

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 10 NOVEMBER 2021

Present:

Councillors:

Adeleke	Mahmood
Durrant	Oguchi
Harden	Barry
Imarni (Chair)	Freedman
Johnson	Hollinghurst
	Pringle

Portfolio Holders:

Councillor Banks (Community & Regulatory)
Councillor Griffiths (Housing)

Officers:

M Brookes	Assistant Director Corporate and Contracted Services
F Jump	Group Manager Financial Services
M Rawdon	Group Manager People and Performance
L Roberts	Assistant Director Performance, People and Innovation
S Turner	PA to the Corporate Directors (minutes)
F Williamson	Assistant Director Housing Service

Consultants:

R Thompson	Director, Hadron Consulting
D McHendry	Managing Director, Knight, Kavanagh & Page

HC/061/21 MINUTES

The minutes from 13 October 2021 were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

HC/062/21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs Bassadone, Oguchi and Ransley sent their apologies for the meeting.

HC/063/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

Chairman:

HC/064/21 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None.

HC/065/21 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

None.

HC/066/21 BERKHAMSTED SPORTS CENTRE

M Brookes presented the report and introduced Richard Thompson of Hadron Consulting and David McHendry of Knight, Kavanagh and Page. M Brookes provided an update from April 2021 and confirmed they are currently at stage 2 and working with key stakeholders, developing site options, assessing the facility mix, and developing the initial capital cost and business revenue plan. Following this, authority will be sought from Cabinet to progress to stage 3 to develop the design for planning application and undertake first stage contractor procurement. Stage 4 will then look to develop the technical side of the scheme, and a report will come back to Cabinet at the close of stage 4.

R Thompson of Hadron Consulting provided an overview of stage 2, noting the challenges of the site and the number of engagement meetings held so far. A number of facility mixes were proposed, and a hybrid model of the essential and desirable facility mixes was presented with a wet side, dry side, community side, and outside facilities. External facilities would comprise of around 150 car parking spaces and a number of options to improve Lagley Meadow.

The Chairman queried if the proposal showed a nursery or creche. R Thompson confirmed that the plan incorporates the Happy Days Nursery already onsite. Cllr Mahmood asked if the square meterage of the pool and fitness area remain the same as the current design. D Hendry of Knight, Kavanagh and Page advised that the swimming pool area has increased with the inclusion of the teaching pool and splash pad. The health and fitness area is also larger with additional studios, which is a key driver for income generation.

R Thompson presented the strategic moves, noting particular attention to the sloped area from Douglas Gardens to Gossoms End, the Lagley Meadow connection, and looking to make an active roofscape. Looking at the design approach, R Thompson presented the existing site and advised that the nursery and 5-a-side pitches will need to be temporarily or permanently removed to allow room for construction of the new centre. The nursery are being engaged with to arrange a temporary facility and then bring back into the scheme, and football will be provided for elsewhere. The current constraints of the site were noted with underground utilities, which would require considerable funds to move, and keeping the existing site open.

Cllr Adeleke asked how much the existing site would be expanded by. R Thompson noted the current site ownership and confirmed that the new centre will be larger at just under 7,000sqm compared to 5,000sqm at present, though the overall site area will remain the same. New access from Gossoms End will bring traffic in off the main road and into a new car park, which will provide temporary parking during construction.

R Thompson next looked to the landscape strategy, noting that they are compensating for any tree loss to create new site access and that both entrances

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will be fully accessible. There are a number of intentions for the roof, including a running track and yoga space. R Thompson also acknowledged Lagley Meadow and the retention of the football pitch, advising that they may look at tiered seating around the pitch and adding a play space, learn to ride facility and pump tracks to look at how the building can be linked to the outdoor space.

Cllr Adeleke asked if solar energy was being considered for the roof. R Thompson advised that the intention is that this is within the scheme, that other roofs will be as lightweight as possible, and they are also taking resident views into account, which will be developed as part of the next stage.

Cllr Harden supported the incorporation of the running track from the meadow and onto the roof. Cllr Harden queried what facilities are chargeable or free access. R Thomson confirmed that the contract with the existing operator continues and that the use of the roof running track would require controlled access. D McHendry advised that they are looking at a partially covered outdoor space that can be accessed from the fitness suite, and anything that requires entering the building will be chargeable and additional outdoor activities could be part of this. D McHendry confirmed they are working with the operator on this and that they recognise that Lagley Meadow is a sensitive component that is currently considered a high-value, low-quality open space with the scheme looking to improve this and link it into the operation of the facility. R Thompson added that they wouldn't be charging people to use Lagley Meadow other than for specific activities and it would remain an open space.

Cllr Pringle referred to the parties currently engaged with and recommended the inclusion of Northchurch Parish Council. It was also noted that Ashlyns School was engaged with despite having a sports facility on site and that primary schools would be using the facility, including St Mary's and Westfield Primary School. Cllr Pringle also commented that ParentMail would be an effective tool to engage with the local schools and their communities. Cllr Pringle then noted a request that the changing facilities include a hoist. R Thompson confirmed that a Changing Places facility is included within the brief and will be a public facility.

Cllr Hollinghurst recommended the installation of ground source coils to provide heating and photovoltaic cells in place of the sun deck. R Thompson presented a slide on the sustainability strategy for the building and a number of renewables that are being considered. R Thompson explained that the swimming pools orientate south to capture solar gain and that thermal zoning, materiality and future flexibility is key. R Thompson then looked at Passivhaus design and that lessons can be learnt from new schemes though it is still a new offer. A microfiltration system is being proposed to reduce water turnover and usage as well as chemical usage, which also reduces the need to reheat more water. Sustainable construction is also being considered to reduce the weight of the building and during the next phase, the full cost of keeping the building fully insulated will be set out. R Thompson confirmed that ground source heat pumping isn't coming out favourably due to Lagley Meadow's distance from the plant and capital costs, though this will be reconsidered during the next phase of design.

Cllr Freedman commented on the public consultation of Lagley Meadow and urged that there be a dual term for the land as Lagley Meadow is where the site sits and the open space is known as East Meadow. R Thompson confirmed that the right terminology would be captured before plans go into the public domain.

Chairman:

R Thompson presented the 4 key phases of development:

- Off-siting of the nursery and football pitches and the creation of new access and car park, and diversion of any facilities.
- Creating a safe zone to allow the existing centre to remain open.
- Construction of the new centre.
- Replacement of the existing leisure centre with the football facility.

Looking at footfall, M Brookes noted the issue of 3G pitch provision during construction and that they are looking for alternatives across Berkhamstead and are considering a permanent solution that could then free up part of the site for other uses. 3 sites have been proposed:

- Bridgewater Primary School
- The Thomas Coram Church of England School
- Durrants Lane

All 3 options will be pursued, and it was noted that the school sites could be utilised by pupils during school hours.

M Brookes then looked to the opportunities should the 3G pitches be relocated offsite on a permanent basis, including the potential for a residential development of approximately 50 units and this will be explored during the next phase.

Cllr Pringle commented that the 3G pitches would require additional facilities, such as toilets and changing areas, and that Durrants Lane doesn't have the infrastructure for this. D McHendry advised that a new pitch would be significantly larger than the current pitches onsite, and this would help address any shortfall in training provision in the area and would be subject to a Football Foundation application to receive funding for this. D McHendry noted that Raiders currently have plans for the Durrants Lane site for facilities and that the FA will only provide changing facilities where adult football is played on the site though they do look to offer a small toilet block, kitchen and meeting space to allow clubs to develop their sustainability. Discussions are ongoing with potential partners to look at the potential solution for the loss of the current 3G pitches.

D McHendry noted the proposed facility mixes, explaining that the key differences are around the provision of the splash pad, which is a key income generator, a smaller sports hall, a larger health and fitness suite and the provision of the spa. D McHendry confirmed that the main differences will be evaluated during the next phase.

R Thompson advised that the scheme is being priced based on the sustainability scheme and this will be developed more fully with the Passivhaus criteria adding a further 6-12% to the overall cost of the building. Further considerations include the S.278, Lagley Meadow options, the current contract, volatile building costs, and the potential loss of football revenue during construction.

D McHendry presented the business case for the spa facility. 12 spa facilities have been identified within a 60-minute drive and a further site in Amersham that is due to open. D McHendry noted Member concern regarding the number of treatment facilities in the area and 60 smaller venues have been identified though they don't offer a day-spa experience or access to a wet environment. The new competitor will be the new spa at Chilterns Lifestyle Centre in Amersham though it will be run by the same operator and can therefore be marketed appropriately. Cllr Pringle noted that there is also a spa in the Pendley Manor Hotel in Tring.

Chairman:

Cllr Mahmood confirmed that he is fully supportive of the recommendations.

M Brookes presented an overview of the next stages, explaining that this will focus on the feasibility of the offsite 3G options, to look at the residential plan, address the sustainability scheme, finalise the funding structure, look at pre-application advice with planners, and seek approval from Cabinet on the 3G pitches and residential considerations.

R Thompson noted the delivery programme, confirming that public consultation may be in 2022 and will be a key part of the next stage. The preferred contractor for the design stages will be identified early on and a planning application is planned for the start of Q2 2022 with a view to have building completed by summer 2024.

Cllr Adeleke confirmed his support of the project and that he felt the plan was an example of how forward-looking the council is. Cllr Adeleke noted a number of points of caution, urging that all climate change considerations be taken into account. It was also noted that a number of key partners have been missed and Cllr Adeleke advised that they speak to Cllr Pringle to ensure all relevant partners are included. Cllr Adeleke then noted the proposed 2024 completion date and queried how realistic this was. R Thompson noted the concerns around climate change considerations and that they are ensuring that the building and designs can be adapted to keep up with technology. On missing consultees, R Thompson requested that any suggestions be sent to M Brookes. R Thompson acknowledged the programme risk, advising that the procurement route looks to get a contractor on board as soon as possible to develop the programme and the key issues are around approvals, though the current timeline is benchmarked against similar facilities and therefore feels achievable.

Cllr Freedman commented that he would like to see the council acting as a community leader during this project and that it be the gold standard in sustainability. Cllr Freedman noted the cost of full Passivhaus certification and requested that this remain an option and that value for money be lower in priority.

Cllr Freedman noted the facility mix options and asked how these were selected, commenting that the facilities appear to cover what is already provided rather than what is required. D McHendry advised that the needs assessment considers all sport and physical activity facilities across Dacorum to support feasibility and key requirements. A multi-layered approach considers demand, and that provisions such as squash and indoor tennis take up a large amount of space with relatively low numbers of users.

Cllr Pringle commented on the need to have a consultation around accessibility for users with sensory issues and requested rooms that can be adapted.

Cllr Pringle noted the investment of public money in the facility and asked if small businesses will have the opportunity to hire out rooms. D McHendry acknowledged the number of spaces currently being hired out and confirmed that they have looked at having a number of treatment and multipurpose rooms. D McHendry added that they have looked at demedicalised areas to ensure the centre can accommodate these and incorporate a number of 1-to-1 and group treatments. M Brookes commented that a key element of the next stage will be public consultation.

Chairman:

Cllr Hollinghurst advised that any proposed car parks would be an opportunity for installing a 7.4kW charging post and would provide additional income generation. R Thompson confirmed there are EV charging points in the car park with future room for growth if required.

Cllr Harden requested that they consider mental health and use of outdoor space, and that they need to consider what is desirable against what is financially feasible. Cllr Harden confirmed his support of the recommendations so far and that he looked forward to further discussions.

The Committee formally noted the report and recommendations.

HC/067/21 Q2 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT

F Jump introduced the report for the forecast outturn position as at Q2. An overall pressure of £1m is forecast, of which £0.7m is Covid-related and the proposal is to fund this pressure from the economic recovery reserve.

The housing revenue account is seeing revenue pressures of £0.8m, which is made up of a number of over and underspends, as detailed in the report. Capital schemes are broadly on budget, against the general fund there is slippage of £0.1m, and against the housing revenue account there is slippage of £11.7m, of which most is against the new build programme and relates to delays experienced with third parties.

Cllr Harden referred to item 4.1 in the report and 3.4 around temporary accommodation and asked for further context on funding. F Jump explained that they are seeing a shortfall against the income targets due to working practices that needed to be introduced, and they are not currently at full capacity and this is impacting budgets. Works are continuing on these properties to make them fit for purpose and these properties therefore can't be used.

Cllr Harden asked if the council are working to encourage the recruitment to fill capacity or if this will be resolved at a later date. F Jump stated that she didn't believe there was an issue with works being undertaken, and that they need to consider how many clients can be housed at a particular time due to restrictions.

Remaining on item 4.1, Cllr Adeleke asked how severe the situation is with staff sickness. F Williamson advised that they have had 4 members of staff off and that throughout the pandemic they have experienced issues with individuals with periods of sickness but also with people being asked to self-isolate. There are currently 2 members absent at present.

The Chairman noted items 5.1, 5.10 and 5.11 and that the bad debt provision is better than expected. The Chairman referred to item 5.12 and the depreciation and revaluations. F Jump advised that professional evaluations were undertaken as a result of publication of the final accounts, and this has indicated an increase in value of council housing stock, which will impact the depreciation of assets charged through the housing revenue account and has therefore increased as a result. The Chairman asked if this was with a particular set of properties. F Jump explained that, given the number of properties, even a small increase in valuation will have a large impact on the depreciation charge.

Cllr Harden noted item 6.4 and commented on the delay in developing housing schemes due to awaiting planning consent or responses from Hertfordshire County

Chairman:

Council and asked if the council were working proactively to address this. F Jump advised that they are actively pursuing all avenues and reassured members that they are doing all possible to expedite these programmes.

Cllr Adeleke raised a point of order that there should have been a declaration at the beginning of the meeting that it was being recorded. The Chairman commented that the protocol has been that meetings have been recorded for a number of months and confirmed that the meeting was being recorded.

HC/068/21 Q2 PERFORMANCE REPORT - HOUSING

F Williamson presented the report, noting this was the first performance data on the new system, which has resulted in a formatting change. F Williamson noted SH03A and confirmed that the figure of 1,606 days is a cumulative figure and not the number of days taken to allocate general needs property in the period, and that this is then divided by the number of properties allocated and results in an average time of 33 days.

Looking at Q1 and Q2, F Williamson confirmed that an external consultant was commissioned to undertake a service review of the housing service, and an action plan has been developed from this, which aligns with a number of areas already within the plan over the coming 2-3 years. F Williamson confirmed that she will bring progress against these actions to future scrutiny committees. Overall, it was recognised the housing service provided a good quality service during the pandemic, though there are a number of areas where there are options for improvement that will be taken forward.

F Williamson then looked to Q2 and advised there have been a number of challenges in the construction sector, which has impacted performance with Osborne and also specialist material supplies, and work is being done to mitigate the impact to tenants. F Williamson confirmed that the service has been kept within target for emergency repairs, though standard repairs are taking longer, and backlog repairs are now increasing.

Looking at performance highlights, F Williamson reported that the Private Rented Sector team have continued to work to licence further HMOs and have increased a further 10 since Q1, resulting in 113 HMOs licensed in the borough. The Tenancy Sustainment Team are seeing a rise in demand for services with a number of households still requiring support, both in financial support and also paying bills as a result of rising energy costs. F Williamson confirmed 99.94% compliance in Q2 for gas servicing, and all those out of target were referred to the Tenancy team, and the compliance figure is now at 100% as of October.

The homelessness team have been working to prevent homelessness, particularly from the private sector, and some cases are being referred to courts for possession, and the team have been successful in ensuring that 36 cases in Q2 were prevented from a homeless presentation. It was also noted that Natasha Beresford, Group Manager for Strategic Housing, was recognised for an Inspirational Colleague of the Year Award for work undertaken during the pandemic.

On performance challenges F Williamson noted the material shortages and a number of surveys are being run across the sector to better understand these. Sub-contractors and individual traders are being offered more lucrative work, and work is ongoing with Osborne to ensure they can engage the supply chain. There was also a 2.6% decline in rent collected in Q2.

Chairman:

There are ongoing issues letting some properties within the sheltered accommodation schemes, especially those with communal facilities. Dispersed schemes have a high-level of demand and are let relatively quickly. The team are developing an options appraisal to consider options available through re-designation or possible remodelling of some schemes, and a report will be brought to Scrutiny once completed.

The Lifeline call service is also experiencing challenge. The call centre was struck by 2 outbreaks of Covid, and self-isolations, which impacted their ability to answer calls within their 60-second target. The group manager has a proposal to serve notice on Tunstall for an improvement notice to allow them a period of time to improve performance.

A new team leader has been appointed for Repairs and Voids, who is collocated at Osborne's offices to ensure the supply chain can deal with the additional capacity. There will also be additional capacity for the Income team with recruitment for 2 posts to provide additional support and advice for those struggling with rising energy costs.

Cllr Mahmood asked for further details on the independent review by Paul Langford. F Williamson explained that an action plan has been developed, including having robust and up to date asset management data, and procurement is underway for a consultant to undertake a stock condition survey in the upcoming months. A quarter of stock will be surveyed each financial year to have up to date information and a rolling service of visiting tenants on a 3-yearly basis has already commenced. The sheltered scheme review has been conducted with information being drafted into a report to consider various options before being presented to the SMT and members. Other recommendations are aligned with the service plan, including being sufficiently customer-focused and ensuring tenants are approached empathetically. The Building Safety Bill will focus on ensuring tenants are heard on management issues and safety, and a campaign has been set up to encourage residents to have a block champion to communicate concerns back to the council.

Cllr Mahmood commented on sheltered housing and how this can be improved. F Williamson advised that the review considers alternatives in respect of remodelling to ensure all properties are accessible. Another piece of work looks at preferences and understanding what isn't sufficiently attractive about current sheltered housing, and financial thresholds in the new allocations policy have also been looked at to provide a higher level of savings to access accommodation. F Williamson added that some feedback relates to it being 1-bedroom accommodation, and while there are visitor facilities, there are concerns about it not being located in the flat. The team propose setting up open days to promote existing schemes and address any misconceptions.

Cllr Hollinghurst commented on the misconceptions around sheltered housing, that the tightened security may be a negative and the increase of male tenants and asked if this was causing any tension. F Williamson noted that some tenants are reassured by the additional security, and on the change in demographic that this mix has provided a more vibrant scheme, though there have been isolated incidents where individuals' lifestyles haven't matched the schemes, so we would wish to avoid similar situations.

Cllr Adeleke noted that the team are returning to face-to-face appointments and queried what safety measures are in place. F Williamson confirmed that Covid

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questionnaires are being undertaken and a telephone screening is made ahead of appointments. Staff undertake lateral flow tests and Covid guidelines are being followed, as set by Health and Safety. F Williamson added that in-person visits are identifying residents whose health has declined more than telephone appointments suggested. For the private rented sector, inspections need to be taken to ensure that landlords have undertaken improvements. Cllr Adeleke asked a follow-up question on sheltered accommodation and when a solution is likely to be found.

F Williamson advised the review and customer feedback is being used to inform an options appraisal noting that the communication and approach needs to be handled sensitively as it may be an unsettling period for older residents whose accommodation has been identified for remodelling or redevelopment. F Williamson acknowledged the delays to the programme, some of which related to Covid and confirmed that a report will go to SLT in December and, subject to comments arising, this will then be presented to members.

Cllr Pringle noted concerns from residents in sheltered accommodation that communal areas remain out of bounds and asked if some proportionality can be introduced to help isolated residents. Cllr Pringle confirmed that some residents would be willing to take responsibility for ensuring that communal areas are cleaned. Cllr Hollinghurst and The Chairman supported the comments, and it was noted that this is being recognised with the recommencement of in-person appointments. F Williamson advised of the phased reopening of lounges and work with Age UK who are now running a number of social events. Funding has also been obtained from Public Health to appoint seven additional cleaners though recruitment has been challenging due to competition from other employers. F Williamson added that the preference would be for smaller-scale gatherings in residents' flats rather than larger-scale meetings in communal areas, and while it's commendable that residents wish to assist with cleaning, there are liability concerns and that cleaners undertake relevant training. Cllr Pringle commented that residents are concerned being unable to socially distance within flats.

Cllr Johnson referred to the missed targets on repairs and asked when they would be addressed. F Williamson explained that Osborne are trying to ensure they have materials in stock and that the main challenge is the ability to attend urgent repairs, cover out of hours service and ensure sufficient trades to cover all routine appointment slots. While repairs such as plumbing are completed within 20 days, fencing is taking up to 12 weeks. F Williamson confirmed that a meeting was held with Osborne last week to identify ways to address the issues, and Osborne are working closely with West Herts College to look to provide apprenticeships. Tenants are being asked to understand that this is a national problem due to pressures in the market.

Cllr Hollinghurst noted his concerns on the continued emphasis on HMOs, particularly given the difficulty in maintaining safe premises across a wide number of individuals. F Williamson advised that the council's role focuses on licensing and enforcement of private properties, not in any way to promote the subdivision into HMO's.

The Chairman referred to item 3.0.1 regarding non-urgent repairs and requested that a record on cancellations be brought to the committee. F Williamson confirmed that the new team leader is addressing complaints, complaints resolution and cancellations, and this will be presented in the Q3 report.

Action: F Williamson

HC/069/21 Q2 PERFORMANCE REPORT – PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES

Chairman:

L Roberts presented the Q2 performance results, noting that a number of retained services relate to customer services, the Old Town Hall and communications, and community safety partnerships and community partnerships are now covered by L Warden.

L Roberts confirmed that measurable targets were achieved other than the average wait time for phone calls due to an increase of 1,500 calls compared to Q1 and a number of leavers from the customer service unit. Replacements have now been recruited and are now in the process of being fully trained.

Cllr Harden referred to item 2.1 on the performance of the CSU, noting the challenge with the average wait time and that CSU12 doesn't have recorded statistics. Cllr Harden asked how long the pre-booked scenario has been implemented and if staff are being managed on call-handling. M Rawdon advised that pre-booked appointments have been in place for around 6 months and that incoming calls are triaged with around 2-3 in-person appointments per week and most appointments taking place over the phone. M Rawdon confirmed that staff are multi-skilled in handling customers over the phone or in person and a customer review is ongoing to look at the future service model.

Cllr Harden asked if they were receiving a negative response from the public on the lack of in-person appointments. M Rawdon confirmed that no formal complaints have been received and that satisfaction remains high. L Roberts added that if they can deliver to customers over the phone then they will and that they will provide in-person appointments where necessary.

Cllr Harden noted an error on item 3.5.6 and clarified that it should state that funding is from April 2022, not 2021.

Cllr Mahmood noted a concern regarding the increase in reported safeguarding issues and asked if those handling these cases are fully qualified to do so. L Roberts confirmed a national increase of referrals and that there is a strong triage system in place with appropriately qualified people to discuss each individual case. M Rawdon advised that mandatory safeguarding training is in place for all staff and advanced training for those dealing with vulnerable people, and a safeguarding officer acts as a triage to discuss any issues.

Cllr Adeleke commented on item 3.1.2 and asked for further information on the Old Town Hall review and asked how it differed from the working party made up of members. M Rawdon confirmed that a review will be conducted on the programme, customer feedback and how to best utilise the asset. In response to member involvement, it was confirmed that alongside the Old Town Hall review is a review of the Old Town with Hemel Place and information will be reported in due course. L Roberts added that the Old Town Hall will be recognised as part of Hemel Place strategy and the individual conducting the report has experience and the key findings will be reported back.

With regards to communications, Cllr Adeleke asked if the large screen in the town centre could be used elsewhere in future to help connect the borough. L Roberts agreed that this could be considered with external bodies to look at gaining commercial income and will be considered going forward. M Rawdon advised that the content is managed by Communications and that the physical screen is run by the Economic Development team.

Chairman:

The Chairman noted an earlier request to look into heritage funding for the Old Town Hall and asked that this be included in further advice. L Roberts advised that there are some restrictions to funding that can be received as a local authority

HC/070/21 ACTION POINTS

The Chairman noted that those involved in the outstanding action points weren't present.

Action point 1 – completed.

Action point 2 – to be chased with A Care.

Action: A Care

Action point 3 – to be chased with J Deane's replacement and arrange a Teams meeting though this may not be until the new year.

Action: The Chairman

Action point 4 – completed.

HC/071/21 WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was noted. Any additional items for future meetings can be emailed to The Chairman.

The Meeting ended at 21:55

Chairman: