has received a significantly high volume of responses than in previous years and is currently at 600% more than the last year's total response with several weeks of the consultation left to run.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Given that the present system of finance and global government spending has seen year on year cuts to public services and several increases to service charges and Council tax rises. Do you agree with me that this cannot go on for much longer before the system becomes unsustainable and renders councils like Walsall basically not fit for purpose. Is there still plenty of fat left on the bone to enable increased service charges, further cuts to council services, and further rises in Council tax to continue for many years to come.

Councillor M. Statham gave the following response:

That's a valid point, well made, of course it is not sustainable forever, and most of the fat has gone, I would say 99% and that is why we are finding challenges at the moment. It is imperative that governments support, particularly on social care, we need that support even if social care is taken outside the bounds of the council, but we need that support to fund that. I agree with you moving forward.

Councillor Smith

As winter approaches, could the appropriate Portfolio holder inform me, this Council and the public of the following;

- a) Does Walsall Council have figures or at least an estimate of the numbers or "rough sleepers" in our Borough,
- b) To the Council's knowledge, what provision has been made /is going to be made available for those in Walsall who are homeless and face the prospect of living on the streets this winter, and,
- c) How will rough sleepers be made aware of such provision?

Councillor Garcha gave the following response:

Yes, I can confirm that the council does have an estimate number of rough sleepers. Every year a formal annual night count is undertaken to help monitor the number of rough sleepers in the borough. The annual night count is verified by an independent person, and this number is then formally published each December. Based on the last published data from 2023 there are 8 individuals who are classified as rough sleepers in the brough.

In addition to the formal count, the housing team also conduct bi-monthly night counts throughout the rest of the year. This helps to monitor the number of rough sleepers and identify any that we are not aware of and to make sure that we can get the support out to them as quickly as soon as we possibly can.

Walsall Council has an outreach team that work throughout the year to help support those rough sleeping, or at risk of rough sleeping, to access the necessary shelter, support and advice needed. Winter night provision has been organised during the period 1st October 2024 to 31st March 2025, and all known rough sleepers have already been offered assistance. Winter night

provision is provided through a mixture of block booking hotel accommodation and through use of existing temporary accommodation directly owned and managed by the Council.

We do have a statutory duty to provide shelter and accommodation to those who are rough sleepers and to those we believe are at risk of homelessness and this is more important during severe weather. In terms of the communications about the provision, we do have a daily outreach team who engage with rough sleepers. When rough sleepers are offered accommodation and should they choose not to accept it, the outreach team do reach out to them on a daily basis to ensure they are offered support every single time. The outreach team do offer a more holistic approach.

We have coordinated our communication with community organisations and the volunteers who we work very closely with in terms of referrals and again, to make sure we can provide a more holistic approach. The aim of the event was to develop a partnership strategy to help eradicate rough sleeping and homelessness. Winter night provision is also promoted via the Council's website.

In terms of rough sleepers compared to neighbouring authorities, we do have less numbers, but of course more work needs to be done, and we want to ensure that no one is in a position where they are out on the streets. That is why our team does a fantastic job in ensuring that they are reaching out every day to make sure that the support is available out there.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Is there any support in terms of providing rough sleepers with money, can they claim money from anywhere to help them get by, so they do not have to beg on the streets. However, I understand not all beggars are rough sleepers. Can rough sleepers in terms of support, does that include any income, how do they access this when they are on the streets.

Councillor Garcha gave the following response:

When it comes to support, it is about ensuring rough sleepers have the advice and to make sure they can receive the full effects of the support available to them. Rough sleepers can attend the voluntary community sector who are able to help them in accessing any support that they might be entitled to. Rough sleepers can access our Walsall Connected Centres which are across the Borough. We do also operate different systems, and our teams have various options available including Change to Action where we encourage those people who do wish to donate to make sure the money is going to the council who can allocate it accordingly in terms of what the rough sleepers might need. We do look at it from a holistic approach and any advice and support that is available, the outreach team is able to offer that to them.

56. **Annual Audit Report**

The report to Audit Committee held on 25 September, 2024 was submitted.

The Mayor welcomed Mr Green, Independent Chair of the Audit Committee who presented the report and responded to questions thereon. Members thanked Mr Green for his work as Chair.

It was **moved** by Councillor Singh Sohal, seconded by Councillor Elson and:

Resolved

That the Annual Report of the Audit Committee 2024/25 be approved.

57. **Recommendation of Licensing and Safety Committee**

Street Trading Review – Change of Designation to Consent Streets

The report to Licensing and Safety Committee held on 18 September, 2024 was submitted.

It was **moved** by Councillor Ferguson, seconded by Councillor Sears and:

Resolved

That Council:-

- 1) In pursuance of the powers conferred upon it by virtue of Section 3 and schedule 4 paragraph 2 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, authorises the designation of all streets in the controlled borough of Walsall as consent streets with effect from 1 December 2024; and that the prescribed statutory notice of intention be published accordingly, and
- 2) noted that the relevant changes to permits for existing licence holders will be made at the renewal stage in April 2025.

58. **Appointment of an Independent Member to Audit Committee**

A report was submitted.

It was **moved** by Councillor Singh Sohal, seconded by Councillor Perry and:

Resolved

That Mr D Walsh be appointed as an Independent Member to the Audit Committee with immediate effect for a four-year Term of Office concluding at the end of 2027/28 Municipal Year.

59. **Planning Committee Appointment**

It was **moved** by Councillor Perry, seconded by Councillor Andrew and:

Resolved

That Councillor Rasab be appointed as a Member of the Planning Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

60. **Appointment of Planning Committee Chair**

It was **moved** by Councillor Perry, seconded by Councillor Andrew and:

Resolved

That Councillor Bird be appointed Chair of the Planning Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

61. **Appointment to Outside Body - Harpers, Marsh, and Crumps Almshouse Charity**

It was **moved** by Councillor Ward, seconded by Councillor Jukes and:

Resolved

That Councillor Russell be appointed Trustee to Harpers, Marsh, and Crumps Almshouse Charity for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

63. **Portfolio Holder Briefings**

Deputy Leader and Portfolio holder for Economic Growth and Regeneration.

Councillor Andrew gave a presentation.

Members asked questions in relation to the presentation which were responded to by Councillor Andrew.

Children and Young People

Councillor Elson gave a presentation.

Members asked questions in relation to the presentation which were responded to by Councillor Elson.

64. **Notice of Motion**

The following notice of motion was **moved** by Councillor Perry and seconded by Councillor Andrew that: -

This Council acknowledges the persistent problem posed by off-road bikes in our neighbourhoods, which have become a societal scourge affecting residents across the Walsall Borough, county, and indeed the country. Despite with our partners our ongoing operational response, the challenges presented by these machines extend beyond mere law enforcement and require a comprehensive approach.

We resolve to:

1. **Recognise the Challenge:** Acknowledge that off-road bikes are a significant nuisance in our communities, creating safety hazards and disrupting the quality of life for residents.
2. **Advocate for Legislative Change:** Urge the government to consider enacting legislation that makes it an offence to supply these machines to young people. Additionally, we call for enhanced powers for law enforcement to enter premises and seize these vehicles more effectively.
3. **Enhance Operational Responses:** Continue our operational responses to this issue, while recognising that current efforts often result in minimal outcomes at court. We seek to balance immediate action with long-term solutions.
4. **Collaborate with Stakeholders:** Direct our officers to collaborate with local partners, and neighbour authorities' following proven successful strategies to tackle this issue more effectively.
5. **Public Awareness Campaign:** Implement a public awareness campaign to educate residents about the risks and consequences associated with off-road biking, fostering community support for solutions.

Conclusion:

The Council calls on all members to support this motion as we seek to address the challenges posed by off-road bikes in a holistic manner. Together, we can work towards creating safer, more peaceful communities for all residents.

Action Requested:

Resolve to write to the Minister of State for Crime and Policing outlining the above and seeking a commitment to investigate strengthening the law.

Resolved

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We resolve to:

6. **Recognise the Challenge:** Acknowledge that off-road bikes are a significant nuisance in our communities, creating safety hazards and disrupting the quality of life for residents.
7. **Advocate for Legislative Change:** Urge the government to consider enacting legislation that makes it an offence to supply these machines to young people. Additionally, we call for enhanced powers for law enforcement to enter premises and seize these vehicles more effectively.
8. **Enhance Operational Responses:** Continue our operational responses to this issue, while recognising that current efforts often result in minimal outcomes at court. We seek to balance immediate action with long-term solutions.
9. **Collaborate with Stakeholders:** Direct our officers to collaborate with local partners, and neighbour authorities' following proven successful strategies to tackle this issue more effectively.
10. **Public Awareness Campaign:** Implement a public awareness campaign to educate residents about the risks and consequences associated with off-road biking, fostering community support for solutions.

Conclusion:

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Action Requested:

Resolve to write to the Minister of State for Crime and Policing outlining the above and seeking a commitment to investigate strengthening the law.

The meeting terminated at 7.51pm.

Mayor:

Date: