

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Joanna Kane (Deputy Mayor in the Chair), and Councillors Joe Baker, Juliet Barker Smith, William Boyd, Brandon Clayton, Claire Davies, Matthew Dormer, James Fardoe, Andrew Fry, Bill Hartnett, Sharon Harvey, Chris Holz, Sid Khan, Wanda King, Alan Mason, Sachin Mathur, Gemma Monaco, David Munro, Rita Rogers, Gary Slim, Jen Snape, Jane Spilsbury, Monica Stringfellow, Craig Warhurst, Ian Woodall and Paul Wren

Officers:

Peter Carpenter, Claire Felton, Sue Hanley and Becky Talbot

Principal Democratic Services Officer:

Jess Bayley-Hill

54. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Councillor Juma Begum.

In the absence of the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor chaired the meeting.

55. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

56. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 11th November 2024 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Mayor.

57. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The following announcements were made at the meeting:

Chair

a) The Mayor's Announcements

The Deputy Mayor read out a statement on behalf of the Mayor at the meeting:

"My apologies for not being able to attend and chair this meeting. In my absence, I am grateful that the Deputy Mayor is able to deputise for me.

Happy New Year to everyone, and welcome back. I am sure we all recognise the number of challenges and changes we will face this year as a Council and as Councillors. Nevertheless, we must persevere and continue working for the residents of Redditch.

Since we last met as a Council, I have attended a number of events. However, I believe it is important to highlight yesterday's event, where our town and council came together to mark 80 years since the Holocaust. People from diverse backgrounds gathered at the Holocaust Memorial marker, including representatives from the Council, the community, and fellow Councillors.

In the hope of building a better future, we must continue to promote diversity, love, respect, and kindness. As Councillors, what we write and share on social media carries significant influence over how people perceive and react. It is, therefore, our moral responsibility to ensure we promote facts over fiction. As the Mayor of Redditch, I urge you to think carefully before commenting or posting online.

I want to express my gratitude to everyone who came together yesterday, standing united against the minority who spread hate and fear. A special thank you to the Council officers and the Holocaust Committee for their excellent arrangements for the event, and to Councillor Hartnett for his remarkable work in making sure the event reflected the dignity and solemnity it deserves in our pursuit of a "Better Future."

Additionally, I wish to highlight the contributions of our two guest speakers: Mirsad Solakovic, a survivor of the Bosnian War who, at just 13 years old, endured unimaginable suffering, including torture by a Serbian soldier who turned out to be his schoolteacher; and Simon Winston, a Polish Holocaust survivor. Their stories deeply moved us all, reminding us of the importance of learning from the past to ensure a brighter and more inclusive future.

Thank you for listening, and I hope you have a productive and meaningful meeting.”

b) The Leader’s Announcements

The Leader advised that since the previous Council meeting he had attended a meeting of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Board alongside the Assistant Director of Regeneration and Property Services.

There had been a number of meetings of Worcestershire Leaders’ Board, which the Leader had attended alongside the Chief Executive. The subjects of devolution and the County Council elections had been discussed at these meetings.

The Leader had attended a number of civic events alongside the Mayor of the Borough of Redditch. This had included attending a number of carol concerts in the community prior to Christmas as well as the Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations on Sunday 26th January 2025.

During consideration of this item, Members had a robust debate regarding the Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations. Members noted that the event had been thought provoking and very emotional.

c) The Chief Executive’s Announcements

The Chief Executive advised Members that forms had been circulated prior to the meeting relating to the external audit process. Members were urged to complete a copy of this form, if they had not already done so, and to return this to the Section 151 Officer.

58. QUESTIONS ON NOTICE (PROCEDURE RULE 9)

The following Question on Notice was submitted by Councillor Brandon Clayton in advance of the meeting for the consideration of the Leader:

“Is the leader of the council in favour of the government devolution white paper which would mean Redditch losing its identity?”

In responding to the Question, the Leader commented that English devolution would be introduced across Local Government over the following years in line with the Government’s English Devolution White Paper. The purpose of the proposed Local Government Reorganisation was to provide greater powers and control to the

local level. As Redditch Borough Council operated in a two-tier authority area, the Council would be impacted by these changes. However, the full implications, including the local government arrangements that would be introduced in the area in the long-term, remained to be confirmed by the date of the Council meeting.

The Leader confirmed that he had been attending regular meetings on this subject, alongside senior officers, partner organisations and sector representatives. Further information was anticipated from the Government on this subject at the end of the month. Once more information was available, Members would consider the implications and the aim would be to ensure that the best arrangements possible were introduced to meet the needs of Redditch residents.

In concluding his response, the Leader urged Members to support him in his proposal for a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority, rather than a Worcestershire Unitary Authority, to be introduced for Redditch.

Councillor Clayton subsequently asked a supplementary question, in which he asked the Leader whether he was in favour of the Government's English Devolution White Paper.

The Leader commented that he had already answered this question in his previous response. Members were asked to note that the Leader would continue to work with officers to ensure that the Council retained its sovereignty when making decisions on this subject. The Leader also made a further plea to Members to support his proposal to introduce a North Worcestershire Unitary Authority to represent the people of Redditch.

59. MOTIONS ON NOTICE (PROCEDURE RULE 11) (TO FOLLOW)

The following Motion on Notice was presented by Councillor Craig Warhurst at the meeting:

“Council notes that:

- Redditch and its surrounding villages have a proud history of supporting farmers and a deep connection to the land they farm.
- Inheritance Tax reliefs like Agricultural Property Relief (APR) and Business Property Relief (BPR) have been essential in helping farmers pass on their farms to the next generation after a death, allowing the farms to stay within the family, and preserving agricultural production and stewardship of the countryside.

- The Labour Government's recent 2024 Autumn Budget changes to Inheritance Tax relief will impose an effective 20% tax on agricultural assets valued over £1 million, introducing what has been termed the "Family Farm Tax."

Council notes that the family farm taxes risk:

- Reducing land availability for farming across the Borough and damaging the ability for farmers to pass their farms to their children;
- Making food production at competitive prices more difficult for the Borough.

Council resolves:

- That the Leader writes on behalf of the Council to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the 6 Worcestershire MPs, outlining the Council's dismay at the decision to restrict APR and urging the Government to halt the Family Farm Tax.
- To ask the Executive to consider engaging with local farmers and community representatives to assess how the Council can provide practical support during this challenging period.
- To call for a detailed list of affected farms to better understand and address the impact of these changes."

The Motion was proposed by Councillor Warhurst and seconded by Councillor Matthew Dormer.

In proposing the Motion, Councillor Warhurst commented that farmers had a proud history in the UK. Tax relief had enabled farmers to pass down farms from generation to generation, thereby ensuring that farms remained sustainable businesses. However, Councillor Warhurst expressed concerns that new national taxation rules relating to farmers would place family farms at risk, which would also place at risk the country's food security. Members were asked to note that the Motion called for the Leader to write to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as well as the six MPs in Worcestershire and Councillor Warhurst suggested that this was something that came within the remit of the Council.

In seconding the Motion, Councillor Dormer highlighted his concerns about the potential damage to farming that would arise from the changes to taxation for farms. In particular, concerns were raised that many farming families would feel unable to afford to pass their farms on to their children and this would result in land being sold that might be purchased by developers. As a

consequence, there would be potentially more housing development on green belt land.

In responding to the Motion, the Leader highlighted his family's history in the farming community. Members were asked to note that there had been many changes at a national level over the years that had impacted on farming. It was suggested that the Executive Committee would be willing to engage with the farming community and to work to identify the number of local farms that might be impacted. However, the taxation changes formed part of the country's wider taxation policy and Members were asked to note that it would not be appropriate for the Council to lobby on behalf of just one part of the business sector. For this reason, the Leader suggested that he could not support the proposal to write the letter as detailed in the Motion.

Following the presentation of the Motion, Members discussed a number of points relating to the subject in detail:

- The number of farms and farmers, both locally and nationally, that would be impacted by the taxation changes.
- The financial costs arising from supermarket practices for the farming industry.
- The rural parts of the Borough and the extent to which the proposed taxation changes would have an impact in these locations.
- The potential for farmers to pass farms on to their children during their lifetimes.
- The risk that farmers could sell land in the green belt to developers regardless of the changes in taxation.

During consideration of this item, Councillor Dormer requested a recorded name vote and names were recorded as follows:

Members Voting FOR the Motion:

Councillors Brandon Clayton, Matthew Dormer, Chris Holz, Gemma Monaco and Craig Warhurst (5).

Members voting AGAINST the Motion:

Councillors Joe Baker, Juliet Barker Smith, William Boyd, Bill Hartnett, James Fardoe, Andrew Fry, Sharon Harvey, Joanna Kane, Sid Khan, Wanda King, Alan Mason, Sachin Mathur, David Munro, Rita Rogers, Gary Slim, Jen Snape, Jane Spilsbury, Monica Stringfellow, Ian Woodall and Paul Wren (20).

Members voting to ABSTAIN on the Motion:

Councillor Claire Davies (1).

On being put to the vote the Motion was therefore defeated.

60. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The Deputy Mayor highlighted that recommendations from two recent meetings of the Executive Committee were due to be considered at the Council meeting. These Executive Committee meetings had been held on 26th November 2024 and 14th January 2025 respectively.

In considering the recommendations, Members were asked to note that the recommendation arising from the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) Tranche 1 report, pertaining to a feasibility study for Matchborough, Winyates and Woodrow District Centres had been made at both meetings. To ensure efficiency in the decision-making process, it was suggested that this recommendation should be considered once only during the Council debate.

Carbon Reduction Strategy and Implementation Plan

Members considered the Carbon Reduction Strategy and Implementation Plan. Officers were thanked for their hard work in developing the content of the strategy and action plan and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was thanked for scrutinising the content of the report in detail.

During consideration of this item, clarification was requested from officers regarding an apparent discrepancy in the implementation plan. The plan reported that staff mileage claims had increased in the previous three years but that agile working had also contributed to a reduction in staff mileage across the Council. Officers undertook to provide a response in writing to Members in respect of this matter after the meeting.

Revenue and Performance Monitoring Quarter 2 2024/25

The Revenue and Performance Monitoring Report for the second quarter of the 2024/25 financial year was considered.

During consideration of this item, reference was made to the redevelopment of the Town Hall as a community hub and questions were raised about whether the plans for the hub would be changing following publication of the Government's English Devolution White Paper. Clarification was provided that the current plans for the community hub remained in place and would proceed as previously planned.

Reference was also made to the decision, taken earlier in the year, not to relocate the library into the Town Hall and questions were raised about the financial implications of this for the Council. The Section 151 Officer explained that it was not possible to provide an exact figure of the costs involved at this stage and this information would become more apparent through the external audit process.

Questions were also raised about the potential impact of Local Government Reorganisation on Council revenue streams, particularly in relation to partner organisations that had hired space in the community hub on the understanding that there would be a local government presence. Members were advised that the MTFP was in the process of being reviewed and regeneration projects had been reset. Savings had been identified alongside pressures as part of this process. It was also noted that many of the facilities that would be installed could be used for other purposes.

Food Waste Business Case and Associated Waste Related Issues

The report in respect of the Food Waste Business Case and associated waste related issues was considered at the meeting. Members noted that there remained some areas of uncertainty that still needed to be addressed but approval of the business case would help the authority to progress with the project according to Government deadlines.

During consideration of this item, reference was made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's recent discussion of the content of the report. Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were thanked for reviewing the business case and for supporting the proposals detailed in the report.

Members highlighted that under existing route optimisation arrangements, Wychavon District Council collected some waste on behalf of Redditch Borough residents. Questions were raised as to whether this would continue when the Food Waste Collection service was introduced. The Chief Executive clarified that no impacts on existing service delivery had been identified in the proposals that had been presented concerning the introduction of a Food Waste Collection service.

Damp and Mould Additional Resources

Members considered a report relating to establishing a Council team to manage issues with damp and mould reported in Council properties. The benefits of introducing an inhouse team for this purpose were highlighted as:

- Helping to build expertise within the Council in terms of tackling issues with damp and mould.
- Reducing response times to reports of damp and mould in properties.
- Providing an opportunity to test various devices and equipment to tackle damp and mould issues. There was no independent research in respect of the equipment that was available on the market to tackle damp and mould, so testing would be helpful in this context.

Council was advised that there were a range of properties in the Council's housing stock which had been built over time using different materials and to different designs. Consequently, properties in the housing stock had different vulnerabilities to damp and mould issues.

Alongside the work of the team, it was acknowledged that action would need to be taken to educate tenants about the causes of damp and mould and action that could be taken to avoid or to minimise the potential for this problem to occur.

Members commented that all tenants had the right to live in safe and clean homes. The introduction of a Damp and Mould team at the Council would help the authority to support tenants in achieving this objective. The Council had responsibilities as a landlord and Members took this responsibility seriously.

Reference was made to the work of the Damp and Mould team and the extent to which this would cross over with ongoing work to improve the energy efficiency of properties in the housing stock. Officers clarified that the Damp and Mould team would be working alongside other officers in the Housing Property Directorate. Officers in this department would make sure that schemes were aligned and that teams worked together where appropriate. The Climate Change Working Group would also have an opportunity to review and make suggestions moving forward.

Consideration was given to the potential need for external service providers to be asked to provide support to the Council's Damp and Mould team in the future. Officers clarified that the aim was to develop internal expertise in this area but the potential need to refer to external experts for additional support could not be completely excluded.

Final Council Tax Support Scheme 2025/26

Members considered the content of the final Council Tax Support Scheme 2025/26 and in doing so noted that the only change to the scheme was to increase rates in line with the level of interest. The

Council's scheme had been in place for a while and had proved successful. A number of Councils were now replicating the authority's approach.

Council Tax Base 2025 – 2026

Council considered a report detailing the Council Tax Base for 2025 - 2026. It was noted that this was a report that had to be prepared every year, prior to setting the Council Tax for the authority for the following financial year. The content was based on factual information relating to Band D equivalent properties.

Independent Remuneration Panel Recommendations 2025/26

The Leader presented the Independent Remuneration Panel's (IRP's) report in respect of proposed allowances payable to Members in the 2025/26 financial year. The IRP had reviewed Members' allowances and, based on their findings, recommended that the basic allowance should increase to £5,826. Whilst the IRP had reported this to represent a 5.58 per cent increase to Members' allowances, it would have in fact represented a 19.6 per cent increase for Redditch Councillors because Members had not approved previous increases proposed by the IRP. The Executive Committee had concluded that a 19 per cent increase could not be justified during a cost of living crisis and were therefore proposing a more modest increase of 2.9 per cent to the basic allowance.

The IRP had also made specific proposals in respect of the Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) paid to certain Councillors in particular positions of responsibility, such as Committee Chairs. The Leader advised that he felt that these proposals would take the Council backwards from the position currently in place. Therefore, the Executive Committee was proposing that there should be no changes to the existing SRAs in the Council's Members' Allowances Scheme.

In addition to the basic allowance and SRAs, the IRP had made recommendations in relation to travel expenses, carer's allowance, subsistence allowance, and travel and subsistence allowances for Parish Councillors. The Executive Committee were proposing that those recommendations from the IRP should be approved.

Following the presentation of the report, Members discussed the proposals that had been made by the Executive Committee. Members noted that by not approving the IRP's proposals in respect of increases to the basic allowance, Redditch Borough Council would fall further behind other District Councillors in Worcestershire in terms of allowances that were paid. Over time, the gap between what the IRP felt Members should be paid and the

actual allowance that was paid to Members would grow wider and at some point, this would need to be addressed.

Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) Tranche 1 (Including Fees and Charges)

Council considered the content of the MTFP Tranche 1 (Including Fees and Charges) report. Members acknowledged that since the report was initially drafted, three sets of accounts had been submitted by the Council which had created greater clarity in respect of the outturn position as well as in relation to earmarked reserves, which were better than had been anticipated.

The Council was due to have a £299,000 overspend position. The main pressures in the budget included:

- The impact of inflation on costs.
- The staff pay award.

There remained challenges that would need to be addressed moving forward during the remainder of the 2024/25 financial year.

Reference was made to the proposed funding in respect of the feasibility study for Matchborough, Winyates and Woodrow District Centres. Members noted that this was being undertaken in a context in which there was a need for investment in these District Centres. Concerns were raised about the need to ensure that the feasibility studies resulted in concrete action to address issues in the District Centres.

Consideration was also given to the feedback that had been received from the public in a consultation exercise that had been held in respect of the budget. Members welcomed the responses that had been received from local residents.

The financial contribution in respect of New Homes Bonus (NHB) funding was also briefly discussed. Clarification was provided that the Council would be receiving £25,000 in NHB funding in 2025/26. This had not been anticipated when the report was drafted but would be reflected in the final MTFP Tranche 2 report.

During consideration of this item, Members thanked the Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer, the Assistant Director of Finance and Customer Services and the Financial Services team for their hard work in preparing the budget papers. In particular, Members praised Officers for their hard work on submitting three sets of local authority accounts in relatively tight timescales.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Rent Setting 2025/26

Members considered the content of the HRA Rent Setting 2025/26 report and in doing so noted that there was a requirement for the Council, as landlord, to set the rents for Council Houses on an annual basis. The Council managed over 5,000 Council House properties, with some tenants paying an affordable rent.

Historically, the Council had included service charges for Council tenants in the annual fees and charges report to Council but for the first time this information had been included in the HRA Rent Setting report. Service charges would begin to be fully charged in the 2025/26 financial year. This included fees for core cleaning, health and safety and cleansing checks and services delivered in communal areas. A dedicated team would be established to provide these services.

Council was informed that Council tenants in receipt of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit would have their rent costs met in the benefits they received. Members were asked to note that it was anticipated that 83 per cent of the Council's tenants were in receipt of either Universal Credit or on Housing Benefits.

The suggestion was being made that a hardship fund should be established. This would improve properties in the Council's housing stock, helping to both enhance the quality of the houses as well as the cleanliness of communal areas.

Members noted that a significant proportion of the cases that were referred to them as part of their ward work related to housing matters raised by Council tenants. Whilst Members recognised the importance of addressing these issues as soon as possible for tenants, it was acknowledged that negative feedback could be demoralising for hard working staff. Members were therefore urged to ensure that they also notified senior officers of any positive feedback that was received, so that this could also be shared with staff.

During consideration of this item, Members noted that the report had been pre-scrutinised by the Budget Scrutiny Working Group. It was acknowledged that, unfortunately, some of the papers contained in the report had been issued to the group at short notice and an apology was extended to the members of the group for this situation. Members thanked the group for their hard work in reviewing the papers.

Questions were raised regarding the 15 per cent management fee that had been referenced in the report, concerning the purpose of

this fee. Clarification was provided that this related to a standard administration charge to cover internal costs.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meetings of the Executive Committee held on Tuesday, 26th November 2024 and Tuesday 14th January 2025 be approved and all recommendations adopted.

61. STATUTORY OFFICER APPOINTMENTS - NOMINATIONS TO THE POSITIONS OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND HEAD OF PAID SERVICE AND DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND SECTION 151 OFFICER

Members considered a report from the Joint Appointments Committee which detailed the process in respect of recruitment of a new Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service and a new Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer respectively.

The Joint Appointments Committee had appointed Members representing both Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District Councils to serve on a Joint Appointments Sub-Committee. This sub-Committee had acted as a joint recruitment panel, undertaking final interviews on 16th and 18th December 2024 with shortlisted candidates. The Joint Appointments Sub-Committee had been advised by representatives of the recruitment consultants, GatenbySanderson, as well as the current Chief Executive and the Human Resources and Organisational Development Manager.

At the end of the interview process, the Joint Appointments Sub-Committee had recommended the nomination of John Leach to the position of Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service and Robert Watson to the position of Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer. In both cases, these nominations had been agreed unanimously. The Joint Appointments Committee had endorsed these nominations at a meeting held on 8th January 2025.

The nominations were subject to approval by both Councils. Bromsgrove District Council had already considered and approved the nominations, at a meeting of their Council held on 22nd January 2025. Should the recommendations also be approved at the Redditch Council meeting, the two candidates would be appointed subject to the following further conditions:

- Right to work verification checks
- DBS criminal record checks
- Medical clearance

- Satisfactory reference checks

Council was reminded that there was a legal requirement for the authority to have officers in post in the statutory positions of Head of Paid Service and Section 151 Officer respectively. It was confirmed that the current Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service and the current Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer would remain in post until the new officers commenced employment with the Councils, to ensure continuing compliance.

During consideration of this item, Members expressed their thanks to the current Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service for her hard work over the preceding 18 months as Chief Executive as well as her lengthy career at a senior level in local government. Members also recorded their thanks to the current Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer for his hard work, particularly with regard to managing the Council's finances and submission of three sets of accounts.

In discussing the report, Members commented that the Joint Appointments Committee was recommending the recruitment of two strong candidates. Members expressed the view that they would be well placed to steer the Council through a likely period of uncertainty, given the context of devolution and local government reorganisation.

Reference was made in the debate to the reasons why both candidates had applied for the positions and the extent to which local government devolution could have ramifications for the recruitment process. Council was informed that both candidates were ambitious and dynamic. They were both keen to work with Members to support the organisation and welcomed challenges as opportunities. Members were reminded that despite devolution, local government services needed to continue to be delivered.

RESOLVED that

- 1) to note the Joint Appointments Committee has completed a rigorous selection process to recruit a new Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service and a new Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer;**
- 2) to approve the appointment of John Leach as Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service, subject to satisfactory reference and eligibility checks;**

- 3) to note that the salary agreed for the Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service is within the range approved by Redditch Borough Council's Pay Policy as the employing authority;
- 4) subject thereto, John Leach to be made available under the shared services arrangements with Bromsgrove District Council to perform such duties as are required in his capacity as Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service for Bromsgrove District Council;
- 5) subject to agreement of resolution 2 above, John Leach be appointed as the Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer for Redditch Borough Council;
- 6) subject to the prior approval by Bromsgrove District Council as employing authority, to approve the appointment of Robert Watson as Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer, to fulfil the purposes of Section 151 of the Local Government 1972, subject to satisfactory reference and eligibility checks;
- 7) to note that the salary agreed for the Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer is within the range approved by Bromsgrove District Council's Pay Policy as the employing authority;
- 8) the current Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service and Deputy Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer to remain in post until John Leach and Robert Watson have commenced employment with the authorities; and
- 9) the current Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service to remain the authority's Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer until the new Chief Executive commences employment with the authority.

62. WAIVER REPORT

The Deputy Mayor confirmed that this report had been withdrawn and would not therefore be debated at the meeting.

63. URGENT BUSINESS - RECORD OF DECISIONS

The Deputy Mayor confirmed that no urgent decisions had been taken since the previous meeting of Council.

64. URGENT BUSINESS - GENERAL (IF ANY)

There was no urgent business for consideration on this occasion.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 9.18 pm