



Minutes of the **ORDINARY MEETING** of the Council of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough held on **Monday 8 January, 2024, at 6.00 p.m.** at the Council House, Walsall.

Present

Councillor C.D.D. Towe (Mayor) in the Chair

Councillor G. Ali

“ B. Allen
“ A. Andrew
“ H. Bashir
“ M.A. Bird
“ C. Bott
“ P. Bott
“ R. Burley
“ S. Cheema
“ S.J. Cooper
“ S.K. Ditta
“ S. Elson
“ K. Ferguson
“ G. Flint
“ M. Follows
“ A. Garcha
“ P. Gill
“ N. Gultasib
“ A. Harris
“ L. Harrison
“ A.J. Hicken
“ A. Hussain
“ I. Hussain
“ K. Hussain
“ S.B. Hussain
“ T. Jukes
“ P. Kaur

Councillor R. Larden

“ N. Latham
“ E. Lee
“ R. Martin
“ R. K Mehmi
“ E. Morgan
“ K. Murphy
“ S. Nasreen
“ A.A. Nawaz
“ A. Nazir
“ A. Parkes
“ K. Pedley
“ G. Perry
“ W. Rasab
“ L.J. Rattigan
“ S. Samra
“ K. Sears
“ P. Smith
“ C.A. Statham
“ M.A. Statham
“ A. Underhill
“ M. Ward
“ V.J. Waters
“ J. Whitehouse
“ T. Wilson
“ R.V. Worrall

64. **Apologies**

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors Singh Sohal, Bains, Murray, Gandham, Hassan and Horton.

65. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 6th November, 2024, a copy having been sent to each member of the Council, be approved as a correct record.

66. **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

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

Resolved

There were no items in private session.

68. **Mayor's announcements**

The mayor welcomed Members to the first meeting of the year following the festive break.

69. **Change in the order of business**

Pursuant to 14(c) of the Council's Procedure Rules, the Mayor sought the leave of Council, which was duly given, to change the order of business to consider item 14 Auditor's Annual Report 2022/23 – Value for Money Summary, as the next item of business.

Resolved

That item 14. Auditors Annual Report 2022/23 be considered as the next item of business.

70. **Auditors Annual Report 2022/23**

A report was submitted.

(See annexed).

The Mayor welcomed Jonathon Leek along with his colleague, Kirsty Lees from Grant Thornton to the meeting. Mr Leek provided an overview of the salient points within the annual report and responded to questions thereon from Members.

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

Resolved

That the 2022/2023 Annual Audit Report be received.

71. **Petitions**

None submitted.

72. **Questions**

(a) From the public: None

(b) From members of the Council:

Councillor Ward

Overnight, Covid-19 changed the way organisations and their staff operated. A survey conducted by KPMG estimates that 63% of all workers will return to the office by 2026. Given this, could the portfolio holder confirm the following:

- 1) How many staff worked exclusively from the civic building pre COVID-19?
- 2) How many staff now work exclusively from the civic building?
- 3) How many staff have been given permission to work outside of the UK and if any staff have been given permission, where are they located?
- 4) Are there any plans to bring all staff back into the office on a permanent basis?

Councillor Bird gave the following response:

The council maintains a flexible approach to work and this is governed by our Ways of Working Policy framework which ensures that our staff are in the right location for the right job. This approach enables employees to work wherever they are needed to, in order to fulfil the requirements of their roles and deliver the councils priorities and outcomes. The council recognises both the business benefits and the wider social and environmental benefits of such a flexible working approach, as well as the benefit to the employee in an increasingly competitive labour market where attraction and retention is becoming more and more important in retaining talent.

Many of our staff work flexibly from a range of workstations, meeting rooms or collaboration spaces within a council building, out in the community, with customers or partners, from employee's homes, other suitable locations, or a combination (hybrid) of these based on the customer and business need. Of course, some of our frontline staff have roles that by their nature need to be carried out in a specific workplace or within the Community and they continued to fulfil those roles throughout the pandemic.

The application of the council's ways of working policy will always be subject to service and resident needs first and foremost, and any arrangements for working in a flexible way will depend on whether or not the role can be done effectively and efficiently from an alternative/home base and will meet customer/business need in addition to other considerations such as health, safety, employee wellbeing and data protection. There are many roles at the council where, for example, face to face contact is always necessary, the role needs to be performed on site due to its nature or essential equipment is at the office base and therefore flexible working will not be possible.

All employees have a designated office or workbase location which will be defined by their manager and service area, regardless of the way of working. All employees are expected to attend an office location as and when required, irrelevant of their way of working and must be able to accommodate such requests during their working hours and at short notice.

The council will only consider requests for remote working outside of the UK in exceptional circumstances for a period not exceeding 3 months within a tax year (April to April) and these are managed locally within service areas, in line with Remote Working (outside of the UK) Guidance and approved by Heads of Service.

Pre-Covid, staff attendance in the Civic Centre/Council House was just over 2,000 individual staff being in the office at some point during a month with around 1000 – 1300 on a daily basis. This dropped to 300 at the start of Covid and just 100 on a regular basis and throughout Covid remained below 600 staff with only the necessary teams coming in on a daily basis.

Currently we are back up to towards this figure at 1,800 individual staff recorded for Nov 2023 and this has increased significantly from the end of last year and throughout this year with a regular trend of 400 – 600 staff in the building every day, in line with our hybrid working policies, and this is a significant increase since last year from the 200 – 400 staff in December 2022.

Councillor Smith

The Blakenall area in particular has been plagued by the very dangerous actions of a few youths (male and female it seems) who have, over a period of many months, and even after recent arrests, been involved in throwing bricks and stones at moving vehicles and at buses in particular, resulting in damage to many vehicles, the cancellation of Bus 19 after 3pm, the reduction in the 30

minute service to an hourly service for the number 19 bus and the re-routing of other buses, all at considerable inconvenience to the local community whose dependence on public transport is above average compared to many areas of our Borough.

Given this and that despite collaborative efforts by Police, Council, Schools and Housing Associations, this behaviour is apparently still taking place in the same area, (as at the time of the submission of this Question on 20/12/23) can I ask you to tell us as much as you can do publicly:

- a) What actually is being done to solve this on- going problem and what reassurance can the appropriate Portfolio holder give me, this Council and above all, the residents of Blakenall, Harden, Goscote and Coalpool, the bus users, bus drivers and local shopkeepers that this dangerous criminal activity will be stopped, that proven offenders will be dealt with appropriately and that normal bus services in our area will be restored as soon as possible?
- b) Do you agree with me that despite all of this, we must put all this in perspective and recognise that the vast majority of adults and children in our area are good, law-abiding folk who are doing their best (for many in difficult circumstances) to cope with everyday life and all that this brings, are helpful and kind to each other and to their neighbours and just want to live a safe and peaceful life?

Councillor Perry gave the following response:

I agree with you that the vast majority of people who live in the Blakenall area and across Walsall never deserve to be associated with the type of criminal activity that you have been vocalising over many weeks and many months Councillor Smith. You also have my commitment that it will continue to get my attention as it has with our partners in trying to seek the right resolution for the vast majority of residents who live there.

You have asked specific questions about what activities have taken place, there will be a meeting next week on the 15 January which I know you and the Bloxwich East and Blakenall members have been invited to, where you will get more detail that cannot be shared in a public forum. This will be around some of the intelligence and actions that have been taken and particularly some of the arrests that have happened which is a matter for the courts as to how that will pursue.

Let me start with youth work, the Leader committed £100,000 at the beginning of summer last year, to the area on an annual basis. That was in response to a direct call from not just the community organisations who work on the ground in Blakenall, but from residents and members about some diversion activity for young people in that area, and that work has commenced. In addition to the money that we invested, we managed to secure a little bit more additional funding to provide to provide detached youth work in the Blakenall area that

commenced just before Christmas, that funding runs through until the end of March. We have had good engagement from young people who the groups are working with and also other voluntary sector community groups who are providing the support we need in that area. Of course, the vandalism of buses, taxis and other vehicles are part of the topic that those youth workers are working on and also the wider impact that it is having.

The Active Living Centre, that has always been a question that I have always asked, why don't we use those assets more for youth and diversion activity. They are part of this solution and working with us to provide more opportunities for young people in the Blakenall and Birchills Leamore footprint. I am pleased to tell you that just before Christmas I met with the organisation called the LionHeart Challenge which has predominantly operated thus far in the Palfrey area and has been successful in engaging difficult children and young people. We have committed funding to the LionHeart Challenge for the Blakenall and Bloxwich area and the first of those sessions will begin in earnest in the Spring. Part of that is working with the next generation of young people and citizens and giving them a solution led focus, so there is funding attached to it and the young people themselves pick the topic and come up with the response to that and as I said that has worked very well in Palfrey.

In terms of the Safer Walsall response, in November, Chief Superintendent Dolby held a partnership meeting, and he called senior members of the partnership to Blakenall where a site visit took place with the partners, and a conversation was had with the people they met at that time. This led to discussions around the short-, medium- and long-term plan of partnership engagement to deal with the problems that have been experienced, including organised criminal gang activity in the Blakenall area and you will get further detail on that next Monday.

Whilst we have been doing that, our partners have been gathering the right intelligence around individuals, locations of concern, and making sure we are very much sighted on those hotspot areas for the challenges that we have faced. We have already taken action around Ryecroft Cemetery, and I know the side effect of that has caused a bit of inconvenience to Cemetery users, notable of that there has been the cutting back of bushes, closing of gates, repairing of fences and CCTV. I am saddened to learn today that there have been further issues with Ryecroft Cemetery. These are deplorable acts, and they are taking place in areas of our community where it should not be happening, and a cemetery should be a safe place, it should be a sanctity of remembrance, not somewhere where people commit crime.

In terms of transport, that was an emergency decision that was taken by the bus operators and quite rightly they should have engaged more, and I think the Leader has made that point as well in terms of the Ward Members and the affected members of the public. Ultimately, they have a job to safeguard not just the bus drivers but the community who could be caught up with a brick being thrown through a window and causing harm to somebody. I know of many cases; we had a bridge in Pelsall where a house brick was thrown off a bridge through a car windscreen and caused significant harm to the individual driver,

so it is a serious issue. That said, the problem we have got now is causing disruption to residents, we don't want to see local bus services diverted, neither do we want to see them operating at reduced hours or frequencies.

Transport stakeholders were involved in a multi-agency operation on Monday, 18 December and high visibility patrols took place, working with the West Midlands Safer Travel Police and lots of people, including groups of youths, were actively engaged and that was a very positive day.

The multi-agency forum highlighted the need to ensure that, as well as statutory agencies, the local community must be part of the approach to stopping this issue from continuing. Educational work with young people in schools and communications to residents, highlighting the impact the issue is having on their community and in particular the impact on vulnerable people in their community has been identified as an action to pursue.

I do want to make a point about the meeting next week, of course it will typify the types of partnership exercises that are being undertaken and as I have mentioned already, some of those I cannot share publicly at this stage. The vast majority of people are law abiding and it is within all of our interests to increase public safety, reduce criminality and antisocial behaviour that is associated with it. We all have a role to play, and our communities have a role to play in challenging the behaviour from a family perspective, from a community perspective and more so, that the individuals who carry out these behaviours are someone's child, someone's neighbour and sometimes they are someone's friend. More importantly, the converse argument there is, I wonder how they would respond, if as a result of one of the mindless acts of throwing a brick through someone's window, if it injured a member of their own family travelling on a bus or using a taxi. It is the same argument when they damage a park, ten years ago they would have been playing on it but when they are older, they are vandalising it.

This issue is above politics, and it must be, because it is about giving decent people who live and work in this Borough, decent places to live, tackle illegality and antisocial behaviour. More importantly, we in this place need to stand together whether it is in Blakenall or any other area of the Borough, but condemning wrongdoing is crucial for building a just and harmonious society. It is important to stand against those actions that harm others, so that we can work together to promote understanding, empathy, and positive change that we know exists across Walsall.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

I have the upmost respect for Councillor Perry and the work that he is doing, and for the multi-agency approach, but local people want this problem sorting. Given the fact that at the moment a few reckless youths are holding the community to ransom, people not being able to get to work or back from work, school transport is affected and so on. Two of the three gates closed at the

Cemetery because of antisocial behaviour, inconveniencing many people, particularly with mobility problems to access parts of the cemetery.

My question is, will you do your utmost with the other agencies and with the Councillors to ensure that the bus service in particular is restored to its normal service as soon as possible.

Councillor Perry gave the following response:

Absolutely, it is within the interests of not just the operator but the community that those bus routes serve, to have that bus route operating safely and in accordance with the routes as published. I also know that the Leader is taking that matter up with the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Councillor Smith

Now that Walsall Council has a closer “handle” on Borough wide housing waiting lists, can the appropriate Portfolio holder inform me, this Council and the public what their records show relating to:

- a) The number of persons on a waiting list for suitable accommodation because they are homeless, including the number of children involved,
- b) The number of persons on a waiting list because they are living in inadequate , unsuitable or overcrowded accommodation including the number of children involved,
- c) The number of people who are currently living in temporary accommodation such as hostels or hotels, including the number of children involved, and could you also tell us whether the figures are generally on the rise for these three categories or whether they are declining?

Councillor Perry gave the following response:

The Council opened a new independent housing register in September 2023 and is planning to start matching properties to applicants using this new waiting list, from February onwards. There will be some detail in my response, there will be some that will follow and there will be more detail that I am happy to share with all Members.

To date, the Council has received 5,713 applications to join the new list (2927 of the applicants were already registered on the Walsall Housing Group (whg) list and have consented to have their data passed over to the Council to join the Council’s new independent list). It will not be possible to comment on trend data until that new waiting list is more established. However, I can confirm that whg have seen rising numbers on their waiting list over the last few years. In September 2022 whg reported that there were 16,000 households registered

on their list. That said, their list was open to all, not just people who lived and worked in Walsall, where as our list is more closed.

All applications received since September 2023 are currently being reviewed and re-assessed in accordance with the new Housing Allocation's Policy which is due to come into force after 31st January 2024. As the Council's housing team are still in the process of reviewing these applications, it is not possible to accurately respond to the questions you have asked using that data at this stage and I will respond further to you when I have more accurate data.

In the meantime, the housing team have used the data held by the Council's internal homeless team to answer some of the questions you have asked:

- a) The number of persons on a waiting list for suitable accommodation because they are homeless, including the number of children involved.

There are currently 72 households (which equates to 284 people, including 188 children) for whom the Council has accepted a homeless duty and are waiting to be matched to a suitable property. Where needed, the Council has provided these homeless families with temporary accommodation, or other types of accommodation whilst they wait for their offer of settled housing.

- b) The number of persons on a waiting list because they are living in inadequate, unsuitable, or overcrowded accommodation including the number of children involved.

This element of the question will be answered in writing after 31st January 2024 when all new applications have been reviewed.

- c) The number of people who are currently living in temporary accommodation such as hostels or hotels, including the number of children involved.

As at 22 December 2023 there were 110 households, which equates to 389 people, living in various types of temporary accommodation, that includes Council owned housing stock, supported accommodation and bed and breakfast accommodation. Of the 389 people staying in that temporary accommodation 217 of those were children.

Using snapshot data at the end of December for the last 6 years, the overall trend demonstrates that there are increasing numbers of households and children in all forms of temporary accommodation. This is in line with national trends. The majority of Walsall households living in temporary accommodation are waiting for an offer of a 3-bedroom property. Homeless households typically wait longest for permanent offers of 4-bedroom properties as they are scarce rarely become available for re-let in Walsall. I will share the further detail when that arises.

I will make one final comment, I think we can be very proud of the team that we have working for us in Walsall. Whilst the problems are similar across the Black

Country and beyond, the way the Walsall team deal with homelessness cases is second to none and they should be credited with the effort that they put in that goes over and above the weekly hours that they are paid for.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Now the Council have taken over the responsibilities for the homeless registers, yet they have not got total control over the lettings because the Council have no properties. Are we not seeing a situation where, if the Council's pushing it out to the community associations to help, that people are going to be blaming the Council and even blaming the community associations that are helping the Council on this, for the fact that they are perhaps not getting the accommodation that they want and as quickly as they want.

Councillor Perry gave the following response:

There will be an element of that, I am sure. 50 percent of the availability we have in Walsall will be in the control of the Council and it is fair to say that this list is the right thing to do, because it wasn't being managed appropriately, and we have got some control over the availability of properties.

More importantly, what we have to do is to work not just with social landlords but with those who wish to be part of the private offer, to come on board with us so that we can improve not just our letting offers, but also the standards and quality of accommodation that private landlords are letting at the same time.

There's a lot of work in progress, but I think our rates are better in comparisons and I think there is a dedicated team of officers who do all they can to house people swiftly and in the right accommodation as soon as possible.

Councillor Smith

In a Government Press release entitled "Simpler recycling collections and tougher regulation to reform waste system published 21 October 2023 it states:

"Weekly collections of food waste will also be introduced for most households across England by 2026 – ending the threat of smelly waste waiting weeks for collection and cutting food waste heading to landfill. This will also stop a trend towards three- or four-weekly bin collections seen in some local authorities across the UK, particularly in Wales"

Can I ask the appropriate Portfolio holder:

- a) What the Council's response to this is and whether indeed it plans to introduce a weekly collection service for food waste, presumably subject to prior public consultation?
- b) If it does, when is this likely to commence?
- c) If it does, how, in practice, will this work?

Councillor Murphy gave the following response:

In October, the government announced that weekly collections of food waste will be introduced for most households across England by 2026.

The introduction of weekly food waste collections is expected to significantly reduce the amount of organic waste going to landfill. The new mandate will ensure that all local authorities provide this service, thereby promoting a more sustainable approach to waste management. Food waste is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, particularly methane. By collecting and properly disposing of food waste, these emissions can be significantly reduced. For example, food waste can be used to produce biogas, providing a renewable source of energy and reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

As this is a statutory requirement, there will not be a public consultation on whether or not the service is introduced. Take up of the service, will however, be optional.

As we develop our plans, we will look to consult with residents about how best to help them recycle their household waste, including food waste. Recycling rates are not where we would like them to be and therefore it is essential that we deliver this service in an accessible and convenient way to encourage active participation.

The service will be in place by March 2026 in accordance with the government's requirements. Prior to implementation cabinet will consider a report setting out the approach to be taken.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

If this does come in, and if you don't get sufficient government money to cover any extra cost, can we have an assurance that this will not be at the expense of charging for the green garden waste service.

Councillor Murphy gave the following response:

We don't as an administration believe in charging for green waste, and we never have done so no, our residents won't suffer regardless of the funding we get, or not.

73. **Mayoralty 2024/2025**

A report was submitted (see annexed).

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

Resolved

That Councillor A. Harris be nominated as Mayor and Councillor L. Harrison be nominated as Deputy Mayor of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council for the municipal year 2024/2025

74. Formation of Political Groups

The report of the Chief Executive was circulated around the Council Chamber.

Resolved

That the receipt of returns from political groups be noted.

75. To appoint members to serve on Committees

A list of nominations from the political groups was circulated around the Council Chamber.

The list was **moved** by Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Andrew and:

Resolved

That the following members be appointed to Committees for the municipal year 2023/24:

Audit Committee

Councillors Bains, Larden, Mehmi, Nawaz, Parkes, Singh Sohal, (1 Vacancy), Mr. A. Green (Independent member), (2 Independent member vacancies)

Corporate Parenting Board

Councillors Elson, Jukes, Harrison, Hicken, Nazir, Waters, Worrall

Health and Wellbeing Board

Councillors Elson, Flint, Nawaz, Pedley

Licensing and Safety Committee

Councillors Bains, C. Bott, Cooper, Gandham, Gill, A. Hussain, K. Hussain, Kaur, Martin, Nawaz, Rasab, Sears, Ward, Worrall

Personnel Committee

Councillors Andrew, Bird, Garcha, Gill, Jukes, Nawaz, Parkes, Ward, Whitehouse

Planning Committee

Councillors Bains, Bird, Bashir, P. Bott, Follows, Gandham, Garcha, Harris, Horton, A. Hussain, I. Hussain, K. Hussain, Larden, Martin, Murray, Nawaz, Samra, M. Statham, Underhill, Waters.

Standards Committee

Councillors Allen, Andrew, Bashir, Burley, Follows, Lee, Martin Sears, Samra, Underhill

Scrutiny Overview

Councillors P. Bott, Cooper, Follows, Hicken, K. Hussain, Latham, Murray, Nawaz, Sears, Singh Sohal.

Children's Services

Councillors Garcha, Harrison, Hicken, Jukes, Latham, Nasreen, Nawaz, Rasab, Rattigan, C. Statham, Whitehouse

Education

Councillors Ditta, Gill, Gultasib, I. Hussain, S. Hussain, Kaur, Latham, Morgan, Rattigan, Singh-Sohal, Towe

Economy and Environment

Councillors Allen, P. Bott, Cheema, Follows, Gill, Cooper, Kaur, Larden, Hassan, Ward, Whitehouse

Social Care and Health

Councillors Gill, I. Hussain, K. Hussain, S. Hussain, Martin, Mehmi, Nawaz, Parkes, Rasab, Rattigan, Waters

76. **To appoint Councillor Natalie Latham as Chair of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

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

Resolved

That Councillor Natalie Latham be appointed as Chair of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

77. Appointment of representatives on outside bodies and charities

A list was circulated around the Council Chamber.

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

Resolved

That the following members be appointed to the undermentioned bodies for the remainder of the 2023/24 Municipal year (unless otherwise stated):

(a) Outside Bodies

West Midlands Pension Fund Committee

X1 vacancy and X1 substitute vacancy

West Midlands Combined Authority – West Midlands Investment Zone Joint Committee

Councillor Andrew

Parking and Traffic Regulations outside London Adjudication Joint Committee (PATROL AJC)

Councillor Bashir and X1 substitute vacancy

West Midlands Fire & Rescue Authority

Councillor Waters (To answer questions on the discharge of the functions of the Fire Authority) and Councillor Cheema

(b) Charities

Harper, Marsh and Crumps Almshouses

X1 vacancy

78. **Recommendations of Cabinet**

The following reports to Cabinet held on 13th December, 2023 were considered:-

a) Treasury Management Mid-Year Position

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

Resolved

That, in line with the requirements of the Treasury Management Code of Practice (2021)), the mid-year position statement for treasury management activities 2023/24 including prudential and local indicators (Appendix A), be noted.

b) Walsall Youth Justice Annual Service Plan

It was **moved** by Councillor Elson, seconded by Councillor Bird and:

Resolved

That Walsall's Youth Justice annual strategic plan be approved.

79. **Portfolio Holder Briefings**

Internal Services

Councillor Ferguson gave a presentation.

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

Children's Services

Councillor Elson gave a presentation.

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

The meeting terminated at 19.20 p.m.

Mayor:

Date: