

Cabinet

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 December 2024 in Shire Hall, Warwick at 6.00pm.

Present: Councillors Davison (Leader), Adkins, Chilvers, King, Melrose, Roberts, Sinnott, and Williams.

Also Present: Councillors: Day (Conservative Group Observer), Falp (Whitnash Residents Association Group Observer), and Boad (Liberal Democrat Group Observer).

69. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Billiald, Hales (representative of the Budget Review Group), and Councillor Milton (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee).

70. **Declarations of Interest**

Minute Number 85 – Planning Applications – High Rise Fire Safety Works.

Councillors Boad and Falp declared an interest as Chair and Vice-Chairman of Planning Committee.

71. **Minutes**

The minutes of the 17 October 2024 meeting were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

Part 2

(Items upon which a decision by the Council was not required)

72. **General Fund Base Budget 2025/26**

The Cabinet considered a report from Finance which informed Members on the base General Fund Budget for Warwick District Council, which consisted of recurrent and previously agreed non-recurrent budgets, and budget change proposals.

The report presented an unbalanced budget for 2025/26 at this stage, with a forecast deficit of £3.525m. This was an increase of £1.091m from the £2.434m deficit forecast in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) last presented to Cabinet in September 2024, with the General Fund Volatility Reserve to be used to balance the budget.

£1.004m of the increase was driven by non-recurrent spend which was expected to be met from funding either through the Local Finance Settlement once confirmed or from reserves. The remaining £0.087m of recurrent growth had been incorporated into the MTFS forecast.

There were further matters that would need to be reviewed in order to finalise the base position as part of the 2025/26 budget setting process

before the final budget would be presented to Full Council on 19 February 2025.

The report contained a number of assumptions within the budget presented, including a 2.99% increase in Council Tax charges, in line with the MTFs last approved in February 2024.

The Council was required to determine its budget requirements in order to set the Council Tax for 2025/26.

In preparing the 2025/26 Base Budget the over-riding principle was to budget for the continuation of services at the existing level. The following adjustments need to be made to the 2024/25 Budget:

- removal of non-recurrent activity;
- addition of inflation (contractual, including a provision for salary pay awards);
- addition of previously approved recommendations from Cabinet;
- addition of budget changes (growth) items; and
- inclusion of any identified savings.

The proposed Base Budgets for 2025/26 were shown in the report as below. These figures include all financing charges.

| | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Net Expenditure for District Purposes 2024/25 Original | | | 21,264,800 |
| Inflation | | | 280,700 |
| Staffing | | | 1,473,100 |
| NI Uplift | | | 455,100 |
| Growth | Increases in expenditure | 4,044,800 | |
| | Reduced Income | 193,000 | 4,237,800 |
| Removal of non-recurrent / time limited expenditure / income | | | (7,572,700) |
| | | | (1,126,000) |
| Changes in Service Income and Expenditure | | | |
| Use of Reserves | | | (15,900) |
| Changes in Contributions from Reserves | | | 81,500 |
| Net Expenditure for District Purposes 2025/26 Original | | | 20,204,400 |

The budget presented an unbalanced position at this stage, with a forecast deficit of £3.525m.

Appendix 1 to the report showed the breakdown of the budget by service area and its associated financing. Key drivers of the position were highlighted.

A provision for inflation was included within the MTFs, last approved in February, for 4% of recurrent expenditure, totalling £1.212m. The main call on this would be allocations to support any potential pay award being agreed for the 2025/26 financial year. In recent years these had been agreed mid-way through the year in question, making it necessary to ensure there was funding available for when this was approved. The remainder of the provision would be to support major contracts.

Where budget managers believed that there was a requirement for a budget change to reflect service delivery, they were asked to complete a budget changes (previously growth) form. These needed to be signed off by Heads of Service before being collated for Executive review.

The Executive team reviewed the proposals put forward, and as at this stage of the budget process, recommended the inclusion of the following GF proposals:

| General Fund (GF) Criteria of Officer Approved Budget Request | Approved Recurring Budgets | Approved Non- Recurring Budgets |
|--|---|--|
| Existing regulatory requirement | 78,100 | 610,000 |
| Service redesign (These should have their own supporting business case) | 28,700 | 230,100 |
| Approval already received (e.g. HAY Panel, Committee Report) | 155,000 | 10,000 |
| Additional cost resulting from fees and charges increase | 1,000 | 0 |
| Unavoidable Change in Service | 415,300 | 154,200 |
| | 678,100 | 1,004,300 |

Proposals totalling £34k had been withdrawn following review. This left a further £0.8m of proposals awaiting a decision. Many of these required further analysis with the service areas or were reliant upon confirmation aligned with meeting the Councils strategic priorities.

The budget reflected changes as a result of WDC's involvement in the establishment of the West Midlands Investment Zone (WMIZ). As part of this, the Council reached an agreement as to the financial envelope of business rates that would be available to WDC to finance local growth initiatives (LGI's). In November, the Council put forward its first LGI, Abbey Fields swimming pool, for approval by the WMIZ Board in December 2024. The LGI and its accompanying financial profile contained assumptions around business rate growth on the Investment Zone sites and borrowing rates.

As the cost of borrowing was previously assumed to be funded within the MTFs, these costs had been removed and would be funded externally via the arrangement summarised above. The profile of costs removed from 2025/26 should deliver a benefit to the budget of £0.7m for this year, and average £0.2m per annum through the MTFs.

The Chancellor announced the 2024 Autumn Statement on 30 October 2024. This gave some early indicators for how local government funding was expected to be distributed through the finance settlement. It confirmed that there would be a 3.2% real-terms increase in Core Spending Power (CSP) for the whole sector in 2025-26. This would include £1.3bn additional grant funding, of which at least £600m would be directed to social care. It was currently unclear therefore if this was an average for the sector, or whether District Council's would also receive this increase.

£233m new funding for homelessness prevention was outlined in addition to the £1.3b grant funding referenced above. Whilst welcome, there was no mention on any increase to the housing benefit subsidy cap for

temporary accommodation (TA) or to uprate Local Housing Allowance rates again, which would mean the significant TA financial pressures the Council had reported in recent years (and more recently in the Q1 budget report in September 2024) remained. A budget growth request had been submitted as part of the management of this issue. In line with a similar approach to last year, a pre-settlement policy statement was intended to be published ahead of the provisional settlement being released, to offer further details.

It was expected that the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement would be released in December ahead of Christmas. Last year it was released on 18 December 2023.

The recent announcements regarding what the provisional settlement would outline were once again a holding position, designed to offer some stability based on a uniform roll-over of the core elements of the settlement. However, this would be the fourth year in succession that the Government had only provided local authorities with a single-year settlement. The hoped-for multi-year settlement had again not been forthcoming, which continued to make financial planning very difficult for local authorities. However, the Autumn Statement made clear indications that a multi-year settlement would be likely for 2026/27.

The Government had reaffirmed its commitment to reforming the approach to funding allocations within the Local Government Finance Settlement by redistributing funding to ensure that it reflected an up-to-date assessment of need and local revenues. This would start with a targeted approach to allocating additional funding in 2025/26, ahead of a broader redistribution of funding through a multi-year settlement from 2026/27. The Government would set out further details through a future local government finance policy statement.

The Budget also announced a set of business rates tax policy measures which were also relevant to local government given that business rates were used to fund local authorities. 2025/26 tax rates were set, with the small business multiplier in England being frozen for a fifth consecutive year at 49.9p, while the standard multiplier would be uprated by CPI in March 2025.

A Retail, Hospitality and Leisure relief of 40% for eligible businesses was confirmed. It also saw an announcement on changes to tax rates from 2026/27. The Government intended to introduce permanently lower tax rates for Retail Hospitality and Leisure properties with rateable values below £500k, to be funded by a higher tax rate for properties over £500k. It was confirmed that government would work to ensure that, as far as practicably possible, local government income was unaffected by business rates tax policy changes and that local government was compensated for administration costs.

The Council, as part of setting the 2024/25 budget in February 2024, made a prudent assumption that financial reform of local government funding could take place as early as 2025/26. This assumed the loss of business rates growth within the MTFs, and also reduced the provision for New Homes Bonus (NHB) and Funding Guarantee (FG) allocations to a combined total of £1m p.a. from 2025/26. As part of a minimum 4%

settlement in 2024/25, a total of £3.364m was received by WDC (£0.902m NHB and £2.462m FG).

Therefore, it was likely (subject to confirmation), that a 3.2% settlement for 2025/26 would deliver funding above what was assumed in the MTFS. The Council would continue to use Business rates overperformance, NHB and the Funding Guarantee to fund one-off items (growth budget changes), or to top-up reserve balances which in turn could be used to support major programs of work such as Planned Preventative Maintenance (PPM) of our corporate assets, our ICT strategy and Equipment Renewal. In addition, it would enable the Council to support delivery of the Corporate Strategy.

The MTFS was last formally reported to Members in September 2024 as part of the Q1 Budget report. The below table showed the change in position once the changes outlined through the Budget Setting process had been incorporated into the Strategy:

| | 2025/26 | 2026/27 | 2027/28 | 2028/29 |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | £m | £m | £m | £m |
| Deficit-Savings Req(+)/Surplus (-) future years (as at Sept 24) | 2.434 | -0.250 | -0.903 | N/A |
| Deficit-Savings Req(+)/Surplus (-) future years (as at Dec 24) | 3.525 | 0.496 | -0.210 | -0.674 |
| Change in Position | 1.091 | 0.746 | 0.693 | N/A |

As part of the MTFS position above, a number of key assumptions had been included:

- a 2.99% Council Tax increase per annum;
- a 2% tax base increase per annum;
- inflation of 3% from 2026/27;
- revenue expenditure costs associated with additional forecast borrowing;
- 'Fair funding' reform for Local Government Financing settlements commencing from 2026/27, including a business rates reset, resulting in the reduction of business rates growth and core spending power grant funding from New Homes Bonus and the Funding Guarantee;
- continued delivery of the change programme launched in March 2024;
- costs associated with the delivery of Abbey Fields Swimming Pool being funded as a Local Growth Initiative from 2024/25; and
- no changes to fees and charges policy at this stage. An update to this will be provided for 26/27 onwards, in line with the outlines and recommendations from the Fees and Charges Review reported to Cabinet in October 2024.

The Council continued to maximise returns in line with its Treasury Management Strategy by ensuring reserves were invested when not required. In addition, agreed borrowing was only taken upon need, and where possible, 'internal borrowing' using reserve balances was used to

minimise the associated revenue cost, particularly as interest rates remained high. This would be discussed in greater detail as part of the updated Treasury Management Strategy, which would be presented to Cabinet in March.

Appendix 2 to the report provided a breakdown of the MTFS by key expenditure drivers.

Members had previously agreed that £1.5m should be the minimum level for the core General Fund Balance. This balance supported the Council for future unforeseen demands upon its resources. In order to consider a reasonable level of general reserves, a risk assessment had been completed, which covered the requirement for maintaining this minimum balance to mitigate against the risks that had been identified, where other funding was not available.

The unallocated General Fund Balance was forecast to be £1.5m, and therefore was in line with the agreed minimum level.

The Business Rate Retention Volatility Reserve (BRRVR) was previously used over prior years to deliver a balanced budget. Last year the decision was made, to ensure this reserve remained available for its primary purpose of smoothing business rate receipts, that any overperformance above a £2m balance was reallocated to the General Fund Volatility Reserve. Business rates were discussed in section 1.2 in the report, which included the expected changes to Business Rate Retention which had been delayed over the last few years. With the result of the expected changes in mind, it was essential that the Council continued to move away from its reliance on overperformance receipts to balance the budget in future years, with the Change Programme being a primary driver in this strategy.

A change programme delivery reserve was established in 2024/25, funded with £0.500m from the Services Transformation Reserve. This was available on an 'invest to save' basis to enable delivery of schemes within the change programme that may require an initial investment in order to deliver recurrent savings.

The Head of Finance had delegated authority enable drawdown from the Equipment Renewal Reserve within the agreed schedule. Any further requests or requests above the agreed schedule would require Member approval.

The full reserve projections would be presented to Council as part of the February Budget Report, alongside an explanation for each reserve. Some of the reserves would have additional commitments not reflected in the schedule, which would reduce the projected balances.

In addition, some reserves were over-committed, which would either require further funds being allocated to them, or a reduction in funded activity. Decisions on funding could only be made once we have received final confirmation of the Local Finance Settlement in December 2024.

In accordance with the Council's Code of Financial Practice, all new and future capital schemes had to be in line with the Council's corporate

priorities, including its capital strategy. A report supported by the necessary Business Case should be prepared for review and approval by Cabinet, identifying the means of funding and, where appropriate, demonstrating options and risk appraisals exercise had been carried out. Should there be any additional revenue costs arising from schemes, the proposed means of financing such had to also be included in the report and business plan.

With this being taken into consideration, the latest Capital Programme would be presented to Council as part of the February 2025 Budget Report, detailing both the General Fund and Housing Investment Programme (HIP), along with their associated funding. It would also outline where slippage and savings on existing schemes had occurred. The Council had some balances and funding which it was able to use to fund specific projects and service demands. The sums available could be used to fund 'one-off' items only. Any initiatives that would result in a recurring cost to the Council needed to be accommodated within the revenue budget. A full update on the reserves position would be reported as part of the February Budget Report.

Within the MTFS approved in February 2024, it was forecast that there would be a requirement of £2.434m from the General Fund Volatility Reserve (GFVR) to enable a balanced budget to be presented for 2025/26. This would be a reduction from the £4.475m required in the prior year, and reflect the actions taken by the Council to deliver on corporate priority one to deliver a financially sustainable position. One such action was the commencement of the change programme. While there was an expectation that further funding would be received through the Local Finance Settlement once confirmed in December which could be used to reduce the deficit by funding the £1m non-recurrent growth, it should be noted that the Council still had a sufficient balance (£3.853m) in the GFVR to accommodate the forecast £3.525m deficit as outlined in the report.

In terms of alternative options, Council did not have an alternative to setting a Budget for the forthcoming year. Members could, however, decide to amend the way in which the budget was broken down or not to amend the current year's Budget. However, the proposed 2025/26 budget sought to reflect the decisions made by Members and make appropriate recommendations.

As agreed in February 2024, the budget setting timetable was amended, and as part of this change, the base budget contained within the report was being presented much earlier to Committee in December 2024. The benefit of this approach was that it would give Senior Officers and Cabinet more time to review additional budget requirements, in particular budget changes and growth requests, before they were put forward for final approval at February Council alongside setting the Council Tax.

Any changes to the proposed budgets would need to be fully considered to ensure all implications (financial or otherwise) were addressed. If any Member was considering suggesting changes to the proposed Budget, these proposals should be discussed (in confidence) with the Head of Finance beforehand to ensure all implications were considered, including

funding. If appropriate, alternate Budget papers could be prepared for consideration by Council.

The Budget Review Group noted the recommendations in the report, the increase in the deficit, and the work completed by officers to resolve this, including the anticipated government settlement. The Group asked officers and the Portfolio Holder for Resources to continue to work on reducing the deficit within the budget.

Councillor Chilvers proposed the recommendations in the report and noted comments from the Budget Review Group.

Resolved that

- (1) the proposed 2025/26 revenue budget as detailed in section 1.1 in the report, be noted, and the shortfall on the year of £3.525m could be addressed using the General Fund Volatility Reserve at this stage of the process, be noted;
- (2) the impact on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) due to changes detailed within the report, how these changes are expected to be accommodated, be noted;
- (3) the proposed budget changes proposals (including growth), how these are classified and their current status for inclusion in the 2025/26 budget and the MTFS, be noted; and
- (4) the next stages in the budget setting timetable, leading to the final budget being presented to Full Council on 19 February 2025, be noted.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Chilvers).
Forward Plan Reference 1,478

73. Housing revenue Account Base Budget 2025/26

The Cabinet considered a report from Finance which presented a balanced budget for 2025/26 and informed Members on the base Housing Revenue Account Budget for Warwick District Council, which consisted of recurrent and previously agreed non-recurrent budgets, and budget change proposals.

The report presented a balanced budget for 2025/26, with a forecast requirement of £2.937m from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Investment Reserve (CIR). This was presenting an increased requirement from the CIR of £5.6m from that presented in the Business Plan last approved in March 2024.

The key drivers of the change included new additional expenditure made up of £1.076m recurrent growth and £0.696m non-recurrent growth. In addition, there was an increased requirement to use external borrowing

to support approved capital schemes in year of £3.1m. The remainder of the variation was driven by a reduction in rental income due to its uplift being linked to CPI, which was 0.3% lower than previously forecast.

The report recommended the base budget requirements that would be used in the setting of the HRA budgets for 2025/26. These figures reflected the costs of delivering an agreed level of service, and any unavoidable changes in expenditure (for example, where the Council was contractually or statutorily committed to incur additional expenditure).

Any changes that needed to be resolved that had not been included in the budgets at this stage would be fed into the February HRA Budget & Rent Setting report. In February, the Council would be able to agree the 2025/26 Budget for the year alongside the HRA rent setting following confirmation of the housing rents and communal utility recharges.

A full revision of the Housing Investment Programme would be presented to Cabinet on 6 February 2025 as part of the final budget setting report.

The dwelling rents report was integrated into the final stage of Budget Setting and would be presented to Cabinet on 6 February 2025.

In determining the 2025/26 Base Budget, the over-riding principle was to budget for the continuation of services at the agreed level. The following adjustments needed to be made to the 2024/25 Original Budgets:

- removal of any one-off and temporary items;
- addition of inflation (contractual services and pay only);
- addition of previously agreed growth items;
- addition of unavoidable growth items;
- inclusion of any identified savings; and
- addition of any Rental Income Inflation.

The table below summarised how the net income from services position had changed from 2024/25 to 2025/26. A full breakdown of the HRA budget (including capital financing and interest charges) could be seen at Appendix 1 to the report.

| | £ |
|--|--------------------|
| Original Net Income from Services 2024/25 | (6,866,300) |
| Net Increase in Expenditure | 975,600 |
| Net Increase in Income | (2,580,800) |
| Original Net Income from Services 2025/26 | (8,471,500) |
| | |

Key drivers of the change in Expenditure budgets included:

- an increase of £672,500 in HRA Repairs and maintenance costs caused by new staff, new budget requirements for regulatory works and increased inflation on contracts;
- a decrease of -£15,800 being charged to Supervision & Management (General) which consist of increased costs linked to new contracts procured to facilitate regulatory changes as included in budget growth requests;

- an increase of £176,900 being charged to the Supervision & Management (Special) budget line which is linked again to New Staff which were included in Growth Requests linked to the regulatory improvements;
- £139,200 increase in Depreciation Charge on Council Dwellings caused by substantial numbers of new dwellings being handed over the Councils HRA; and
- a £2,580,800 net increase of HRA Rental Income as per Rent Policy and Inflation.

A number of assumptions had been made in setting the budgets for 2025/26 as follows.

Inflation had been applied in line with specific guidance for each expenditure type, for instance the Gas and Electricity inflation had been advised by ESPO, other inflation factors such as for the major works costs had been inflated at various percentages depending on the contract, staff costs had been inflated in line with the National Local Government Pay agreement and where there were no clear inflation factor percentages a 3% estimate had been applied to general budgets where applicable, which was a decrease from 4% used in the previous year.

Although the more detailed rent increases would be included in the final HRA Budget & Rent Setting Report which was presented to Cabinet in February 2025. For this first version of the Budget report the base rent budget was calculated using inflation advised by the Social National Rent Policy. The rent Policy for Social and Affordable Housing had confirmed an inflation of Consumer Price Index (CPI) at September 2024 which was 1.7% +1% so a total increase of 2.7% from April 2025.

Shared Ownership rents were previously governed by a different rent policy, as set out in the Rent Review schedule of shared ownership leases. Shared ownership rents used to increase once a year by a maximum of Retail Price Index at November plus 0.5%. To ensure that shared ownership rents were increased using a more modern measure of inflation, from 12 October 2023, the policy was updated by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and instead increased once a year by CPI at September plus 1% for new shared owners, subject to certain exceptions. This reform brought shared ownership rents into line with the limit that normally applies to annual rent increases in other forms of social housing.

Rent Policy had been very unpredictable with various changes in recent years, but the new Government announced in their October 2024 budget that it would be consulting on a new five-year social housing rent settlement, which capped the rents social housing providers could charge their tenants, to provide the sector with the certainty it needed to invest in new social housing. The intention would be for this to increase with Consumer Price Index inflation figures and an additional 1%. The consultation would also seek views on other potential options to give greater certainty, such as providing a 10-year settlement.

Although this update mainly affected the Council's Housing Investment Plan and Capital receipts the new Government confirmed at the recent

Autumn Budget that Councils would be able to retain 100% of the receipts generated by Right to Buy sales. With the view that this change would enable Councils to scale-up delivery of much needed social homes whilst still enabling longstanding tenants to buy their own homes. The Chancellor had set out how Right to Buy discounts were to be reduced from the 21 November 2024 to protect existing social housing stock to meet housing need, whilst ensuring long-term tenants could still benefit to deliver a fairer and more sustainable scheme that also presented better value for money for Councils.

These changes had been fed into the capital Budgets and HRA HIP where financial guidance had been issued and these updates would also be included in the HRA Business Plan which would be presented to Cabinet in March 2026.

Where budget managers believed there was a requirement for a budget change to reflect service delivery, they were asked to complete a budget changes (previously growth) form. These needed to be signed off by Heads of Service before being collated for Executive review.

The proposals put forward had been reviewed by the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive and Programme Director, and at this stage of the budget process recommended the inclusion of the following HRA proposals:

| Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Criteria of Officer Approved Budget Request | Approved Recurring Budgets | Approved Non- Recurring Budgets |
|--|---|--|
| Existing regulatory requirement | 307,200 | 197,300 |
| New legislation requirement | 68,000 | 0 |
| Invest to save initiative (Part of Change Management) | 125,000 | 0 |
| Service redesign (These should have their own supporting business case) | 566,500 | 498,100 |
| Advanced approval already received (e.g. HAY Panel, Committee Report) | 0 | 0 |
| Additional cost resulting from fees and charges increase | 10,000 | 0 |
| Unavoidable Change in Service | 0 | 0 |
| | 1,076,700 | 695,400 |

Proposals totalling £0.301m were awaiting a decision. Many of these required further analysis with the service areas or were reliant upon confirmation aligned with meeting the Council's strategic priorities.

Appendix 1 to the report showed the breakdown of the budget by key income and expenditure categories, and their associated financing. HRA Capital Investment Reserve (HRA CIR) - Any HRA operational surplus above the amount required to maintain the appropriate HRA working balance of £1.5m was transferred into the HRA Capital Investment Reserve (CIR) to be used on future HRA capital projects. If HRA costs increased to the point that there was a requirement to draw money out of the CIR then this was noted in the same place in the budget Appendix 1 to the report. The 2025/26 Base Budget required a £2,937m contribution from the reserve into the HRA operating budgets

to enable the budget to be balanced, which meant that there were no top ups being paid into the HRA CIR in 2025/26.

The Current Balance of the HRA CIR was £20.488m, this could change once the 2023/2024 accounts had been finalised. There were numerous demands on this reserve particularly for the financing of housing acquisitions, regulatory improvements, Fire Safety works and decarbonisation works. The CIR was available to support the Major Repairs Reserve to support the ongoing improvement works on the Councils Housing Stock. The full impact of having to drawdown from the HRA CIR would be documented in the forthcoming HRA Business Plan Report being presented to Cabinet in 19 March 2025 but in future years budgets would need to be adjusted to ensure that there were sufficient surpluses to enable the HRA CIR to continue to be topped up.

The Budget Review Group requested reports be shared earlier, to give sufficient time for Members to read and effectively scrutinise. The Group noted the significant work from officers, considering the challenges that had been faced during the past year and the regulatory changes. The Group recognised the importance of providing Council homes, particularly for vulnerable residents living within the District.

Councillor Adkins proposed the recommendations in the report and noted comments from the Budget Review Group.

Resolved that

- (1) the latest revenue budget for Housing Revenue Account Services in respect of 2025/26 as outlined in Appendix A to the report be noted; and
- (2) the next stages in the budget setting timetable, leading to the final budget being presented to Full Council on 19 February 2025, be noted.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Adkins).
Forward Plan Reference 1,510

74. Procurement Exercises over £150,000

The Cabinet considered a report from Finance which sought approval to begin the procurement exercises identified in the report, in line with the agreed Procurement Code of Practice, with details set out in the Confidential appendix to the report.

The report brought forward all proposed procurement exercises ready to be sourced, some of which formed key decisions as they were over £150,000; others were provided for advisory purposes. As explained in the report to Cabinet in March 2024, a gap was identified within procurement governance process at WDC which was clarified by Cabinet and Council to confirm that any proposed procurement activity above

£150,000 needed to be considered by Cabinet.

These exercises were set out in the confidential appendix to the report (due to the values associated and the Council not wanting to declare the anticipated budget). These items and the reason for their procurement were set out within the confidential appendix to the report, so as not to disclose the Council's position in respect of the anticipated cost. It should be noted that these exercises were at early stages of the procurement process.

In terms of alternative options, in respect of the recommendations, the Cabinet could decide not to approve some or all of the identified procurement activities, however, some of these related to the provision of core or statutory services, and to pause or stop at this stage would significantly delay some of these activities where new contracts were required.

Councillor Chilvers proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that

- (1) the commencement of the following procurement exercises requiring key decision approval, be approved:
 - Business Continuity Service;
 - Fire Safety work and associated improvement works;
 - laptop replacement programme; and
- (2) the commencement of the following procurement exercises for advisory purposes, be approved:
 - Play Area at Castle Farm;
 - Play Area at Mill Gardens;
 - General Housing repairs and Voids; and
 - Decarbonisation works and associated improvement works.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Chilvers and Davison).
Forward Plan Reference 1,465

75. Abbey Fields Cycle Route Consultation

The Cabinet considered a report from Safer Communities, Leisure and Environment. At the meeting held on 8 March 2023, Cabinet agreed that a more detailed design work should be done on the preferred route for a cycle route across Abbey Fields. This had been grant funded by Warwickshire County Council from Active Travel England (Active Travel Capability Fund). It was also agreed that, following the completion of the design work, a public consultation should be undertaken, running for a period of six weeks. The report updated Cabinet on the design work that had been carried out since March 2023, including resolving complex

issues concerning the scheduled ancient monument, and sought agreement from Cabinet to the brief and scope of the six-week consultation.

The preferred route agreed in March 2023, was Route 1, as seen in Appendix 2 to the report. Officers had been working with Warwickshire County Council and Sustrans to develop more detailed design proposals for this route, including addressing feedback from Historic England regarding the potential impact on heritage assets.

This preferred route was based on the principle of widening the existing pedestrian path across Abbey Fields to three meters, to meet national guidelines for a shared use cycle/pedestrian pathway (Local Transport Note (LTN 1/20) – Paragraph 6.5.7). The solution was identified as it minimised the impact on Abbey Fields with regards to its status as an Ancient Monument.

On this basis, Sustrans were commissioned to prepare detailed designs to widen and upgrade the Abbey Fields paths to a shared-use walking and cycling route

The widening of the path was proposed to be undertaken using a “no-dig” approach to minimise sub-terranean disruption.

There were several specific design details that still needed final resolution including:

A section of the proposed path, south of the Finham Brook towards Borrowell Lane, deviated for a proportion of its length away from the existing footpath on advice from Historic England to minimise the impact on the current hedge line which the current footpath ran alongside, as seen in Fig. 1 in the report. In principle, this had been agreed with Historic England but was waiting on the outcome of a proposed Heritage Assessment.

The redevelopment of the Swimming Pool was integral to the proposed cycle path and, as such, there was ongoing dialogue between Sustrans and the Council Project Team over the details on the proposed levels around the corner of the proposed Leisure Centre and the duck feeding platform.

There needed to be detailed discussions around the access point from Bridge Street to understand the interactions of the different users at that point.

There were ongoing discussions, with internal colleagues involved in the construction of the new swimming pool, around the management/mitigation of the interaction of the different users across the extent of Abbey Fields, especially around the “pinch-points” surrounding the new swimming pool. Soft surfaces, bollards, ramps, signage etc. were all being considered.

WCC had completed feasibility designs for a new Toucan signal-controlled crossing on the A452 Bridge Street to connect with the existing traffic-free walking and cycling route along the Finham Brook to the Kenilworth

Greenway (National Cycle Network Route 52 to Coventry). WCC had also completed feasibility design for a new Toucan signal-controlled crossing to replace the existing zebra crossing on the B4103 Borrowell Lane to connect with the existing traffic-free walking and cycling route to Castle Farm (also part of National Cycle Network Route 52) to Warwick. It was proposed that the new Toucan crossings would form part of the consultation.

The March 2023 Cabinet report committed the Council to undertaking a six-week period of consultation following the completion of the route design. However, the report did not specify the scope of that consultation. Appendix 1 to the report set out the proposed scope of the consultation, along with a procurement brief to enable a consultation expert to be brought on board to manage the process on behalf of the Council.

It should be noted that Appendix B of the March 2023 Cabinet report summarised previous consultation activity going back to 2016. Whilst there were clearly differing views about the proposal for a cycle route across the park, the Cabinet agreed to support further work to design the preferred route and to carry out a further consultation. Given that feedback from Historic England suggested other routes were not feasible, it was proposed that the consultation focused on feedback regarding the design of the preferred route thereby using local knowledge to help finalise any outstanding design issues.

The anticipated timescales were set out below:

| | Nov 24 | Dec 24 | Jan 25 | Feb 25 | Mar 25 | Apr 25 | May 25 |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Completion of Heritage Assessment | | | | | | | |
| Consultation with FOAF | | | | | | | |
| Discussion of Heritage Assessment with Historic England | | | | | | | |
| Procurement of consultant for Public Consultation | | | | | | | |
| Discussion with Legal about public by-laws | | | | | | | |
| Detailed discussions on interface between swimming pool development and cycle path | | | | | | | |
| Public consultation | | | | | | | |
| Report to WDC Cabinet | | | | | | | |

Depending on the consultation and the decision taken by Cabinet on the way forward and the potential access to the full funding required, it was anticipated that it would be possible to complete the tender process by the end of 2025 and commence construction in Spring 2026.

In terms of alternative options, one option would be to seek views on route options through the consultation. This option was not proposed because feedback from Historic England had been clear that other options would be more damaging to the scheduled ancient monument and would not be supported by Historic England. It would therefore be misleading and raise false expectation to include this in the consultation. In any event, Cabinet had already agreed the preferred route option.

Given that previous consultations had sought views on whether there should be a cycle route across Abbey Fields at all, another option would

be to limit the consultation to exclude any question about whether a route should go ahead or not. This option was not proposed because for the first time, the choice between no route at all and a clearly defined route was clear. Further, consultation law required that the consultation was not presented as 100% a fait accompli and it was always an option not to proceed.

It was proposed an external organisation be used to manage the consultation. An alternative to this would be to manage the consultation internally within the Council. This option was not proposed due to capacity constraints which would risk further delaying the consultation. However, it would be important that the Council took responsibility for ensuring that the matters set out in paragraphs 3.3 and 3.4 in the report were built into the process.

Councillor Williams proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that the brief for the procurement of an external organisation to undertake a six-week consultation on the Abbey Fields cycle route (as set out in Appendix 1 to the report), be approved.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Williams).
Forward Plan Reference 1,397

76. **Cost of Living Project Proposal**

The Cabinet considered a report from the Chief Executive which sought approval from Cabinet for the allocation of the £65k per year for the next three years to Citizen Advice South Warwickshire, to deliver an outreach financial advice service across Warwick District.

The cost of living was continuing to have a devastating impact on household budgets for many people in making decisions about what they prioritised.

The Council was keen to do what it could to help families and vulnerable individuals access the range of support available.

The vision of Citizens Advice South Warwickshire (CASW) was that it sought to provide free, independent, confidential, and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. CASW valued diversity, promoted equality, and challenged discrimination.

Citizens Advice South Warwickshire had a long-standing track record of delivering financial advice and support to residents in the District. This was an opportunity to build on the significant ongoing investment that the Council already provided to Citizens Advice South Warwickshire.

The project was to enable Citizens Advice South Warwickshire to expand its services by appointing two full time Generalist Advisers to cover several key locations including Parish areas, community hubs, health centres, libraries, churches, and faith groups, with regular drop-in services for local residents.

This would be delivered as face-to-face provision, close to where residents lived and would augment Citizens Advice existing provision at the Community Pantry in Lillington, drop-in services at Hamilton Terrace, and at the Royal Pump Rooms.

The new service would be able to support residents with complex needs by providing a clear referral route into more targeted support through their projects including Advice Action Empower in Warwick Town, Warwick Foodbank and the debt team.

Citizens Advice South Warwickshire were committed to working with health partners and local surgeries to ensure a seamless advice pathway for patients to find out more about how Citizens Advice South Warwickshire could provide confidential advice to help build resilience and better manage their health outcomes.

In addition, Citizens Advice South Warwickshire ran a telephone line, offering full advice via telephone that ensured that residents had further support available to them whether it be before or after their face-to-face appointment.

The appointed workers would liaise closely with other providers working in the community including Parish areas, Age UK, WDC Heart Team, Church and other religious organisations, health partners, Dementia Support Team, community hubs and warm/social hubs across Warwick District.

The referral pathways would be via telephone, signposting onto workers alongside a dedicated email access point. Referrals would also come from the telephone line and from the supervisors and volunteers who saw clients face to face at Hamilton Terrace.

An alternative option would be to utilise the additional funding to create a Warwick Support Fund aimed at older people impacted by the removal of the winter fuel allowance who were just above the threshold of pension credits and struggling families. WDC could support these two groups by providing fuel vouchers and signposting for food support. However, the Citizens Advice South Warwickshire proposal offered a more comprehensive package of support for WDC residents.

Another alternative would be to do nothing, which was not recommended as residents of the District would not benefit from this additional assistance.

Councillor Sinnott proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that

- (1) Citizens Advice South Warwickshire be allocated the £65k per year over the next three years to deliver an outreach financial advice service across the District, be approved;
- (2) the allocation of funding based on the Service detailed in appendix 1 of the report, be

approved; and

- (3) the funding will be allocated in the form of a grant/service level agreement which will be measured against the following key performance indicators detailed in appendix 1 to the report, be agreed.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Sinnott).
Forward Plan Reference 1,505

77. Advertising and Sponsorship Policy

The Cabinet considered a report from Marketing and Communications which sought to provide framework and guidance for officers when advertising or sponsorship opportunities were sold to local businesses and organisations.

Advertising was the practice and techniques employed to bring attention to a product or service, which put it in the spotlight, drew it to the attention of consumers, and was usually paid for.

Sponsorship was to support an event, activity, person or organisation financially or by providing products or services. It should be mutually beneficial and should not be confused with other types of funding which the Council administered, such as grants.

There could be cross-over between how advertising and sponsorship works in Corporate Advertising & Sponsorship Policy. For example, advertising on roundabouts was usually called sponsorship because the funds supported the cost of maintaining these Sites.

The Council's use of advertising was part of the Council's ongoing commitment to communicate openly, provide important public information, raise awareness of the Council's role, work, and successes, encourage positive behaviour change, and promote opportunities for people to engage with the Council and local decision making. Examples included promoting local consultations, encouraging people to vote and promoting the Government's cost of living campaigns.

In June 2024, the Change Programme Board approved the proposal to generate income via selling advertising space on the Council's website and offering roundabouts for sponsorship.

This initiative provided the opportunity to generate income into the Council, which could be used to support and enhance services. It had been fully reviewed where there was the potential for this policy to impact the Council's reputation, firstly if it was not managed and coordinated effectively and consistently, and secondly, if the officers coordinating it did not have the expertise or understanding of how to capitalise on the benefits of effective advertising and sponsorship. Whilst advertising and sponsorship provided the opportunity for income generation, it was essential that it was managed within the wider context of the Council's strategic aims and priorities and advertiser/sponsor's organisations aligned with the Council's core values.

This Policy would provide a consistent framework to centralise the approach to advertising/sponsorship opportunities. It would provide clear aims and objectives for accepting advertising/sponsorship, and conversely, reasons why some organisations would be rejected.

In addition, the Policy would provide the necessary governance for this new initiative. The Head of People and Communications together with the Marketing and Communications Manager and the Head of Service from the related service area, would have the final say on every advertising/sponsorship opportunity, where any issues would be discussed with the wider Senior Leadership Team, so that each advertiser/sponsor could be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

The Marketing and Communications Manager would oversee the advertising/sponsorship as it progressed. They would ensure the WDC brand was reflected accurately, and cross-check advertising/sponsorship across the Council which could have been requested via different service areas.

The Advertising and Sponsorship Policy would provide a basis to support officers with understanding the impact of their advertising/sponsorship on the Council's reputation, which ensured aims and objectives were aligned with Council's strategic priorities as well as its core values.

The alternative option would be to manage advertising and sponsorship without this Policy. However, the potential inconsistency of approach and lack of governance and expertise in this area would risk mistakes being made and put the Council's reputation at risk. It could also impact existing relationships with organisations who would be impacted if WDC got it wrong.

Councillor Melrose proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that the approach and process as detailed in the Advertising and Sponsorship Policy (Appendix 1 to the report), be approved.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Melrose).
Forward Plan Reference 1,506

78. **Election Count Venue – Code of Procurement Practice Exemption**

The Cabinet considered a report from Governance which requested an exemption from the Code of Procurement Practice to enter an agreement with Grandstand - Stoneleigh Events Limited (and individual contracts for each event) for the provision of an election count venue (in May 2025, May 2027, May 2028, May 2029 and up to one other occasion) along with associated ancillary services for the venue hire.

The Council's Code of procurement Practice required a competitive process for all contracted spend above £25,000. However, CPV 75100000-7 (administration services) within the Light Touch Regime of the Public Contract Regulations 2015 (PCR2015) provided flexibility

procuring contracts with a total spend below £552,950 +VAT, which gave discretion to the Council to award without going out to competition if it was deemed not beneficial to do so, as long as the decision-making process was fair, open, and transparent.

The provision of the Count venue was the responsibility of the Returning Officer (which for Warwick District Council was the Chief Executive) for each election. The elections project board had considered options for the delivery of the election count for 2025 through to 2029.

The project board, worked with the Procurement Team and recognised there was a need to test the market to see what suppliers were available locally for an agreed specification. The Returning Officer wanted to ensure agreement was in place to cover the whole election cycle of Parliament where an election could be called within minimum notice. This way it removed a significant risk to delivering elections and provided a secure working environment.

Therefore, an outline specification for a venue was developed to allow for the delivery of the election count for WCC elections in 2025 (Warwick District Divisions), District & Parish (2027) PCC Election (2028) (for WDC Area) and WCC Election (May 2029) (Warwick District Divisions). Agreement was also sought for the venue host another election in this period, i.e. the next UK General Election, which was due to take place before August 2029.

Expressions of interest were sought and the only venue that expressed an interest was the current provider at Stoneleigh Park. Officers had assessed the venue and agreed that it met the outline specification provided.

In terms of alternative options, the Returning Officer had considered alternative venues, within the Council's portfolio of assets, and methods of operation, but these were not considered appropriate for the delivery of this significant event for the Council, especially as none of its assets owned were of suitable size.

Councillor Davison proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that an exemption under the Code of Procurement Practice of up to (£200,000) for the Council to enter a contract with Grandstand - Stoneleigh Events Limited (and individual agreements for each event) for the provision of an election count venue (in May 2025, May 2027, May 2028, May 2029 and up to one other occasion) along with associated ancillary services for the venue hire, be approved.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Davison).
Forward Plan Reference 1,524

79. **Mill Gardens and Castle Farm Play Area Upgrade**

The Cabinet considered a report from Safer Communities, Leisure and

Environment which sought authority to proceed with the project, as funding was in place for the replacement and improvement of the play areas in Mill Gardens and Castle Farm.

WDC was seeking to improve the quality of Green Spaces throughout Warwick District. This was to ensure that everyone had access to high quality public open spaces within 15-minutes' walk of their home that were defined as 'good' by the Green Flag self-assessment criteria.

The Cabinet report related to two sites shown in images within the report and it was intended that Mill Gardens play area would be delivered first – once the procurement process had been followed, and then Castle Farm play area would follow once improvement works to the drainage on the site had been undertaken which was anticipated to be in May 2025.

Where relevant, the report aimed to deal with the sites in order with Mill Gardens first, however, the Equality Impact Assessments had been assessed separately to reflect the site differences and opportunities.

At Mill Gardens, in the area under the extensive tree canopies from the mature and well-established trees there were large areas of shrubs. These were mature but there was a significant issue with rodents in the area and they could invite litter to collect. Part of the design of the area would be to remove the dense shrubs in the northeast area of the site to reduce vermin and to open the site up in this area as well as provide shade within the play area.

The Castle Farm site was located between the edge of the suburban area in Kenilworth and the area related to the Castle and the surrounding area including the fishponds and the footpath link to Abbey Fields. To the west of the site was Inchbrook Brook tributary which ran to the west of the site. To the west of the hedge adjacent to the play area was the Kenilworth Moss Local Wildlife Site.

The park surrounded the leisure centre and focused on leisure activities and nature. The character of the site had been significantly altered and extended with the new leisure centre which had increased the number of visitors to the site. It also introduced a clean modern aesthetic with the introduction of new materials and a colour palette. Additionally, there were improved activities introduced to the site beyond the built form with pétanque and the outside area for the scout/guide centre. The car park of the leisure centre had also been extended to allow for extra capacity on days where the sports pitches were in use and people had travelled from the leisure centre across to the sports pitches.

The area which surrounded the new leisure centre, which including the play area, had had little investment over the past few years and was starting to show signs of age that the new building highlighted and contradicted. Castle Farm, along with other destination park play areas had some of the oldest play equipment across the District compared to the other 59 sites. Other destination parks included St. Nicholas Park and Newbold Comyn, which also had some of the oldest play equipment and were key sites for upgrading which was likely to be reflected in the Play Area Improvement Programme.

A recent questionnaire, undertaken with parents of children at Evergreen School, clearly set out the importance of facilities to afford an ease of access in terms of the parking, toilets, dropped kerbs, level thresholds etc. that meant the site was more able to meet the needs of accessible users than other sites in the local area. The play equipment as it was, did not reflect an accessible environment and would be a key focus of the design, both in terms of consultation and play equipment and surfacing.

The replacement of the play area, which included equipment and surfacing, was proposed to improve the area as part of the ongoing commitment to improving green spaces within the District. The Green Space Strategy had focused its investment over the last 12 years on neighbourhood parks and play areas and the focus was now on the destination parks such as Mill Gardens and Castle Farm. There was an annual inspection of all play area sites in the District undertaken by The Play Inspection Company. Within the site-specific risk assessment undertaken in March 2024, the annual inspection highlighted the need for investment at both sites.

Play equipment required a vigilant and cyclical maintenance program for both repair and replacement to ensure it was not outdated or no longer functioned through wear and tear, weathering or anti-social behaviour. The maintenance program ensured the play equipment was safe to use for the community.

A revised Play Area Improvement Programme was estimated to be provided to Cabinet in May 2025, which would list year by year a programme of all the Districts' play areas that needed upgrading and the investment needs. This programme would be based on the latest annual inspection/condition survey as well as other factors discussed further below.

Officers had reflected on the last annual inspection outcomes and believed there was an opportunity to have the installation of new play areas at Mill Gardens and Castle Farm well underway prior to the formalisation of the updated Play Area Improvement Programme. The Green Space Team regularly considered the need to repair, revitalise, and replace play equipment and the play environment to provide a good play experience for children and families in the District but also in terms of play value, that the item of play equipment provided interest and grew skills and physical challenge to aid growth.

In addition to regular inspections by Council officers and Idverde play team, the Council also commissioned an annual audit by a specialist consultancy to undertake a detailed and comprehensive inspection of all public play facilities to ensure they were fully aware of the current condition and anticipated life expectancy of play equipment.

This information fed back into the commissioning and specification of play equipment on new sites as well as the ongoing maintenance for play equipment undertaken within the Green Space team.

At the time of writing, the play area failed to fully meet Play England's 10 principles for designing successful play spaces, which were:

- 'bespoke'
- well located

- make use of natural elements
- provide a wide range of play experiences
- are accessible to both disabled and non-disabled children
- meet community needs
- allow children of different ages to play together
- build in opportunities to experience risk and challenge
- are sustainable and appropriately maintained
- allow for change and evolution

The evaluation regarding the need to replace play equipment was based on several factors which included the following.

The play equipment in Mill Gardens lacked key components which would be included in the replacement play equipment, such as no swing provision and limited equipment for people with accessibility issues. Equipment, such as the shelter, had been removed and there was a void area in this prominent part of the park.

Within Castle Farm, there was a variety of play equipment to provide a range of play activities such as swinging, climbing, sliding, rotating, sand play, rocking etc. However, the play experience was lacking, and it did not provide a coherent play experience. For example, there was a sand area with limited play equipment near a rope climber pyramid. The incremental development of the play area was let down by the older pieces of play equipment, such as the swings and the multi play unit, which were in disrepair with moss and algae on them.

An independent play area inspection was undertaken annually by The Play Inspection Company, who inspected the individual pieces of equipment for repair and issues that needed rectifying.

Both sites had shorter life expectancies compared to other play areas that had been upgraded over the last 15 years.

The number of repairs needed to the equipment per site could be an indicator of the remainder of life cycle left in the play equipment and would increase as items became worn.

Surfacing beneath play equipment had altered over time with different preferences emerging. In Mill Gardens, due to the location and the length of time it had been down, the bitumen surface was worn or damaged which needed addressing and the safety surfacing was in poor condition. Additionally, there was algae, silt, or moss growth on the surface which could be slippery.

Surfacing preference at the time of writing was for a rubber bonded mulch, which allowed for water to permeate to prevent standing water. It would be soft if there were falls and trips and would provide a firm surface which would allow ease of use for wheelchair users and pushchairs. The surfacing both in terms of condition and type could be a factor in considering whether play equipment needed replacing.

In Castle Farm, the older play equipment had grass mat surfacing, however, over time the surfacing had disappeared as the soil had come to the surface, which made it less absorbent. Underneath the newer

equipment there were contained areas of loose bark chippings. This could present a challenge to those with mobility issues where the step could be a barrier and the bark a challenge to wheelchairs users to overcome.

In Castle Farm, the existing play area was sited beyond the extent of the flood zone, however, the ground frequently became saturated and struggled to dry out during wet weather. Part of the plans for Castle Farm was to include a shallow Sustainable Drainage System (SuDS), beyond the play area with drainage across the area proposed. This would help ensure the play area could be used throughout the year and would provide a drainage pond designed with planting and materials to encourage wildlife. This linked to the wider goals for the site, not only to improve biodiversity, but also to provide an opportunity to improve knowledge of existing habitats onsite through onsite education.

The report by The Play Inspection Company stated there were 'some accessible features; an area that presents difficulties to the majority of people with disabilities but in favourable circumstances and certainly in partnership can be accessed.' This was less than ideal in terms of the level of play provision WDC would like to achieve in such a high profile and well used sites for the community.

The alternative option would be to retain the existing equipment to the point of failure and its removal, either incremental or wholesale, and at some point, closure. A further option would be to repair the play equipment piece by piece as they failed, however, this option would be significantly more expensive to undertake and would be likely to generate a play environment which lacked a cohesive design. WDC had completed some major repairs successfully to a few items in this play area, such as the ship, and this had been far more cost effective than replacement. For other items of play equipment, such as the smaller pieces, it would not be cost effective. Alternatively, it could be cost effective to reduce the number and variety of play equipment, however that would not meet the high standards required for these high-profile sites.

Councillor Roberts proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that

- (1) the replacement of the play equipment and surfacing of the play areas at Mill Gardens and Castle Farm parks, subject to a maximum budget (the amount provided in confidential Appendix 1) for all costs for the construction of the project, be agreed;
- (2) authority be delegated to the Head of Safer Communities, Leisure and Environment, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood, to agree the final design within the agreed budget; and
- (3) the procurement of suitable play equipment providers, in line with Council's Code of

Procurement Practice, be approved, and authority be delegated to the Head of Safer Communities, Leisure and Environment to apply for all necessary permissions, consents, and licences to enable these works.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Roberts).
Forward Plan Reference 1,512

80. **Decarbonisation and Energy Efficiency Framework for Council Homes**

The Cabinet considered a report from Housing which sought approval for the Decarbonisation and Energy Efficiency Framework for Council Homes. The Framework set out how the Council would ensure all of its homes would reach at least EPC 'C' by 2030 and the challenges associated with meeting this target.

WDC's Corporate Strategy included a strategic priority of 'Low Cost, Low Carbon Energy across the District'. This committed the Council to finding ways to reduce energy consumption and bills across its residential and commercial properties. Part of this priority included developing a Decarbonisation and Energy Efficiency Strategy to ensure existing Council homes reached a minimum of EPC 'C' by 2030.

In addition to the Corporate Strategy priority, commitments to improving our housing stock to meet EPC 'C' were made in the Climate Change Action Plan and Fuel Poverty Strategy. More widely, the energy efficiency of social housing was an important national issue and had recently been included as part of the of the Regulator for Social Housing's statutory consumer regulation objective.

Improving the energy efficiency of our housing stock was therefore of high importance, but there were a significant number of challenges to achieving this. The purpose of the Framework was to understand these challenges and set out how the Council would address them.

The Framework was attached at Appendix 1 to the report. It began by detailing the wider policy context that it sat within and explained why reaching EPC 'C' was an appropriate target. Importantly, this target was not the end point for the Council's efforts to improve the efficiency of its housing stock, but a milestone on the journey to Net Zero. It was expected that there would be further work to improve WDC's homes beyond EPC 'C' and where upgrades were undertaken to the homes, these would consider the wider goal of reaching Net Zero.

The Framework also laid out in detail the challenges to reaching EPC 'C', which included the diversity of WDC's housing stock, the data held about Council homes and the need for effective resident engagement. The cost implications and resource limitations were also discussed along with the funding opportunities for energy efficiency works.

To address these challenges, four key principles were identified:

- "improve the quality of our energy performance data and our

- knowledge of our housing stock;
- work in partnership with our residents to deliver upgrades and ensure that any improvements benefit residents' energy costs and comfort;
- integrate energy efficiency/building performance into our maintenance and improvement works; and
- make sure upgrades represent value for money and seek funding to contribute to energy efficiency improvements."

These principles would serve as a simple framework against which any work associated with improving the energy efficiency of our homes could be assessed. In addition, the principles formed the basis for an action plan which set out specific tasks that officers considered necessary to reach EPC 'C' and against which progress could be measured. Given this was a substantial long-term project, the actions and target dates might evolve as our knowledge and experience builds. As such they would be reviewed as necessary.

There were also several broader delivery milestones associated with this project to highlight for context as follows:

- "Surveyors recruited - April 25.
- Work on EPC F properties commences – April 25.
- Stock Condition Survey finalised – August 25.
- Analysis of Stock Condition Survey work against works required for Decarbonisation– October 25.
- Delivery programme constructed – December 25.
- HRA Business plan – HIP approved – February 26".

It should also have been noted that the Framework was focused on Council owned rented homes and did not include leasehold homes where the Council remained the freeholder (as the Council had no right to make alterations within the home of leaseholder) unless it was necessary to do work to such properties to facilitate work on our rented homes, such as to the fabric of the building. Even where improvements were made to a leasehold property, the Council was unable to undertake an EPC to measure the effectiveness of the work as the property was not in the Council's ownership.

There were two alternative options to approving the current framework. The first, was not to approve it and cease work on it. However, this would be contrary to the commitments within several Council policy documents, which included the Corporate Plan.

The second option was to require changes to the Framework if Members considered these were necessary. This could be done in two ways, either by giving instructions to officers and delegating final approval of the Framework to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Assets once the changes had been made or by requesting changes and that the Framework be presented again to Cabinet for approval when completed.

Councillor Williams proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that the Decarbonisation and Energy Efficiency Framework for Council Homes set out at

Appendix 1 to the report, be approved.

(The Portfolio Holders for this item were Councillor Adkins and Councillor Williams).

Forward Plan Reference 1,504

81. Lease extension to Myton Church for the Westbury Centre

The Cabinet considered a report from Place, Arts and Economy, which brought forward proposals for Cabinet to agree a new extended lease to Myton Church for the property known as the Westbury Centre, and to agree a similarly extended lease to the adjacent property known as Jubilee House, in the circumstance that this property was assigned to Myton Church from the existing tenant. The report also sought agreement that each lease was granted at one peppercorn, given that the combined value of each lease extension was less than the existing repairing liabilities Warwick District Council potentially held on the Westbury Centre.

The Westbury Centre was located in the south of Royal Leamington Spa Town Centre off Westlea Road within a residential suburb. A 1950s building of brick construction, it comprised a full height main hall under a shallow dual pitched roof with single storey flat roof extensions constructed directly south, east, and west. There was an area of landscaping to the front of the building along with a hard surfaced car park and games court to the side (set out in Appendix 1 to the report, tinted pink on Plan 1).

In 2004, Warwick District Council (WDC) let the Westbury Centre to Warwickshire Association of Youth Clubs (WAYC, subsequently known as Young People First (YPF)) on a term of 99 years as headquarters and a youth club and community centre for which WDC received a capital receipt at the commencement of the lease followed by a peppercorn rent of £1 per annum, if charged, for the length of the lease. As such, WDC retained the freehold of this land.

Additionally in 2004, land to the rear of the Westbury Centre was let to WAYC/ YPF on a co-terminus term of 99 years following which YPF built a modern two storey office building with associated car parking in 2006 (known as Jubilee House), which provided accommodation in support of the youth & community centre (Appendix 1 to the report, tinted blue on Plan 1). WDC also received a capital receipt at the commencement of this lease followed by a peppercorn rent of £1 per annum, if charged, for the length of the lease. As such, WDC retained the freehold of this land.

In 2014, YPF assigned its leasehold interest within the Westbury Centre to Myton Church (MC) and more recently WDC had been approached by YPF regarding their intention to assign their remaining leasehold interest (78 years) for the Jubilee House site to MC, as permitted under the terms of their lease.

In turn, MC had approached the Council regarding their wish to be granted a new lease term of 250 years for their Westbury Centre site and to request the same term for the neighbouring Jubilee House site, should the assignment from YPF to MC take place.

These longer-term leases were required by MC to support their intention to undertake significant investment to refurbish or redevelop the Westbury Centre buildings that were dated, suffered from a poor layout, structural issues, as well as poor energy efficiency. Their intention was to provide updated or new accommodation that better served the needs of the Church and the local community, as well as delivering an energy-efficient lower carbon building. The more modern Jubilee House element would, if assigned to MC, be retained as part of and to support their new development.

MC's request for one (or possibly two) new longer-term lease/s of 250 years (in comparison to the 78-year remaining term/s) provided them with the certainty and long-term legacy to encourage successful fundraising through its members and beyond.

Whilst the alternative option of a freehold sale of the Council's land had been considered, in retaining the freehold title, the Council maintained wider control on the future of the site, given its adjacency to the Ford's Field recreation ground and that the Council also ensured the site was used for community use. Whilst such similar restrictions might be placed on a freehold title, retention of the freehold and provisions within a long lease provided suitable controls on the site and the ability to determine longer-term use of the site should the current tenant's intentions change.

WDC had therefore used consultant valuation surveyors to provide leasehold valuation figures to show the value of the proposed two new longer terms leases. (see Confidential Appendix 2, Table 1 to the report).

Surrendering both leases and granting new longer-term leases required the parties to consider upon what terms the new longer-term leases would be granted. The parties had discussed permitted user clauses associated with the Church and the continued community use of the facility, as well as standardising landlord and tenant responsibilities, consistent with a long lease including no break clauses and MC taking full repairing liability for the Westbury Centre, in contrast to the terms of their existing lease.

Confidential Appendix 1 to the report set out cost data regarding repairing liabilities WDC potentially held on the Westbury Centre.

WDC had received legal advice as referred to in Confidential Appendix 1 to the report.

Negotiations with MC had arrived at a mutually beneficial position as referred to in Confidential Appendix 1 to the report.

Both new leases would be granted at a consideration of one peppercorn as explained in the Confidential Appendix 1 to the report.

In terms of alternative options, Cabinet could decide not to grant the new extended lease(s), however, this would likely hinder MC's ability to fundraise and undertake the wider improvements they sought to make to the buildings and consequently the facilities available to their organisation and the local community. Please also see Confidential

Appendix 1 to the report regarding this option.

A second alternative was outlined in the Confidential Appendix to the report.

Cabinet could decide to sell the freehold of each site. However, by retaining the freehold title the Council maintained long term control on the future of the site adjacent to a WDC owned open space as well as its use for community value. Whilst restrictions might be placed on a freehold title, provisions within a long lease provided suitable and potentially stronger controls on the site and the ability to determine longer-term use of the site should the current tenant's intentions change.

Councillor Adkins proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that

- (1) the surrender and re-grant of a lease term of 250 years to Myton Church for the land and buildings known as the Westbury Centre for one peppercorn (Appendix 1, area tinted pink on Plan 1 to the report), be approved;
- (2) the surrender and re-grant of a lease term of 250 years to Myton Church for the land and building known as Jubilee House (Appendix 1, area tinted blue on Plan 1 to the report) in the circumstance that Myton Church first takes an assignment of this property from the existing lease holder, Young People First, be agreed;
- (3) in each case, a 250-year lease is granted at one peppercorn, be approved; and
- (4) authority be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive to agree the rest of the terms of each new 250-year lease.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Adkins).

Forward Plan Reference 1,508

82. Response to Government Consultation on enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings

The Cabinet considered a report from Governance which brought forward a proposed response from Warwick District Council in respect of the Government consultation on enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at Local Authority meetings.

The Government started a Consultation on the 24 October 2024 for eight weeks on enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings. The consultation sought views on the detail and practical implications of allowing remote and hybrid attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings in England.

The Government was consulting on introducing powers for local authority members to apply to the relevant authority for a dispensation to attend formal Council meetings remotely and vote by proxy in certain circumstances.

The Government had set out its intention to reset the relationship between central and local government as partners in delivering better outcomes for the communities they collectively represent. The Government was of the view that key to this was supporting the sector to modernise democratic engagement, raise standards, and widen the range of candidates standing for Council by removing unnecessary barriers.

The attendance of elected Members at local authority meetings was a core part of the democratic process at local level and was integral to Members carrying out their functions effectively. In addition to the value of Members coming together to debate and discuss the issues which impact the lives of the people they represented; it was also important that local residents had the opportunity to engage directly with the people they had elected to take key decisions on their behalf.

At the same time, the Government recognised that there were circumstances in which it might not be possible for Members to attend Council meetings in person. It was with this in mind that the Government intended to amend the law to introduce provisions for remote attendance at local authority meetings.

The Government's intent was that this increased flexibility would strike the balance between the principle that significant in-person engagement remained vitally important, and a recognition that there would sometimes be a need to accommodate Members' requirements to attend Council meetings remotely. It was hoped this would encourage a wider diversity of people willing and able to stand and actively participate in local democracy by creating improved conditions where meetings were accessible and inclusive.

In addition, the Government was seeking views on the possible introduction of proxy voting for those occasions when an elected Member, due to personal circumstances, might be unable to attend even remotely, for example during maternity, paternity or adoption leave.

As part of the awareness of the consultation, officers highlighted the consultation to all Parish/Town Clerks in Warwick District and all District Councillors. It was also included in the Chief Executive/Leader weekly email and the District Council newsletter.

The views of the Chairman of the Council, Committee Chairs and Group Leaders were sought. The views from this feedback were built into the consultation response which provided a balanced view overall. It showed the advantages but also the potential challenges and risks of the proposals.

In terms of alternative options, the recommendation was for the Cabinet to approve the Council's response to the consultation. The Cabinet could choose to change the response, but it should be mindful this had been

built on feedback from the Chairman of the Council, Committee Chairs and all Group Leaders, therefore this was not recommended. The Cabinet could also decide not to respond to the consultation for the Council, but this was not advised.

Councillor Davison proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that the response from the Council, as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, to the Government Consultation on enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings, be approved.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Davison).
Forward Plan Reference 1,516

83. **Criteria for the Freedom of District or awarding status of Alderman/Alderwoman**

The Cabinet considered a report from Governance which brought the criteria for the appointment of Honorary Aldermen and Women of the District and Honorary Freeman and Women of the District for approval.

In March 2024, the Chairman of the Council announced the intention to award five or six people Freeman or Freewomen of the District. This would be combined to mark the move of Council meetings back to the Town Hall from Shire Hall.

To progress this, a Working Group was established by the Chairman, which comprised of the longest serving male and female Councillors, a Portfolio Holder, the current Chairman, and the incoming Chairman and Vice-Chair of the Council. The intention was for the Working Group to identify a process seeking nominations for these positions from across the District, review any nominations and recommendations that would be brought to Council.

In reviewing the legislation for the appointment of Freeman or Freewomen of the District it was noted the provision in respect of Aldermen and Alderwomen. This title was reserved in law for those individuals' who had served as Councillors on the appointing Council.

The title of Alderman or Alderwoman was an honorary title and was bestowed by the Council on former Councillors in recognition of their eminent service to the Council and community.

The Local Government Act 1972 (Section 249) permitted the Council to confer the title of Honorary Alderman on persons who had rendered eminent services to the Council. A resolution had to be passed by no less than two thirds of the Members voting at a specially convened Council Meeting was required to appoint Aldermen or Alderwomen.

Since 2009, the Council had been able to confer the title of Honorary Alderwoman on former female Councillors who met the criteria.

An Honorary Alderman or Alderwoman had the right to attend civic

ceremonies and meetings of the Council but did not have the right to vote at any such meetings, and Aldermen and Alderwomen did not receive any allowances or payments from the Council.

Similar to becoming Honorary Alderman or Alderwoman, the Council could also award Freedom of the District to individuals, but they did not have to have served on the Council and did not have the right to attend civic ceremonies and meetings of the Council.

Honorary freemen or honorary freewomen should be persons of distinction, and persons who had, in the opinion of the authority, rendered eminent services to that place or area.

While the proposals were aimed at a celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Warwick District Council, away from this it was good practice to have arrangements in place in case there were nominations or appropriate individuals these awards could be bestowed upon.

The intention was that those awarded would be provided a certificate of award and would be invited to formal presentation by the Chairman of the Council. It was required that a Council meeting specifically for the award would be convened. For the award of Freedom of the District to the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers the award by Council was made in June 2013 (as a short Council meeting prior to a normal Council meeting) with the event to mark the award held in November of the same year. The details of the events to mark any awards would be formalised by the Chairman at the appropriate time.

In terms of alternative options, consideration was given to the potential to have a more general awards scheme that enabled recognition of community groups or businesses or provided a different name to the award. As the provisions set out in the report were those provided in statute, therefore affording more weight and importance it was not considered appropriate to look at other awards at this time.

Councillor Davison proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that

- (1) the procedure and criteria for awarding the status of Honorary Alderman or Alderwoman of the District and Honorary Freemen or Freewomen of the District as set out at appendixes 1 to 3 to the report, be endorsed; and
- (2) the timescale for making these awards as part of the conclusion of the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the District Council, be noted.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Davison and Councillor Billiald).

84. Employment Committee Minutes – 17 September 2024

The recommendations in the minutes were approved.

85. Planning Applications – High Rise Fire Safety Works

The Cabinet considered a report from Housing which sought delegated authority for officers to submit planning applications for the removal and replacement of exterior cladding to High Rise blocks and associated work, required for Fire Safety improvements.

Warwick District Council was working with Wates Living Space to prepare designs and programme delivery of works to remove unsafe cladding and refurbish four High Rise blocks:

- Westbrook House;
- Ashton Court;
- Southorn Court; and
- Radcliffe Gardens

The removal of unsafe exterior cladding would necessitate replacement cladding including insulation and appropriate fire barriers. This work also created an opportunity to complete other improvements such as replacement windows, roofs, and ventilation systems.

The projects planned for each of the above four High Rise blocks would be assessed and approved by the Building Safety Regulator before works could commence on site. However, before submitting plans to the Regulator, WDC were required to apply for planning permission for the proposed work. This was because the works affected the exterior appearance of the buildings including the choice of cladding, window and door materials, as well as finishes and colours.

A Planning Application would be submitted for each block as part of the project programme. Before submitting any planning applications, WDC would consult with tenants and residents, key stakeholders, the Portfolio Holder and Ward Councillors so WDC could understand and incorporate views on the proposals. Briefing sessions and consultation events would be planned in due course.

Determining planning applications of this nature typically took eight to ten weeks, which allowed for the statutory consultations, officer considerations and Planning Committee. Westbrook House was the first block to reach this stage and pre-application discussions with the Planning Team had already commenced and would continue until the final application was submitted by our design partners Wates Living Space.

It was envisaged that the planning application for Westbrook House would be submitted January 2025. Subsequent applications for the remaining blocks would be submitted when required and following necessary consultation.

There were two alternative options. The first was to require Cabinet approval for each planning application. This option was not favoured as it would require additional officer time to prepare reports and additional Cabinet time to consider them. This would delay the necessary improvements. The second option was not to allow applications to proceed. This would prevent the necessary improvements being undertaken and given the fire safety implications, this was not considered a viable option.

Councillor Adkins proposed the report as laid out.

Resolved that the Head of Housing in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Assets, be authorised to submit planning applications for the removal and replacement of exterior cladding and related works to High Rise blocks owned by the Council.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Adkins).

86. **Public and Press**

Resolved that under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 that the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following items by reason of the likely disclosure of exempt information within the paragraph of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, following the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, as set out below.

| Minutes Numbers | Paragraph Numbers | Reason |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---|
| 87,88,89,90, 91,92, & 93 | 3 | Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority |

Part 2

(Items upon which a decision by the Council was not required)

87. **Confidential Appendix to Minute Number 74 - Procurement Exercises over £150,000**

The confidential appendix was noted.

88. **Confidential Appendix to Minute Number 76 - Cost of Living Project Proposal**

The confidential appendix was noted.

89. **Confidential Appendix to Minute Number 79 - Mill Garden and Castle Farm Play Area Upgrade**

The confidential appendix was noted.

90. **Confidential Appendix to Minute Number 81 - Lease extension to Myton Church for the Westbury Centre**

The confidential appendix was noted.

91. **HRA Repairs and Maintenance Procurement**

The recommendations in the report were approved.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Adkins).
Forward Plan Reference 1,515

92. **Joint Waste Contract – Client Management**

The recommendations in the report were approved.

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Roberts).
Forward Plan Reference 1,450

93. **Confidential Minutes**

The confidential minutes of the meetings 4 September 2024 and 17 October 2024 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

(The meeting ended at 7.05pm)

CHAIR
6 February 2025