

**Minutes of a meeting of the
Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Adur District and Worthing Borough Councils**

QEII Room, Shoreham Centre, Pond Road, Shoreham

5 September 2024

Councillor Joss Loader (Chair)
Councillor Nigel Jenner (Vice-Chair)

Adur District Council:

Councillor Carson Albury
Councillor Robina Baine
Councillor Emma Evans
Councillor Dan Flower
Councillor Andrew Harvey
Councillor Pauline Higgins

Worthing Borough Council:

Councillor Cathy Glynn-Davies
Councillor Dan Hermitage
Councillor Heather Mercer
Councillor Jon Roser
Councillor Elizabeth Sparkes
Councillor Samuel Theodoridi
Councillor Carl Walker
Vacancy

Absent

Councillor Carons Albury, Councillor Emma Evans and Councillor Elizabeth Sparkes

Substitutes

Councillors Tony Bellasis, Kevin Jenkins and Andy McGregor

JOSC/12/24-25 Declaration of Interests

JOSC/13/24-25 Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the 15 July 2024 were approved as a correct record and be signed by the Chairman

JOSC/14/24-25 Public Question Time

There were no questions from the public

JOSC/15/24-25 Members Questions

There were no questions from Members

JOSC/16/24-25 Items Raised Under Urgency Provisions

There were no urgent items

JOSC/17/24-25 Consideration of any matter referred to the Committee in

relation to a call-in of a decision

There were no call-ins

JOSC/18/24-25 Update on the delivery of Our Plan and Interview with Chief Executive

The Committee had a report before it attached as item 8, which had been circulated to all Members and is attached to a signed copy of these minutes. This report would assist the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee (JOSC) in questioning the Chief Executive and the Adur and Worthing Council Leaders.

Questions for the Chief Executive

A Member asked, "I refer to Appendix B; Joint Priorities for Adur and Worthing Councils, Point 3.1

'Simplification of online processes, making it quicker and easier for residents to get in touch with teams and access services they need.'

Having consulted widely with Adur Councillors, there have been many concerns raised by residents across Adur by the removal of face-to-face appointments at the Shoreham Centre using the 'cheese counter' drop in system. Many residents have tried in vain to book appointments via the telephone, only to be held in lengthy queues. In moving towards a simplified online system, is the Council in danger of marginalising the many residents who lack either the IT skills, or the financial resources to access the necessary hardware to take advantage of this shift?

Members were informed that as part of the service redesign for Resident Services the organisation was moving to a digital first approach. To address the budget savings required they had reduced the number of officers and the capacity in the team. As part of this work they were now mirroring the same approach across Worthing and Adur which meant switching to appointments only. Switching to an appointment only system with telephone triage ensured they were able to help everyone as quickly as they were able in the channel most appropriate to residents needs with the officers available. It was worth noting the Shoreham centre would deal with people that present with more urgent needs without the need for an appointment.

In the Shoreham centre there was a hybrid approach, maintaining face-to-face service while also enhancing online and telephone options. This would ensure that all residents, regardless of their situation, had access to essential services.

There wasn't always a requirement for residents to always speak with an officer when they needed to deliver forms/letters. Having received feedback, they had created a secure option to enable residents to leave their forms without the need for an appointment.

There were still some issues that were being worked through, and the long term plan was to pursue partnerships with local organisations that could provide workshops or one-on-one support sessions to help residents improve their digital skills to empower more people to use online services.

A Member asked, "I sent an email on August 14th requesting an explanation as to why the councils' internal communications' strategy appears to have changed. To date, I have yet to receive a reply.

This followed an incident whereby elected members found out that some public toilets were going to be closed on a busy August Saturday, due to staffing issues, via social media. There was no prior warning or consultation.

In that email, I asked why hard-pressed service heads are being asked to update ward members about sensitive communications issues, rather than receiving briefings via the communications' team. I have no issue with service heads communicating with us directly, as well, but I'm unclear why the two functions appear to be mutually exclusive.

In the past, press releases were shared in advance but it now appears that most issues are shared via social media platforms

Please can you set out what the Senior Leadership Team is doing to ensure that internal communications are fit for purpose and that we have timely, clear updates with no mixed messages or "surprises".

Members were informed that the councils' People & Change department, which included the communications and engagement team, produced internal and external updates for a range of different audiences including residents, visitors, staff and members.

This often, but not exclusively, involved messages such as press releases and social media posts that were prepared in advance of key events. Press releases were shared with selected members in advance of publication, as had been the case for a number of years.

The communications and engagement team had never been the only source of information for members. Instead, staff from across the councils were encouraged to develop relationships with members and to provide them with updates directly on projects or activities which they had an interest in.

In terms of the toilets closure incident that was highlighted, this related to a short-notice decision to close a number of different sets of toilets across Adur and Worthing due to staffing issues.

When it became clear that the closure would be necessary, the communications and engagement team produced messaging to alert residents and visitors to the fact to minimise the impact on them using the councils' social media channels. They used these channels for this purpose regularly, as they had a wider reach than more traditional routes to the public and could help get information out more quickly. Media outlets were aware of this fact and used the social media channels as a source of information on a daily basis.

A Member asked, "I've been advised by senior officers that the councils are promoting most of their news via social media platforms. Please explain how the councils reconcile this approach with their commitment to promote greater public engagement and accessibility? How will you communicate with hard-to-reach groups that have no access to computers and/or don't use social media? This may include people with disabilities and where English is their second language."

Members were informed the councils used their social media channels to send out regular updates to communities and to the media. The most commonly used channels were Facebook and LinkedIn. The Adur & Worthing Councils Facebook page had a

following of around 14,600 while around 3,900 people, groups and organisations received updates via the LinkedIn account. The Facebook page, in particular, generated a number of comments and questions from residents to the councils, allowing them to engage with the community in real time.

These channels were also a regular source of information for local and regional media outlets in the same way as press releases sent directly to journalists were.

It remained the case that there were members of communities who they did not directly reach currently with information. The organisation provided more information to the public and the media via social media channels, their website and through the use of press releases and engagement exercises than they did in the past, but it was true that not everyone had access to that information if they did not proactively seek it out. They were actively looking for ways to reach those members of the communities.

A Member asked, “What for you are the most pressing risks and challenges in the year ahead to the successful delivery of the mission projects?”

Members were informed although each project area would hold its own risks and challenges, there were a set of wider cross-cutting risks:

1. Financial constraints: The ongoing financial challenges, particularly in the context of local government funding, were one of the most significant risks. These constraints could limit the ability to allocate sufficient resources to mission projects, potentially leading to delays or reductions in the scope of planned initiatives. The need to balance the budget while maintaining essential services added to this pressure. Their interconnected work on the Financial Strategy, Organisational Design and Performance work was all about fixing the foundations, prioritising to make the best use of resources and developing better long-term resilience.
2. Workforce capacity and skills development: The successful delivery of mission projects heavily relied on the availability and expertise of the workforce. However, there was a risk of overburdening staff, especially in light of recruitment challenges and the need for specialised skills in key areas. Investing in workforce development and ensuring they had the right skills mix was critical and they had developed strategic approaches through the Skills Framework and supporting services post-redesign to develop their skills through skills audits, personal development plans and team transitions.
3. External dependencies and partnerships: Many of the major programmes required collaboration with external partners, including other local authorities, community organisations, and private sector entities. The success of these was not entirely within their control, and any misalignment in priorities or delays from partners could impact project timelines and outcomes. Effective relationship management and clear communication channels were essential to mitigate this risk.
4. Public engagement and communication: Engaging the community and ensuring transparent communication about mission projects was vital for gaining public support and ensuring the projects met community needs. They were developing communications strategies around each of the joint priorities so that they had a consistent set of communications that show how major programmes and services were delivering these.

New governance and processes had been put in place that allowed them to improve their monitoring of risks across all of the major programmes and projects, so that projects

were assessed monthly to ensure that they were on track and that mitigations were put in place to counter any risks.

A Member asked, "In terms of emergency and temporary accommodation spend in Worthing, can more detail be provided on the way that the council is addressing the increased demand for service against the backdrop of reduced officer capacity?"

Members were informed as part of the organisational design work throughout the Council, the housing service had been redesigned to ensure resources were in the right places and had been enhanced where possible. Key changes in respect of housing needs specifically were:

- Increased number of Homeless Intervention & Prevention Officers that would enable the Councils to have the skilled and experienced officers available at the earliest opportunity to identify opportunities to prevent homelessness and implement prevention options. An additional benefit of this approach is that citizens needing advice and support weren't having to transfer case officers as they moved through the prevention, relief and main duty stages of homelessness.
- Increased capacity in Temporary Accommodation Officer role and Income Recovery Officer supporting citizens placed in temporary accommodation through both income and debt management support but also wider wrap around support including health, addiction, healthy relationships and access to employment opportunities and housing options where needed.

A Member asked, "Page 17, Milestones by RAG Status - There are 38 tasks in progress but delayed, 10 tasks with significant issues and 2 on hold. Are the tasks in the RAG Status, currently in amber and red, expected and what impact will this have on the proportion in future quarters?"

Members were provided some context and insight into the status of these tasks, as well as their expected impact on future quarters.

The RAG status for tasks reflected the dynamic nature of ongoing projects and initiatives. The 38 tasks marked as "in progress but delayed" and the 10 tasks with "significant issues" were indicative of the challenges faced in an ever-changing operational environment. These challenges could arise from factors such as resource constraints, external dependencies, or unforeseen obstacles that require adjustments to our original timelines.

The tasks currently marked as amber were often due to minor delays or complexities that had emerged during the implementation phase. These were expected and manageable within the broader scope of the performance management framework.

They had implemented mitigation strategies to address these delays, such as reallocating resources, refining project scopes, and more.

The tasks marked as red, which included those with significant issues or on hold, were being closely monitored. These tasks often involved more substantial challenges, such as significant external dependencies or critical resource shortages. They were prioritising these tasks and deploying targeted interventions to address the underlying issues. While

these tasks may have continued to show as red in the short term, they were confident that with sustained focus, they could either bring them back on track or develop improvement plans that tackled any further deep-rooted issues.

New governance and processes had been put in place that allowed them to improve the monitoring of risks across all major programmes and projects, so that projects were assessed monthly to ensure that they were on track and that mitigations were put in place to counter any risks. They had a standing item at the monthly Major Programmes Board to review amber and red-rated projects and the mitigations for these, so that they could improve the RAG status until the projects were complete.

A Member asked, “Recognising the importance of Our Plan as it delivers structural and organisational redesign of Adur & Worthing Councils, we cannot get away from the fact that this is driven by an urgency to reduce expenditure in order to make substantial savings in organisational costs. Indeed the delivery team for the redesign was commissioned on a 'invest to save basis' investing circa £1m to save circa £4.5m in annual costs. How confident are you that each team will achieve its required 2024/25 savings target?”

Members were informed that the 2024/25 budget included savings of £3.371m with £2.2m from the organisation redesign programme. The overall savings of the redesign programme were £4m, with £1.8m proposed for 2025/26. The Adur and Worthing councils approved the use of capital flexibilities of £1.5m to support the 2 year programme of redesign which included £440k for delivery support.

The programme was progressing well but there was some delay in the delivery timescales for the year 1 areas of focus. There are a number of controls in place to mitigate this, firstly recruitment was being closely controlled both to generate savings but to support flexibility within the redesign programme with creation of redeployment opportunities. The year 2 redesign work had also been brought forward into 2024/25 to accelerate savings where possible as well as ensuring a full year benefit in 2025/26. Overall savings were being identified that closely met the target for the areas of focus that were currently in the programme and indications were that other areas of focus would be possible. The impact on the savings in the delay was being mitigated by other savings. The programme was still live and therefore they were working on projections, this would continue to be monitored and progress reported to members.

A Member asked “Clearly through this structured rolling plan of organisational change some teams will have completed their redesign process. Are their new structure/s now signed off as complete and set as their operating model going forward for us to understand and be able to effectively scrutinise?”

Members were informed that Neighbourhoods, Housing and Resident Services had finalised their structures following consultation with staff. Recruitment of roles was complete for Neighbourhoods and Resident Services, and recruitment was taking place that month for Housing. They were developing communications strategies with them to enable staff, members and residents to better understand these services and the changes that will affect them.

Questions for the Leaders.

A Member asked “with regards to Paragraph 3.1 of report to JSC on 17 July - Councils for the community

Both councils will therefore demonstrate a more community-led approach in the coming months through the development of new initiatives to increase engagement with citizens. It is clear from this paper how stronger partnership with community groups will be sought and how it has been demonstrated via the CIL process. It is less clear how this will be community-led? Over the coming 12 months. Who are the communities that will be enabled to lead, what will they be enabled to lead and what is the framework through which they will be able to enact leadership?”

Members were informed that they were developing new initiatives to increase engagement between the Councils and citizens and were actively considering the questions raised about community leadership and sharing / building community power. They had started the process of regularly convening ‘community leaders / organisers’ through the CEX’s hosted ‘community leaders conversations’. This network included more than 50 local community-led organisations working across the borough and district including residents’ groups, community hubs, youth organisations, green / transition groups, arts and culture orgs, community interest groups and those working in arts and culture.

The outcomes from the first session in June signalled a shift in the relationship between council and community leaders to one of open and emergent dialogue. Themes discussed included consensus between council and community leaders on the shared need to widen and diversify participation; develop facilitation skills; and to develop new spaces / forums where council and community leaders could stop and think together for the short and long term.

They were anticipating that with the new neighbourhood model (which would be launching with members and the wider community) to look at how they would take this format into neighbourhoods and hyperlocal spaces.

To the questions around leadership - who would be enabled to lead what and through what framework - these were questions being actively considered in thinking about where to invest limited resources.

They were currently thinking about how they could pay more attention to spaces where there was the greatest opportunity to ‘re-connect’ and reduce ‘social distance’ between different groups of people, between people and community assets and between people and the environment - and how the council could use its resources to create the right conditions for participation.

In terms of the ‘what’ and the need for a framework through which people could enact leadership - they agreed this would be helpful and would need to be developed iteratively with residents and communities taking into account the different spaces councils and people occupy and how they intersected.

A Member asked “with regards to paragraph 3.3 of the JSC report on 17 July - Regenerating our streets and spaces

Adur & Worthing Councils are working with partners to develop an inclusive economy that works for everyone, through community wealth-building principles. Active support for local businesses, attracting external investment into high street and regeneration projects are all important but don’t alone constitute community wealth building as might be

defined by CLES or enacted in councils such as Preston. How satisfied are you with our current progress on community wealth building in Worthing and what progress can we expect to see in the following 12 months?"

Members were informed that the leaders were pleased with the progress to date but of course there was always more to be done. In terms of the progress this included:

1. The establishment of the Neighbourhood team which would focus on inclusive growth to place, which included the Council for the Community principles
2. The new financial strategy was being developed to enact the economic principles principles that were agreed at a previous JSC, and things like the new procurement strategy (within the financial strategy) would bring that to life, including the proposition development work which was also based around these principles
3. Finally, the mission framing approach in the plan referenced regenerative development which reinforced the commitment in this area.

As for practical measures that would start coming through included neighbourhood plans (with the community), a refreshed procurement strategy, as well as the initiation of further propositions such as Sussex Bay and, more recently, the Sussex Energy mission work with Greater Brighton partners.

A Member asked, "Page 31, Paragraph 3.1 - In the body of Councils for The Community it highlights that citizens have their say on issues that affect them - including on budgets, community safety, active travel, shopping and retail and the future of the local economy. What strategies have been most productive in engaging with residents and how have the outcomes of this transitioned to decision making?"

Members were informed the work with West Durrington residents and communities on a revised design for delayed Community Facilities was a good example of where they had worked at the neighbourhood level and in collaboration with a residents association to design an engagement process that directly impacted decision-makers (in this case, a consortium of housing builders and the WBC as planning authority) to agree a new set of plans for the delivery of a community park, allotments and football pitches (post planning delays aside).

What was learnt from this example was the importance of designing engagement into a decision making process - whether this was a planning process, procurement process, strategy delivery, commissioning or grant-giving process.

They were now looking to scale these approaches through upskilling the teams involved in neighbourhood projects (including active travel and parks investment) and the review of Community Funding.

One area they were planning to experiment with was how they used digital engagement to engage residents in profiling and supporting local community-led projects to attract crowdfunding and enable participatory budgeting - so that decision-making was a product of citizen engagement.

More generally, as councils for the community, they were committed to encouraging as many residents as possible to get involved in the decisions that were shaping the future of Adur and Worthing.

The current methods included the use of social media channels, public consultations and engagement events across a range of services. But they were always looking to find ways to speak to those who felt least confident in getting in touch, so that everyone's voice could be heard.

A key feature of the ongoing organisational redesign was a greater focus on being at the heart of the community so that they could better and more quickly respond to the needs of residents.

Every day residents engaged with the social media channels and said exactly what they thought of what the Councils were doing on their behalf - both positively and negatively. This almost instant feedback flowed through to the teams and the cabinets so that they were aware of public feeling on specific issues when they were making decisions.

The online consultations did not generally lead to huge numbers of responses from the community, but they ensured that key groups and local organisations that represent large sections of residents did get involved so that they could be sure they had heard from a range of people affected.

Additionally, social media posts advertising these consultations generated further comments to be considered by teams and the cabinets. They also proactively encouraged developers to engage early with residents and other stakeholders over any major projects or schemes that were likely to have an impact on towns and villages.

A Member asked, "In your role now as Council Leader what are your personal red lines when it comes to service provision?"

Members were informed that one red line would be a failure to be transparent and honest with residents and that a lot of red lines were already in the rear view mirror, due to ongoing issues. That nobody entered politics to look at red lines but to try and achieve more positive goals.

A Member asked "Your Council's financial position is finely balanced, with no signs of an increase in local authority funding from central government, how do you see WBC matching demand with provision in 2025/26 and 2026/27?"

Members were informed the development of the five year medium Term Financial Plan was in progress from 2025/26. The new financial strategy adopted by members at the JSC in July 2024 set out the strategies that would support the development of the budget. These included alignment of the treasury function with strategic planning, assets management with a flight to quality approach, income generation and external funding development and the creation of a new procurement strategy to drive better outcomes and save money.

Members also asked about the former Lancing police station, CIL funding, the relationship with West Sussex County Council, requests for 20mph speed limits, the winter warm spaces programme, devolution and the role of the Brighton Greater Economic Board.

Members were informed that there were plans for the former police station but they weren't ready to be revealed just yet, that CIL funding was very useful but had restrictions on how and where it could be spent, that Councillors were working well with officers from WSCC, that Members were doing their best but ultimately road speed limits rested with WSCC, the warm spaces programme would continue, conversations were being hard with neighbouring authorities regarding devolution and that the Brighton Greater Economic Board had proven to be a useful partnership with an achievable pipeline of projects.

Members went on to discuss the common themes that had arisen from questions and how best the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee can support the Councils in the future and how external support can be sought and assist.

Resolved:

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended inviting the LGA to carry out a Corporate Peer Challenge

JOSC/19/24-25 Review of JOSC Work Programme

The Committee had a report before it attached as item 9, which had been circulated to all Members and is attached to a signed copy of these minutes. This report set out progress with the delivery of the new Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee (JOSC) Work Programme for 2024/25 which was submitted to the Committee for consideration and comment.

Members discussed the theme of the next meeting of JOSC being around housing, who to invite to speak and how to encourage public participation. Members also discussed the scrutiny request that had been submitted to look at commemorative events.

Resolved:

The Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to add the scrutiny request; looking at the plan for future commemorative events and how to cover the communities wishes, to the meeting in January.

The meeting was declared closed by the Chairman at 9.20 pm, it having commenced at 6.30 pm

Chairman