

TEWKESBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Council Offices, Gloucester Road, Tewkesbury on Tuesday, 7 March 2023 commencing at 4:30 pm

Present:

Chair
Vice Chair

Councillor J W Murphy
Councillor K Berliner

and Councillors:

G J Bocking, C L J Carter, K J Cromwell, P A Godwin, P D McLain, C E Mills, H S Munro, S Thomson, M J Williams and P N Workman

OS.90 ANNOUNCEMENTS

90.1 The evacuation procedure, as noted on the Agenda, was advised to those present.

OS.91 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

91.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H C McLain, J K Smith and C Softley. There were no substitutes for the meeting.

OS.92 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

92.1 The Committee's attention was drawn to the Tewkesbury Borough Code of Conduct which was adopted by the Council on 24 January 2023 and took effect on 1 February 2023.

92.2 The following declaration was made:

Councillor	Application No./Item	Nature of Interest (where disclosed)	Declared Action in respect of Disclosure
K J Cromwell	Agenda Item 7 – Council Plan Performance Tracker – Quarter Three 2022/23	Related to a person with an interest in the Garden Town.	Would leave the meeting if required.

92.3 Councillor Cromwell sought advice as to whether he would need to leave the meeting for the item on the Council Plan Performance Tracker as he had an interest in the Garden Town which was included in the tracker. The Head of Democratic Services advised that this was a discussion in public that involved scrutinising the Performance Tracker and was not a matter which involved any decision-making. Depending upon the questions raised in relation to the Garden Town the Member would be advised whether it was necessary to leave the meeting.

92.4 There were no further declarations made on this occasion.

OS.93 MINUTES

- 93.1 The Minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2023, copies of which had been circulated, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

OS.94 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE FORWARD PLAN

- 94.1 Attention was drawn to the Executive Committee Forward Plan, circulated at Pages No.12-20. Members were asked to determine whether there were any questions for the relevant Lead Members and what support the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could give to the work contained within the plan.

- 94.2 The Head of Corporate Services reminded Members the Forward Plan was a fluid document but there were several items in the pending section which would need to be brought forward ahead of the new Committee being formed following the elections in May. Accordingly, it was

RESOLVED That the Executive Committee Forward Plan be **NOTED**.

OS.95 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23

- 95.1 Attention was drawn to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme, circulated at Pages No. 21-24. Members were asked to consider the Work Programme.

- 95.2 The Head of Corporate Services advised there was one Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting remaining in the current Council term on Tuesday 28 March 2023 and an Agenda Item for that meeting would be the approval of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for 2023/24. A Member sought assurance that the report on the use of mobile surveillance equipment for fly-tipping investigations would be taken to the meeting and this was confirmed by the Head of Community Services.

- 95.3 It was

RESOLVED That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2023/24 be **NOTED**.

OS.96 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE TRACKER - QUARTER THREE 2022/23

- 96.1 The report of the Head of Corporate Services, circulated at Pages No. 25-90, attached the performance management information for quarter three of 2022/23. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee was asked to review and scrutinise the information and, where appropriate, identify any issues to refer to the Executive Committee for clarification or further action to be taken.

- 96.2 Members were informed this was the third quarterly monitoring report for 2022/23 and represented the latest information in terms of the status of the actions set out in the Council Plan which had been refreshed and adopted by Council on 26 July 2022. Progress against delivering the objectives and actions for each of the six Council Plan priorities was reported through the performance tracker, attached at Appendix 1 to the report, which was a combined document that also included a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Key financial information was also reported alongside the tracker documents with a revenue budget statement attached at Appendix 2 to the report, a capital monitoring statement attached at Appendix 3, a reserves position summary attached at Appendix 4 and Finance KPIs attached at Appendix 5.

96.3 Key actions for the quarter were highlighted at Paragraph 2.3 of the report and included approval of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and budget proposal by Council, receipt of 45 live premises applications and approval of three grants as part of the High Street Heritage Action Zone; approval of the Empty Property Strategy and Electric Vehicle Charging Strategy by the Executive Committee; the new Web Developer taking up their post allowing work to recommence on reviewing the corporate website; and the Business Transformation Team being nominated as finalists in Netcall's App of the Year for the planning application tracker which was soon to go live. Members were reminded that, due to the complex nature of the actions being delivered, it was inevitable that some would not progress as smoothly or as quickly as envisaged and the details of those actions were set out at Paragraph 2.4 of the report. It was noted that several were strategic actions relating to the Joint Strategic Plan and Community Infrastructure Levy as well as the work regarding the Ashchurch and Northway Bridge Over Rail and the Garden Town. It was important to recognise that a lot of the actions would be delivered over a number of years so there would be natural slippage. In terms of KPIs, the status of each indicator was set out at Paragraph 3.3 of the report and KPIs where direction of travel was down and/or not on target, were set out at Paragraph 3.4. of the report. Particular reference was made to KPIs 21, 22, 23 and 24 in relation to Planning Enforcement with the majority of categories reaching 100% for the second quarter running; KPI 36 relating to food establishment hygiene ratings remaining good; KPI 37 which showed that the percentage of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests answered on time had improved with 90% being achieved, which was positive considering the authority received 900 FOIs per year; and KPI 40 which showed that waste being reused, recycled or composted was above target

96.4 During the debate which ensued, the following queries and comments were made in relation to the Council Plan Performance Tracker:

Priority: Economic Growth

P42 – Objective 1 – Action b) Develop and launch the new Economic Development and Tourism Strategy – A Member noted that the new target date was September 2023 and he raised concern there was a pattern of this strategy being delayed. He felt the strategy needed to be introduced at the start of a calendar year so it was in place for the summer months; the September implementation date meant that opportunities to improve tourism would have been missed for a full 12 months.

The Head of Development Services explained that one of the reasons for the delay was because the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had identified it for review. A workshop had been held with Members in November 2022 following which it had been agreed that the strategy should be approved by the new Council which would be responsible for taking it forward. The Head of Development Services noted the point about tourism but indicated that it was an economic development strategy as well. She provided assurance that work was underway and the findings of the economic assessment of the borough had been presented to the Committee. The Head of Finance and Asset Management pointed out that, given the importance of the strategy for the borough, the Corporate Leadership Team had asked for it to be postponed to allow further work to be undertaken before it was brought back to Members. It was hoped it would be possible to bring this to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee before September, following which it would need to go to the Executive Committee for approval.

In response to a query as to whether the strategy could be split in two to separate the economic development and tourism aspects, the Head of Development Services advised that the two were so integrated it would be impossible to pick them apart.

P43 – Objective 2 – Action a)
Deliver employment land through allocating land in the Joint Strategic Plan and Tewkesbury Borough Plan – A Member noted that it was almost Spring, which was the target date for this action, yet the timetable was still under review so he asked when it was expected to go to the Executive Committee.

The Head of Development Services confirmed that the dates in the adopted Local Development Scheme would be met. The Local Development Scheme had been reviewed and it was now intended to start in July 2023. The reasons for this were two-fold with the first being the commitment to work in partnership and the funding agreement between the three authorities to ensure the necessary resources were available to take the Joint Strategic Plan forward; secondly, implementation of forthcoming planning reforms was a key issue. Currently, in order to be examined under the existing National Planning Policy Framework, it would need to be submitted by June 2025 with all plans adopted by December 2026 - Members would be aware that examination of the Joint Core Strategy had taken three years so it was necessary to consider when would be best to submit and the implications of that. The Member raised concern as to whether there would be enough time for the Joint Strategic Plan to be examined under the current planning framework in light of the length of the previous examination and the Head of Development Services explained that was only one element of what was being considered as it was also about what dates could realistically be achieved. She provided assurance that the three authorities were committed to reviewing the Joint Strategic Plan as quickly as possible.

The Head of Development Services reminded Members that they were welcome to attend meetings of the Planning Policy Reference Panel which was the appropriate forum to raise any issues regarding the Joint Strategic Plan.

P45 – Objective 3 – Action b)
To deliver projects as part of the Tewkesbury High Street Heritage Action Zone including Shop Front Scheme, Upper Floors Scheme and Traditional Skills – A Member noted that the Council was working with Historic England to reallocate funding this year and to cover grant funding in year 4 of the project and he asked if there was any risk to retaining the money if the action was delayed.

In response, the Head of Development Services advised that the Tewkesbury High Street Heritage Action Zone Programme Manager had been working with Historic England since the report had been produced and she was pleased to confirm that all of the money had now been allocated so work would continue for the final year of the programme.

Priority: Housing and Communities

P56-57 – Objective 3 – Action b) Adopt a revised charging schedule for the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) – A Member asked why it had taken longer than expected to look at this and whether there was an opportunity to add a standard inflationary annual increase pending a more thorough review.

The Head of Development Services advised that the current CIL charging structure was the first one which had been introduced and was a flat rate based on geographical location. There were many ways the charging schedule could be reviewed and Officers had been looking at the various options; however, unfortunately, this often raised more questions. It was intended to come back together as an Officer group to understand how the charges would work in reality. A number of workshops had been held with the development industry to understand it from their perspective and it was important to ensure that whatever was put forward was robust. In terms of a standard charge, she explained there were certain areas where land was much higher value so it was important to ensure that the opportunity to receive more money was not missed. In response, the Member indicated that he was concerned that the delay with the new charging schedule meant that the Council was missing out on money and, given that costs had increased across the board, he felt it might be appropriate to increase CIL in line with inflation to take account of that whilst the review was undertaken. The Head of Development Services indicated that she would check if this was possible following the meeting.

A Member indicated that he wished to make a general point regarding CIL and infrastructure as a whole which was linked to the Joint Strategic Plan. He felt the main issue with the Joint Core Strategy was its failure to deliver the necessary infrastructure to go with

the housing which resulted in developers having to pay to transport children to and from school and residents being unable to get appointments with doctors/dentists. This needed to be considered when assessing the value of land. In response, the Head of Development Services indicated that she was unable to comment on what had happened previously as she had joined the authority after the Joint Core Strategy had been adopted; however, she reminded Members that money was also available from Section 106 for many of the larger schemes so it was not just about CIL. She clarified there was still a CIL rate in place currently so money continued to be collected despite the review; however, the amount collected would never be enough. Notwithstanding this, she accepted the point which was being made in terms of the assessment being based on how easy it was to get the upfront infrastructure first. The Member questioned what needed to be done to get to the point where basic infrastructure was being delivered for people who moved into the new developments and the Head of Development Services advised this was a problem across the country which had been acknowledged by the government in the planning reforms. One of the main issues was identifying responsibility as there were many different bodies e.g. Police, NHS, Highways Authority, County Council etc. which led to conflict about who was delivering and when. The Member expressed the view that one of the major shortfalls of the Joint Core Strategy was having an urban extension strategy without providing infrastructure to areas of massive growth. The majority of development had been in the suburbs of Gloucester where there was a seven-form entry shortfall of secondary school places and children were being shipped out to primary schools; as a Council it was necessary to look at where building would take place and phase it if necessary. The infrastructure plan was an essential part of the Joint Strategic Plan and sites should not be allocated for development without having infrastructure foundations in place. The Head of Development Services advised that the Joint Core Strategy had been examined under a previous National Planning Policy Framework system; under the existing one, deliverability must be demonstrated, for instance, if infrastructure was needed in the first five years it would be necessary to show how this would be funded and, if it was within the first

5-10 years a route map was required.

A Member pointed out that infrastructure was often required after a development had been built when Section 106 money had run out and she asked what could be done to address that. The Head of Development Services explained that it was not possible to go back to the developer to ask for more money once the Section 106 Agreement had been signed; however, there were neighbourhood CIL monies available which Parish Councils could use.

Another Member indicated that she was struggling to understand the issues around CIL and the Head of Development Services undertook to invite the CIL Manager to a future meeting to answer queries.

P59 – KPI 15 – Total new affordable housing properties delivered by tenure type – A Member raised concern that she could not tell if the figures were high or low and she asked what percentage of all properties completed were defined as affordable housing.

The Housing Services Manager undertook to provide a figure in terms of total delivery across the borough by way of comparison to give assurance the targets were being achieved.

P61-62 – KPI 17 – Percentage of major applications determined within 13 weeks or 16 weeks where an EIA is required, or alternative period agreed with the applicant, and KPI 19 – Percentage of major planning applications overturned at appeal – A Member questioned when the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would start to see improvement against these actions. He recognised that progress was being made within Development Services but the Committee was required to assess performance based on the KPIs.

The Head of Development Services felt this was a fair comment; it had been a difficult few years but the team had been working hard to reduce the backlog of applications and contractors had been appointed to assist with that so she hoped Members would start to see smiley faces within the next six months.

In terms of KPI 19, the Member asked whether the applications being overturned on appeal were determined by Officers under delegated authority or by the Planning Committee and he expressed the view that this should be made clear within the report in order for Members to understand what was happening and to address the root cause. The Head of Development Services confirmed it was a mixture of both delegated and Committee decisions. This was a very important indicator as, if the national threshold of 10% was exceeded, it would be highlighted to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) – one application was the equivalent of 1.5% so it would not take many overturns for the percentage to increase above the threshold. She stressed the importance of ensuring there were solid grounds for refusal so they

could be defended on appeal. She undertook to separate delegated decisions and Committee decisions within this KPI going forward.

P63 – KPIs 21, 22, 23 and 24 – Planning Enforcement – A Member congratulated the team on the improvement in planning enforcement.

The Head of Development Services undertook to pass this on to the team.

Priority: Garden Communities

P75 – Objective 1 – Action b) Prepare a Strategic Framework Plan (SFP) (previously named Design Manual) and P76 – Objective 1 – Action f) Work with partners to maximise sustainable development principles and low carbon technologies as part of the Garden Communities programme – A Member noted there seemed to be a connection between the SFP and the Garden Communities programme and he asked for clarity on which was reliant on which as he was under the impression that the SFP would need to be completed before action f) could be delivered yet the target date for the SFP was after the sustainable strategies.

The Garden Town Programme Director confirmed that sustainability was part of the SFP and it was intended it would be delivered by May 2023 to align the two objectives. The Member went on to query why this had been delayed and was informed it was due to the nature of the work involved and the engagement needed to make it robust. The key thing was ensuring the May timeframe was achieved in order to feed into the Joint Strategic Plan process; this had always been the intention so the delay was not a major issue in terms of overall deliverability.

P75 – Objective 1 – Action c) Finalise the design and launch the construction phase of the Ashchurch and Northway Bridge Over Rail – A Member asked for clarity as to whether there was still a potential way forward following the loss of the Judicial Review.

The Garden Town Programme Director advised that the reality was that, without planning permission, it was not possible to proceed with the programme and the knock on effect of that was the potential problems with grant funding and the time schedule for drawing that down. Whilst the judgement quashed the planning permission, it was being assessed in terms of whether it would be possible to resubmit the planning application and discussions were taking place with Homes England regarding the funding. He could not give Members any further information at this stage other than to provide assurance that Officers were in dialogue and that the loss of planning permission meant that it was not possible to continue with the plan of action e.g. going out to tender etc. The Member felt that this commentary could

have been provided in the report and the Garden Town Programme Director accepted this point but advised that more information was included later in the document. In response to a query regarding what happened to the grant money in the event the bridge was not built, the Garden Town Programme Director advised that a lot of money had been spent in terms of design and this was part of the discussion taking place with the Homes England Housing Infrastructure Fund Team. The Member questioned whether the bridge could have been delivered within budget in any case. The Garden Town Programme Director advised that, whilst it had not gone out to tender, the estimated cost was £11.3m which exceeded the £8.1m working budget so, although no documents had been signed, there was an agreement in place with the developer to fund the difference.

- 96.5 Turning to the financial information, the Head of Finance and Asset Management advised that the financial budget summary for quarter three showed a projected surplus of £1.2m for the full year against the approved budget – an increase of over £1m on the quarter two projection. The significant increase in surplus projection was due to the cost of both the Pay Line Review Phase 1 and the excess cost of the national pay award being taken from the reserves which were set aside to fund those costs; increased business rates retention of £249,000; increased planning fees; receipt of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) grant of £128,000 which was not expected to be spent by year-end; investment interest being £100,000 more than anticipated; further reduction of the Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) gate fee by £35,000; and Ubico's forecast deficit reducing by £100,000 since quarter two, mainly within diesel and employment costs.
- 96.6 The table at Paragraph 4.2 of the report highlighted the variances against budget. In terms of employees, the net position was a surplus against target of £540,830, mainly due to employees savings being accrued by One Legal. The projected outturn for supplies and services showed a potential underspend of £133,418 and there had been a reduction in the projected overspend in relation to payments to third parties to £187,994. Income was performing well in many areas with several streams projected to deliver more than budgeted, including planning fees and licensing; however, it was noted that income from the Leisure Centre would be £65,000 less than budget as a reduced management fee had been agreed. In terms of corporate expenditure, the increased market rates were good news for the Council's investment activities with day to day investments and pooled funds experiencing returns significantly in excess of budget expectations with a surplus of £513,000 projected. The overall projected position on retained business rates was currently exceeding budget expectations with an overall surplus of £104,000. Bringing together both the surplus on net service expenditure and surplus on net corporate expenditure resulted in the overall budget surplus projection of £1.2m for the year. Whilst there was still time between the third quarter and end of year, this was a good position to be in approaching year-end.
- 96.7 The capital budget position as at quarter three was attached at Appendix 3 to the report and was currently showing an underspend of £2.4m against the profiled budget of £4.1m. The main elements of the forecast included Ashchurch Bridge, the solar canopy and Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). Appendix 4 to the report

provided a summary of the current usage of available reserves. As at 1 April 2022, the reserves stood at £18.13m, an increase of £1.93m on the previous year which included external funding for a range of projects. Significant actual expenditure had now been made against reserves totalling £1.49m which included the cost of the Local Pay Line Review Phase 1 and the excess cost of the national pay award. It was noted that, as part of the CIPFA Financial Management Code, approved by the Audit and Governance Committee, the report now included a number of KPIs to ensure frequent and meaningful data was reported regularly allowing for further scrutiny of the Council's financial performance. Appendix 5 to the report showed the level of bad sundry debt for each service area along with statistics on the Council's treasury management position and the number of vacancies in each service area.

- 96.8 A Member sought confirmation as to whether all of the commercial properties within the Council's portfolio had been let and the Head of Finance and Asset Management advised that every unit owned by the Council was now fully occupied and the inducement periods had now passed. The Member went on to ask if Officers had any concerns regarding interest rates moving forward and the Head of Finance and Asset Management indicated that it was thought interest rates were now close to their peak and were likely to drop over the next two years, not to historical low levels but around 3% in terms of the base rate meaning there would be a spike in investment income over the next 18 months before falling back to more ordinary levels. Officers were aware of the risks and looking to manage them so they did not anticipate any peaks or troughs and had no particular concerns at this stage. In response to a query regarding the contracts for the commercial properties, Members were informed these were all fixed term and low rates had been secured with the Public Loans Board so the change in interest rates would not affect that too much. The Head of Finance and Asset Management provided assurance these were secure and profitable and there may be an opportunity start to sell some of the portfolio going forward.
- 96.9 A Member drew attention to Page No. 36, Paragraph 5.4 of the report, which stated that a new grant application had been made in October for funding towards the heat replacement project and he asked if there was a timeframe for when the Council would be informed as to whether that had been successful. The Head of Finance and Asset Management advised that an informal indication had been given that the bid had been successful; however, it had not been formally confirmed so there was some way to go in terms of it being a live project. It should be borne in mind that the Council had been in this position before and had subsequently been disappointed by the tenders and it would be necessary to take a report to Council in the summer to seek match funding in order to move forward. Members would be notified when formal confirmation had been received.
- 96.10 With regard to Appendix 3 to the report, a Member drew attention to note 8 which stated that awarded housing benefit was higher than expected and he indicated it would be interesting to know the reasoning behind this; in terms of note 19, there was an adverse variant of £4,300 in respect of the Golf Club and he asked for clarification on that; however, most concerning to him was the favourable variant relating to the vacant posts within One Legal and he hoped that a report would be provided to the new Council in terms of how recruitment was progressing. In response, the Head of Finance and Asset Management explained that, in terms of housing benefit, the amount of claimants was not falling as quickly as the government had expected and the number of working age people were not moving to Universal Credit as rapidly as anticipated so they were retained within the housing benefit portfolio. He did not think there was an issue in terms of significant cost to the Council as the vast majority was paid by the government and Officers worked to recoup the net deficit through housing benefit. He would be happy to provide a more detailed explanation following the meeting. With regard to the Golf Club, a full year's rental income had been included in the budget and the current

tenant had an inducement of a free rental period; however, going forward they would be paying the amount due so there would be no negative variance in next year's budget. In terms of One Legal, there was a high number of vacancies but it was a big service comprising four Councils with 45 full-time equivalents and this position was reflective of the difficulties with recruiting the legal profession into local government. The Director of One Legal had made good progress recently and every effort was being made to promote the benefits of a shared service so it was hoped there would be improvement in future reports; however, it was a very difficult field in terms of attracting staff. With regard to housing benefit, the Member asked whether it would be fair for the Council to make an adjustment to next year's budget based on the explanation given and the Head of Finance and Asset Management advised that it was amended each year to reflect the reality of the situation on the ground and the government stipulated a percentage reduction which must be applied to the 'real' figures – this was not in line with the expected reduction so, whilst the Council did try to amend the figure, it was hampered by the government.

96.11 A Member asked if it was possible to adjust the Ubico budget going forward in order to account for the overspend. The Head of Finance and Asset Management explained that, when the budget had been agreed with Ubico in November 2021 this had been considered prudent and reasonable as inflation had been nowhere near current levels; however, the national pay award had resulted an additional £1,925 for every scale point which was the equivalent of 10.5% at the lower end which incorporated a lot of Ubico employees and had translated into an increased cost for Ubico. In addition, diesel costs had risen by 50%, although prices were starting to come down. These factors were largely outside of Ubico's control and resulted in an unforeseen overspend on the budget that was set. The Member indicated that, whilst he understood the reasons for the overspend, due to various external factors which were out of Ubico's control, there had been an overspend on the contract for a number of years so he felt the budget could be adjusted to account for such variables. The Head of Finance and Asset Management advised that a prudent view had been taken this year and the Council did have risk reserves which could be used to manage the overspend and that reserve would be in place for next year. Another Member pointed out that economies of scale or savings had always been promised and, whilst he understood costs increased, he asked when the Council was likely to see that benefit. In response, the Head of Finance and Asset Management agreed it had been an ambition, both of the Council and Ubico, to exploit the teckal exemption and that was in the business plan for the current year and was being worked on so, although he did not know the timescales, a report would be coming forward to Council.

96.12 Having considered the information provided, it was

RESOLVED That the performance management information for quarter three of 2022/23 be **NOTED**.

OS.97 HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY ACTION PLAN MONITORING REPORT

97.1 The report of the Housing Services Manager, circulated at Pages No. 91-118, set out the progress which had been made against the Housing and Homelessness Strategy Action Plan. Members were asked to consider the report.

97.2 The Housing Services Manager indicated that, with regard to Priority 1, good progress had been made with two schemes being delivered by registered providers and a wider developer-led scheme which had increased the amount of social rented properties the authority was able to secure so Members should see those coming to the Planning Committee shortly. With regard to Page No. 92, Paragraph 2.2.2 of the report, it was noted that a particular focus for year one was around assisting customers with the impact of inflation and the schemes would deliver 47 new units

which would have high efficiency standards. The social rented properties were being delivered by registered providers at Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) 'A' rating to ensure properties were better quality, as well as being more affordable, to improve the experience for tenants in terms lower energy bills etc. With regard to Priority 2, as set out at Page No. 92, Paragraph 2.3.1 of the report, the stock condition survey would be moved from year one to year two as the survey was being carried out across the county and Tewkesbury Borough was further down the list than had been anticipated. Paragraph 2.3.2 explained that discussions had taken place with registered providers in relation to the condition of their stock and the Housing Services Manager was pleased to report that the Council's main partners had processes in place for dealing with condensation, damp and mould. Paragraph 2.4.1 of the report gave an update on Priority 3 and Members were advised that training was being sourced for the Housing Services team on reform procedures which would help them to understand the experience of domestic abuse, mental ill health etc. in terms of why people made, on the face of it, seemingly strange decisions.

- 97.3 A Member drew attention to Page No. 115 of the report and, with regard to action e) work with partners to establish arrangements for management of empty homes that are brought into use through management orders, he asked how many empty homes had been identified and how many had been brought back into use. In response, the Head of Community Services advised that none had been brought back into use as the first phase of the Empty Homes Strategy was to identify all empty homes in the borough and undertake assessments to establish the cause before targeting those which could be brought more easily back into use. There were approximately 510 empty homes across the borough and it was not expected it would be possible for all of those to be brought back into use as some would be uninhabitable. He stressed it was a four to five year plan and this project was still very much in the first stage. The Member went on to comment that issues with damp, mould and condensation were often the result of modern houses which were heavily insulated and not properly ventilated meaning there was nowhere for condensation to go. The Head of Community Services advised that building regulations were in place to deal with that and he provided assurance that registered providers were taking this very seriously - new affordable properties were 'A' rated so they did have adequate ventilation. It was noted that these type of problems were often linked to lifestyle, for instance, people could not afford to put the heating on so did not want to open windows etc. so there were a whole host of reasons behind the problem; nevertheless, it was crucial it was addressed. Another Member was pleased to note that Housing Services had recently worked with the Armed Forces charity SSAFA to ensure the housing aspects of the Armed Services Covenant were being implemented and she asked if this included those who were currently serving. The Housing Services Manager advised that the Covenant was broadly based on those being discharged in order to assist with the transition.
- 97.4 With regard to Page No. 115 of the report, action b) support partners to target advice at households most at risk of fuel poverty, a Member noted that a cost of living event had been held in Tewkesbury and he asked if had been well attended. The Head of Community Services advised that Officers had engaged with approximately 45 people which was not as many as they would have liked; however, it was recognised that not everyone was comfortable with discussing financial matters in a public building and the Department for Work and Pensions would be reflecting on that ahead of future events, for instance, looking at more appropriate venues, holding online sessions etc. Another Member went on to question what the current target was for affordable housing as he understood it was 35% in the Joint Core Strategy; in response, he was advised that affordable housing provision for new developments was 40% for anything outside of the Joint Core Strategy – this was policy so was non-negotiable. The Member noted that the Housing and Homelessness Strategy included an objective around reducing the

impact of new homes on the environment whilst increasing their resilience to climate change and he asked whether a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) would be produced in relation to this - he was aware Cheltenham Borough Council had a draft SPD for improving quality of housing efficiency. The Housing Services Manager advised this would be considered as part of the Joint Strategic Plan review and he clarified that the SPD the Member had referenced in relation to Cheltenham Borough would also cover Joint Core Strategy areas.

- 97.5 With regard to Page No. 58 of the Agenda, which related to the Council Plan Performance Tracker considered earlier in the meeting, a Member asked whether the figures in respect of KPI 9, total number of active applications on the housing register at the end of the quarter, was in relation to Tewkesbury Borough or all of Gloucestershire Homeseeker and was advised that those figures were solely for Tewkesbury Borough. In response to a query regarding the affordable housing figures in the performance tracker, the Head of Community Services explained they would have been generated under the old Housing and Homelessness Strategy where 40% affordable housing was not required so it was not possible to read across the two documents. The Member asked whether the development at Golden Valley was a Joint Core Strategy site and was informed it was a joint allocated site. In response to a query as to whether it would be possible to require 40% affordable housing on the site, the Housing Services Manager advised that it had been addressed in the same way as the Joint Core Strategy sites. The Head of Community Services indicated that the affordable housing requirement for Joint Core Strategy sites was 35% with social rent being the favoured tenure type. The Member questioned what percentage of the Council's housing stock was with Bromford, and how much was with other registered providers, and what type of relationship the authority had with the organisation. He raised concern that Tewkesbury Borough residents were missing out on affordable housing within the borough. The Head of Community Services advised that the authority had a number of key partners across the borough, including Bromford, which was by far the biggest with around 2,500 properties. The Council's relationship with Bromford was very good and they were a 'go to' partner when something needed to be delivered, for example, the Homes for Ukraine scheme. It was more difficult to build a relationship with national providers who had a small amount of stock in the borough. In terms of local connection issues, this was not taken into consideration in terms of the strategic allocation sites so people from Tewkesbury or Gloucester would have equal standing. At a Parish level, people could have a local connection via other means than living in the area.

- 97.6 It was

RESOLVED That progress against the Housing and Homelessness Strategy Action Plan be **NOTED**.

OS.98 CUSTOMER CARE STRATEGY

- 98.1 The report of the Head of Corporate Services, circulated at Pages No. 119-138, set out the progress made against the actions within the Customer Care Strategy during 2022/23. Members were asked to consider the report and to endorse the action plan for 2023/24.
- 98.2 The Customer Services Team Leader advised that some of the key points included the Customer Services team being the first point of contact for Licensing and Planning queries so they could answer frequently asked questions freeing up the specialist teams to deal with more complex enquiries; this had been working well and Licensing, in particular, were very happy with the results. The Customer Services team had also been working with the Business Transformation team to enhance online services offered to customers e.g. bulky waste service. In 2023/24, it was intended to look at a new telephone system for the authority as the current

system did not work with other platforms such as Teams. Customers were still being encouraged online where possible, freeing up staff to assist those who were not able to access services in that way. When letters were sent out in bulk at particular times, this resulted in a high number of calls so it helped if people could self-serve, for instance, garden waste renewals had recently gone out so this was generating a lot of customer contact. The Head of Corporate Services drew attention to Page No. 124 of the report and indicated there was a sentence missing in relation to the action around implementing improvements as a result of the residents' satisfaction survey and he clarified that the residents' satisfaction survey had been completed and a report had been presented to Council. With regard to the telephone system, this was coming to the end of its life and would be a major project for the Business Transformation team over the next 12 months. It was thought there was better technology available such as intuitive software which would assist the customer experience, for instance, using voice recognition to request a service or Officer rather than listening to a list of options.

- 98.3 A Member was pleased to note that the telephone system was being reviewed and he asked whether the Customer Services team was aware of what happened when they transferred calls to Officers and they did not pick up. The Customer Services Team Leader advised that if they knew an Officer was unavailable they would not put the call through and if Officers did not answer they should have a voicemail stating where they were, when they would be back and who they could contact instead. The Member expressed the view that the system was very clunky and some Officers had voicemails whilst others did not. The Customer Services Team Leader indicated that Officers could be away from their desks and telephones for a number of reasons ranging from annual leave to being out on site or in a meeting. If Customer Services could not get through, the only option was to take a message for the customer. One of the main issues was that an Officer might update the Teams system to show they were not available but that was not linked to the telephone system. The Head of Corporate Services indicated that, if Members were having problems contacting individual Officers, they should provide him with the relevant details and he could look into this further to try to resolve any issues. The Customer Services Team Leader advised that the Business Transformation Team was working on something for the Planning department which would mean that, if the telephone was not answered, a message would be sent to the Planning Officer so they had to respond within a certain timescale and it would be flagged if they did not. If that was successful then it could potentially be rolled out across the authority.
- 98.4 A Member was aware that some residents struggled with the Report It system, particularly the map, and so reverted to sending emails but it was often unclear what happened to them after they had been sent to Customer Services. The Customer Services Team Leader explained there was a central Customer Services inbox and whoever was on reception that day was responsible for the administration; if Customer Services could deal with the query they would answer it, if not, they would send it on to the appropriate Officer and would let the customer know and provide contact details. She agreed that the Report It system was not always clear and she undertook to speak to IT to see if anything could be done.
- 98.5 A Member asked whether the Advice and Information Centres (AICs) were promoted and if that could be improved in any way rather than closing them. In response, the Customer Services Team Leader advised that attempts had been made to promote them but there had been very minimal take-up of the services provided which had included Benefits and Housing Officers being located in the AICs; the main requests now were for photocopying and blue bags. During the pandemic, a lot of people had found alternative ways to communicate with the Council and Customer Services were only present at the AICs for two hours per week – the venue in Brockworth was open 9.00am-5.00pm and Customer Services did not need to be present to give out blue bags etc.

98.6 It was
RESOLVED That the progress made against the actions within the Customer Care Strategy during 2022/23 be **NOTED** and the action plan for 2023/24 be **ENDORSED**.

OS.99 SEPARATE BUSINESS

99.1 The Chair proposed and it was
RESOLVED That, under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items on the grounds that they involve the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

OS.100 SEPARATE MINUTES

100.1 The separate Minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2023, copies of which had been circulated, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The meeting closed at 6:30 pm