

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 19 OCTOBER 2023 FROM 7.30 PM TO 11.00 PM**

Members Present

Councillors: Beth Rowland (Mayor), Adrian Mather (Deputy Mayor), Jane Ainslie, Sam Akhtar, Keith Baker, Rachel Bishop-Firth, Laura Blumenthal, Prue Bray, Rachel Burgess, Anne Chadwick, Stephen Conway, David Cornish, Andy Croy, David Davies, Peter Dennis, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Paul Fishwick, Catherine Glover, Andrew Gray, John Halsall, David Hare, Peter Harper, Pauline Helliar-Symons, Graham Howe, Chris Johnson, Clive Jones, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, Sarah Kerr, Abdul Loyes, Morag Malvern, Charles Margetts, Rebecca Margetts, Andrew Mickleburgh, Jordan Montgomery, Stuart Munro, Alistair Neal, Stephen Newton, Ian Pittock, Jackie Rance, Ian Shenton, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Tony Skuse, Caroline Smith, Mike Smith, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane, Alison Swaddle, Marie-Louise Weighill and Shahid Younis

53. Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Gary Cowan and Phil Cunningham.

54. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 21 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

55. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Prue Bray declared a personal interest in Item 70 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Berry Brook Homes, Wokingham Housing Ltd. and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Stephen Conway declared a personal interest in Item 70 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor David Cornish declared a personal interest in Item 70 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Keith Baker declared a Prejudicial Interest in Item 65 Outcome of Code of Conduct Complaint on the grounds that he was the subject of the report. He indicated that he would leave the room during the discussion of the item.

56. Mayor's Announcements

A Minute's silence was held to respect all the victims of the terrible events in the Middle East.

57. Public Question Time

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Mayor invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

57.1 David McMullen asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

Question

"A commitment to increased working from home has been a part of the Climate Emergency Action Plan agreed by this Council in 2020, 2021, 2022 and, hopefully, 2023.

Could the Executive Member remind us of the environmental advantages that come from staff who can, working from home?

Answer

Thank you for your question, David.

The Modern Workforce Policy is the approach that the Council is taking to how we ensure our workforce has the capacity and capability to deliver the priorities of the Council including our approach to flexible working. The Policy recognises the diversity of the services the Council delivers, and that one size does not fit all. Whilst the policy encourages flexibility, the needs of our residents and the service being delivered is at the heart of everything. The advantages of a flexible and agile approach include being able to respond to residents needs more readily while being a flexible employer able to attract talent from further afield. The outcomes of the policy will have a positive impact on colleague wellbeing and enable the Council to play its part in our ongoing commitment to supporting those in need most, protecting the environment and indeed supporting the climate emergency agenda.

The immediate environmental advantages include reduced air pollution and carbon emissions at a local level. In terms of our Climate Emergency Action Plan, it is estimated that annual carbon savings of 405.42 tCO₂e from a pre-Covid baseline will be achieved from staff working from home. This reduction in emissions contributes towards the overall goals of the Plan of reducing the negative impacts from climate change, both locally and globally. In terms of reduced air pollution, cleaner air means people live longer and suffer less from chronic illnesses meaning a better quality of life. This in turn reduces pressures on an already struggling NHS.

Reducing unnecessary travel into and out of the Council's offices to the minimum ensures positive environmental benefits and that we make responsible choices allowing technology and modern ways of working to be used to the maximum.

Supplementary Question:

Given what Councillor Rance proposed with the following question which said 'Covid has been and gone but the Liberal Democrats of Wokingham Borough Council clearly believe in allowing their employees to swap the office for the lounge at home. The public sector's most important role should be delivering effective services for the taxpayer, not helping workers to have more leisure time in their tracksuits. The public should be receiving decent service instead of the Liberal Democrat Council having raised council tax, cancelled bin collections. When will all the Council staff be back at their office desks serving residents rather than enjoying a relaxed home atmosphere?'

Could the Executive please confirm, how much time each Councillor spends writing questions like Councillor Rance's in the Council Chambers or from the comfort of their own home?

Supplementary Answer:

That is really hard for me to answer, in terms of there are so many different questions asked. There are multiple processes which have to be gone through. A number of officers have to spend quite a bit of time formulating answers, some are quicker than others, some can take several hours, and potentially days depending on what is being asked but it does take a lot of time which is taken away from delivering on services.

57.2 Peter White asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport, and Leisure the following question:

Question:

I believe in response to the 30x30 obligation that the UK signed up to that we have requirements to ensure we protect 30% of our land by 2030. I believe the Nature Recovery Strategy which is a Berkshire wide strategy run by Windsor and Maidenhead is part of this. Does WBC foresee any issues or conflicts allowing a local authority completely surrounded by green belt land making biodiversity decisions for Wokingham Borough?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. The 30 by 30 challenge is the objective of the global community to conserve 30% of terrestrial and marine habitat by 2030. The UK pledged to meet this objective along with nearly 200 other countries.

In the UK some 17% of terrestrial and 8% of marine areas are currently under some form of environmental protection and the challenge nationally is to increase that protection, by identifying new areas deserving of similar protection using the means provided through current legislation. Our marine environment is an area of national focus, where detailed consideration is currently being given to the designation of new marine parks.

However, at a local level, local authorities have a key role to play in identifying additional areas deserving of habitat protection and in identifying areas where landscape and habitat rejuvenation should be considered. In Berkshire the local authorities are working together to deliver a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for the county, with the intention for the final strategy to be published in Autumn 2024. The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead has taken on the role of being designated the 'responsible authority', with a wide group of representatives working collegiately on the steering group, including Wokingham Borough Council. The work does not enable the Royal Borough or any other party to make decisions on behalf of Wokingham.

I should also clarify that Green Belt is not an environmental designation and has no purpose or status in law as protection to local landscape or habitat. Green Belt has very different statutory purposes, which are set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.

Supplementary Question:

The Berkshire Local Nature Partnership has mapped biodiversity opportunity areas across Berkshire. Wokingham Borough fares poorly with regards to this, but we do have two and they follow the River Loddon. Based on a previous response to question Councillor Ian Shenton intimated that biodiversity remediation would be targeted where it would be most effective. These biodiversity opportunity areas are, I assume, likely places. A significant area of land in one of these BOAs is a current hot topic for the LPU. It is an area of land which the landowner is keen to sell for housing, and it comes as no surprise when looking at the stakeholders in the Berkshire Nature Recovery Strategy Steering Group, one of them is the University of Reading, the same landowner whose business model is trying to sell off land in only one of two Biodiversity Opportunity Areas in the whole of Wokingham Borough. I am sure their vested interest is in keeping the price of their land high. I see this as a potential conflict of interest. Does Wokingham Borough Council agree with my appraisal of the situation with regards to the University of Reading, or does it condone the University of Reading's representatives' inclusion in the Steering Group?

Supplementary Answer:

I cannot comment on anything to do with the University of Reading land as far as housing is concerned. I can only comment from an environmental perspective. It is very early in the process of developing the local Nature Recovery Strategy, and there is an awful lot of work still to do.

57.3 Ann Dally asked the Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Finance:**Question:**

Could the Council please let us know what information and support will be available to the approximately 1200 households currently receiving either legacy benefits (Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support) and/or tax credits during the first stage of the upcoming managed migration to Universal Credit, when people living in the Bracknell Job Centre area receive their Migration Notices from the DWP.

And has the Council plans to update its (much improved) website to include information advising people to complete a benefit calculation to ensure they are getting their full entitlement to legacy benefits before moving onto Universal Credit and stressing when residents receive their Managed Migration Notice they need to make a claim for Universal Credit themselves by the 3 month deadline giving in this Notice or their benefits will end?

Answer:

The Department of Work and Pensions have advised that nationally they will now be moving a number of residents from current legacy benefits to Universal Credit by the end of 2024. This will not be for everyone at this stage and the gradual migration is now planned until 2028 and beyond. Initial detail suggests this will affect 40-50 claimants in Wokingham in 2023/24.

Officers meet regularly with Local DWP representatives to ensure an understanding of their approach and the timelines for the migration. Residents contacted are required to provide specific information directly to the DWP to assess their claim – and the Council cannot be involved in that process, but through our liaison with DWP we ensure, where possible, we are provided with details of those affected.

There are a number of methods of support available to claimants, including a dedicated phone line, face to face support in the local jobcentre and independent support through “Help to Claim” (which is delivered by Citizens Advice). There are also arrangements at the DWP for transitional protection to be paid where appropriate. Our officers are aware of these arrangements and will signpost residents appropriately, as well as where needed, holding any collection activity whilst changes are made. We are updating the website with the latest information and will continue to do so as further detail is confirmed.

Supplementary Question:

Can I just say you said, ‘will be moving’ and one of the key things about my question is that people are not being moved by the DWP, they have to apply themselves and that is a really key point. I know managed migration supports the idea that someone is going to manage you to migrate but that is a really key point to the question.

I am wondering leading on from that, could you please clarify the ways Wokingham Borough Council will be offering advice and support to households who not only have to budget monthly on Universal Credit rather than fortnightly on legacy benefit, but they also have to cover a payment gap of 2-3 weeks from the last payments of the legacy benefits until the first payment of Universal Credit?

Supplementary Answer:

Unfortunately, the migration is owned by the Department of Works and Pensions. Our guys are only really working with them to understand who the people are who are affected. We are able to do a certain amount of things in terms of providing a little bit of advice, but it is largely signposting people to Citizens Advice where they can get help, so our officers are aware, and we are of course holding any collection activity whilst changes are made, which is what it says here, which means that our officers will do the best to help them. Unfortunately, the whole process is really driven by the Department of Works and Pensions.

57.4 Jim Frewin asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:

Question:

As a resident I applaud the recent communication highlighting that Wokingham has made £29m savings over the past 6 years. Can the Executive member of Finance kindly provide further detail on how and when these savings were achieved?

Answer:

Thank you for your question, Jim. Page 22 of the most recent Medium Term Financial Plan shows that we have actually generated £31.1million worth of savings over the past 5 years including this year’s savings targets.

Each years' proposals are itemised in the 'Summary of Budget Movements' stating which year they apply to and for the past 3 or 4 years have been considered publicly by Overview and Scrutiny Committee. However, if I am to put this into the perspective of budgets set by the Liberal Democrat administration, that is to say this year and next year, we are expected to save over £27million in these two years alone. I am sure you can imagine, our savings are a very long list, which are far too long to read out, but I can say that key categories are:

- Reduction in costs to back office and staffing through restructuring, modernisation and holding vacancies;
- Reduction in our contract costs or containing increases through effective procurement practice set out in our procurement strategy;
- Managing and reducing demand through early intervention and prevention measures, particularly with regards to our care services;
- Generating additional income through new activities such as sensible commercial investments and reviewing our ongoing fees and charges; and
- Curtailing or postponing Capital Expenditure to minimise our exposure to expensive debt and maximise our treasury management income.

Focusing on these types of activities across the Council has meant there has been very little in terms of actual service reductions for our community over this period despite our savings being such a sizeable figure.

Supplementary Question:

I find the idea of comparing across a six year period actually quite refreshing. It takes us away from what we did this year, what they did last year concept that seems to be around this Council. Can I ask that we have more communications where we compare across the last six or seven years?

Supplementary Answer:

Sure, I think we can do that, thank you.

57.5 Natalie Wilson asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

In 2022 Wokingham Borough Council published a really good plan to make walking and cycling safer and easier, which I and many others contributed to. As a part of its very ill thought out 'Plan for Drivers', the government has withdrawn the 2020 document, which expects councils to create a safe space for walking and cycling following high standards of design. What affect will this have on plans in Wokingham?

Answer:

Thank you, Natalie, for your question.

The withdrawal of the document is related to the Government releasing its policy paper "The Plan for Drivers". This suggests some actions that are already best practice and most responsible authorities, including WBC, already are doing these. This includes getting "right speed limits in the right places" have local support. The

plan for drivers states: “None of this replaces the significant investment we’ve made in public transport and active travel. It sits alongside them as part of our long-term plan to help people across our country travel in the way that works best for them.” We are keen to ensure that those who need to drive and have no other option are able to do so but we need to make the alternatives more attractive. It is not yet clear what impact other elements of the plan for drivers will have on WBC, however, we await further announcements and guidance.

This Council has already committed to following Local Transport Note 1/20 design standards and has an approved Local Cycling Walking Infrastructure Plan, none of that has not changed. The only change to legislation within the Traffic Management Act actually expired 30 April 2021 therefore the withdrawal of the document does very little in terms of limiting Wokingham Borough Council’s ability to deliver for all road users. Where it might have an impact is whether government chooses to allocate funding for these measures in future. It is quite interesting that in this week’s Local Transport Today Active Travel, ‘Cycling and walking tzars urge the Prime Minister to reaffirm their support for gear change.’

Supplementary Question:

We know that funding for improvements is very difficult and has been made harder by the Government taking away funding in the last Budget which was already promised for walking and cycling. However, there are many small changes which could be made, which are not expensive or complicated. Will the Council look at what can be done now until more funding becomes available?

Supplementary Answer:

Yes, we are already doing that. We have some small pots of money through our Safer Routes to School budget and walking and cycling measures. We are looking at particular low-cost schemes which will bring high benefits for residents.

58. Petitions

There were no petitions received.

59. Presentation from Group Manager Andrew Stockwell, Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Council received a presentation from Andy Stockwell, Group Manager, Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service.

The presentation covered the following points:

- RBFRS performance
- Prevention
- Protection
- Response
- Community Risk Management Plan
- Financial Position
- Sector wide challenges

Following the presentation, Members asked the questions set out below:

Councillor Andrew Mickleburgh

Question:

I understand that electric vehicle car fires are far less commonplace than internal combustion engine vehicle fires. What statistics do you have on this, what are the risks and consequences of lithium car batteries catching fire and what specific measures are in place to respond should a major incident happen involving such fires?

Answer:

I do not have the statistics at the moment in time, but I can go away and get that information for you. Lithium ion batteries are a cause of concern for us in electric vehicles. They are not just in electric vehicles, they are in e-scooters, in bikes and even in vapes as well. So, they are on the trend up in terms of risk and at some point, yes we have combustible vehicle fires that are more frequent, but as more electric vehicles are being bought and come into play that obviously is going to rise as well. We do prevention awareness when we do our prevention activities. When our teams are going out, doing our safe and wells we talk about lithium ion batteries, when to charge them and how to charge them appropriately, and what to do in the event of a fire. We train our crews on lithium ion batteries in terms of how we can respond to these appropriately, and we work with the National Fire Chiefs Council because we are aware that it is a sector wide problem, and there is some guidance that needs to be developed around that as well.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen

Question:

A couple of years ago the Chief Fire Officer said that you were going to do some work to try and reduce the stress on the Ambulance Service when required. I am just wondering how that had gone, or whether it is still happening?

Answer:

I do not know the specifics of that and maybe I need to go away and look into that for you. We have enhanced the training of our crews, so we are governed by SCAS to deliver a higher level of service in terms of first aid, which means we are able to support patients in casualty care before the Ambulance Service get there. We have enhanced our training for all our crews which means we are able to deliver a higher response to members of the public.

Councillor Prue Bray

Question:

There have been a number of fires caused by faulty vapes and disposal of vapes. What advice do you have on how to prevent such fires, and what can we as a Council do to help you get that advice out to people?

Answer:

So, in terms of advice my advice is do not charge them in sleeping areas, do not charge them at night when people are asleep. We need to be making sure that members of the public and the community are using appropriate chargers to charge

these devices, and not something they bought online. I think as Councillors and Members if you become aware of areas and problem areas, raising it to us so we can go out and give some prevention activity and really target that in specific areas if you become aware of it.

Councillor Bill Soane

Question:

Now that Highways England has completed the work to upgrade the M4 to what is called a smart motorway, what effect has this had on the safety of fire crews and how the service is able to respond to emergencies?

Answer:

I think I would need to take that question away in terms of if there is any statistical data to show response times in those areas. I could not really comment at that moment in time. If you are happy for me to take that question away and I will look into that for you a bit further.

Councillor Bill Soane

Question:

Are you in contact with the Government and Highways England on issues such as safety on these roads?

Answer:

So, we work with local partners, we work with Highways England and if we come across any issues in that area, we will obviously raise that in partnership with them and discuss the issues.

Councillor Rachelle Shepherd Dubey

Question:

Are you going out to schools and universities to explain to them how to safely charge all the electronic gear they have including bikes and scooters?

Answer:

We target Year 5s and Year 7s and that is specifically about water and road safety because we use instant data to determine what the risk is. Obviously, as a lithium ion batteries start to rise and the incidents and trends start to rise, then we will tailor our prevention activity to meet that. Currently at the moment we do not deliver any prevention activity to universities.

Councillor Paul Fishwick

Question:

Last week there was a car fire at Luton Airport that had devastating consequences. How many vehicle fires occur each year on average within Berkshire?

Answer:

I would have to go away and get that information for you in terms of how many we

get in a year. I do not have that data at the moment, apologies.

Councillor Sam Akhtar

Question:

My question was in regard to cladding. Many years ago, in London there was the unfortunate incident and there have been others across London. Do you know as a Borough has that been looked at in terms of the risk, and what mitigations have been done to stop this from happening in our Borough?

Answer:

As a Borough in terms of those high rise high risk residential buildings, the risk within Wokingham Borough is quite low because we have a low building stock in terms of buildings who have got that cladding. I can say that across the service we have done a project on all our high risk high rise buildings, and that continues in our business as usual work now. So, we have been out identifying these buildings, we have worked with responsible people, we have done audits where we have needed to, we have put enforcement on where we have needed to. That work will continue as one of our high risks. We are aware that high residential buildings are a risk across the service.

Councillor Peter Harper

Question:

As part of our Climate Emergency Action Plan, we are trying to reduce emissions from vehicles across the Borough. What work is the Fire Brigade doing to look at zero emissions vehicles as part of their fleet?

Answer:

It is part of our Strategic Assessment Framework. We are upgrading our power infrastructure to support EV charging and to further support longevities on our site. We are going out and fitting charging points for EV vehicles for the long term future. [re electric vehicles] I would have to go away and ask. I am not sure that that is part of the plan at the moment, maybe longer term but I would need to go and check that for you.

Councillor Stephen Conway thanked Andy Stockwell and his colleagues for the service that they provided the Borough.

RESOLVED That the presentation be noted and that Andy Stockwell be thanked for attending the meeting to give the presentation and answer Member questions.

60. Treasury Management Outturn Report 2022-23

Council considered the Treasury Management Outturn Report, set out at Agenda pages 47 to 56, which provided a summary of the treasury management operations during the 2022/23.

It was proposed by Councillor Imogen Shepherd-Dubey and seconded by Councillor Stephen Conway, that the recommendation set out in the report be approved.

Councillor Andy Croy questioned whether the recommendation should be 'to note' as opposed to 'to approve' as it had been in previous years. It was explained that in previous years the report had been taken down a different reporting route.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED: that the Treasury Management Outturn Report 2022-23, which was considered by the Executive on 28 September 2023, be approved and that it be noted that:

- 1) that all approved indicators set out in the Treasury Management Strategy have been adhered to; with the exceptions of; • Internal borrowing ratio. • Ratio of financing costs to net revenue stream – General Fund. • Capital financing requirement – HRA.
- 2) As at the end of March 2023, the total external general fund debt was £118m, which reduces to £68m after taking into account cash balances (net indebtedness) reducing interest costs in the current economic climate. This was an improved position from the forecast at mid-year stage of £81m net indebtedness and £72m at March 2022.

At this point in the meeting Councillor Stephen Conway questioned whether item 65 Outcome of Code of Conduct Complaint should be deferred to a future meeting, as there was disagreement as to whether the apology referred to in the report had been given to the full satisfaction of the complainant, to allow further clarity on the matter.

Councillor Keith Baker made a Point of Personal Explanation. He stated that the wording of the apology had been agreed and signed off by the Monitoring Officer and the Independent Person. He felt that any further delay would be unreasonable and against the principles of natural justice. In addition, one of the individuals who had received the apology had indicated that they were satisfied with the apology.

In line with 4.2.12 c, Councillor Andy Croy proposed that the order of business on the agenda be amended, and that item 65 Outcome of Code of Conduct Complaint be taken last. This was seconded by Councillor Tony Skuse. Upon being put to the vote the proposal was agreed.

61. Polling Places Review 2023

Council considered a report regarding polling places, set out in agenda pages 57 to 74.

It was proposed by Councillor Prue Bray and seconded by Councillor Stephen Conway that the recommendations in the report be approved.

Councillor Prue Bray indicated that the Council regularly reviewed its polling stations. However, on this occasion the Electoral Review had altered the pattern of wards and meant that consideration had to be given as to whether the location of any polling stations needed to change to match the new wards. A small working group would be set up to look at the results of the forthcoming public consultation and oversee the proposals which would come back to Council in January. She drew

Members' attention to the updated list of polling stations which had been circulated. It was noted that it was planned to move the polling station for Wokingham Without from Oaklands Junior School to St Sebastian's Memorial Hall.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Council agrees:

- 1) to note that a formal review will be undertaken of all Polling Districts and Polling Places within the Borough, as required by legislation;
- 2) that the decisions reached under this review will be implemented for all elections subject to the approval at the Council meeting on 18 January 2024,
- 3) to the setting up of a small Member/Officer working group to review the responses from the consultation received. The working group to consist of one nominated Member from each of the three political groups.

62. Outcome of Code of Conduct Complaint

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

63. Petition Debate

In accordance with the Constitution, the Council considered a petition, with over 1,500 signatures, relating to the reduction of litter bins in the Borough.

The petition stated:

'We call on Wokingham Borough Council Liberal Democrat Group to reverse their reductions to litter bin provision across the Borough. Their proposed changes would reduce the number of bins available and empty them less frequently. Litter bins in the Borough are already overflowing and the impact of these reductions would not lead to a cleaner and greener environment.'

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen presented the petition. She thanked Councillor Norman Jorgensen for putting forward Motion 506 which asked for a rethink on the removal of litter bins in the Borough. She felt that his recommendations had had some impact. A consultation had now been held to seek residents' views and a report taken to Overview and Scrutiny outlining the results of the consultation and the resultant possible decisions, including costs of individual changes. Councillor Pauline Jorgensen questioned why these had not happened earlier.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen stated that in July, Liberal Democrat Executive Members had tried to drive through reductions to key public services, via press release without the correct decision-making process, a business case or any scrutiny being carried out. Approximately 2,000 residents had signed the petition asking that the Executive reconsider. She went on to give examples of the impact of the initial implementation. In July, many bins had been covered and bin collections scaled back. Residents had reported overflowing bins and bad odours. Councillor Pauline Jorgensen was of the view that reducing the number of bins and bin collection would lead to increased littering and increased cleaning costs. Residents expected clean

public spaces. She commented that the majority of bins scheduled for removal were in Woodley and Earley.

In the ensuing debate, Members made the following points:

Councillor Andrew Mickleburgh was of the view that petitions were a valuable mode of civic engagement and thanked all those who had signed the petition to give their views.

Councillor Laura Blumenthal referred to bins in her ward that had been scheduled to be removed – in a shopping parade and on busy roads. Residents had been shocked when bins had been made unavailable. She felt that there was a pattern of decisions being made and then consultation following afterwards. Councillor Laura Blumenthal referred to the Council's Vision of being cleaner and greener, and its desire to support biodiversity. She felt that the removal of litter bins did not support this.

Councillor Andy Croy commented that the ward most impacted by bin removal would be Winnersh and not Woodley and Earley. On 2 October the Corporate and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee had looked at the budget saving proposals around street cleaning and ground maintenance. Twelve had been forwarded on to the Executive and the Committee had agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to look in detail at the proposal around litter bins. He felt that this was the correct manner to deal with the issue and that the petition sought to short circuit the process.

Councillor Chris Johnson also highlighted the Task and Finish Group which had been established by the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Other savings in street cleansing and grounds maintenance had been supported.

Councillor Norman Jorgensen commented that at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, the removal of litter bins had not been supported, and it had been suggested that consideration could be given to other ways in which the savings could be made. He stated that only approximately 4% of respondents to the consultation had supported reducing the number of litter bins.

Councillor Stephen Newton highlighted the need for the Council to look at its cost and examine savings opportunities. The Council needed to make difficult decisions. He referred to the impact of high costs and high interest rates. The Council was working to support residents and maintain services.

Councillor Shahid Younis stated that there were other ways that savings could be made, and that the Executive were fixed on one particular way of making savings. He commented that holding elections every four years could have made savings. Whatever was agreed needed to be sustainable and help to provide a cleaner, greener environment in the Borough.

Councillor Sam Akhtar referred to the litter problem in the Borough. He was of the view that more bins and collections not less were required. Reducing bins and

collections would have a negative impact on wildlife.

Councillor Abdul Loyes felt that maintaining public spaces was one of the most basic Council duties and that in reducing the number of litter bins, the Council would fail to meet a fundamental obligation to residents. The population had expanded in the Borough suggesting more bins not less were required. He referred to overflowing bins and littering in the summer.

Councillor Prue Bray stated that she could not support the Motion as it was factually incorrect. No decision had been taken to reduce the number of litter bins. Process and evidence-based decision making was important. This would include assessing what the likely impact of removing bins would be. All factors, including the Council's financial position and if there were better ways to make savings, needed to be weighed up when taking a decision. Taking all the evidence into account would be how the Executive would approach making the decision.

Councillor Andrew Gray commented that at the meeting of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 October, the Conservative members had agreed to put the matter to a Task and Finish Group. However, they now wished to short circuit the process.

Councillor Rebecca Margetts commented that bins in her ward had not been emptied and that a decision to remove bins had been reversed.

Councillor Prue Bray declared a Point of Personal Explanation and indicated that a decision had not yet been taken.

Councillor Rebecca Margetts went on to state that bins had been covered, others had not been emptied, and rubbish had accrued. Members had received correspondence from residents as to why the bins were covered or not being emptied and had not known how to respond to them.

At this point in the meeting, in line with 4.2.13.11 g Councillor Peter Harper proposed that the time limit for speeches be extended. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Croy. Upon being put to the vote this was agreed.

Councillor Jackie Rance was of the view that Town and Parish Councils did not have sufficient funds to be liable for emptying and maintaining the bins in their areas, and the responsibility should lie entirely with the Borough Council.

Councillor Graham Howe commented that the Borough was a nice place to live and visit. It needed to be kept that way and for people to have pride in their area.

Councillor Stephen Conway also thanked the petitioners for expressing their views and assured them that they would be taken into account. He reminded Members that no decision had yet been taken. There was a need to follow due process.

Councillor Stephen Conway emphasised that the model of working with Overview and Scrutiny and Overview and Scrutiny Committees Chairs presenting and explaining their recommendations to the Executive, was one which the Executive wished to follow.

In responding to the debate Councillor Pauline Jorgensen reminded Members that a press release had been issued in Councillor Ian Shenton's name saying that the bins would be removed. This suggested that a decision had been taken. She stated that the petition and Motion had been put in place prior to the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting. She felt that it was clear that residents did not want to see a reduction in litter bins.

It was proposed by Councillor Pauline Jorgensen and seconded by Councillor Norman Jorgensen that the petition be supported.

The Mayor announced that, following the vote, the petition was not supported.

It was then proposed by Councillor Stephen Conway and seconded by Councillor Prue Bray that:

'Council thanks the petitioners for expressing their views and notes that:

- a. the Corporate and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 October considered the responses to the council consultation on proposals in the street cleaning and grounds maintenance service review, which included consideration of litter bins,
- b. the recommendations from that meeting will be presented by the chair of the committee to the Council's Executive on 26th October in order to enable the Executive to take them into consideration when making its decision.'

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That Council thanks the petitioners for expressing their views and notes that:

- a. the Corporate and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 October considered the responses to the council consultation on proposals in the street cleaning and grounds maintenance service review, which included consideration of litter bins,
- b. the recommendations from that meeting will be presented by the chair of the committee to the Council's Executive on 26th October in order to enable the Executive to take them into consideration when making its decision.

64. Member Question Time

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Mayor invited Members to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

64.1 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Residents Services the following question. Due to his inability to attend the following written answer was provided:

Question:

At the September 22 Council meeting last year, I asked a question on whistleblowing. Councillor Baker asked a question on some Officers not answering

requests for information but actually not even acknowledging such requests.

The CEO replied that plenty of all Officers do reply which I acknowledge. Plenty suggests not all.

Councillor Sarah Kerr added that she did recognise this problem across a number of departments.

To date, 13 months later I have not had a reply to my question. I have no idea if Councillor Baker has either and I have no update on how the Customer Excellence Programme has resolved this problem which she stated was a problem across several departments.

All I have heard from Councillor Sarah Kerr is a public allegation that and I quote “We have been told about some instances of behaviour on the part of councillors, and I mean councillors plural, towards officers that has fallen short of the standard we would expect”.

Can I be updated on progress in the problem of answering questions as 13 months seems a bit unreasonable time to wait for an answer?

Answer:

Thank you for your question.

As you state, the question you asked at the September 2022 Council meeting to the Leader of the Council was specifically about councillors and whistleblowing. Stephen gave you an answer to your substantive question at the meeting and I understand has subsequently responded to your supplementary question.

We know that people have inconsistent customer experiences when they interact with the Council – there are examples of excellence, but the customer experience is not always owned by everyone.

I'm pleased to update you (and Council) that a new Customer Excellence Strategy has been developed that outlines the vision and ambition around improving a more consistent customer experience which Executive will be considering at its meeting next week. This follows extensive consultation with residents, community groups and members (through the scrutiny process).

64.2 Pauline Jorgensen asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

Shinfield Road is a very busy and dangerous road and difficult for people to cross, therefore many parents' resort to transporting their children to and from Crosfields school by car increasing the traffic problem for local residents. When asked about this last year Councillor Fishwick said that he had looked at the site and that insufficient numbers were crossing the road to make this viable. This is a ridiculous assessment, the reason people don't cross the road is because it is so dangerous. It is also an insult to parents who want to walk their children to school or who would be

happy for them to walk or cycle unattended without the need to cross a busy road. This Council is meant to be trying to increase cycling and walking to school and this is an obvious opportunity to do that.

Now a 7 year old boy, has been knocked down by a cyclist who was overtaking a bus stopped by the South entrance. Please can you urgently reconsider your decision?

Answer:

Thank you, Pauline, for your question.

We are very sorry to hear of the incident involving a 7-year-old boy, we hope he makes a full and speedy recovery.

As you know the Council has a limited budget, it does now and did when the Conservatives were in administration. Therefore, locations for crossing sites are prioritised, using an assessment process that includes data on the number of people crossing the road, the ease to cross the road and the number and speed of vehicles, and local factors such as being near a school in the area are also considered. Doing it this way ensures that our limited funds are directed to those sites where there is the highest need, and not who shouts loudest. We are committed to promoting safe walking and cycling routes to schools where funding is available, however, with the limited budgets we have, I am sure you would agree we must prioritise the locations with the highest demand. Unfortunately, there are other locations within the Borough which come out of the assessment as a higher priority, and so I cannot at the moment commit to funding this scheme.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for that answer, Paul, it is rather disappointing. I am very surprised that somewhere that has actually been an accident that required an ambulance and paramedics, where the paramedics saying that they find it very difficult to actually deal with the accident because of people driving so dangerously and fast whilst they were trying to sort it out, is not a priority. I would also like to ask you have you actually asked the School if they would be willing to help fund a crossing, because I believe they might be interested in talking to you about that and it would be a shame if the Council just dismissed this suggestion out of hand without looking at what could be actually done to fund it?

Supplementary Answer:

Unfortunately, from time-to-time accidents do happen on the highway network and pedestrian personal injury accidents are taken into account. This is something which is new because it has only happened in the last few weeks, so if it is reassessed at any particular time that particular accident would be taken into account. As I said before, everything is evidence based, so we are looking at that type of information such as personal injury accidents. There is a system and a process that we go through. We have not asked the School for any contribution towards it, but it is something that we could do in the future once everything is reassessed.

64.3 Mike Smith asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question:

According to a recent report by the House Builders Federation, (Section 106 Agreements and unspent developer contributions in England & Wales – 10 Sept 2023) which is based on a FoI requested responded to by 50% of all English and Welsh Councils, - that over £2.8 Billion is currently unspent – this equates to each Council currently sitting on £8.2 million of unspent developer contributions and much is in danger of not being used within the relevant time frame.

Please could the Leader of the Council reassure us that all Developer Contributions are allocated and will be spent within any deadlines and therefore not have to be handed back to Developers?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. I can, I hope, reassure you, that there remains a sound process in place for managing S106 contributions and ensuring contributions are spent in a timely fashion.

You will note from last year's infrastructure funding statement that only £2,061 of S106 funds collected at that time remained to be allocated, and all service areas will continue to work hard to ensure S106 contributions collected through the planning process are spent lawfully on the infrastructure mitigations for which they were collected.

In practice, the risks that S106 contributions are handed back to a developer are very low, however, it is feasible that a project for which a contribution was collected can no longer be brought forward, perhaps because other capital funds were needed to deliver the project and are now unavailable or there is no longer a need for the project.

These circumstances will be rare, but it is important to recognise that they may arise, and in such circumstances, a contribution may need to be returned to a developer.

To keep a S106 contribution when it could not or no longer is needed to be spent would be unlawful and would undermine the credibility of the planning process, hence we work very hard to co-ordinate our spend with our capital programme and spend in a timely manner.

In the unlikely event that a S106 contribution needed to be returned to a developer for the reasons outlined above, we would let Members know the reasons why.

64.4 Jackie Rance asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:

Question:

On what date was the £10 million loan sent to Woking Council and what were the terms of the loan, namely repayment date, interest rate and repayment schedule?

Answer:

Councillor Rance – I am very disappointed in you - if you had been paying attention

at our Council meeting, last month, you would have realised that I talked about this loan to Woking BC back then.

However, I am happy to repeat that the agreement to make loans to other Local Authorities was part of the Treasury Management Strategy, agreed by all Councillors, back in our February budget meeting - and we regularly make loans to other councils.

In this particular case, the loan was made to Woking Borough Council on 8th June 2023 and at an interest rate of 4.75%. The £10million will be repaid to us on the 8 March 2024 with £356k of interest. That is an excellent example of good financial management as I do not know many places who would pay us that amount of money, for loan of such a short period of time. - And we can use the money from this interest payment for vital services.

Supplementary Question:

How much of the approximately £130million of revenue reserves do you have invested in other councils?

Supplementary Answer:

I think you need to look at our Treasury Management report that we have just looked at this meeting.

64.5 Jane Ainslie asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question:

Home to School Transport Policy for 2024 has now been agreed. It changes transport provision for young people over 16 with SEND to promote Personal Transport Budgets instead of defaulting to Council Operated Transport such as taxis.

There will always be some young people for whom a Personal Transport Budget won't be appropriate. Parents are concerned that suitable travel arrangements for those young people will be delayed because they will be required to go through an appeal against having a Personal Transport Budget first.

What reassurance can you offer them about the process that will be used for determining transport options for these young people?

Answer:

The policy is that for all eligible students moving into post 16 education for the first time they will need to apply for a Personal Transport Budget (PTB) if they require Travel Assistance, as this is the standard offer.

But if families feel that the only way, they can get their child to school is by using traditional transport such as taxi or minibus, they will be able to appeal the offer of a PTB so that the Council can consider their individual and/or any exceptional circumstances. The written policy gives more information on what exceptional circumstances means.

Please note that when making an offer, the type of Post 16 transport remains at the discretion of the Council, but we will take into consideration individual circumstances and the needs of the child (including a consideration of their application form, the EHCP and any current transport risk assessment that the Council has undertaken).

The Council is of course aware that the young people to whom this policy applies will have varying degrees of SEND and that there may be many reasons why a student could only access school/college using council approved transport. Parents should include all the relevant information at the time of application. The Council will consider any exceptional circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

It is not our intention to make this process more difficult or stressful for parents or young people than it has to be, and officers will always aim to process cases as quickly as possible.

64.6 Rebecca Margetts asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Residents Services:

Question:

In the Wokingham newspaper on the 5th October the Executive Member for Finance said “We have 10 libraries in Wokingham Borough Council – there’s a requirement to provide a library service, but not at that level.” This has understandably concerned many residents who use the library service.

The previous Conservative administration opened new libraries and increased opening hours whilst saving money, by reducing costs.

Can the Executive Member for Finance please identify which libraries could be closed or have their hours reduced?

Answer:

We do not have any current plans to close libraries or reduce hours, but it would be irresponsible of me to say that it will never happen because we just do not know what the financial situation would look like in the future.

Supplementary Question:

I think it is disappointing to see Liberal Democrats making policy announcements on the hoof in casual comments to journalists. Obviously, you cannot guarantee Sarah that no future proposed service cuts will happen, but can we ask that they go through the proper decision making process and consult residents properly through that process?

Supplementary Answer:

No policy decision has been made publicly. It is a statement of fact that we do provide a range of library services which are beyond what we are statutorily required to provide. If we were in a situation where we had to issue a Section 114 notice that might be an area that was looked at. We are not in that situation at the moment, and it is simply a statement of fact that, that there are areas that should we get into that

position, we are obviously working very hard as an administration to make sure that we do not get into that position, and should there be any changes like that then of course there will be a consultation. I believe there is quite a good article on the front page of the Wokingham News today that you can have a look at about libraries.

64.7 Charles Margetts asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:

Question:

Can the Executive Member for Finance give an update on how much money the Council has managed to save in its running costs by moving staff to Shute End's basement and Ground Floor, closing the 2nd floor and partially closing the 1st floor, and how much did the move cost?

Answer:

As a way of mitigating the operational costs of the Shute End building, the office accommodation at Shute End was consolidated down into two floors. Significant areas of the building were closed down and the available desks were reduced from 800 to 405.

The move cost around £11,000, which covered the works to physically reconfigure some of working spaces, moving the equipment and the waste disposal costs. This consolidation has reduced annual running costs (heating, lighting, cleaning etc) of the Shute End offices by £68,000 per annum. A one-off reduction in business rates of £17,000 for vacant office space, has also been made. So, in total, the cost of moving was £6,000 less than the saving in Business Rates and there is an on-going annual saving in running costs of £68,000 per year.

Supplementary Question:

I fully support the Council looking to use its resources more efficiently and save money wherever possible. However, there is potential to make more money from this move. I am told by officers these spaces total 22,000ft². The rate for secondary office space for Wokingham according to a Commercial Agent I spoke to today is £15 per square foot, that is an annual income of £300,000. Alternatively, the Council has recently let charities take over the old library for storage, a small area of Denmark Street offices, and some space at the Mulberry Business Park on non-commercial rents. Alternatively, these people could be located in Shute End, which would free up those properties for redevelopment or to be let at a commercial rent. So, there is opportunity there to make a lot more money and fill in some of the budget holes that you continually talk about. What I would say is, is given the Council is not maximising the return from these property assets, what can you do to actually make sure this happens going forwards?

Supplementary Answer:

I think you will find that is precisely what we are doing. The problem with Shute End, although there is some empty floors I full agree, is one it is not premium office space anymore and two, whoever took it on would have to take a lease on for only three years, and be willing to cover the cost of £68,000 a year for that space. If you can find anyone who will pay £68,000 a year for the space that we have got here, then do let me know urgently.

64.8 Laura Blumenthal asked the Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty the following question:

Question:

The Council launched its anti-poverty strategy in May 2022. Over the last year and a half, please can you share how many residents have been lifted out of poverty and prevented from falling into poverty?

Answer:

Thank you for your question, Laura.

I'm afraid that even the UK's national government, and the Office for National Statistics, is unable to provide this kind of information.

The Tackling Poverty Strategy explains how we will measure progress towards our long term goal of ending poverty in the Borough. I brought a detailed report to the Executive in March 2023.

Examples of the impact so far:

Resident income gains of well over a million pounds through advice and debt writeoff partly due to the additional debt adviser

A 500% increase in visits to the cost of living help hub, hugely increasing the number of people able to access the help they need.

£1.5 million of government emergency funding distributed using the Hardship Alliance, who offered additional help to thousands of residents who most needed it.

We have also finished the homes for homeless people at Grovelands, kept social housing rents low, funded the council tax reduction scheme, and made a £250,000 Hardship Fund available to fund long term projects.

It is a lot but it would be very premature to talk about ending poverty as a result.

I am concerned that your question indicates that that the Conservative group is seriously underestimating the work needed to end poverty in the Wokingham Borough. Thousands of Wokingham residents are now unable to pay for basic essentials. If we take just one group – those receiving Universal Credit, each single recipient has an income £35 / week lower than what they need to survive. That's an estimated shortfall in income of £12 million a year just for Wokingham residents on Universal Credit. That is not a shortfall that Wokingham Borough Council can bridge on its own. This is the tip of the iceberg. Residents have been hammered financially over the last 18 months. Global problems have been exacerbated by disastrous Conservative policy on Brexit and the economy. Food prices are rising steeply.

Thanks to the Liz Truss budget thousands of those with mortgages will be paying an average of £4,800 a year more, with rents also skyrocketing. To end poverty in Wokingham, we need a national government which is serious about ending poverty and that means a change of national government as soon as possible.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you, Rachel, for your answer however disappointing it may be to blame the Government, as if it is a bingo thing popping up.

My question was really focused on how do we know we are going in the right direction and the good work that is being done, because there is good work being done – the Council, the charities, resources are being put in. That is not in doubt. It is how do we know we are actually getting the aim of the Anti Poverty Strategy realised, which is all about prevention and getting people out of poverty locally in this Borough. We cannot control national things. We can control local things, so what data are we using from our own charities that we are in partnership with, from the own data we have got as a Council, to know that actually we are on the right track, what data are we using there?

Supplementary Answer:

So, as I mentioned earlier, I brought a very detailed report to the Executive in March 2023. We are going to be continuing to provide those reports on a regular basis. We have created an equality profile along with eight other Borough profiles. These are going to be shared by the end of October 2023. Updates of other data based on the census information are also being developed. These are going to provide us with a better understanding of the base line measurements going forwards. Some of the information in the Tackling Poverty Strategy lays out on page 12 and 13, how we are going to measure the success of the policy going forward. This includes information, which is available on a regular basis, so the number of children on free school meals, that is something which is one of our KPIs and that comes to Overview and Scrutiny on a regular basis, and the number of people on the Healthy Start initiative, that comes out on a monthly basis. I am talking to the officers at the moment about how we can improve the way we report on this, but there is a lot of information out there and it is reported on a regular basis.

64.9 Catherine Glover asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:**Question:**

Under an S106 agreement with Taylor Wimpey entered into in 2014, provision was made for a footpath along the lower section of Hyde End Lane, to allow pedestrians to walk safely from the new estates around Fullbrook Avenue to Oakbank School and Ryeish Green leisure centre.

Hyde End Lane is a one-way rural lane, with no footway, used as an exit route from the new estates towards the M4, locally judged to be dangerous.

The cost of the path was to be shared between Taylor Wimpey and WBC. Taylor Wimpey installed their section earlier this year and we understand that they offered to complete the path in return for a notional payment from WBC. This suggestion was declined.

There is considerable local anger that the path is incomplete. A petition with 400 signatures has been gathered locally. The Council's failure to complete the path was the lead story in Wokingham Today on 28 September. Could the Executive member

for Active Travel, Transport and Highways say when the work will be undertaken and give an undertaking that the path will be completed at the very latest by the beginning of the new school term, which is 4 January 2024?

Answer:

Thank you, Catherine, for your question.

The hybrid planning application from 2013 was approved for up to 900 dwellings with associated infrastructure. This included a new school and footway connections to it, but not a footway on this section of Hyde End Lane.

We understand why there is local demand for the footway link. Unfortunately, the route crosses land that is not highway and is not owned by the Council, which makes it difficult. There are further complications due to the expansion of the nuclear exclusion zone which has delayed a decision on the school. The Council is having to negotiate legal agreements and other permissions. All of these things are barriers to providing a path quickly. However, we do think a temporary solution could be delivered and as such we are looking at steps to deliver this as soon as reasonably practical. We have already taken action to improve safety, including additional signing and clearance of the highway verge.

It remains my intention to facilitate a solution as soon as reasonably practicable, I will be happy to keep you informed of progress.

Supplementary Question:

The solution is going to require funding. I understand that in the last 2/3 years housing developments in Shinfield including Spencers Wood must have generated several million pounds in CIL money. Would the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways agree that it would be fair and reasonable to spend a small amount of this, something like 1/1000th, on providing 90m of footpath to keep people safe?

Supplementary Answer:

Subject to permissions being granted, as we do not own the land and we do not know where the funding is going to come from at the present time, it is going to be in the mix and negotiations that are undertaken whilst we work through this with our partners.

At this point in the meeting Councillor Prue Bray proposed that 4.2.12m be moved to suspend standing order 4.2.10.8 to allow all Member questions to be put. This was seconded by Councillor Stephen Conway. Upon being put to the vote this was agreed.

64.10 Caroline Smith asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Residents Services the following question:

Question:

I have just had solar panels and battery storage installed on my home which we purchased via the Solar Together Berkshire scheme. I was amazed at how quickly installation took place and how competitive the price was. The return on investment

appears to be is in the region of eight years and it is having a marked impact on the electricity we import, reducing it by around 25% and what we are not using is exported which is about 28% of what we have generated - this is only in the last two weeks.

I'd like to understand how the scheme is doing across the Borough and how well it has been received.

Answer:

Thank you for your question, Caroline.

It is the first time we are running the Solar Together Scheme in our Borough, and we are pleased to hear that you were able to take up this opportunity and thank you for sharing your positive experience.

We have been working collaboratively with four of the other Berkshire authorities on the Solar Together scheme, and across all five authorities, it has attracted over 7,000 houses and small businesses to register their interest since its launch in June.

In Wokingham Borough, over 2,800 residents and small businesses registered their interest, although we do not anticipate all of those will come to fruition. But so far over 500 have accepted their offer, paid their deposit and are having their surveys and installations done for either Solar PV, battery storage or both.

The scheme has performed exceptionally well in our Borough. Out of all five of the authorities, in Wokingham, we have had significantly more registrations of interest and conversions to proceed than our neighbouring authorities, and to be in a position whereby approximately 500 buildings in the Borough will have the ability to generate their own green energy because of this scheme, is a significant step forward in the building decarbonisation plans of the Climate Emergency Action Plan. In addition to reduced carbon emissions, these properties will also benefit from lower bills and increased energy security.

Supplementary Question:

Will there be an opportunity to revisit this scheme in the future?

Supplementary Answer:

So, we are continuing to evaluate what is going on at the moment and we are going to look at the feasibility of doing this. I hope so because we are getting a lot of interest from people, they are seeing their neighbours having solar panels put on their buildings and they are now asking can we do this. So, there is a lot of interest and we hope that we can. There is a couple of things that we need to make sure happen first. We are not a big enough Borough to do this on our own which is why we are doing it with the other Berkshire authorities, so we need to ensure that they do it as well, and making sure that we have got that resource in place as well. All being well I would like to think that we can.

64.11 Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:

Question:

Last week two separate emails went out to staff to quell concerns that the Council was planning mass redundancies after the Executive Member for Finance casually mentioned in the local paper that the Council would be cutting back on non-statutory council services including “making some staff redundant”. Would the Executive Member for Finance like to take this opportunity to apologise for causing such concern among staff, and for throwing out comments without further detail before any consultation?

Answer:

Why on earth are you asking such a question? There was no mention of mass redundancies by me in the press and the only councillors I have seen suggesting such a possibility in the media, have been Conservative Councillors.

Every Council, but especially those with responsibility for Adults and Childrens, are having to think carefully about how to spend every penny. Wokingham Borough Council has an innovative and committed workforce, which is underpinned by a robust approach to financial management, This means we are not currently in the unfortunate position of other Local Authorities, who may need to undertake a large scale redundancy approach to reduce their costs.

To be honest, I find it a bit rich that you asked this question at all, given that back in February the Conservatives proposed an alternative budget that included huge cuts in the workforce. So, I think it should be YOU apologising for speculating and trying to stir up unnecessary concern. Please can you stick to the facts when asking your questions and not make up a fear mongering narratives, when there really is no need for it.

Supplementary Question:

I find that a very flippant response actually, quite patronising. My supplementary is this – there are very real consequences of talking about serious matters such as bankruptcy, redundancies and service cuts, and the worry she has caused both residents and staff, does the Executive Member also realise the legal requirement to have a consultation before announcing redundancies, and not doing so could be challenged by staff who feel that they are being treated unfairly? When will she be correcting this?

Supplementary Answer:

I am afraid to say that I have been informed that there is no such redundancies. I am aware that any redundancies would go through the Personnel Committee for a start, of any mass scale, and there is a limit on how many that can be. At the moment we are not anywhere near that limit and there is no reason for people to be worried.

65. Minutes of Committee Meetings and Ward Matters

65.1 Caroline Smith asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

On Ryhill Way in Hillside ward there are at least three places where the road seems to have suffered from some subsidence by the drain covers. I understand that there has been some recent investigatory work. Please could you tell me what was found and if there are some remedial works to be done?

Answer:

Yes, there were at least three areas where trial holes have been undertaken. Nothing untoward was found. They have been reinstated. The next steps are that next week the areas will be marked up for full reinstatement to bring the depressions back up to the same level as the rest of the road. It will require road space so we have got to put that through the particular system, and there may also need to be a road closure on at least one of them, so I can update you once I have further information on that.

65.2 Peter Harper asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Residents Services the following question:

Question:

At the Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 25 September, the report on the Barkham solar farm stated that verbal confirmation had been received from SSE about an improved date for the connection. Do we now have a date in writing from SSE or are we progressing on the basis of a verbal confirmation, bearing in mind this is a £26million project?

Answer:

We are getting the written confirmation by the end of the month. SSE are waiting for some information from ESO as in National Grid ESO. We have been speaking to them almost daily, got another meeting with them on Monday. Everything is good from their end, it is just waiting for some internal documentation for them to get it out to us at the end of this month. The works that we are progressing on are mostly, it is not the actually the build yet as you are well aware, it is the surveying work, so minimal cost work at the moment that just means that we are shovel ready. We are not spending the full £26million at the moment on that verbal thing. The consequences of not getting Bouyges to continue some of that surveying work is that they could walk. We have a contract in place and the cost of procurement would be substantially higher, so we have taken the right decision there.

65.3 Peter Dennis asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question:

Following up on my question at the last Full Council about residents being impacted by lease holders, I have received an email from residents today where they have had their maintenance charge doubled. So, I am asking the Leader of the Council have we made any progress with our Wokingham MPs?

Answer:

I wrote as I think I reported at the last Council meeting to all four of the Borough's MPs. I have had responses from two of them, Theresa May, and John Redwood. I am particularly grateful to Theresa May for involving herself in this matter because as you I am sure all know, whilst she is an MP for part of the Borough, that part of the Borough does not include Montague Park, but she undertook to take this matter up on a more general principle of the treatment of leaseholders. On our behalf she contacted the Secretary of State, and I am pleased to say the Secretary of State has actually responded to her, and she has shared with me the letter she received from the Secretary of State, and I will be very happy to pass that on to you so that you in turn can share it with residents of Montague Park. It makes interesting reading.

Sir John also responded. He asked me to get the residents concerned to contact him directly which I understand they have tried to do. I cannot say what the outcome of that is because I am not sure what response they have received.

That is the current situation. We will be continuing what we can do to try and help this particular set of residents, but we are also actively looking at ways in which we as a Council can find ways of trying to mitigate this problem, because it is a problem that not only affects the Montague Park residents but many other residents. The problems of leaseholders are felt in many parts of our Borough and across the country. Ultimately this is a national issue that requires national legislation to remedy, but we are going to be doing all we can through a variety of channels to try and help leaseholders.

65.4 Graham Howe asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

I have asked on previous occasions as to when there is going to be some activity on getting the plans for parking and traffic management in Wargrave moving. Previously he had answered that there was not resource available. We are a number of months on, and could he please give me an update?

Answer:

I can certainly give you an update when I have a look through the list to see exactly where that is currently sitting in the priority order so I will come back to you on that.

65.5 Andrew Mickleburgh asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

I was delighted when the Anti-Social Behaviour Team responded to an offer from the managing agents of the Maiden Lane shopping precinct in my ward, to make available a vacant shop for a Community Corner from which the ASB Team, Police, Craunston and others, have once a month been able to engage with our local residents. Feedback has been positive. I believe that the initial proposal was to trial this initiative for a period of time which might soon be coming to an end. If so, would you consider supporting any efforts to continue with the Community Corner for as long as the premises are available and the ASB Team believe it is useful?

Answer:

Yes, I have understood that it has received a positive reception and I think we would be very inclined to support that.

65.6 Alison Swaddle asked the Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty the following question:

Question:

In the minutes of the Corporate and Community Scrutiny meeting on 2 October, there is reference to considerable staffing reductions saving £3million with more being examined for this year. However, how many staff do we still have as outside consultants or contactors as these are a considerable cost to the Council? Would they deliver savings if brought in as permanent Council staff?

Answer:

So, this is something that we discuss very regularly at Personnel Board. I could not quote figures to you off the top of my head but information is available in the minutes of the Personnel Board, so that is probably the best place to look. We also constructively challenge on whether we can do exactly the sort of thing that you have just spoken about, whether we can save money by bringing these people inhouse. Now sometimes it is simply impossible to get these staff as permanent members of staff, so very often specialisms such as children's social workers, it is very difficult to get these people as permanent members of staff. In other cases, it is actually saving money to the Council if we bring people in as contractors. If for example, you need a specialist IT person it can be better to bring them in as a contractor or an agency person. But the Personnel team does look very closely at how we can get the best balancing of staffing for the Council, the right mix of contractors, agency staff, permanent staff, people working on fixed term contracts, so it is something that is under active, continual and cross party review.

65.7 David Cornish asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

Some people in Finchampstead understandably have concerns about the planned refurbishment of California Crossroads. Unfortunately, these concerns have been greatly exacerbated by misinformation being spread locally about how this work will be funded. To help allay these concerns and to ensure that residents are fully aware of all of the relevant facts, could the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways please reassure the people of Finchampstead that the upcoming refurbishment of California Crossroads will not be funded in any way from council tax receipts or the council revenues, but that the cost of the whole project will be met from developer contributions, principally from the SDL at Arborfield?

Answer:

As you know this scheme has a very long history. It should have been built in 2019. It was delayed by the waterworks, it was then delayed by Covid, and it was then delayed by The Ridges embankment slipping. So, the contract has now been let, trial holes have been started and they are due to be completed at the end of this month subject to of course us having some dry weather as we need that. Once that

is all completed, we will then be starting the main works in February next year. All of the costs from this particular scheme come from S106 from the SDL and there is no council tax monies involved whatsoever.

At this point in the meeting Councillor Prue Bray proposed that 4.2.12m be moved to suspend standing order 4.2.10.9 to allow all Member questions to be put. This was seconded by Councillor Stephen Conway. Upon being put to the vote this was agreed.

65.8 Laura Blumenthal asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

You will remember that I have raised in this Chamber multiple times about the issue in my ward of the flooding at the roundabout on Nightingale Road, and you have kindly said to this Chamber that you were going to get in touch with Thames Water, and you were good to your word, and you emailed me letting me know the actions that Thames Water were exploring doing. I was intrigued to read a Lib Dem leaflet in my ward saying that the issue had been solved, and that it was only when Beth Rowland took action has this been sorted out. So, my question is, has the issue been solved, and if so why is it that your colleague is taking credit for my work, and I have to learn from a leaflet she had put out that it has indeed been solved, when you know how much I have been nagging you about this?

Answer:

Beth Rowland contacted me in December last year, same time as you did. As you are aware you started this process back in 2016 but nothing was done whatsoever. This particular work has been done. I have contacted Thames Water and I have got this situation sorted out. I emailed you and Beth Rowland both at the same time to say that the work has been completed.

65.9 Lindsay Ferris asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

A number of residents have contacted me and I have also looked on Twyford Facebook about the state of the 850 Arriva bus service, which has had a number of cancellations and late running of late, and on at least one occasion the 850 was converted to an 800 which left the resident instead of in Twyford, in Henley. I would like to understand what actions we can take, which is obviously a commercial service, to see how we can improve this?

Answer:

As you have rightly pointed out the 850 service run by Arriva is a commercial service. It runs on an hourly basis. It starts in High Wycombe, and it comes through Henley, through Twyford, through Charvil and all the way to Reading, and then it returns. It is quite a long route overall. Certain things can happen on that route – there could be an accident, there could be a diversion, and it can get rerouted from time to time, and unfortunately sometimes it does get cancelled. They have the app available through the Arriva system. They also have their website available as well.

We have contacted Arriva. Their Commercial Director has informed us that they are open to suggestions on how information can get out to the public but there are these particular positions at the moment where the app is available and the website. Unfortunately, if a route is cancelled it is a pretty long wait to the next bus as it is an hourly service, but it is run commercially.

65.10 Rebecca Margetts asked the Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan the following question:

Question:

A resident has contacted me with regards to the question raised by Councillor Harper at the last meeting. Councillor Harper asked for clarification on the weight of the Finchampstead Neighbourhood Development Plan and the weight it would carry in the planning process. You did promise him a written answer which he has not received. Will you commit to provide a written answer within the next week so I can respond to my resident?

Answer:

You should have had an answer this afternoon because I authorised it to go about 4pm this afternoon.

65.11 Mike Smith asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question:

I understand that Maiden Erlegh School in my ward is increasing its SEND capacity and facilities by expanding into the old Silverdale Centre formerly occupied by a nursery and ETC youth services. Please could you provide some details and explain how this will help Maiden Erlegh residents that need SEND help?

Answer:

Yes, indeed Maiden Erlegh school opened in the Silverdale Centre which has been converted in a project over the summer which was led by our officers. The same resource space had been operating within the school buildings that existed, but it was not really very suitable for them to meet the pupils' needs, and also it could not cope with the full contracted capacity. We now have a facility which can take the full 25 children. Those new facilities are really welcome. We did make a contribution to the capital costs as a Council, but off the top of my head I cannot tell you how much that is.

We have got plans for more resource bases and more SEND units to offer more places for children who do not need to go into a special school but need more support to keep them in mainstream. That is all wrapped up in the SEND improvement work and also part of the Safety Valve. Obviously it will help us with the cost of providing places as well as improving the outcomes for children because we will be able to meet those children's costs in mainstream. I cannot say exactly how many Maiden Erlegh residents that is but it is certainly a valuable facility for the Borough, and I was really pleased to go and see it open. It is a fantastic building now.

65.12 Charles Margetts asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

My question is for Paul, and it is about California Crossroads as well. I have been contacted over the last few weeks by several of the traders and I will read you just a couple of sections of the emails 'Hi Charles, please can you help? I have not seen or heard anything for months since the phase letters were sent out about the work. I am very worried about the scheduling of this which could have a terminal effect on my business. Please could you help try and get some information for us.' One this morning 'Hi Charles, please can you help? I have had no contact at all from Wokingham Borough Council. No emails, no phone calls, no visits. I am desperate for details. I need to organise my business effectively. At the very least I have 20 or so staff to consider and if income levels are going to be high enough to continue to employ them for the period of this work. Please could you push to the Council to actually meet us all on site and actually engage with us?'

Councillor Rebecca Margetts has also been contacted by the Head of Nine Mile Ride School along the same lines. She wrote to a Highways Officer about two weeks ago, the one who is meant to be responsible for this and had no response.

My request is, would you commit to a meeting on site with the officers responsible and the local businesses, to reassure these people about what is going on, brief them fully, and make sure that they are fully informed so that they can actually plan for the future and make sure their businesses survive this considerable time period of work?

Answer:

Letters were sent out to all the businesses which described how the trial holes were going to be done and the timings of those trial holes. It also stated in there that the main works would be starting in February, and there was a link to the website. There is not much else that we can say at the present time, we have been doing some work with the contractor and they can then lay out the actual timings of all the future works. That will happen and we will be sending further information to all businesses, and they will be kept up to date. I am happy to have a meeting with them but there is very little we can say at the present time apart from what I have already said.

65.13 Chris Johnson asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question:

This year due to the increased demand for entitled school transport, many families in the Shinfield parish who had previously been able to acquire paid for places found themselves without guaranteed places on provision transport. During the weeks leading up to the beginning of the school term you and officers have worked with providers and Reading Buses to tweak timetables, shuffle routes, and manage the availability to move from 58 worried families down to less than 16. I understand that there were some options that were not possible to achieve before the school term started. Can you add any more information regarding the timetable and route variations that may become beneficial in the future for affected families?

Answer:

We went through quite an interesting time over those few weeks in the summer. I am very pleased that we did manage to reduce the number of people who were looking for help with farepayer places for around 50 something to around 15 I think it was. We are looking proactively at what we can do for next year, that is one of the things that we have undertook to do.

So, the things that we are looking at are things like can we charter bigger coaches, whether public bus timings can be tweaked, although it has already become obvious that some bus routes are proving tricky to change but there are others that are looking a bit more promising, but I cannot guarantee what will happen. We are also working on some road safety issues which parents asked us to do at those meetings, and the other thing that we are doing is meeting regularly now with the Education Working Group of Shinfield Parish Council. We have had one meeting and we have got another one scheduled. In fact, this week I have had something from the clerk asking for some information for that meeting. We are hoping that by doing this we will avoid such problems happening next year, but of course some of it will depend on who applies for which school, what choices they make, and who gets allocated what. The deadline for applying for a secondary school place this year is 31 October, and at some point after that it will become clearer to us what we may need to put in place for next year, so watch this space I think.

65.14 Andy Croy asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:**Question:**

First of all, Paul, I would like to thank you and your officers including the Civil Enforcement people for the work that they have been doing in Whitegates around The Drive and London Road, and that work is very much appreciated by bus passengers and by residents alike.

However, two separate problems in my ward. If one is a cyclist and one drives down Culver Lane and under the bridge and into Reading, you are taking your life into your hands. It is not one hole it is like the Somme there. It is impossible to know which bit to report because it is such a mess. At the other end of the ward, we have residents in Woodley Town Centre, they are being terrorised by being people on scooters, motorised scooters in particular, hurtling past people at great speeds. I appreciate that enforcement is up to the Police, but I would like to think about what we can do in terms of an engineering solution to make that particular area harder for motorised scooters and cyclists to use. So, my question is will you come with me to my ward again to visit both sites to look at the options?

Answer:

First of all, I will pass on your thanks to the officers. I am sure that they will appreciate that. Culver Lane, yes, I am quite happy to get on my electric bike and cycle up, and cycle around parts of Woodley and Bulmershe. It is quite enjoyable, and also have a look at the precinct in Woodley. One thing I would say though about e-scooters, is that I just hope the Government get their finger out and start going through the process of whether or not these are going to be legal in the future or not,

and where people can actually ride them because they are an absolute menace. They have had lots of reports from the PAC committee and they have done nothing about it, so the Government need to start shifting themselves.

65.15 Shahid Younis asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

It is regarding an access road in my ward, Addington Gardens, which leads up to Rivermead School. There is a double line from Loddon Bridge all the way to the entry of the school. Consistently parents are parking on the double lines and causing a real concern to the other parents and also the staff as well regarding the safety of the children. What measures can we put in place to make sure that the restrictions are enforced and to ensure the childrens safety?

Answer:

I will speak to the officers tomorrow and I will get the CP officers up there as soon as possible to start enforcing those double yellow lines.

65.16 Anne Chadwick asked the Deputy Leader the following question:

Question:

How far is it considered reasonable for a resident to need to walk to get to their polling station? In my ward there is a new estate which is fairly distant from the polling station, and it looks as if that could be affecting voting levels.

Answer:

That will fall to me. I think I am going to be the Lib Dem person on the working group that we are having to review polling places, and I think the appropriate thing for you to do with that is to give us the information about the specific polling station and we will take it into account when we look at the review.

65.17 Abdul Loyes asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

A resident in my ward was concerned that if St Crispin's Leisure Centre closes there would be increased pressure on Bulmershe Leisure Centre. The Executive Member for Finance said that the problem with St Crispin's Leisure Centre is not financial but refused to answer a public question on what the problem is, that the consultation seeks to solve. What is the problem please?

Answer:

The problem is twofold. The school is expanding and is requiring increasing use of the facility, and becoming increasingly conscious of the significant safeguarding issue on the premises of St Crispin's. Secondly, the usage of the centre has not recovered in the way that the other centres have since the return to more of less normal use of gyms etc after the main part of the pandemic. That is in essence the reason for the standing back and taking a look at it via the consultation.

65.18 Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

In my ward along Sonning Lane, which is not a wide road, there are speeding buses who also on occasions mount the pavement. I ask the Executive Member and senior highways officers to meet with me, with staff from Reading Bluecoats School, and councillors of Sonning Parish Council, to witness this and take the appropriate necessary action? The afternoon time is the best time for the visit.

Answer:

I am quite happy to do so.

**66. Statements by the Leader of the Council and Executive Members
Councillor Lindsay Ferris, Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan:**

The planning permission for the Arborfield District Centre given by the Planning Committee last week represents a milestone following several years of hard work, to ensure we give a real heart to the new community. It has taken longer to get to this point than expected because of the knock on impacts to the economy in recent years, with Covid 19 and the cost of living crisis etc, but officers, local Members and the developers have all worked hard to reach this milestone. With that permission in place, we will now work with the developers and the local community to make the best of the opportunity we now have. That means our officers and local Members can continue to work with Crest and local groups to bring forward new community facilities with the range of uses that local people want to see provided, and encouraging local businesses to contact Crest about the new shops and commercial spaces coming online in the next couple of years. At this juncture, however, and to celebrate the success of reaching this point, I just want to say thank you to our officers, in particular Connor Corrigan and Nick Chancellor who have been central to getting to the scheme to this point, and to Crest for their continued positive engagement with us, to my local Members, colleagues, who have brought their own influence to bear, that is cross party, on this work, and to local people for their patience and continued interest in this scheme. I have no doubt we will raise a glass of something, like we were a bit earlier, when we see the first spade in the ground.

Councillor Stephen Conway, Leader of the Council:

First may I just say very quickly that I am really delighted that we did extend question time then. I personally take the view that, that is one of the most important parts of the Council meeting, an opportunity for all councillors irrespective of party to ask questions about things that are relevant to the people that they represent, so I make no apologies for approving the extending of that. It is an important thing to do.

I want to congratulate in my statement as Leader, and in this case, it is relevant to say my statement as Executive Member for Housing. I want to congratulate our excellent housing team for its success at last night's Royal Berkshire Property Awards, where our new temporary accommodation units at Grovelands, I do not know how many of you have visited Grovelands and have seen what those accommodation units are like. They are really impressive. They are environmentally incredibly sustainable and sufficient. They have been judged by the award body, the best residential development of the year, and that is a really great accolade for our

officers. This is a really well merited recognition by the work put in by our officers and the architect and the contractors, and it shows with commitment and imagination we can deliver much needed temporary accommodation in a very high quality which saves both the Council and residents, money.

I also want to update Council on the work done to identify any RAAC in our estate. I am delighted to say that all Council properties have been assessed and only one has been found to contain RAAC, that is 28-38 Peach Street, and in that single case only to a limited extent as reported to the last Council meeting. I should like to thank our officers for conducting this work speedily and efficiently, and saving the council taxpayer the cost of employing external consultants. We are very lucky to have such suitably qualified officers available here to do that work, and I would like to thank them very much for what they have done here to enable us to come up with this really clean bill of health.

67. Statement from Council Owned Companies

There were no statements from Council owned companies.

68. Motions

68.1 Motion 508 submitted by Prue Bray

Council considered the following Motion, submitted by Councillor Prue Bray and seconded by Councillor Stephen Conway.

'Wokingham Borough Council has been under increasing financial pressure due to continued underfunding by the government over more than 20 years. High inflation, high interest rates, and increasing demand for statutory services have made the pressure worse.

In order to ensure that we make the best use of finite resources, that services are as sustainable as possible for the future, and that the most vulnerable in our community are protected, this council endorses an approach to decision-making by the Executive that is based on:

- recognising our responsibility to act in the interests of the community and the climate
- operating as one organisation
- practicing fiscal responsibility
- seeking to maximise income from external sources such as grants
- working constructively with partner organisations of all kinds
- pursuing a collective vision for the area, formed with the community
- taking into account the needs of less well-off and vulnerable residents
- planning for the long term
- making decisions that are informed by evidence
- maintaining good quality prevention and early help services -
- providing efficient and effective access to services and information for residents
- observing the principles of openness and transparency
- welcoming internal overview and scrutiny, enabling all councillors to contribute.'

Councillor Andy Croy commented that there was much to commend in the Motion.

However, he expressed concern regarding – ‘welcoming internal overview and scrutiny, enabling all councillors to contribute’ and felt that this did not fully represent actual practice. He emphasised that Overview and Scrutiny did not receive the proposals around moving the Council from the Shute End offices until after a decision had already been taken by the Executive.

A number of Members spoke in support of the approach set out in the Motion.

At this point in the meeting, in line with 4.2.13.12, Councillor Pauline Helliard Symons proposed that the question be put and to move to the vote. This was seconded by Councillor Peter Harper. Upon being put to the vote the Mayor declared the proposal to be lost.

Members continued to debate the Motion.

Upon being put to the vote it was agreed that:

RESOLVED: That Wokingham Borough Council has been under increasing financial pressure due to continued underfunding by the government over more than 20 years. High inflation, high interest rates, and increasing demand for statutory services have made the pressure worse.

In order to ensure that we make the best use of finite resources, that services are as sustainable as possible for the future, and that the most vulnerable in our community are protected, this council endorses an approach to decision-making by the Executive that is based on:

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- maintaining good quality prevention and early help services -
- providing efficient and effective access to services and information for residents
- observing the principles of openness and transparency
- welcoming internal overview and scrutiny, enabling all councillors to contribute

68.2 Motion 509 submitted by Pauline Helliard Symons

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.