

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 18 JANUARY 2024 FROM 7.30 PM TO 10.30 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, Phil Cunnington, David Davies, Peter Dennis, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Paul Fishwick, Catherine Glover, Andrew Gray, David Hare, Peter Harper, Pauline Helliar-Symons, 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, Caroline Smith, Mike Smith, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane, Alison Swaddle, Marie-Louise Weighill and Shahid Younis

84. Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Gary Cowan, John Halsall, Graham Howe, and Tony Skuse.

85. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 16 November 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

86. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Stephen Conway declared a personal interest in Item 105 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Prue Bray declared a personal interest in Item 105 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Berry Brook Homes, Wokingham Housing Ltd. and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Michael Firmager declared a prejudicial interest in Item 96 Council Tax Base 2024/25 on the basis that he had a half share in his late parents' property in the Borough. He would withdraw from the Chamber during the discussion and not vote on this item.

Councillor David Cornish declared a personal interest in Item 105 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor David Hare declared a personal interest in Item 105 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Optalis.

87. Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor thanked those who had contributed to the Christmas collection for the Woodley Food Bank and the children from local schools who had participated in the

Mayor's Concert.

88. Public Question Time

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

88.1 Paul Stevens asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question

During recent heavy rainfall the sewage pumping station at Arborfield has been discharging untreated sewage directly into Barkham Brook.

Earlier this year, Thames Water was fined £3.3million after it discharged millions of litres of untreated sewage into two rivers near Gatwick in 2017, killing more than 1,400 fish.

Can the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure explain how it is proposed to stop Thames Water from dumping untreated sewage into local waterways?

Answer

Whilst the Council shares your concerns over the discharge of raw sewage into our local rivers, unfortunately we do not have any powers to undertake any enforcement action over these incidents. The regulation of sewage discharges is a matter for the Environment Agency (EA), who are the body with legal powers of enforcement.

However, the Council continues to engage locally with both the EA and Thames Water and indeed Thames Water very recently attended a Council Overview and Scrutiny meeting where they were questioned on a wide range of issues.

I may add that to change the current discharge situation would require massive capital investment, and Thames Water's ability to borrow was compromised by the level of debt accrued under the previous ownership of Macquarie. While paying out billions in dividends and bonuses, they simultaneously racked up billions in debt, to the point where 28 pence out of every pound that you pay to Thames Water goes to service their debt.

This ultimately arises from the ideological privatisation of a monopoly essential service, and while the Lords attempted to address discharges via Amendment 45 during the passage through Parliament of the Environment Act, the Government chose to defeat the Amendment to maintain the status quo. John Redwood, James Sunderland and Theresa May all voted against the Lords Amendment. They are clearly happy with sewage in our rivers.

Supplementary Question:

Sewage outfall into rivers is likely to be compounded by the increased flood risk due to climate change, and the flood plain of Barkham Brook for example, on the River Loddon, are also just below a Category A dam at Bearwood Lake. Can Wokingham offer any reassurance to potential occupiers of any new homes to be built on any

current or future flood risk areas, that they will be able to insure them? In proposing for example to develop the Loddon Valley garden village Strategic Development Location with up to 4,500 additional houses, are we not in great danger of building tomorrow's problems today?

Supplementary Answer:

I think that is a question which is better addressed to the Environment Agency. Ultimately, they are the enforcement body, and they are the ones that have the powers.

88.2 Moses Iyengunmwena asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question

With the planned change to bi-weekly bin collection, I am concerned about whether the Council now has more realistic figures of the cost-effectiveness of the change and want to ask if the Council has considered the likely environmental impact due to increased rodent infestation and the associated costs of dealing with and managing the health implications on the residents?

Answer

The costs and savings for this project have been detailed in the full report which was considered by Overview and Scrutiny in February 2023 and subsequently Executive in March 2023. The finances were calculated through two independent waste management consultancies, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) and Eunomia. There is a robust financial monitoring process in place to ensure spending is to budget and the actual costs and savings will be known by the end of March 2025.

There are no substantial health effects as a result of this change, and this has been confirmed in a 2007 review by Cranfield University and Enviro. Both organisations found "no evidence that alternate week waste collection will cause any significant health impacts for residents, or that any health impacts are likely to be significantly greater than those associated with weekly collections". It also found that "common-sense steps", I quote, such as closing bin lids, can easily prevent odours or vermin from being a problem. The use of the food waste bins will also reduce any impacts, and these will continue to be collected on a weekly basis.

Supplementary Question:

General waste does not include food, but it includes other items that attract rodents such as used nappies, tissues, sanitary products, and pet waste. How does the Council intend to address this?

Supplementary Answer:

As I said in my answer, an independent review confirmed in 2007, by Cranfield University and Enviro, that there was no evidence that alternate waste collections will cause any significant health impacts for residents, and they would have looked at all of those aspects in coming to that conclusion.

88.3 John Sephton asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport

and Leisure the following question:

Question

Road cleaning, footpath cleaning, verge cutting ETC for 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 was not carried out in accordance with the schedule stated in the consultation document issued 2023, this would have resulted in savings for those years. What was the saving over these two years?

Answer

The street cleansing and grounds maintenance contracts contain expected output standards that equate to indicative frequencies, which were provided for the purpose of the consultation. There was no saving made during those years as the contracted work was undertaken. Furthermore, the contracts allow us to easily review performance and issue a penalty if the output standards are not met.

Supplementary Question:

When can we expect the schedule for 2024/25 to be published?

Supplementary Answer:

That is detail I do not have. We can provide you with a written answer.

88.4 James Wyper asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question, which was answered by the Executive Member for Finance:

Question

My question is on behalf of Ashridge Park, a grassroots football club that hires facilities at Montague Park and Cantley Park. Prior to March 2023 WBC charged VAT on all Sports Pitch bookings, but an exemption (VATLP19200) on bookings in blocks of 10 or more meant that we did not pay (and WBC did not collect) VAT on most bookings. In March 2023 HMRC ruled that bookings were not liable for VAT. WBC has continued to charge users at the VAT-inclusive rate, keeping the benefit of the tax cut for themselves. However, because the exemption that we used to take advantage of now longer applies, we are paying thousands more (20%) than last year for the same facilities. The SLA for Cantley that both parties signed in 2021 caps annual price rises at 3% until 2026. We first queried this with WBC in June 2023 and have yet to receive a substantive response.

I would like to ask the Executive Member if they accept that by retaining the VAT savings for themselves, and greatly increasing the costs that the club is paying, the Council is in breach of the SLA and what their plans are to remediate this?

Answer

As you correctly suggest, in March 2023 the HMRC made a public statement agreeing to change their stance in respect to charging VAT on sports pitch bookings. Despite this statement, we were aware that a further review was being undertaken and that further guidance would be issued once that was complete.

At the time when this was highlighted, Wokingham Borough Council took external advice on the position, and we were advised to hold off from making any changes to

our VAT requirement on sports pitches until the full and longer term position was clarified.

Sadly, our experience shows that sometimes government bodies issue statements on policies that are not ready to be implemented yet and things often change before we are actually get to see the details and are required to act on them.

The good news is, that sports pitches have now appeared in HMRC advice very late in 2023, and we are currently working through all of the detailed changes required in order to align how our fees are classified for VAT purposes.

I can assure you and Ashridge Park FC, that the Council has at no point increased its own element of the fees that are being charged - and that the VAT part of our fees was only ever expected to be passed on to HMRC. Now that we finally have the full and confirmed understanding, we are working to review how much VAT has been paid to HMRC and we will recover any overcharge payments. These overpayments claimed will be used to repay any organisations that were overcharged. We are working to do this as quickly as possible and will be in touch with all organisations affected in due course, so it is good news.

Supplementary Question:

Would you care to put more detail as to what 'in due course' actually means please, are we talking weeks, months?

Supplementary Answer:

Sadly, I cannot as we are dependent on what HMRC does and what they will allow us to do. I did ask the question as well when it came through, but unfortunately, we cannot put a date on it, but it will be in a reasonable time, I hope.

88.5 Guy Grandison asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question

Can the Executive Member please give me an update as to the progress of the Playing Pitch Strategy that was committed to come in January of 2023?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

At the January 2023 Executive meeting it was agreed to reassess the needs of the Earley and Lower Earley area within the strategic review of all playing pitches. This review is being undertaken in parallel with the work progressing on the Local Plan Update as there are obvious interdependencies.

Supplementary Question:

It is dependent on the Local Plan Update – so when will the Local Plan Update come because right now, we are being left behind, and 40% of matches being abandoned due to pitch issues, due to waterlogging etc. That is not very good for grass roots sports. Can we get a move on please?

Supplementary Answer:

The Local Plan Update is not within my portfolio, and I cannot comment on any timescale for that.

88.6 Philip Meadowcroft asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:**Question**

During the first nine months of 2023 WBC made £75 million worth of loans to cash-strapped local authorities.

WBC Councillors and Officials have repeatedly emphasised to me that these loans, including the £10million lent last June to the bankrupt Woking Borough Council, were underwritten or guaranteed by the Treasury.

They have referred me to sections 6 to 13 initially (then just Sections 6 and 13 only) in the Local Government Act 2003 in support of their entrenched belief that Treasury guarantees for these loans actually existed.

Nowhere, however, in Section 6 or 13 do the words "guarantee" or "underwritten" or "Treasury" or "Government" appear.

Councillors and Officials appear to be persisting in misleading and deceiving Full Council, and the Wokingham residents and council taxpayers they represent, with false and misleading statements justifying their actions which they cannot actually show and prove to be true.

This is tantamount to a material and significant deception.

When and how, please, will the truth be told, together with an apology?

Answer

Thank-you Mr Meadowcroft.

Inter-Authority borrowing and lending has been common practice nationally over many decades and it is used as a standard and common mechanism by Councils to address peaks and troughs in cash flows. I can confirm, that all of the £75million in loans that you reference and that have reached their maturity date - have been repaid, on time with full interest and no issues. No Council anywhere has ever defaulted on these loans.

Your question is similar to the question that you asked at our Executive on the 30th November, which is where it was explained to you that our loans to Councils have backing from the Treasury in the Local Government Finance Act, and it is mentioned in our CIPFA guidelines. In the case of Woking, it is also mentioned in their publicly available S114 notice that all existing contracts will be honoured by borrowing from the PWLB or Treasury, if necessary.

The reference to the Local Government Act 2003 was provided directly to you by our Chief Finance Officer. It was not to demonstrate the guarantee of any specific loan,

but to point to an aspect of the Legal Framework under which inter-authority loans take place.

The specific guarantee to repay specific loans is put in place through individual contracts, using Treasury Management brokers who are approved by the Finance Conduct Authority. I stress that this does not mean the Financial Conduct Authority approves every individual transaction. All of our loans have the required agreements in place which includes Lender Protection as set out in section 2 of the Local Government Act 2003. Our strategies and processes to borrowing and lending, include the individual transactions are regularly subjected to Audit.

Due to Commercial sensitivities, we can only refer you to the legal documents that are publicly available, and I am suspecting that is not going to be detailed enough for you.

I am sure you honestly believe that there is something in what you are saying, but I am afraid it is not correct. I can assure you that we are acting within the law. Unfortunately, your question attacks the integrity of our officers— who manage these funds and the contracts – and they are the ones who have many years of experience in doing so.

The best approach I can suggest is coming back after 8 March, I believe it is that the money comes back, and come back to our next meeting and ask us then, how things went with this loan.

Supplementary Question:

Despite my repeated attempts over the past six weeks, the Executive Member for Finance together with the Council's financial officers, have not come anywhere near answering my straightforward question about central government guarantees for loans that Wokingham makes to other local authorities. At the beginning of your reply, you said that all £75million loans had been repaid, and then at the end you told me that one of them had not yet been paid because it is not yet due, and that is the Woking one on 8 March. Your answers have been evasive, and this to me is deeply worrying, and it is ominous. Others in the Chamber might share my pessimism. But let's try to move on shall we. My supplementary question is, what is the real truth please, and why are you so determined to hide it from me and everybody else?

Supplementary Answer:

I am sorry Mr Meadowcroft, but I am afraid you have got that wrong because we are not hiding anything from anybody. This information is public information. It is in our Treasury Management Strategy and is practice that we have been doing for more than anyone can remember, more than 20 years. You seem to think that there is something wrong, but I am afraid that is not the case. Everything is within the law, and officers have been doing it for years, so I do not understand why you are pursuing this route. All I can suggest is to come back after the loan has been repaid. I might add that I did not say that all the loans had been repaid, but this one is obviously due to come back in March, early March, so come back and we can tell you how it went.

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

Question

For the £10million loan made to Woking Council after it had declared itself bankrupt by issuing an S114 notice, please will you state both the gross as well as the net earnings from this loan - after arrangement fees, legal costs and any related borrowing costs - and whether there is a hypothecated use for the net earnings?

Answer

The £10million loan was made with an interest rate of 4.75%, meaning there is an expected return of £357,000. This is for the 274 days, or 9 months, that was agreed for this investment.

Wokingham Borough Council paid no arrangement or legal fees on this transaction. Only the Borrower pays arrangement and legal costs, which are covered by the brokers.

Every council in this country use loans and borrowing to manage their cashflow, which can fluctuate significantly pending on the receipt of incomes, grants and the profile of expenditure which includes larger capital schemes as well as ongoing revenue costs - such as salaries and contract payments. A good example is CIL money from a developer which is ringfenced for infrastructure. We do not get all the money from the developer at once, as it comes in slowly as properties are sold. While we may not have the money to begin working on a project, we can lend it to another council for a short while where it is left to generate interest. All of the income generated through the interest payments on these loans is revenue and it is fed into the overall financial position of the Council, which obviously, revenue is the thing we are desperate for.

Supplementary Question:

This is obviously a complex and sensitive topic so to help my supplementary is quite a simple one.

Can you please provide detail of the process applied to these loans within Wokingham – who defines the need – who authorises and who then signs off the loans and what scrutiny process is applied?

Supplementary Answer:

Basically, it is in the Treasury Management Strategy which I think you were part of this Council last February, when we agreed it, and a lot of this information is in there. It delegates the position to our officers, which is headed up by our Chief Financial Officer, and the individual decisions are made by that group of people. The reason why we delegate it to the officers, and it is safe to do so, and I think we are limited up to £10million per transaction, per Council, is because councils are safer places to put your money than banks. It is a really safe way to generate income and manage cash flow, so it is a decision that is delegated to our officers. I hope that helps.

89. Petitions

There were no petitions submitted at the meeting.

90. Adult Social Care's Social Care Future Vision and Charter

Council received a presentation on Social Care Futures from service users Gregg Burgess, Yvonne Thrower, Callum Bell, and Jay Dudakia. A report was also contained within the agenda, set out at Agenda pages 53 to 76.

Gregg, Yvonne, Callum, and Jay spoke about their personal experiences with social care and introduced the Social Care Futures vision. Members were requested to sign up to the Social Care Futures Charter.

Councillor Stephen Conway thanked the service users for their presentation and indicated that the Council was committed to the work behind Social Care futures and would do all it could to facilitate the objectives of the Charter.

Councillor Shahid Younis asked what was one thing that the Council could do which would make a big difference. Gregg commented that the Council should dare to be different and think bigger, as everyone had different care needs and requirements.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen thanked carers for all the work that they put into caring, and also thanked officers for recognising that service users were the experts about what they wanted and needed, and being open to listen.

Councillor Keith Baker proposed that a recommendation be added that the service users be invited back to Council in 12 months' time for a progress update, to establish what changes had been made. This was seconded by Councillor Andy Croy.

Councillor Prue Bray stated that they would do what they could do to bring the voice of the child into the process for children's social care.

Councillor Andrew Mickleburgh commented that the goal should be about moving from surviving to thriving, and that there were strong analogies between the corporate parent responsibilities and the responsibilities to all residents who may need support. He asked that consideration be given to how service users could be empowered to ensure that the Charter was not just a paper document but led to meaningful changes.

It was proposed by Councillor David Hare and seconded by Councillor Phil Cunningham, that the recommendations set out in the report be approved.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That

- 1) our commitment to the SCF vision be noted;
- 2) how we can best deliver the SCF vision and work with people who use adult social care and family carers to achieve positive outcomes for our community, be considered;

- 3) Members attend briefings (dates TBC)
- 4) the principles included within Wokingham Borough Council's SCF Charter, be noted.
- 5) the service users be invited back in 12 months time for a progress update.

91. Council Tax Base - 2024/2025

(At this point in the meeting Councillor Michael Firmager left the meeting and did not take part in discussions relating to, or vote on the item)

Council considered the Council Tax Base 2024/25, set out in Agenda pages 77 to 82.

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

Councillor Peter Harper requested that the recommendations be voted on separately.

Councillor Imogen Sheperd-Dubey outlined proposals contained within the report.

Councillor Laura Blumenthal expressed concerns around potential unintended consequences to the vulnerable. She felt that the exemptions were unclear. With regards to properties that were empty for over a year, she was concerned that those who were grieving or suffering economic abuse could be negatively impacted. The purpose of the Levelling Up Bill was to assist areas with high levels of second homes for holiday lets, which did not apply to Wokingham Borough. She went on to question what was meant by properties that were occupied 'periodically'.

Councillor Peter Harper stated that the issue of second homes in the Borough was not so great as other areas, such as the Lake District or Padstow. Over half of the properties which would be impacted by the proposed change were in Bands A-D, modest family homes. He questioned how the additional tax would be enforced.

Councillor Stephen Conway commented that there was a housing crisis, and to bring empty homes into use so that people could live in them, was sensible. He indicated that the exemptions were established by the Government and addressed the situations highlighted by Councillor Blumenthal.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the proposed Council Tax Base, for the whole area and by Parish, as set out in the report be agreed.
- 2) an additional 100% Council Tax long term empty property premium from 1 April 2024 for long 77 - 82 term empty properties which have been empty and unfurnished for a period of one year (currently applied after two years) be agreed.
- 3) an additional premium of 100% for properties occupied periodically (Second Homes) which are unoccupied but furnished from 1st April 2025, be agreed.

(At this point in the meeting, Councillor Michael Firmager returned to the meeting.)

92. Council Tax Support Scheme 2024/25

Council considered the Council Tax Support Scheme 2024/25, set out in Agenda pages 83 to 88.

It was proposed by Councillor Imogen Shepherd-Dubey and seconded by Councillor Rachel Bishop Firth, that the recommendations set out in the report be approved.

Councillor Sheperd Dubey indicated that the scheme was required to be reviewed annually, and this year a growth of approximately £100,000 had been added to bring the scheme in line with the increases with the Government's welfare payments, which had increased by 6.7%. She thanked the officers who had been involved in reviewing the scheme. Councillor Shepherd-Dubey went on to highlight that Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payments, Armed Forces Independence Payments and War Disablement Payments were disregarded in the income calculation for an individual. It was noted that 70 emergency payments had been made from the Hardship Fund.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That the Council agree the proposed Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme for 2024/25:

- 1) a local CTR scheme for 2024/25 be adopted on the same basis as the 2023/24 with a growth of £100k included in the proposed Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) in order to maintain support in line with Council Tax increases and to reflect increases in central government welfare payments (6.7%).
- 2) that the full disregard currently allowed for War Widows and War Disability Pensions be continued from 1st April 2024 in respect of the Prescribed and Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Housing Benefit schemes.
- 3) that funds be made available to the hardship fund, known as Section 13a (S13a) scheme, for those who cannot pay their council tax liabilities.
- 4) the linkages to the broader Tackling Poverty Strategy of both the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the S13a scheme, be noted.

93. Treasury Management Mid-Year Report 2023-24

Council considered the Treasury Management Mid Year Report 2023-24, set out in Agenda pages 89 to 98.

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

Councillor Imogen Sheperd-Dubey indicated that the report provided a retrospective update on the status of the Council's loans and investments, and the overall management of treasury funds within the first six months of the year. She highlighted the Council's net indebtedness, which was helping with funding

pressures. More internal funds were being used instead of external borrowing and high interest rates. The average interest rate on the Council's external debt was forecast to be 3.68% across the year and was expected to rise in the next financial year. The expiration of loans and the refinancing at higher rates was being monitored, however, it was expected that current debt finance would be sufficient to absorb the impact. She indicated that the treasury investment returns were forecast to be £3million over this year, an improvement of £1.4million. Councillor Shepherd-Dubey emphasised that all in all debt was being managed.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen was of the view that the local authorities that the Council was borrowing money from or lending money to, should be specifically named within the report.

Councillor Croy asked how the Council's debt profile had changed. Councillor Imogen Sheperd-Dubey responded that there had been reprofiling. In addition, some projects had not been progressed and others had become less ambitious.

Councillor Stephen Newton referred to the impact of changing interest rates on residents and services in the Borough. The Council was in good shape compared to many. For example, as of last September, Woking Council's debt per resident was £18,706, Thurrock was £8,049, and Reading, £2,100, whilst Wokingham was £713. Councillor Newton outlined the criteria followed when lending.

Councillor Imogen Sheperd-Dubey commented that local authorities were not listed due to commercial sensitivities and this method of recording had been used for a number of years.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That it be noted that

- 1) that the Treasury Management Mid-Year report was considered and agreed by the Executive at their meeting on Thursday 30 November 2023;
- 2) that all approved indicators set out in the Treasury Management Strategy have been adhered to; with the exceptions of; • Ratio of financing costs to net revenue stream – General Fund. • Capital financing requirement – Housing Revenue Account (HRA). • External borrowing – HRA;
- 3) As at the end of September 2023, the forecast for the total external general fund debt is £129million at March'24, which reduces to £110million after taking into account cash balances (net indebtedness) reducing interests costs in the current economic climate.

94. Polling Places Review 2023-24

Council considered the Polling Places Review report, set out in Agenda pages 99 to 130.

It was proposed by Councillor Prue Bray and seconded by Councillor Stephen Conway, that the recommendation set out in the report be approved.

Councillor Bray highlighted the supplementary information provided which helped to

clarify the responses to the consultation. In addition, the new ward boundaries and the changes to parliamentary boundaries had been taken into account. She detailed specific areas where voters would see a change in the polling station that they used. It was noted that additional work would be undertaken around some of the internal and external parish boundaries as a result of changes to Borough wards and largescale developments.

Councillor Pauline Helliar-Symons commented that she had worked for many years to help facilitate the move of the Wokingham Without polling station out of Oaklands Schools. She commented that 51% of those who had responded to the consultation had been in favour of moving to St Sebastian's Memorial Hall, but that many of those who had not been in favour of this specific site had referred to the lack of car parking and the busy road on which it was located. However, assurances had been provided by officers that additional car parking would be provided and a temporary pedestrian crossing, and additional signage considered. Staff would be on site on polling day to assist with parking and access. Councillor Helliar-Symons emphasised that the issues with the site had to be addressed before May.

Councillor Stephen Conway was pleased to note that voters in south Twyford would no longer have to travel to Hurst in order to vote.

Councillor Bray emphasised that the proposals were not perfect, but any anomalies could be revisited in future.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the consultation responses made in respect of the review of polling districts and polling places as provided at Appendix 1, be noted.
- 2) the adoption of the polling district boundaries and final proposals for polling places as detailed in Appendix 2 be approved.
- 3) it be requested that the Electoral Registration Officer makes the necessary amendments to the polling districts to take effect from publication of the revised register on 1 February 2024.
- 4) the continuing delegation to the Returning Officer to designate polling places in accordance with section 18B of the Representation of the People Act 1983, be noted.

95. Timetable of Meetings 2024/25

Council considered the Timetable of Meetings 2024/25, set out at Agenda pages 131 to 136.

It was proposed by Councillor Stephen Conway and seconded by Councillor Prue Bray, that the recommendation set out in the report be approved.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED: that the 2024/2025 Timetable of Meetings be agreed.

96. Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan

Council considered a report regarding the Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan, set out at Agenda pages 137 to 150.

It was proposed by Councillor Lindsay Ferris and seconded by Councillor Stephen Conway, that the recommendations set out in the report be approved.

Councillor Ferris commented that it was the third Neighbourhood Plan that had progressed to this stage in the Council year. The referendum had been held on 7 December 2023. Turnout had been 29% and 96% had voted 'yes, suggesting it had considerable support in Ruscombe.'

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED: that Council agrees to

- 1) Make (adopt) the Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan so that it forms part of the statutory Development Plan, pursuant to Section 38A(4) of The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004;
- 2) Publish the Decision Statement pursuant to Regulation 19 of The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (as amended) ("the Regulations") in order to give effect to the above recommendation; and
- 3) Delegates to the Director of Place & Growth, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan, and in agreement with the Qualifying Body, to make any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual corrections to the Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan and supporting documents.

97. Member Question Time

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

97.1 Keith Baker asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question

Can I first say thank you for providing free parking for the Winter events held in Wokingham and Woodley. The Wokingham event required the closure of several roads in order to provide space for stalls and rides. Clearly closure of these roads required advertising and time commitment from Officers in carrying out the legal process to close these roads.

What was the total cost of these highways actions and who paid for those costs – the Borough Council or Wokingham Town Council?

Answer

Thank you, Keith, for your question.

Established events such as the Winter Carnival in Wokingham and Woodley require temporary traffic restrictions and are for the benefit of the community or charities and

have been included in a permanent Traffic Regulation Order for over 10 years. This allows the required restrictions to be enacted when required and without further advertisement or legal costs. This saves planned, regular event organisers significant costs that can be focused on key events and traffic management. Whilst there is an officer time outlay to enact the restrictions and assess the event plans, this is generally minimal because of the positive relationship maintained with the event organisers. With such events, the checking of the details can equate to approximately 1 hour of officer time.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you very much for that information, and I am very pleased that Wokingham Town Council benefits from, in essence, the costs of the Order from ten years ago. Unfortunately, in Woodley, it is not the case. Historically the charge for removing or temporarily suspending the 8, I think, disabled car park spaces, in the middle of the precinct, has always been waived, never any cost. This year WBC decided or tried to charge £686 for doing it. After a lot of toing and froing that was waived, but they were told in no uncertain terms that next year they will have to pay the £686. This is not Woodley Town Council, it is the Town Centre Partnership, who will have to pay that, and I think that is unfair. So, can I ask you as the Executive Member responsible, to take that away and give Woodley Town the same benefit that Wokingham Town has? For all the reasons that you mentioned about the benefits of Wokingham Town, they are the same in Woodley Town.

Supplementary Answer:

The benefits that Wokingham have had for the last ten years, you were actually the Executive Member for Highways when all of that was put together, and none of that has changed at all. During some period before this administration took over, a new change was made for Woodley, to charge for suspension of those bays. In the winter of 2022 I got that waived and for this year 2023, it came from the Economic Development Fund, the £600 odd that you mentioned. This authority does not have a bottomless pit of money, and we would need to work on, together, how that would be funded for 2024.

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

Question

In October, as part of an interview with the Executive Member for Finance, the Bracknell News said that the Council needed to “find savings or extra income of £15million for its budget next year”. In Wokingham Today, she gave the figures of £11.7million and £13.1million, totalling £24.8m. Yet the MTFP reports presented to Community and Corporate O&S as recently as December say the Council needs to find £20m over 3 years. Which of these figures is correct?

Answer

Thank you, Jackie, for your question.

The answer is that all of the figures you mention are correct but relate to different years and different points in time. The £11.7million is the savings target that was agreed in the 2023/24 budget. The £15million, or more precisely £15.5million is the

total savings challenge for the year 2024/25 as reported to Community and Corporate O&S since the end of September. The latest paper despatched to the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee this week now states a total of £17.3million for 2024/25, so you can clearly see that future savings targets do change and will continue to do so as we live in a world where much of our future is unknown.

If we take the year 2023/24, it had a savings budget of £11.7million and add the full savings challenge of £17.3million for 2024/25 - we actually have a 2 year total of £29million to find, however some of this will need to be met initially from our reserves. The Overview and Scrutiny report goes on to show a further £7.3million savings needed in the year 2025/26, making a staggering £36.3million savings challenge for the 3 years between 2023-26.

As the future is not cast in stone and we cannot predict every event that might affect us, it is still an educated guess that we can plan against, and I would expect these future numbers to fluctuate.

However, these required savings are a huge increase on any previous savings requirement levels, and they reflect the extreme financial challenges this Council has faced since 2023. This is the key issue that this Council should be focused on, not the marginal movements in the calculations, as the stark overall financial situation faced by this Council and many others does not change.

Supplementary Question:

Despite what the Executive Member for Finance said in Wokingham Today, the Council's core spending power is increasing by £12.4million, 7%, which is more than any other Berkshire authority and more than the average for England. Will she now admit that she has more money to work with than previous Conservative administrations who managed to balance the books and invest in services, where she cannot?

Supplementary Answer:

I am afraid that is rather a ridiculous situation. The core funding has gone up by 7% I will agree, but that amounts to £667,000. We have to find £17.3million next year. The £667,000 is like a drop in the ocean. It is a ridiculous statement to say that we have got more than we had in previous years.

97.3 Shahid Younis asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question

Why was 8am to 9am, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, during term time only chosen by Wokingham Borough Council as the time to offer women's only swimming?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Shahid. I am assuming you are referring to Forest School and am sure you will appreciate that the school must consider their own curriculum and their safeguarding procedures in offering women only swimming. Furthermore, this school provides a swimming facility for 9 local primary schools as

well as local swim schools. I understand that it is not financially viable to maintain and manage this pool outside of term time. It is therefore not a Wokingham Borough Council decision as to the availability of this pool.

We have however managed to get an agreement with the school to provide women's only swimming at the times you reference in your question, we are also in discussions for the potential to enhance the offering, but this is dependent on availability and that a community group can be found to utilise a session in line with the school policies.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for the response. I suppose 8-9, it does not take much ingenuity to conclude that the response from the females is going to be very minimal, because that is the most busiest time when they are doing the school rounds. Also, as a councillor who actually initiated this 2 years ago to relaunch this session, neither I nor were the females who are likely to be impacted by this, why were we not consulted on this before the programme was launched?

Supplementary Answer:

I said that we are looking to continue to work with the school for additional times, because we are aware that 8-9am is not an ideal time, but none of this would have been necessary, had your administration not terminated existing established women only swimming at Bulmershe pool, before moving it and relocating it and rebuilding it in a way that meant that women only swimming would never be possible again. This is yet another example of an area of running the Council where we are trying to have to rescue something from the shambles that your administration left behind.

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

Question

There is anxiety among local charities and residents about Wokingham Borough Council's plan to stop funding the One Front Door service this summer. The funding pays for Citizens Advice Bureau Wokingham staff and services to help residents who find themselves in financial difficulty. The service costs £90,000 a year to run and the Council ringfenced £250,000 a year ago to support financial hardship projects, of which not a penny is planned to help continue One Front Door. With the Administration not supporting this service who will be helping these struggling residents?

Answer

Wokingham Borough Council is absolutely committed to ensuring our residents have sources of help and support and the Citizens Advice will continue to be an important part of this. We are still providing funding so that they can support residents on issues including benefits, debt, employment, and housing, as well as family and legal issues.

One Front Door was set up to provide a triage service to meet the huge additional surge in calls for help during the Covid pandemic. It has provided a valuable service to residents, and this Executive extended funding into 2024 because of the Cost of

Living Crisis.

It was created as a temporary enhancement to the normal core Citizens Advice service. You yourself, Laura, in your previous role as Executive Member for Anti Poverty, signed off the strategic direction for One Front Door to transition to a longer term, sustainable arrangement. I am not clear why you now oppose this.

The £250,000 Hardship Fund is a Liberal Democrat initiative. It is earmarked for a number of projects which will provide longer term benefits to our residents by fighting the root causes of poverty. This includes boosting access to a full education through poverty proofing the school day, and by funding a Community Pantry which will help residents on low incomes access affordable healthy food.

You were included, Laura, in the cross-party consultation on the use of this money and you spoke in this Chamber opposing its use to support residents in need.

This Executive will continue to support the Citizens Advice service, will provide other sources of help and advice for our residents, and will work to fight the root causes of poverty.

One Front Door was funded by central government grants which the Conservative Government has unfortunately ended. As a financially responsible Executive we have to move forward with sustainable ways to support residents.

We are working as a council, with the Citizens Advice and with other members of the Voluntary and Community Sector to achieve this. This includes improving our processes for signposting and referrals, and a partnership with the BOOM credit union to support residents with finances.

Supplementary Question:

I think you will agree that we had hoped that demand would have fallen for the service after Covid, after cost of living, and unfortunately the demand is just at the same level. It is not decreasing. So, with the service closing with it being embedded in local charities across this Borough more vulnerable people will not get the support that they need. So, I do hope that you will go away and seriously have a good look at this to help prevent disaster, especially as much of the £250,000 still has not been spent. I did not speak against helping people in need, that is a matter of record.

My question is will you let charities know before the end of this month, what is going to replace One Front Door? I do not mean the name of it, how is it going to work, nuts and bolts, what is the infrastructure, that at the moment they do not know, and they are very worried about people falling through the cracks?

Supplementary Answer:

Thank you for your question, Laura. I agree with you that it is very sad the number of people who are in desperate need, and continue to be at a very high level, but due to extreme economic turbulence that we are seeing in this country. The Officers are talking to the Hardship Alliance and to the Citizens Advice Bureau. They are going through the process of transitioning the service, and they will keep them fully informed. I need to stress that Citizens Advice Wokingham is not stopping the

services that they provide in this area. What will be ending in the summer is the temporary triage service, so all of the core services are going to continue – the welfare benefits, the money and debt, the employment, the housing, the advice in all of these areas, will be continuing.

I need to stress as well that Citizens Advice is just one way that residents can get help with the cost of living support. The Council has an extensive cost of living support hub and directory, both were refreshed and relaunched in autumn 2022, and these are helping residents get immediate online help and support. Just to give an example of how successful this is, there have been more than 78,000 visits to the Council's cost of living help website. One in four of every of those visits, that is 18,000 in total, ends in a successful signpost to support. This is thanks to a campaign to raise awareness of this. We have had 42 partner campaigns, and the site has been added to 700 referral points with local partners. We have put leaflets through doors for residents to signpost them to help. There has been ongoing communications and campaigning, online adverts, social media posts, emails to those most likely to be affected, there have been cost of living surveys.

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

Question

I wanted to raise a question about future parking provision in the Arborfield Garrison development in the area around the sports facilities. Residents have shown me figures that before development there were 232 spaces and the current plan has 65 being maintained after development. This lack of parking will see gridlock in the area and visitors using the sports facilities parking all over neighbouring roads rather than in off road car parks. Will the Executive Member commit to meet me and members of the Arborfield community to develop a plan to increase the amount of car parking and avoid this problem?

Answer

As you are aware, the current proposal for improved sports provision including parking in Arborfield is currently being assessed by the local planning authority.

Officers are aware of both local residents' and the local clubs' concerns, and these will be considered as part of the determination process. Clearly parking is a key consideration for any enhanced facilities, and I understand officers are meeting with local stakeholders to listen to their concerns and help inform them of their assessment.

I would also be happy to meet with local Members and the local community to discuss these issues.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for agreeing to meet with the local people involved. A particular concern is the car park around the Sports Pavilion, where 26 spaces are currently allowed. Now the initial response that was got from officers when this was pressed with them was, this is above the 20 per pitch guidance of the Council, which is correct for the one cricket pitch that is there, but not for the 4 football pitches for the rest of the year, which will see with a football club with close to 200 playing members and 7 games

every Saturday, could see significant problems. I welcome your comment and I will encourage them to arrange that meeting ASAP, and would just ask if officers come back with this kind of response, that it is just not going to work, there is some intervention to make sure that a problem is avoided before it starts?

Supplementary Answer:

What I can say is that I met Crest before Christmas, and I asked for meeting to be set up, that local Members and officers could discuss the issues with Crest. We are looking at putting together a meeting on 31 January, prior to the Community Liaison Group, and that will give all parties an opportunity to discuss.

97.6 Andrew Gray asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

Earlier in the year it was confirmed that the leaving care allowance was being increased from £2,000 to £3,000. Can the Executive Member clarify how care leavers receive the £3,000 they are entitled to?

Answer

How care leavers receive the allowance really depends on what is appropriate for the individual concerned. As a corporate parent our main priority is to assist our care experienced young people to become fully independent before they turn 25, when our formal duty ends. Care Leavers with a 'former relevant' status have an allocated Personal Advisor (also known as PA) who work with them from the age of 16 up to age 25.

As a corporate parent a key offer and duty is preparing and supporting our care leavers when they move to their own tenancy. This includes the offer of a 'setting up home allowance' (SUHA) which are funds up to the value of £3,000. This increased from £2,000 in 2023.

Care Leavers can use this money for specific items at any time following a move. However, the main function is to help care leavers set up their home, when moving into their first independent accommodation. This can be to purchase essential items. Essential items can include white goods for example a washing machine, kitchenware, and furniture. Their 'setting up home allowance' may also be used to purchase flooring when they move into independent social housing.

The 'setting up home allowance' is a one-off allowance. How it is accessed will vary depending on the care leavers support needs. This could include transferring the funds into the care leavers bank account for them to administer and obtain the items they require, or Personal Advisors can order items on behalf of the care leaver where they are not yet able to manage this independently, or where they don't have access to payment methods. Young people can also buy necessary items as agreed with their PA, keep the receipts, and be reimbursed.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for the response. You mentioned that the amount was up to the value of £3,000 from the Department of Education to the local authorities. In March 2023 it was mentioned that the grant was a minimum of £3,000, which I think is an important

distinction to make. Are you confident that all care leavers are getting the full entitlement of a minimum of £3,000?

Supplementary Answer:

That is not quite right, in that it is our discretion as to how much we give them. We make a policy decision ourselves, and I cannot answer for each individual care leaver, because each individual care leaver is different. Some people will not need that amount of money, others will. I am sure you would want us to just give them money which they do not need either. I will have to look into this a bit more and give you more of a written answer. Maybe we can discuss it after this meeting, exactly what you would like to know, and I am sure we can arrange for that to happen, but I would not like you to think, and I do not think that it would be true, that some care leavers are not getting the amount of money that they need to actually be able to set up their home.

98. Minutes of Committee Meetings and Ward Matters

98.1 Stephen Newton asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

The bridge that spans the railway by Earley Station is a vital link between my ward and Woodley, in addition to being used by many rail passengers. Some residents have told me that they have been advised that the Lib Dems have planned to close the bridge. I believe that we were seeking to repair the bridge, which was feasible and affordable, unlike the previous administration's proposals, that can continue to be used for many years to come. This will presumably require a temporary closure whilst the work is carried out. What is the truth please? Is it closing or were people simply mischief making and misleading residents, can you also provide an update on what is planned, and the timescales that my residents can truly rely on?

Answer:

The bridge has been assessed. The span across the A3290 is going to be just repaired. The ramps will be demolished, and they will be replaced by a similar type of structure but made of steel. The Council is currently exploring the detail design options for a design and build contract. That will hopefully be completed by 2024, and in 2025/26, subject to Network Rail possessions, the works will be undertaken. Of course, during that period, whilst those works are being undertaken the bridge will be closed temporarily. On completion the bridge will be reopened as it is at the present time with ramps, which is a stepped ramp, and the span across the A3290.

98.2 Charles Margetts asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

April 2023 I contacted you over two byways in my ward, Tintagel Road and Range Road, and you sent me a long and detailed response saying that work would be carried out there, which it was, and that would use up basically all of the capital fund available. You said at the time that ultimately it would be a corporate decision on whether there will be another bid for future works for byways.

My question was simply this – I was contacted literally this morning by two of the residents on Range Road, who said that the recent bad weather has caused the repair work to deteriorate, and I was just looking for some guidance on whether a budget is in place or what kind of response I should be giving in terms of repairs etc?

Answer:

We have not entirely finalised things for next year, but this might look optimistic, but there will be a budget to do what we have previously been doing, such as on Tintagel. It is not for want of my trying, I would rather like to have one, but for this moment in time I cannot promise you anything.

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

Question:

We have received reports of poor performance and bad management agents of estates and blocks of flats, especially within Montague Park. What movement has the Council made with regards to flat management and estate management companies?

Answer:

Thank you for your question, Pete. The Council, as I think I have reported in the past, has been trying to explore ways in which we can use our own Local Plan policies, emerging Local Plan policies to try and address this issue, but it is in truth a national issue. I know it is affecting residents in Montague Park, but is affecting leaseholders across Wokingham and the country, so I think it is properly addressed, or most effectively addressed by changes to national legislation. I recall reporting in a previous Council meeting on a helpful response from Theresa May MP. I have recently had a very constructive meeting with Matt Rodda, the MP for Reading East, which was facilitated, and I am grateful for this, by the Leader of the Labour Group. That was a really interesting conversation. It was a face-to-face meeting, and it gave me some insights into the kind of legislative changes that may be in the offing, either through the current legislation that has been making its way through parliamentary processes, or more likely in the more wide ranging measures introduced by a new administration after the General Election. So, we continue to raise this issue with the Borough's MPs, and we are continuing to try to ensure that we lobby for changes that will benefit leaseholders.

98.4 Alison Swaddle asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

My question relates to the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on November 15th, as this is the Full Council since they were published. Item 50 looked at proposals for changes to waste collection, refers to super recyclers, those that create very little landfill waste, and who could possibly share a wheelie bin with a likeminded keen recycling neighbour. This idea is very attractive to some residents in my ward who are very concerned about where they would put a wheelie bin, because they do not have a garden, they do not have side access, they do not have a garage, they could share with a neighbour. The Minutes record that

officers will look at the collection of redundant bins, i.e for those who would happily share one. I would like to ask why could we not ask residents to apply if they want to share a bin, and this would avoid the cost to the Council of delivering and then returning to collect an unwanted, unneeded bin? Has this been looked at?

Answer:

I will certainly raise that as a question with officers. That is an approach that we should have a quick look at, rather than collecting after the event. There is I suppose one caveat, if the property changes hands and the incoming resident finds that there is no bin, because we have to think what that might entail as well.

98.5 Rachelle Sheperd-Dubey asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

When will Lenham Close get the double yellows so that they can more safely exit on to Old Forest Road?

Answer:

Thank you, Rachelle, for your question. Today I signed off the IEMD Amendment 1, which includes four roads within Winnersh. The next stage is for the legal order to be sealed and then the order will be placed with a contractor to undertake the works. These are anticipated to be completed by the end of March 2024 for the yellow lines, and where appropriate, any particular signs.

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

Question:

On Woodlands Avenue there is a service road called Port Close. The garages, the green area, the streetlights, they all belong to Reading Borough Council. One of the streetlights has not worked for a very long time, and a lot of the garages are not being let out and they are in a state of disrepair, the green area, one of the barriers has been broken down and there are cars parking all over it. Wokingham Borough Council officers have done as much as they can, so please could you help if I send you more details, to get in touch with your counterpart at Reading Borough Council, to try and get it sorted once and for all.

Answer:

Thank you, Laura, for your question and for raising those issues. Yes, please send me the details, and I will speak to my counterpart of Reading Borough Council.

98.7 Ian Pittock asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

Some months ago, you gave an answer to a resident's question about a pedestrian crossing at Biggs Lane to assist the children attending the recently built Farley Hill Primary School in Barkham. The answer was that no crossing was justified given the volume of traffic and lack of pedestrians. This answer ignored the fact that the

school is currently largely populated by pupils from distant locations who travel by car since relocation from the Farley Hill hamlet, but which is in the process of being enlarged to triple the number of pupils who in the future will come from the northern part of Arborfield Green and the surrounding area. A more recent study has been undertaken and this still does not recognise the changes in pupil numbers that are underway. The cost of providing a signal controlled crossing at Biggs Lane for the primary aged school children attending Farley Hill Primary School is somewhere between £100,000 and £120,000. Barkham Parish Council has considered the use of a lollipop person but that would mean a permanent raise of the parish precept. It is likely to be Barkham Parish Council's CIL fund that will pay for this signal-controlled crossing. Given this, could I ask you to please look at moving this matter forwards to the next stage?

Answer:

Thank you, Ian, for your question. Yes, Biggs Lane, an assessment has actually been undertaken, and it is noted that the school is not full, the number of children will expand as the years go by. I think that they are up to Year 3 at the moment, so there is an additional two years still to come in, and that will increase the number of students crossing the road with parents. With that increasing number it is going to be on the priority list to undertake work on site, however, the funding is likely not to reach that using Borough Council funding, so CIL money would be welcome to actually allow this to go in much quicker than it would normally do so. So, I will take this forward thank you very much.

98.8 Sam Akhtar asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

I have a resident who lives in Charvil and both his children go to the local Charvil Piggott Primary School. He has brought to my attention that the flashing 20mph sign outside the primary school has stopped working. The resident has written twice to the Council, and it still has not been fixed. I have also been chasing this up for months. The traffic on this road is increasing and since the road has been resurfaced, the speed bumps there have actually been less effective. Last month I was shown a dashcam footage of a high-speed dangerous driver doing an illegal opposite lane overtake on this very road. Can I please request that the flashing 20mph sign is fixed and new speed bumps are installed before an accident occurs or worse?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. I will certainly look into getting the advisory 20mp flashing sign fixed. I do not know why they have not been fixed, it has not been brought to my attention. I will look into the speed data that we have because we use GIS systems so we can pick it up at any particular time, and see if it is speed compliant before we take it forward with anything else.

98.9 Catherine Glover asked the Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan the following question:

Question:

In light of the recent news that a landowner has entered into a promotion agreement to bring a residential scheme for up to 500 new homes on a 95 acre parcel of land in Spencers Wood, I would like to ask the Executive Member if we can rely on the AWE Burghfield detailed emergency planning zone, as grounds for planning permission being refused for this and other developments within the zone?

Answer:

You will be aware that I cannot talk about individual planning applications, but what I can report is that the planning appeal that was in Burghfield, there was a High Court challenge, and that High Court has now approved a consent order to squash the allowed appeal at The Hollies, Reading Road, Burghfield Common. The matter has now passed back to the Planning Inspectorate who will appoint a new inspector who will hold a new public inquiry, so that means that the original proposal if people are not aware, there have been two planning appeals in the DPZ area, one which was in Wokingham which was 49 social housing which went through on appeal, we lost that and the AWE did not do too much at that particular junction. On this occasion for the one in Burghfield Common, the AWE put up a big defence against it and it went on appeal, and it now went to court, and I have just given the High Court response, so it sounds like the AWE are taking the DPZ much more seriously than about 12 months ago.

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

Question:

My question is regarding the recent flooding which we all know has taken place, but particularly in my ward a number of residents have been complaining about this, and just a few roads which are highlighted - Delamere Road, Whitegates, houses actually got flooded because of the blockage of drains. Byron Road, again in Whitegates, Loddon Bridge Road, where in front of the dentists, there was actually such a big lake where people had to wear large shoes to go to the dental practice. Another issue which has also been highlighted is the end of Culver Lane as well. This is a bit of a tricky one. Actually, this one caused some injuries as well because of the ice so a few people ended up in hospital. This may be a trickier one I say because you may actually need some help from Reading Borough Council because it is right on the border, and it is a long-standing issue. Whenever it rains, it floods and causes havoc because that is the only place that you can go across. My general question is what is Wokingham Borough Council's general drainage cleaning strategy and how often are they cleaned?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. Yes, there was an awful lot of rain after one of the wettest Decembers that we have had for a long, long time. There was some flooding that occurred and of course some of our systems go into the local river, known as the Loddon and when that backs up some of drainage does not work as efficiently as it would normally do.

Reference to Culver Lane, there is an issue with the drainage under that bridge. That is currently an ongoing repair that the team are looking at. They hope to get it completed by the end of March. There are some other higher priorities in front of

that where houses are at risk of flooding, which is the ones that they are currently working on. What I have arranged through officers is during the winter period, under Culver Lane, it is on the secondary salting route, so it does not get it done every night, it only gets done when there is severe weather around, that will be presalted at the same time as the primary route network. That will protect that particular road and since last Saturday.

Reference to gully cleansing, it depends on what particular road you are on, the number of times they are cleansed, and some locations are more vulnerable than others in collecting debris. We do have some of our gulleys that have sensors in them and when that sensor indicates it needs cleaning, that is when it will be cleaned.

98.11 David Davis asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

Parents, headteachers, governors, Pauline Helliard Symons, and myself, as ward members, have all been working to address the serious risk to pupils as the result of traffic at drop off and pick up for Oaklands School Ellis Road entrance in Crowthorne. I am grateful to my recent response to the email regarding the approval of the TRO to add further lines, which I believe has been approved, or I hope it has. But as I requested in that email, will you commit to urgently meet with myself and the school leadership at one of these times to see the chaos for yourself, because those familiar with the matter do not believe that the proposed changes will bring the situation to a satisfactory resolution?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. I wanted to make sure and not step ahead of myself by agreeing to meet you until such time as I had signed off the IEMD. I hope you understand that. Now that I have made that decision, I am quite happy to come out and meet you and other ward members and parents or governors or headteachers of the school. I will liaise with you for a date and time.

**99. Statements by the Leader of the Council and Executive Members
Councillor Prue Bray, Executive Member for Children's Services:**

I have two short announcements. The first is that we have successfully concluded the appointment of a new permanent Director of Children's Services, who will be starting on 8 April. Her name is Emma Cockerell and I look forward to welcoming her to the Council. My delight at this appointment is tinged with a little sadness because it means in a few months we will be saying goodbye to Helen Watson, our interim Director, and I will be very sad to see her go.

The other announcement is to draw everyone's attention to the fact that government statistics show that 95% of the 2-2 ½ year olds in Wokingham Borough, reach all of their development targets, the highest percentage in England by some margin. This featured in a story in The Guardian last week. Now, I am not claiming that the Council is responsible for this, but our Early Years Team certainly deserve some credit for it and I congratulate them. Thank you.

Councillor Lindsay Ferris, Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan:

After waiting for many months, the Government eventually issued their new planning document known as the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF for short), just before last Christmas. Despite the noise it was very disappointing, and I believe a missed opportunity. What I would like to know is why the Government has decided to penalise an area like ours where we have more than met, overprovided is the word, its housing targets, when other parts of the country have not. Despite this bad news the Council has been working on how to improve the current draft Local Plan update. This includes policies to ensure that future homes are better able to meet climate change, are better designed and insulated, so that it would be less expensive to heat and to live in. Two, we have identified 13 valued landscapes in the Borough where we plan to protect these important and valued views for the future. Three, we have increased the number of green open spaces from the original 8 sites in the current draft Local Plan update to around 100 such sites. Areas designated and proved in the new Local Plan would be protected for the future and have the same status and protection as the Green Belt.

Councillor Stephen Conway, Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Housing:

The Council has now received a formal variation offer from SSEN for connection to the Grid in summer 2026. The variation offer has been accepted and the paperwork has been signed and returned to SSEN. This is an extremely positive step for the project in terms of delivery and leaves us in a very enviable position when compared with other solar farm projects across the country which have experienced really quite significant delays. Having been told in March of last year, that the solar farm could not connect to the Grid until 2037, this revised offer of 2026 is testament to the ongoing engagement and relationship building with both National Grid and SSEN that has occurred over recent months. It should be remembered that the solar farm is not only a key priority of the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan, it will also generate a considerable income for the Council, which will in time help to fund other Council projects and services. I should like to take this opportunity Madam Mayor, to thank Sarah Kerr, the former Executive Member and all the Council officers involved in producing this successful and very welcome outcome.

100. Statement from Council Owned Companies

There were no Statements from Council Owned Companies.

101. Motions

101.1 Motion 511 submitted by Prue Bray

Council considered the following Motion, proposed by Councillor Prue Bray and seconded by Councillor Phil Cunnington.

'This Council notes the key conclusions from the Marmot Review "Fair Society, Healthy Lives" that

- Reducing health inequalities is a matter of fairness and social justice
- There is a social gradient in health – the lower a person's social position, the worse their health
- Health inequalities result from social inequalities. Action on health inequalities

requires action across all the building blocks of health and wellbeing.

- Focusing solely on the most disadvantaged will not reduce health inequalities sufficiently. To reduce the steepness of the social gradient in health, actions must be universal (for all), but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage.
- Action taken to reduce health inequalities will benefit society in many ways, including economic benefits
- The fair distribution of health, well-being and sustainability are important social goals. Tackling social inequalities in health and tackling climate change must go together

and the 6 policy objectives, known as the “Marmot principles”, which are

- Give every child the best start in life
- Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
- Create fair employment and good work for all
- Ensure healthy standard of living for all
- Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities
- Strengthen the role and impact of ill-health prevention

Wokingham Borough Council is an affluent borough but not everyone in the borough is thriving, overall wealth can obscure the pockets of deprivation and relative inequalities that persist in the Borough.

Many of these principles are reflected in the work of the Council and building an approach based on drawing together what already exists will begin the journey to becoming a “Marmot Borough”.

Council asks the Director of Public Health to proceed with the work to shape this approach with the aim of becoming a Marmot Borough focused on the principles outlined above, reporting on progress to the Health and Wellbeing Board. Council asks that during the course of this approach, where there are any financial implications for the Council, these are to be reported to the Executive and the Corporate Leadership Team for consideration.’

Councillor Andy Croy emphasised the impact of austerity on the Marmot principles.

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

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That this Council notes the key conclusions from the Marmot Review “Fair Society, Healthy Lives” that

- Reducing health inequalities is a matter of fairness and social justice
- There is a social gradient in health – the lower a person’s social position, the worse their health
- Health inequalities result from social inequalities. Action on health inequalities

requires action across all the building blocks of health and wellbeing.

- Focusing solely on the most disadvantaged will not reduce health inequalities sufficiently. To reduce the steepness of the social gradient in health, actions must be universal (for all), but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage.
- Action taken to reduce health inequalities will benefit society in many ways, including economic benefits
- The fair distribution of health, well-being and sustainability are important social goals. Tackling social inequalities in health and tackling climate change must go together

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- Give every child the best start in life
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Wokingham Borough Council is an affluent borough but not everyone in the borough is thriving, overall wealth can obscure the pockets of deprivation and relative inequalities that persist in the Borough.

Many of these principles are reflected in the work of the Council and building an approach based on drawing together what already exists will begin the journey to becoming a “Marmot Borough”.

Council asks the Director of Public Health to proceed with the work to shape this approach with the aim of becoming a Marmot Borough focused on the principles outlined above, reporting on progress to the Health and Wellbeing Board. Council asks that during the course of this approach, where there are any financial implications for the Council, these are to be reported to the Executive and the Corporate Leadership Team for consideration.

101.2 Motion 512 submitted by Rebecca Margetts

Council considered the following Motion, proposed by Councillor Rebecca Margetts and seconded by Councillor Lindsay Ferris, which had been amended by the proposer following the publication of the Agenda.

‘This Council believes that residents should receive the infrastructure and amenities they are promised when they buy a new home and that developers and this council should be held accountable for their legal obligations within major S106 agreements. For clarity, the major sites refer to SDL sites and other large sites only.

This Council will produce a biannual report detailing performance against financial, programme and other obligations of all parties within major S106 agreements of which this Council is a party. The report will be issued to all members of this council

and relevant community groups.

Increasing transparency on performance against commitments will provide confidence to communities that promises will be delivered on. This Council will learn the lessons from delays in the delivery of the Arborfield Green Village Centre and other facilities and amenities across the SDL.'

Upon being put to the vote it was

RESOLVED: That this Council believes that residents should receive the infrastructure and amenities they are promised when they buy a new home and that developers and this council should be held accountable for their legal obligations within major S106 agreements. For clarity, the major sites refer to SDL sites and other large sites only.

This Council will produce a biannual report detailing performance against financial, programme and other obligations of all parties within major S106 agreements of which this Council is a party. The report will be issued to all members of this council and relevant community groups.

Increasing transparency on performance against commitments will provide confidence to communities that promises will be delivered on. This Council will learn the lessons from delays in the delivery of the Arborfield Green Village Centre and other facilities and amenities across the SDL.

101.3 Motion 513 submitted by Ian Shenton

Council considered the following Motion, proposed by Councillor Ian Shenton and seconded by Councillor Sarah Kerr.

'Climate change, intensive agriculture, and unsustainable use of resources are causing significant pressures on nature's biodiversity locally and nationally. The result is a risk to local wildlife and longstanding habitats; simply put it is the decline of nature all around us.

In response, this Council formally declares an Ecological Emergency and will:

1. Address ecological issues alongside climate emergency actions to ensure that opportunities to gain co-benefits from addressing both together are maximised.
2. Add ecological implications to those for climate in committee and Council reports.
3. Ensure the delivery of biodiversity and environmental enhancements through our planning policy and development control functions by
 - a. Adopting robust biodiversity policies
 - b. Incorporating biodiversity measures into the Borough Design Code.

- c. Ensuring that all our planning guidance documents reflect the importance of biodiversity.
 - d. Striving to enable the development of a 20% mandatory biodiversity net gain policy for Wokingham through the new local plan.
4. Re-establish the Wokingham Biodiversity Forum to allow the Council to collaborate effectively with local partners and the wider community.
 5. Retain and update the Wokingham Biodiversity Action Plan including an audit of habitats and condition across the Borough with a highlight report each year and a progress report presented to full Council every 5 years.
 6. Work with local, county, regional and national partners to produce a County wide Local Nature Recovery Strategy, and to increase wildlife habitats, green infrastructure and natural capital in Wokingham Borough.
 7. Promote habitat creation and restoration in the right places and with the right species, ensuring robust connectivity between them and guided by the County Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the Wokingham Biodiversity Action Plan.
 8. Manage Council services, buildings and land where appropriate in a biodiversity-friendly manner, taking opportunities to create new wildlife habitats and corridors.
 9. Provide advice for local communities and businesses on how to incorporate biodiversity, green infrastructure and natural capital into Neighbourhood Plans and other initiatives.
 10. Seek funding sources for any of the above actions that cannot be accommodated within the existing budget envelope.'

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That Climate change, intensive agriculture, and unsustainable use of resources are causing significant pressures on nature's biodiversity locally and nationally. The result is a risk to local wildlife and longstanding habitats; simply put it is the decline of nature all around us.

In response, this Council formally declares an Ecological Emergency and will:

1. Address ecological issues alongside climate emergency actions to ensure that opportunities to gain co-benefits from addressing both together are maximised.
2. Add ecological implications to those for climate in committee and Council reports.
3. Ensure the delivery of biodiversity and environmental enhancements through

our planning policy and development control functions by

- a. Adopting robust biodiversity policies
 - b. Incorporating biodiversity measures into the Borough Design Code.
 - c. Ensuring that all our planning guidance documents reflect the importance of biodiversity.
 - d. Striving to enable the development of a 20% mandatory biodiversity net gain policy for Wokingham through the new local plan.
4. Re-establish the Wokingham Biodiversity Forum to allow the Council to collaborate effectively with local partners and the wider community.
 5. Retain and update the Wokingham Biodiversity Action Plan including an audit of habitats and condition across the Borough with a highlight report each year and a progress report presented to full Council every 5 years.
 6. Work with local, county, regional and national partners to produce a County wide Local Nature Recovery Strategy, and to increase wildlife habitats, green infrastructure and natural capital in Wokingham Borough.
 7. Promote habitat creation and restoration in the right places and with the right species, ensuring robust connectivity between them and guided by the County Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the Wokingham Biodiversity Action Plan.
 8. Manage Council services, buildings and land where appropriate in a biodiversity-friendly manner, taking opportunities to create new wildlife habitats and corridors.
 9. Provide advice for local communities and businesses on how to incorporate biodiversity, green infrastructure and natural capital into Neighbourhood Plans and other initiatives.
 10. Seek funding sources for any of the above actions that cannot be accommodated within the existing budget envelope.

101.4 Motion 514 submitted by Andrew Mickleburgh

Council considered the following Motion, proposed by Councillor Andrew Mickleburgh, and seconded by Councillor Jane Ainslie.

‘This Council notes:

- Care experienced people can face significant barriers that impact them throughout their lives;
- Despite the resilience of many care experienced people, society too often does not take their needs into account;
- Care experienced people often face discrimination and stigma across housing,

health, education, relationships, employment, and in the criminal justice system;

- Care experienced people may encounter inconsistent support;
- As corporate parents, councillors have a collective responsibility to provide the best possible care and safeguarding for children looked after by us as an authority;
- All corporate parents should act as mentors, hearing the voices of looked after children and young people, and consider their needs in any aspect of council work;
- Councillors should be champions of the children in our care and challenge the negative attitudes and prejudice that exists in all aspects of society;
- The Public Sector Equality Duty requires public bodies to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation of people with protected characteristics.

This Council therefore resolves that:

- It recognises that care experienced people are a group who are likely to face discrimination;
- It recognises the Council's duty to put the needs of disadvantaged people at the heart of decision-making through co-production and collaboration;
- Future Council's decisions, services and policies be assessed through Equality Impact Assessments to determine the impact of changes on people with care experience, alongside those who formally share a protected characteristic;
- In the delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Council includes care experience in the publication and review of Equality Objectives and annual publication of information relating to people who share a protected characteristic in services and employment;
- This Council will treat care experience as if it were a Protected Characteristic;
- It calls upon other bodies to treat care experience as a protected characteristic, until such time as it may be introduced by legislation;
- The Council will continue to proactively seek out, listen and respond to the voices of care experienced people when developing policies, incorporating their views.'

It was moved by Councillor Marie-Louise Weighill and seconded by Councillor Andy Croy that the Motion be amended as follows (in bold).

‘This Council notes:

- Care experienced people can face significant barriers that impact them throughout their lives;
- Despite the resilience of many care experienced people, society ~~too~~ often does not take their needs into account;
- Care experienced people often face discrimination and stigma across housing, health, education, relationships, employment, and in the criminal justice system;

Care experienced people may encounter inconsistent support;

- As corporate parents, councillors have a collective responsibility to provide the best possible care and safeguarding for children looked after by us as an authority;
- All corporate parents should act as mentors, hearing the voices of looked after children and young people, and consider their needs in any aspect of council work;
- Councillors should be champions of the children in our care and challenge the negative attitudes and prejudice that exists in all aspects of society;
- The Public Sector Equality Duty requires public bodies to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation of people with protected characteristics.

This Council therefore resolves that:

- It recognises that care experienced people are a group who are likely to face discrimination;
- It recognises the Council's duty to put the needs of disadvantaged people at the heart of decision-making through co-production and collaboration;
- Future Council's decisions, services and policies be assessed through Equality Impact Assessments to determine the impact of changes on people with care experience, alongside those who formally share a protected characteristic;
- In the delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Council includes care experience in the publication and review of Equality Objectives and annual publication of information relating to people who share a protected characteristic in services and employment;
- This Council will treat care experience as if it were a Protected Characteristic;
- It calls upon other bodies to treat care experience as a protected characteristic, until such time as it may be introduced by legislation;
- The Council will continue to proactively seek out, listen and respond to the voices of care experienced people when developing policies, incorporating their views ***AND act on the expressed priorities of Care Leavers and their organisations by ensuring that Care Leavers' access to their records is made more meaningful and complete.***

Councillor Mickleburgh indicated that the proposed amendment was acceptable. The amended Motion became the substantive Motion.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That Council notes:

- Care experienced people can face significant barriers that impact them throughout their lives;
- Despite the resilience of many care experienced people, society ~~too~~ often does not take their needs into account;
- Care experienced people often face discrimination and stigma across housing, health, education, relationships, employment, and in the criminal justice system;

Care experienced people may encounter inconsistent support;

- As corporate parents, councillors have a collective responsibility to provide the best possible care and safeguarding for children looked after by us as an authority;
- All corporate parents should act as mentors, hearing the voices of looked after children and young people, and consider their needs in any aspect of council work;
- Councillors should be champions of the children in our care and challenge the negative attitudes and prejudice that exists in all aspects of society;
- The Public Sector Equality Duty requires public bodies to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation of people with protected characteristics.

Council resolves:

- It recognises that care experienced people are a group who are likely to face discrimination;
- It recognises the Council's duty to put the needs of disadvantaged people at the heart of decision-making through co-production and collaboration;
- Future Council's decisions, services and policies be assessed through Equality Impact Assessments to determine the impact of changes on people with care experience, alongside those who formally share a protected characteristic;
- In the delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Council includes care experience in the publication and review of Equality Objectives and annual publication of information relating to people who share a protected characteristic in services and employment;
- This Council will treat care experience as if it were a Protected Characteristic;
- It calls upon other bodies to treat care experience as a protected characteristic, until such time as it may be introduced by legislation;
- The Council will continue to proactively seek out, listen and respond to the voices of care experienced people when developing policies, incorporating their views AND act on the expressed priorities of Care Leavers and their organisations by ensuring that Care Leavers' access to their records is made more meaningful and complete.'