

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.46 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, Gary Cowan, Andy Croy, Phil Cunnington, Peter Dennis, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Paul Fishwick, Catherine Glover, Andrew Gray, John Halsall, David Hare, Peter Harper, Pauline Helliard-Symons, Graham Howe, Chris Johnson, Clive Jones, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, Sarah Kerr, Abdul Loyes, Morag Malvern, Charles Margetts, Rebecca Margetts, Andrew Mickleburgh, Jordan Montgomery, Stuart Munro, Alistair Neal, Stephen Newton, Ian Pittock, Jackie Rance, Ian Shenton, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Tony Skuse, Caroline Smith, Mike Smith, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane, Alison Swaddle, Marie-Louise Weighill and Shahid Younis

35. Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted from David Davies, John Halsall and Wayne Smith.

36. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 20 July 2023 and the extraordinary meeting held on 24 July 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

37. Declarations of Interest

Declarations of interest were submitted as follows:

Councillor Prue Bray declared a personal interest in Item 52 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Berry Brook Homes, Wokingham Housing Ltd. and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Stephen Conway declared a personal interest in Item 52 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor David Cornish declared a personal interest in Item 52 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

38. Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor informed Members of her attendance at the recent Citizenship Ceremony. The Mayor had the opportunity to speak to a Year 7 pupil who was appearing in a musical on the West End stage. It was a great pleasure to meet this pupil, whose achievements were a credit to the Borough's schools.

Councillor Stephen Conway informed Members that this would be the final meeting attended by Callum Wernham from Democratic Services. Councillor Conway thanked Callum for his service and support to Members in a range of settings,

especially in relation to the Planning Committee, and wished him well for the future.

39. Public Question Time

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

39.1 Paul Stevens asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

Question

In a recent bulletin from WBC on fighting climate change much was made of the impact "food miles" have on our "carbon footprint". I quote:

"If you're looking for inspiration on how to reduce your food miles and lower your carbon footprint, look at these top sustainable tips:

- * Choose food with fewer food miles
- * Grow your own fruit, vegetables and herbs
- * Share surplus food with friends, family and the local community
- * Shop locally e.g. butchers, farmer's markets and local food stores
- * Use refill shops to prevent plastic waste
- * Only buy what you need to prevent food going to waste
- * Turn leftover food into compost and use soil for growing your own food"

Have the Council also considered encouraging local farmers to grow local food on local farmland, to then be sold to local residents?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Paul.

We acknowledge the significant impact that global mass production and consumption of food have on climate change and ecological systems. We also acknowledge the unprecedented pressure on our local land, to balance the demand for new homes and infrastructure with the need to make green spaces available to our community.

We do not directly liaise with farmers to encourage them to grow food on the Borough's land and sell it to local residents, but as you'll be aware, some already do. As a semi-rural local authority, we recognise the importance of growing food locally. This has positive implications on individuals and communities, including supporting the local economy, improving people's health and wellbeing, reducing food waste and protecting biodiversity.

For this reason, the Council runs various initiatives to support local food production, including providing allotments to our residents, funded through s106 developer contributions. In the past 4 years, Wokingham has had several new allotment facilities added which new and existing residents have access to. Sites in Binfield Road, Mulbury Grove, Penny Grove, Shinfield Orchard Rise and Ifold Crescent include over 130 plots, providing residents with the opportunity to grow their own food on local land, benefitting them as well as their friends and families. Some allotments are also provided with compost toilets and solar power electricity, allowing residents to spend more time at the allotment.

There are local markets and farm shops around the Borough where local farmers can and do sell their produce, thus providing residents as well as visitors with fresh produce that has a low-carbon impact, whilst supporting the local economy.

Supplementary Question:

Given the imminent publication of the Local Plan in November, has it also occurred to Council to stop encouraging big owners of farmland such as the University of Reading, to stop them selling off their farmland to housing developers, and instead encourage them in, what would seem to me, to be their primary purposes i.e. education and research into better farming and food production methods?

Supplementary Answer:

Given that this relates to the Local Plan it would put me in a very difficult position to say anything on this, as I cannot predetermine any judgement on that Local Plan until it comes to Full Council for debate, so I am going to have to decline to give a detailed answer on that I am afraid.

39.2 Tony Johnson asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:

Question:

Please will you explain how governance of investments, loans and debts actually works at Wokingham Borough Council?

Answer:

The Borough's strategy for its Treasury Management functions which includes investments, loans and borrowing, are reported and agreed at Council annually in February. The report details the proposed approach, various prudential Indicators (such as the level of borrowing) and our investment strategy. These approaches are set within the appropriate guidance and regulations of the Prudential Code (Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA)) and are set to ensure they are affordable, prudent and sustainable, and that treasury management decisions are taken in accordance with good professional practice.

This strategy is set alongside the Capital Strategy and the Medium-Term Financial Plan. A mid-year report and outturn report are also then reported through the committee system during the financial year.

Further governance such as reporting, and approval levels are detailed in the Council's constitution and financial regulations which are then embedded operationally through processes and controls within the team.

This function and their activity is then audited both internally (processes and controls) and externally in terms of accounting and as part of the audit of the year end accounts. All financial transactions and accounting are also required to meet regulations and process set by the Financial Conduct Authority.

I can reassure you that the team undertaking these roles and actions have appropriate training and management support. We believe both through internal controls and through external governance the Strategy and operations are robust and support the financial stability of this Council.

Supplementary Question:

Before anyone starts thinking that this administration is in power but not in control, please would you provide a written public explanation into who, how, why and when Wokingham came to loan £10million to a neighbouring council, which had declared itself bankrupt by issuing a Section 114 notice, with focus on the risk assessment at the time and the risk assessment today, given the Prime Minister's statement last week that he would not be bailing out councils following the bankruptcy of Birmingham?

Supplementary Answer:

The fact is that Woking is not bankrupt. It is just a term that they use because councils, as you know, are underwritten by the government in all of their transactions, so we have commitment from Woking that they will honour our debt of £10million plus the interest that will come back with it. I am going to talk about it later on actually. As for Birmingham, I do not know about Birmingham. That is what they want to do with Birmingham, but certainly with Woking we have had reassurance that we will get paid.

39.3 Jim Frewin asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:**Question**

During the January 2023 Full council meeting the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services made a statement to this chamber highlighting the issue of poor behaviour by Councillors. The statement indicated poor behaviour by Councillors plural towards officers and stated that 'Robust discussions are perfectly possible without descending into bullying and harassment'. Can she please provide an update on what actions have been taken to prevent such poor behaviour?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

All councillors when elected sign up to the Member Code of Conduct which sets out our legal responsibilities and the high standards of conduct and behaviour that the public, officers, and our fellow councillors quite rightly expect of us.

In Wokingham Borough we have a clear process for dealing with any formal complaints we receive. This process is in line with best practice and, indeed, our Member Code of Conduct replicates the model Code promoted by the Local Government Association.

At each meeting of our Standards Committee, members receive updates on the outcome of any complaints, scrutinise any patterns or trends, and recommend and promote training to all members in the application of the Code.

My original statement in January was made because, in my opinion, there were some individual councillors who were dangerously close to not meeting expected standards of behaviour. Much better to nip it in the bud than have the formal standards processes to go through. After all, prevention is the best cure. But I never singled out any specific councillors and the statement was made as a general one. The statement was simply a reminder to all councillors that we have a behaviour standard to meet.

Supplementary Question:

What process and policy safeguards are in place to protect councillors and members of the public from such poor behaviours that as you describe can descend into bullying and harassment?

Supplementary Answer:

That is a really good question, Jim. I do not know the answer. I am going to ask to get a written response to you if that is ok, thank you.

40. Petitions

The following member of public and Members presented petitions in relation to the matter indicated.

The Mayor's decision as to the action to be taken is set out against each petition.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen	<p>A petition signed by 1,800 residents opposing the plans to remove 170 litter bins.</p> <p>Referred to the Place Clienting team.</p> <p>The petition would also trigger a debate at Council.</p>
Ian Spurrier	<p>A petition signed by 405 people requesting an improved Wokingham to Crowthorne bus service.</p> <p>Referred to the Highways and Transport team.</p>
Councillor Stephen Conway	<p>A petition signed by residents of Hurst Road Twyford requesting a reduction in the speed of traffic using the road.</p> <p>Referred to the Highways and Transport team.</p>
Councillor Gary Cowan	<p>A petition signed by residents of Church Lane, Arborfield, requesting closure of the road to through traffic.</p> <p>Referred to the Highways and Transport team.</p>

41. The Tenants Charter - Modernising the Tenant Customer Experience within Wokingham Borough

The Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 37 to 48, which formally updated Members on progress of work by Tenant Volunteers over the past year, working in partnership with the Council. The report focussed on the development and implementation of the new Tenant Involvement Strategy. The draft Tenant Involvement Strategy Priorities Action Plan was appended to the report.

Steve Bowers, Chair of the Tenant and Landlord Improvement Panel (TLIP) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that the Tenant Charter set out the views of the Council's tenants on the measures required to modernise the customer experience and ensure continuous improvement. Mr Bowers referred to the ten key priorities identified by tenants and emphasised three, as follows:

- Tackling the stigma associated with being a Council tenant;
- Communications with tenants and residents across the Borough;
- Modernising tenant engagement techniques to increase active involvement.

The report also highlighted a number of factors which made it a good time to reflect on the future of housing services for tenants and to update the Tenant Charter.

These factors were:

- Lessons being learned from the Grenfell Tower disaster, including the need for greater transparency over decision making;
- Implications from the Government's Social Housing White Paper, including the need for higher standards for landlords;
- Digital transformation, which provided opportunities for enhanced communications and resident engagement;
- Demographic trends such as an ageing population and increasing demand for disability and social care support.

Mr Bowers notified Members that TLIP had been nominated for an Inside Housing award for excellence in tenant decision making.

Councillor Stephen Conway thanked Steve Bowers, all the tenant volunteers and housing officers who had worked so hard to develop a strong partnership. TLIP was an excellent example of successful partnership working.

Members reiterated Councillor Conway's comments and gave examples of the positive working relationship between TLIP and the Council over a number of years.

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 Tenant Involvement Strategy Draft Action Plan be noted and the Council continue to work in partnership with tenant volunteers to achieve the aspirations of the Tenant Charter.

42. Wokingham Borough Council: Climate Emergency Action Plan, Fourth Progress Report

Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 49 to 80, which set out the fourth progress report on the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP).

The report stated that the CEAP contained 10 key priority areas for carbon reduction and over 100 actions agreed by the Council in order to achieve its 2030 carbon neutrality goal. The report provided details of progress against the agreed actions including outcomes, milestones, RAG status and the anticipated costs and projected carbon savings.

The Borough's current carbon footprint was estimated to be 505 ktCO₂e, with a projected shortfall in 2030 of 240 ktCO₂e after all the actions in the CEAP were implemented. This meant that further actions and resources would be needed alongside the strategic embedding of climate emergency considerations across the organisation. Further actions would require additional financial resources which would be challenging in the context of the other challenges facing the Council.

Councillor Sarah Kerr introduced the report and referred to the need for greater Government support and funding for local authorities which were implementing local measures to address the climate emergency. Councillor Kerr thanked the Climate Emergency officers and local volunteers who had worked hard to support delivery of the updated CEAP. Councillor Kerr referred to the Prime Minister's recent announcement relating to delaying Climate Emergency measures and emphasised that the Council remained committed to delivering the outcomes described in the CEAP.

Councillor Peter Harper stated that the latest CEAP update was disappointing and felt that the Council was seeking to take credit for the achievements delivered by the Government, energy companies and voluntary organisations.

Councillor Andy Croy stated that the latest version of the CEAP was more realistic than previous iterations and emphasised the need for greater Government support for local authorities.

Councillor Stephen Conway confirmed that the Council remained committed to local leadership on the Climate Emergency agenda. Councillor Conway thanked the Council's Climate Emergency officers for their hard worked and gave special thanks to Sabrina Chiaretti, the Climate Emergency Service Manager, who would be leaving the Council shortly.

It was proposed by Councillor Sarah Kerr and seconded by Councillor Chris Johnson that the recommendations in the report be approved.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED That Council notes:

- 1) the progress made in the Climate Emergency Action Plan Fourth Progress Report, covering the period May 2022 to May 2023;
- 2) the new format of the CEAP, including significant design changes to make it a more effective engagement and communication tool;
- 3) that a more ambitious approach will be required in some areas, moving forwards,

to enable the Council to play as full a role as possible in achieving carbon neutrality by 2030;

- 4) that the CEAP remains a live document and continues to be updated as more details become available to support decision making.

43. Pay Policy Statement

Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 81 to 90, which set out the Council's annual Pay Policy Statement.

The report stated that the Pay Policy Statement was an annual statement which the Council had to make in order to meet its statutory duty under the Localism Act 2011. The Act brought together strands of increasing accountability, transparency and fairness in the setting of local pay and required councils to produce an annual statement which included policy on:

- the level and elements of remuneration for each chief officer;
- the remuneration of the lowest paid staff;
- the relationship between remuneration of chief officers and other officers;
- remuneration on recruitment increases, use of performance related pay and transparency.

Councillor Rachel Burgess expressed concern that the report did not mention the Gender Pay Gap and stated that the Council's pay gap was worse than the local authority average and much worse than neighbouring Reading Borough Council.

It was proposed by Councillor Rachel Bishop-Firth and seconded by Councillor Prue Bray, that the recommendation in the report be approved.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Pay Policy Statement, 2023, be approved.

44. Prevention & Youth Justice Service: Youth Justice Plan

Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 91 to 130, which set out the Youth Justice Plan for 2023/24. The Plan included a summary of the work delivered by the Prevention and Youth Justice Service during the past year, including achievements, risks and challenges. It also included the Service Development Plan and key priorities for 2023/24.

The report stated that key achievements in 2022/23 included establishing the Turnaround Programme, implementing the Exclusion Prevention Programme and focussing on support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Priorities for 2023/24 included rolling out the Exclusion Prevention Programme, delivery of the Serious Violence Strategy and joint work with the police to implement an early prevention pathway for weapon related offences.

It was proposed by Councillor Prue Bray and seconded by Councillor Andrew Mickleburgh, that the recommendation in the report be approved.

Councillor Andy Croy expressed concern that the report had been submitted to

Council without consideration by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Youth Justice Plan, 2023/24 be approved.

45. Finchampstead Neighbourhood Plan

Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 131 to 143, which sought adoption of the Finchampstead Neighbourhood Plan.

The report stated that Finchampstead Parish Council (the Qualifying Body) had produced the Plan in order to help shape how development was managed in its area. The preparation of the Plan had been informed by consultation and independent examination. A referendum on the Plan had taken place on 7 September 2023, with 89.6% of those voting expressing support.

Under the relevant regulations, the Council was required to “make” (adopt) the Plan and bring it in to legal force. Once made, the Plan would form part of the statutory development plan, thereby forming the starting point for the determination of planning applications and appeals, alongside local plans, in or affecting the Finchampstead Parish.

It was proposed by Councillor Lindsay Ferris and seconded by Councillor David Cornish, that the recommendations in the report be approved.

Councillor Peter Harper requested clarification on the weight that the Plan would carry in the planning process. It was confirmed that a written response would be provided for Councillor Harper.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED That Council:

- 1) make (adopt) the Finchampstead 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 a Decision Statement (as described in Enclosure 1 to the report) pursuant to Regulation 19 of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (as amended) (“the Regulations”) in order to give effect to Resolution 1, above;
- 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 Plan and supporting documents.

46. Appointment of a Parish Council Representative to the Standards Committee

Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 145 to 147, which sought

confirmation of a Parish Council representative to the Standards Committee.

The report stated that the Standards Committee included seven Borough Council Members and three co-opted (non-voting) Town/Parish Members. Of the three Town/Parish Members at least one should be a Town Council representative and at least one should be a Parish Council representative. Following the decision of Councillor Roy Mantel (Twyford Parish Council) to stand down a vacancy had arisen for a Parish Council representative on the Committee.

The process for appointing the Town/Parish representatives was overseen by the Monitoring Officer and one of the Council's Independent Persons. Any recommended appointment is agreed by full Council. Five candidates had been interviewed for the vacancy and it was confirmed that Councillor Jackie Jagger (Twyford Parish Council) had been recommended for appointment, subject to ratification by Council.

It was proposed by Councillor Morag Malvern and seconded by Councillor Caroline Smith the recommendation in the report be approved.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Councillor Jackie Jagger (Twyford Parish Council) be appointed as a Parish Council representative on the Standards Committee.

47. Authorisation of Procurement Strategy of the Agency Worker Contract
Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 149 to 159, which gave details of a proposed approach to the retendering of the Council's current arrangements for the provision of agency staff.

The report stated that the managed service provider arrangement allowed the Council to ensure that, where it needed temporary agency resources, it achieved consistent employment terms and conditions and the best value for money arrangements. The most cost-effective solution was proposed to be continuation of the current service model which was available at a competitive price from the framework owner, the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO). The call-off pricing for the next generation of the Managed Services for Temporary Agency Resources (MSTAR) Framework was similar to current arrangements and was competitive. The proposal was supported by the Council's Procurement and Human Resources teams.

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

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Council agree the procurement strategy for the Temporary Agency Staffing Solutions contract, as set out in the report;

- 2) the strategy be to procure a new managed service contract for supply of agency workers through a national framework agreement (Managed Services for Temporary Agency Resources (MSTAR) via the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO) in the same service model as currently provided;
- 3) the contract to run for an initial period of one year, from 1 February 2024, with options to extend by one year for each of the following three years.

48. Member Question Time

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

48.1 Andrew Mickelburgh asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question

The quite recently laid micro-asphalt in Kitwood Drive and roads off, in Lower Earley, has been very badly damaged in many places by, residents say, contractors working in the area. The area of damage is extensive, and I believe not unique to this particular locality. I believe, albeit as a lay person, that the damage in this and other instances is of sufficient severity to severely reduce the lifespan of the recently maintained road surface. What recourse does Wokingham Borough Council have to ensure that contractors found to be responsible for road damage such as this can be required to help rectify the damage?

Answer

Thank you, Andrew, for your question.

The Council has the power, under the New Roads and Streetworks Act statutory code Specification for the Reinstatement of Openings in Highways and it requires companies that dig up the road to reinstate to a national standard. The Senior Streetworks Inspector has inspected the damage caused by utility company CityFibre and has issued a formal defect Notice to them as a result. We cannot give a timeline for when these repairs will be carried out at present but can confirm we will be requiring CityFibre to liaise with the Council's Capital Schemes and Highway Assets teams, to make sure that the repairs meet the standards of the existing surface.

Supplementary Question:

I note that you are unable to provide a timeline for when these repairs will be carried out and would appreciate some more detailed explanation as to why this is so, so that I can feedback to our residents. I imagine, for example, that the extent and the nature of the roadworks in this instance, these are not minor repairs, are such that they might have to be included in a future WBC highways programme with CityFibre then responsible for reimbursing the costs. If so, I imagine there could be a considerable period of time elapsing before the work is completed?

Supplementary Answer:

Yes, it is micro asphalt surface and that is a seasonal type treatment that can only really be carried out in the summer months, hence why CityFibre has got to liaise with the Highways and Assets team for that work to be done.

48.2 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan

the following question:

Question:

To determine the minimum number of homes needed, the NPPF implies that strategic policies should be informed by a local housing need assessment, conducted using the standard method.

The evolving Strategic Environmental Assessment must also take account of the infrastructure changes as a whole, which should be deliverable within the next local plan period.

Will that assessment deliver fully the infrastructure requirements for the whole development of 4500 Houses at Hall Farm in the draft LPU update.

Answer:

This is a slightly muddled question.

It is the role of a Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment to help understand the effects of an emerging local plan rather than set infrastructure requirements. As you will be aware, a SA (incorporating SEA) has been prepared and published for all stages of the emerging Local Plan Update to date.

Turning to infrastructure, Infrastructure Delivery Plans have also been produced and published alongside the emerging local plan. These documents set out the infrastructure required to help mitigate the impacts of development.

No decisions have been made regarding the future development strategy for the Borough. The work programme for the local plan was agreed by the Executive in July 2023.

For any site that is included in the Local Plan Update, there will be policies and requirements in the Infrastructure Delivery Plan that are clear in the infrastructure required to be delivered or contributed to as part future development proposals. A combination of CIL and/or S106 are used to deliver that infrastructure with delivery phased through the period of construction. Any development of scale will expect to deliver a full suite of infrastructure to serve incoming and existing local residents and businesses. If allocated, Hall Farm would be no different.

Supplementary Question:

The Lib Dems I believe learnt the lesson of over 20 years ago when they supported more housing in the Berkshire Structure Plan, and they were virtually wiped out then, and they only got back in thanks to support of two independents, one of whom they treated quite disgracefully I think, so I would suggest to Labour watch out. I feel sorry for them 20 years ago and I considered offering them the old red telephone box in Arborfield for Group meetings.

In the Wokingham Paper today the Lib Dem Leader said that the Government sets the Council's housing targets, and he added that the Government tells councils how many new houses they must plan with planning permission for a 15 year local period, and I will emphasise that, a 15 year plan period. A 15 year plan period, not a 30 year plan period which the Lib Dems are supporting but they do not seem to have

the guts to come clean and admit it.

Having misled the residents twice on housing numbers, do they think that doing it a third time, they can get away with it?

Supplementary Answer:

We have an annual housing number allocated to this area, as is everywhere around the country. The figure at the moment is 795 homes per annum. It is not a figure that we are keen on, but it is the figure that is allocated to the Council area, and it is the same whether it is Reading or West Berkshire or wherever. So, we are dependent on delivering a local plan that meets those numbers.

We are currently in the situation that the Government is in the process of redoing the planning documentation, in particular the NPPF. In the draft NPPF which was consulted on over Christmas through to March there was a draft proposal which included the allowance of including overprovision of homes in one local plan to be taken into account in the next local plan, and that is the situation that we in Wokingham Borough are currently in. We have lost our five year land supply because too many houses were built, particularly between the period of 2015 to 2022. Therefore, we have lost our five year land supply for that reason – we have overprovided. If the Government does come up with the proposal in their final NPPF to take account of over provision, our new local plan would not need to take account of a best part of 2,000 houses or dwellings. The current figure, the exact figure of over provision was 1727.

48.3 Peter Harper asked the Deputy Leader of the Council and Children's Services the following question:

Question:

In light of the recent issue with RAAC panels in schools with the associated safety risk, what surveys have the council carried out on schools and other WBC property to identify the existence of RAAC panels?

Answer:

Following recent guidance from the Department for Education, WBC Property Services identified 26 Maintained Schools and one (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) unit within the Borough that required further inspection to provide assurance that there was no Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) within the structural elements of the school construction.

The Council's Property Services, using technically proficient in-house Property staff, carried out visual inspections to all School sites over 3 days to provide such reassurance. The DfE website confirming our zero-return position was updated on Friday 8th September as requested by them.

The other state schools in the Borough are academies and free schools, and they do not come directly within the Council's remit. However, we have written to all of them about the need for surveys and offering support if required. We believe that further information was needed from a couple of those schools but there is no reason to suppose that any of them are at risk.

Property Services have further carried out a desktop review and risk profile of all of

the property estate. One building has been identified with confirmed presence of RAAC. This is the former Marks & Spencer's building at 28-38 Peach Street, Wokingham. The RAAC is not structural and is in area of the building not accessed by the public. In the long term, it has already been proposed that we would replace this part of the structure if we proceed with the decision to move the Council's headquarters from Shute End into that building, which is flagged up in the Executive agenda which was published yesterday, so the presence of RAAC does not have any impact on the ability to deliver that move. A number of other relatively low risk sites have been identified that require further, more detailed visual investigation to provide assurance which is currently being undertaken with internal resources. We expect these surveys to be completed by the end of this month.

Supplementary Question:

I have to say that I am concerned by the statement that you are using internal surveyors to do this work. My understanding is that neighbouring authorities are using specialist RAAC surveyors because it is a complicated matter. Can I ask if the Lead Member will look at using specialist surveyors to carry out this work rather than internal staff?

Supplementary Answer:

We have used qualified staff as far as I am aware, and because the likelihood is so small in any case, I am confident that they are competent to do the job which they have been tasked with, and perhaps if other local authorities do not have that capacity internally that is their look out and not ours.

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

Question

I'm raising this in the Chamber so my conscience is clear. There is an accident waiting to happen. In my ward there is a permanent line of cars parked on Fairwater Drive, at the junction with Highgate Road. This is where primary school children cross to get to school and cannot see over the cars. Despite near misses of vehicles pushed to one side of the road on a blind bend, the Council has decided that the area is safe and installing a formal crossing a low priority. Please can you ask officers to revisit their decision or at least can you meet with residents on site who are upset with the Council's lack of action?

Answer:

Thank you Laura for your question.

As you must know, a lot of work has already been done, including meeting with residents.

The Traffic management team receives over 40 requests per annum for pedestrian crossings, over 200 requests for parking restrictions and amendments and over 100 requests for traffic management/speed limit changes. We cannot afford to do all of them.

I also need to have a clear conscience, and that is why this administration is committed to doing road improvements in order of priority need. There are other

locations in the Borough that have to take precedence as far as road safety is concerned. We only have limited funds, and it is important we spend them wisely and where they will have the most impact on safety.

However, we believe there is an alternative solution that will improve road safety in Fairwater Drive, especially at the junction with Highgate Road, where parked cars have the potential to obstruct sightlines for pedestrians, particularly primary school children.

The Highways team has considered the possibility of extending the existing double yellow lines slightly further to enhance visibility for pedestrians. This measure would discourage parking in critical areas, thereby improving safety. We are working to include this in Amendment 2 which is programmed to be advertised in January 2024. This will bring about safety improvements without the need to wait for a crossing.

We will continue to keep the formal pedestrian crossing on our list for annual review and prioritisation for when new budgets become available.

Supplementary Question:

I request that the lines be extended, and I was told no it is not needed, so it sounds as if things have developed, which is good news. How far is a little further in your response? Is it a few metres or just a few inches, as that will make the world of difference?

Supplementary Answer:

You will be informally consulted on the length of lines before we actually go out to formal consultation so just watch this space.

At this point in the meeting Prue Bray proposed that 4.2.10.9 be suspended so that the Members Question Time be extended to ensure that all questions were answered. This was seconded by Stephen Conway.

In line with 4.4.3.6 the Mayor agreed that this be extended.

48.5 Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport, and Leisure the following question:

Question:

Between 2011 and 2021 the population of Wokingham Borough grew by 15% according to the Office of National Statistics. On that basis don't you think Wokingham Borough needs more public litter bins, not fewer?

Answer:

There is no direct correlation or standard link between population and the number of litter bins required. However, we do have a requirement to assess where litter bins are, their usage and if there are others nearby which could be otherwise used, and this assessment has been undertaken as part of the current analysis.

An extensive public consultation has been undertaken in August and good feedback has been returned with suggestions of litter bins to be removed and those to keep. This analysis of that continues.

Regardless of whether the litter bins are removed through the process, our focus is to strengthen the communications to the Borough to responsibly dispose of litter in conjunction with national campaigns including Keep Britain Tidy. Additionally ongoing support will be provided to litter picking groups and organisations. Enforcement action will be taken against those individuals which litter or flytip.

There are of course several new developments which, when adopted, have public litter bins in open space areas. They will also be emptied and have been allocated 'commuted sums' to undertake this.

Supplementary Question:

What other areas if any did the Council consider cutting or finding savings from before it decided to cut public litter bins?

Supplementary Answer:

My responsibility is quite a limited part of the Council's activities so I cannot answer that question in full. We have looked at, almost everything in my portfolio is resident facing, and so we have had to choose very carefully.

48.6 Jackie Rance asked the Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion & Fighting Poverty the following question:

Question

Covid has been and gone, but the Liberal Democrats of Wokingham Borough Council clearly believe in allowing their employees to swap Office for the Lounge, at home. The Public Sector's most important role should be delivering effective services for the taxpayer, not helping workers to have 'more' leisure time in their tracksuits. The Public should be receiving decent services, instead the Liberal Democrat Council have raised Council Tax, cancelled Bin Collections, cut down the grass cutting everywhere, put up Parking Charges, diminished School Bus Services and lost footfall in the town centres.

When will ALL Council staff be back at their office desks serving residents, rather than enjoying a relaxed home atmosphere?

Answer

This has to be one of the most outrageous questions ever put to an Executive Member of this Council.

For you to use the difficult financial decisions we have had to take due to the country's appalling economic situation and the historic low funding we receive from Government to attack our dedicated and hard-working officers is a low point in this Chamber.

Your question is illogical and full of errors, but I will attempt an answer.

Firstly, during the Covid 19 lockdown the Council continued to provide high quality services to residents thanks to excellent use of IT, creative partnership working with the voluntary sector, and dedicated officers prepared to be incredibly flexible to do what was necessary for residents.

Like many other organisations, we are building on this success with the development of a Modern Workforce Strategy. This will be centred on ensuring that staff are based at the location where they can best serve their residents. The principles for this work were agreed unanimously by the cross-party Personnel Board in June, supported, Jackie, by your Conservative colleagues.

I do not have time to go through the full benefits of these arrangements, but they include saving the Council a very considerable amount of money; helping us to fight climate change by reducing unnecessary car journeys; and widening the number of highly qualified staff who can apply for our roles. If you would like to understand more about this, can I refer you to the minutes and recording of the Personnel Board on 21st June 2023.

Your factual errors need to be corrected. We have not cancelled bin collections. We have not diminished school bus services. Our town centres are thriving. And although we had to raise Council Tax because of low government funding, that is exactly what happened every year any of us can remember under the previous Conservative administration.

I'll end with an unprecedented request – or perhaps offer. You have the right to a supplementary question, but I would urge you to consider using it instead to apologise for the unwarranted and utterly unsubstantiated slurs you have made against our hard-working officers.

Supplementary Question:

Of course, I know officers work hard at home but the NHS says that working from home can cause stress, a lack of motivation, anxiety and uncertainty. The BBC reported in June that 81% of under 35s feared loneliness from long-term home working. What is the Council doing to support staff who prefer to work in the office and find their colleagues are working from home, and find that Council offices are invariably empty, lacking the supportive social environment of a busy office environment?

Supplementary Answer:

The Council continues to support all of our officers wherever they work. A lot of our officers do find working from home very beneficial. A lot of our officers have a hybrid working environment which enables them to balance time working from home where they can get focus time to concentrate, with time working in the office. The Modern Workforce Strategy will look at where we can place our officers best to best serve our residents. We will look alongside that, and the Personnel Board will be very engaged with looking at the welfare of our staff and how we can best support them.

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

Question:

Residents in my ward endure bad parking which blocks roads for residents and public services alike.

On 8th September, a bus had to reverse from that part of the London Road which is a slip road, back onto the main A4 roundabout as its passage was blocked by cars parked in contravention of both permanent and temporary TROs.

To local residents, buses being forced to change their routes is not news anymore - it happens on a regular basis.

In total, for these roads in the Whitegates area of Earley (London Road, south side between Aisha Masjid and Shepherds Hill roundabout), The Drive and Erleigh Court Gardens), how many parking tickets have been issued by our Civil Enforcement Officers between January 1st 2023 and August 31st 2023?

Answer:

Thank you, Andy, for your question.

We understand the frustrations that residents and public services have been facing due to the challenges posed by inconsiderate or illegal parking.

I want to assure you that the Council is actively working on addressing this issue in response to the persistent parking problems. We have developed proposals to introduce additional parking restrictions in the vicinity. These proposals are part of the upcoming amendment to our parking regulations. If these proposals are approved and put into place, we will closely monitor the situation. Our aim is to ensure that these new restrictions are effective in preventing further parking violations and obstructions to the roads. We are committed to taking necessary action in the future should contraventions continue to disrupt the flow of traffic and impact the daily lives of our residents.

The slip road in question already has restrictions and for now we will increase enforcement in the area. We encourage residents and ward members to continue reporting instances of inconsiderate and illegal parking. If actual obstruction does occur, please call 101 as it is a Police matter.

During the period between 1st January 2023 and the 31st August 2023 there have been a total of 245 Penalty Charge Notices issued to vehicles on roads within the area you have specified.

London Road, Earley	132
The Drive	55
Erleigh Court Gardens	48
Chiltern Crescent	10
	245

Supplementary Question:

It is encouraging that some enforcement is happening, but in spite of the enforcement the problem persists, and increasing the amount of parking restrictions is not going to be enough. Whatever enforcement we are doing is not enough because people think they can park where they want, when they want, without any sanctions. Will you meet with me to actually talk about a strategy which tries to reduce this to the lowest possible level?

Supplementary Answer:

I would be very pleased to meet with you on site and discuss this.

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

Question:

Residents have complained to me that public litter bins are full and need to be emptied more frequently not less. Has the Council considered the costly consequence of reducing litter bins such as increases in vermin, littering, dog fouling and fly tipping?

Answer:

Your question to a limited extent overlaps with that of Michael's so you will forgive me if there is a slight overlap in the answers.

As part of the analysis of the proposed changes to the street cleansing service, a comprehensive assessment has been undertaken to identify those litter bins which were full, half full or empty on a weekly basis. In addition, mapping data was used to assess where litter bins were near close to others which would indicate sufficient coverage in a particular area.

In 2018, Hertfordshire Council along with others undertook a research project, along with several other councils, with the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) which selected areas to remove litter bins to understand the impacts. It was discovered that the removal of the bins in fact reduced the total level of litter across all the trial areas by 23.5%. Notwithstanding this, the analysis of the consultation results are being considered and a full report is to be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 October.

Regardless of whether the litter bins are removed there will be a comprehensive communications campaign and we will continue to work closely with our internal and external stakeholders to mitigate potential impacts.

The majority of members of the public are responsible and will not break the law by littering, dog fouling or fly tipping. However, individuals that are caught undertaking these damaging activities are warned that we will prosecute and will publicise any successful actions.

Supplementary Question:

The Liberal Democrat administration have a track record of ignoring the results of public consultation. Can the Executive Member guarantee that the administration will listen to residents' response to the consultation?

Supplementary Answer:

We are going through the results of the consultation, and I do object to this myth that your Party are perpetuating that we ignore the results of consultations. We did not ignore the results of consultations for example on the presence of a 3G pitch at Maiden Erlegh School. We have totally accepted the results of the consultation. I am afraid your myth does not stand up, but we will be taking note of the results of this particular consultation.

49. Minutes of Committee Meetings and Ward Matters

49.1 Rachel Burgess asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

I was pleased to learn from one of our Labour Town Councillors that after our campaign the Council has agreed to put forwards a proposal for the installation of a pedestrian crossing on Warren House Road in Norreys. I presented a petition on this to Council in March 2022 on behalf of residents, but even though I was the petitioner I have not actually had a formal update. I am sure that you would agree that petitioners and residents deserve to be kept fully apprised of these developments, so can I ask that a full update on the proposed crossing including estimated timescales is provided to me as the petitioner, so that I can update residents?

Answer:

Thank you for your question, Rachel. Sorry that you have not had a reply. Warren House Road crossing has been assessed and it has been justified so it is on the list. I can provide you with a formal update as well and that will give you a rough timescale. It is all going to be dependent though on funding. It is also going to be dependent on any new schemes that come in. As I mentioned earlier on in Laura's response, there are a lot that come in every year. They all need to be assessed and if any of those are rated higher than they will jump over the top. I will give you as much as I possibly can.

49.2 Graham Howe asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

Question:

Since 1924 the Wargrave Library has operated in the Woodclyffe Hostel and has been a valued part of the village. Why is it that following the efforts of the previous and current administration to make a fairly significant investment in the Twyford library for the benefit of the Twyford residents, there has been a decision to withdraw Wokingham Borough Council paid staff from Wargrave and a call for community volunteers to run it? How do I explain this decision which shows an inequality that is being applied to the Wargrave Village community, and will he reconsider that decision?

Answer:

Firstly Twyford is a capital investment from S106 payments so there is a difference obviously between the capital and revenue payments that are for the day to day general running of the library. We are actually calling volunteers for a number of our libraries to help with the running. We are in a financial situation that makes it very, very challenging for us, and we want to do everything we can to keep these vital, community services open. We are looking at alternative models, looking at community hubs and how we can bring services in together. We are starting a very big piece of work around that. In order that we can do this work and get them and look at how we can continue to provide vital services in the right places in a way that we can afford to do it, we do need some support from the community in terms of volunteers to help us do that. It is not exclusive Wargrave library. I would much rather see that we can continue having these services rather than closing them down. We are very much on a journey of partnership working and I hope you would support us on doing everything we can to keep this open.

49.3 Rebecca Margetts asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

Residents have contacted me as Finchampstead Road, as many of us know, can be a perilous route for cyclists, especially travelling into Wokingham by bike. With only three bus service a day or a long walk, the only other way to get to Wokingham is by car. I have had previous meetings with Councillor Kerr and Councillor Cornish about a safe cycling route from Finchampstead into Wokingham. We have made no progress. Please could you advise what provision is being made for communities outside Wokingham, and whether you could meet with us to see whether we can progress this further?

Answer:

Finchampstead Road or the route from Finchampstead to Wokingham was included in our consultation for the LCWIP. Unfortunately, there was a lot of negative feedback and that has actually put it down in the lower part of the priority list. We will be working on this particular project to try to get it to go forward. We are reliant on capital money coming in from Active Travel England as well as the design and any consultation, but we have got to work through the list that we have currently got. If there are ways of trying to get around it I would be happy to meet with yourself and other ward members to look at other particular routes, but it will be some time. It is really unfortunate that there was this negative feedback from a lot of people in the Finchampstead area which then pushed this scheme down the list.

49.4 David Cornish asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan the following question:

Question:

I am very pleased that the Council this evening voted to adopt the Finchampstead Neighbourhood Plan. This represents a huge amount of work by a team of community volunteers and the Parish Council and was supported by 89% of residents who voted in the referendum.

Whilst supporting development in a couple of specific locations it would add very real and substantive protection to those areas of the parish most valued by the local community, and it just may be due a quirk of the planning system and where we are with the Local Plan update, it just may be that it will require WBC to demonstrate only a three year housing supply figure not five to avoid the tilted balance being applied when setting planning applications in the parish. This has yet to be tested.

However, one omission in the Plan is the extra protection which was sought for areas of countryside generally to the south west of Nine Mile Ride. This was rejected by the Independent Examiner as being a strategic issue more appropriate to the Borough's Local Plan. Could I therefore ask the Executive Member for Planning that the proposal for a strategic green gap to be created in the area south of Nine Mile Ride now be given careful consideration as part of the forthcoming Local Plan update?

Answer:

I too was concerned about the removal by the Inspector of this particular requirement and I will look further into your request.

49.5 Phil Cunnington asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport

and Leisure the following question:

Question:

It is to do with two parks and three incidents in my ward, and to do with dogs off of leads. We have got two incidents in Cantley Park that have been brought to my attention, one only yesterday. Three different types of victims – one was a jogger, one was a cyclist, and one was a child. All where dogs are off their leads and do not seem to be under the control of their owner. Now I recognise that there are some signs requiring owners to care take in these areas, but the other one was in Ashridge Meadows, which of course I recognise might not necessarily be straight forward for you, but is there a way that we could perhaps have some sort of low cost campaign reinforcing the expectations of dog owners in these two parks, but perhaps in others too, because I believe that this could be an issue of public safety?

Answer:

It is certainly something that we can look at. I suspect it is not just unique to your ward as well. I wonder if you could send me the details of the actual incidents in an email and I will make sure that our team look at it.

At this point in the meeting, in line with 4.2.10.9 Prue Bray proposed that the question time be extended to enable all questions to be put. This was seconded by Stephen Conway. On being put to the vote this was agreed.

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

Question:

Many of my residents in my ward have been impacted by what is termed 'fleecehold' whereby estate and flat management companies hold them to ransom. My residents would first of all thank the Leader of the Council for communicating to the management company asking for them to deal with the residents fairly. That is really appreciated. However, there is still issues. While the Council has no legal standing with such companies, what else can the Council do to push these companies to act in a fair and responsible manner?

Answer:

If I may take this opportunity to thank you also for the work that you have been doing with those leaseholders in Montague Park who have been affected by this really quite serious matter.

My colleague Lindsay Ferris, the Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan, is I know, working with the officers to see whether there is anything we can do within the emerging Local Plan which will address this problem. But I have to say this is very clearly not a problem limited to Montague Park. It is a national problem and because it is a national problem and not just a local problem, I undertake to write to all four of the Borough's MPs to try and seek to get their support in lobbying government for legislative changes. I think that is an appropriate step to take given the seriousness of this problem.

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

Question:

My question is around the communications on the current roadworks that are underway by SGN in Church Road and surrounding roads. Whilst SGN are responsible for the actual roadworks, the Council has a responsibility to ensure that

all signage is concise, meaningful and appropriate. Reading Buses who are affected by this communicated that this would finish on 2 October. Residents had a leaflet dropped from SGN saying that the work would last 32 weeks. Yellow signs appeared saying that the work would last for 14 weeks. Recently residents of Cornfield Road inform me of the yellow sign between the junction of Cornfield Road and Church Road was closed, absolutely the right thing to do. Unfortunately, this was positioned at that junction which was at the end of Cornfield Road and not the entry point of that road, so residents have had to put up with drivers constantly using their driveways to turn around and go back down the road. Where is the quality control from highways on this project? Can you please look into this to ensure that all signage for future roadworks is precise and appropriate?

Answer:

Traffic management is actually the responsibility of the utility company and the inspectors from our Streetworks Team inspect, and if they find that there are issues with it they can serve a defect notice. However, I will look into this and get you a response back.

49.8 Andrew Mickleburgh asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

Kilnsea Drive is one of a number of roads in Hawkedon ward that have recently benefited from WBC's new preventative maintenance measures. Surface cracks have been filled and sealed, but the rejuvenation liquid that I understood would complete the maintenance was not applied. Could you please provide Hawkedon residents with an explanation and update, including any impacts that not applying the rejuvenation fluid at that time might have?

Answer:

Asphalt preventative can only be applied later in the summer months. It is guaranteed for a particular period of time which is five years. They will not allow any guarantees after 31 August hence why it is has to stopped. This particular road, the first part of the preparation was undertaken, which was the sealing of the joints and some of the defects. Unfortunately, some of the wet weather in July and August across the area, because they do not just work for us, has delayed the programme and therefore they have only completed part of the work in that area. It has been added to next year's programme.

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

Question:

This week saw the start of, I think, six sessions of drilling testholes at California Crossroads. The first session was I think was Wednesday night. Thursday, I think it was, some residents were on the phone complaining that they had been woken up at 3am in the morning and they did not know what was happening. This was followed by the Headteacher at Nine Mile Ride because the contractor had left their blue hut and all their fencing in front of the emergency gates to Nine Mile Ride School, which have signs on them saying 'keep clear at all times.' I did raise this with Highways earlier, who did assure me that the consultation letter did go out, and I do accept that we can sometimes send letters to people, and they may not read them or take them on board. However, I did press the point on the hut and the equipment and was told that these spaces had been allocated by a Highways officer. I did explain to the

officer involved the problem that this caused, and he said that he would look into it, but offered no commitment that next time it would be different. Could I ask that you take this up and just make sure that when the contractors are doing the next five sessions, they do not block access to the school?

Answer:

I am surprised they are actually blocking access to the school because the work is overnight. Certainly, for emergency access they should not be doing that at all, but the works are overnight. They are working to up to around 11.30pm with the noisy type works and then it is softened after that. The work that was done on Tuesday night, Tuesday night I understand did go on a bit longer and that was the very first night they were working there in Area 1. Last night it was rained off because there was torrential rain. They are working tonight but they are in a different location, not in Area 1, they have gone into Area 2 which is Nine Mile Ride, because some residents did contact me through David Cornish because they had got some young children who could not sleep, but they were adjacent to where the works were being done, really adjacent, I am talking about a few metres apart in the alleyway leading up to the car park. Those works are not taking place tonight. They are going to take place tomorrow night which at least allows the children to sleep overnight. There is a reserve night of next Friday so they will not be disturbed during school times, but I will certainly feedback about the emergency access as they should not be blocking that.

49.10 Adrian Mather asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question:

Wokingham Borough Council has recently purchased the Berkshire Care Home in the Evendons. Please can you inform us why we have done this, and what are the benefits to Wokingham Council?

Answer:

We have done this basically so that we can control the market and so we can provide good, effective and reasonable service to the people that need it, especially those with dementia. We want to concentrate obviously on dementia because that is a growing need in this area. The fact that we can charge a reasonable rate and not have money going out of the charge to the people who provide for the service, the people in the background are very important because we can make sure that people get a good service, whilst also getting a service which is effective and reasonable. That is how we will work with people. We are not going to have massive charges to pay in the way, so we will work with people in that way. I think that the home, it is at the moment it needs improvement, but we have a plan to improve it. We are already putting into operation some of the necessary work to improve it in the build and things like that, and so we will go forward and I think it will be a great asset to the authority when we see this in a year or two's time, blooming and being a great place to go.

49.11 Laura Blumenthal asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

Would you join me in encouraging more of the good work that the Council had been doing with the Friends of South Lake? They have been helping do lots of good work in nature areas in my ward. I started up, or I relaunched the Friends of South Lake

in the beginning of this year and the Countryside Team have been doing good work with them. This is totally the type of work the Council should be doing, working with the community to improve the local area, getting people out and about in the natural world, so would you please encourage more of this work across the Borough, and indeed thank the Countryside Team for their work, and indeed the Friends of South Lake?

Answer:

Clearly we will do everything that we can to make a positive impact on our residents whatever part of the Borough they are in.

49.12 Jordan Montgomery asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

Earlier in June resurfacing works were carried out on a stretch of Nine Mile Ride adjacent to the entrance of Johnson and Johnson. This was very much welcomed by residents of the ward who had been requesting said works for a long while. Unfortunately, not long after emergency works had to be carried out on this section of the road due to a burst water main. Residents have been complaining about the state of the road following these works, particularly regarding a jarring bump that differs in colour from the rest of the tarmac. However, I understand that these works were only intended to be temporary in nature due to it being an emergency, and that a more permanent fix would be carried out at a later date. Please could you provide further information on when such remedial works will be conducted to improve this situation?

Answer:

Yes, Nine Mile Ride it had its resurfacing done and then unfortunately there was a burst water main near Johnson and Johnson. The water company has reinstated, but it is a temporary fix at the present time. The inspectors from WBC Streetworks Team have been to have a look at it. It is not dangerous. However, the water company have been contacted to see when they will be giving a permanent reinstatement, and they will be doing that very shortly. I have not got a date from them but it is going to be soon.

49.13 Mike Smith asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

In Maiden Erlegh adjacent to the railway station there is an ageing concrete footbridge crossing both the railway and the motorway that has been discussed in Council on many occasions. The previous administration's promises have been for an expensive replacement which would have cut right across the Earley Town Council cemetery, destroying the tranquillity of the important place of rest and contemplation. It would have also led to the loss of virtually all of the parking spaces at the station and significant loss of mature and ancient woodland on the Woodley side. Quite an environmental nightmare. I understand that a review by officers and yourself Paul, led to a revised outline plans which indicated that it could be both safely and cost effectively repaired to extend the life. Please may I have an update on progress for the present?

Answer:

Yes, essentially it is now going to be a repair and refurbishment of the bridge. We

do not need to go for the total replacement as was originally proposed.

There is a meeting to be held next week on 27 September and that will finalise the discussions on the work that has been done to date. We will then provide the next steps, and that will also include potential work with Network Rail, because we will need track access to do any works above the railway. I can update you next week after that meeting.

49.14 Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

There were a number of works done on the Reading Road recently to treat the Reading Road in Winnersh. We would like to know how long this less expensive treatment going to last on the roads?

Answer:

The asphalt preventative maintenance work which has been undertaken between Showcase Roundabout and Winnersh Crossroads has a guarantee of five years. The actual cost of those particular types of work compared to full resurfacing, full resurfacing costs around fifteen times more, so with this preventative type work we can do an awful lot more preventative maintenance than just resurfacing which would be very isolated in one particular location.

49.15 Abdul Loyes asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan the following question:

Question:

I have been asked by a proposed mobile phone mast which is going to be out outside Loddon Vale doctors' surgery. This is what the manager has written to me 'I am very concerned at this proposal to put up a 20m phone mast right outside the practice surgery. This is terrible. Please do something about it.' Can I ask whoever the Lead Member for that is, if we can remove it? This is a practice which a lot of people use, and I would be very pleased if you could do something about it.

Answer:

This would be aimed at me, but this would be a planning application issue, and if it is in your ward then you would have right to raise it and make a point to planning officers involved, and if necessary list the item to be taken into account. That is the proper route and the major route. I cannot comment on a particular application.

50. Statements by the Leader of the Council and Executive Members

Stephen Conway, Leader of the Council:

As we have heard already, the Council is planning to vacate its Shute End headquarters as part of its efforts to save money in these challenging times. It is only right and proper that when we are having to make savings, the Council's estate should make a contribution. Though many of us are emotionally attached to it, and I have to say I am one of those people, I have spent many happy hours in this Council Chamber, this building is far too expensive to run in our current circumstances. Jackie might care to note that thanks to modern, flexible, working practices, especially working part of the week from home, a building of this size is no longer needed. We can therefore save the council taxpayer money by moving to smaller accommodation that is cheaper to run. Associated with this move away from this idea of a big central headquarters is a community hub model, and we are exploring

this at present to see if we can decentralise the way the Council interacts with our community. This would bring the Council and its services into the main communities of the Borough, so I wanted to update colleagues on that, and explain why vacating Shute End is the right thing to do.

Sarah Kerr, Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services:

I just wanted to update on three parts of my portfolio. Firstly, the website went live in July. The previous one was built with old technology and was at the end of its life, and it caused many frustrations for residents. This is just the beginning of the development. We have launched what is known as Minimum Viable Product. It is already improving user satisfaction and making services more visible to vulnerable residents. The new site is also more accessible, particularly for those with disabilities. We are going to continue to improve and develop the website based on data and feedback. Enhancing digital services like our website benefits all residents and saves time by preventing avoidable problems. This enables us to focus on helping those who cannot use digital services or need a more personal non digital approach, and I would just like to take a moment to thank the officers who have worked so hard. This has been a really tough job to do, and they have done an exceptional job, so thank you very much.

I would also just like to highlight some progress in the domestic abuse part of my portfolio. The statutory duties that we have for domestic abuse are actually quite narrow, and the majority of the victims that we support do not actually fall under these statutory duties, but it is obviously the right thing that we morally do. We also do a lot of work in preventative stuff as well, and many of you will be aware of the Council's home refuge service. Something else that I wanted to mention was that we now have put domestic abuse specialists sitting in different parts of the Council, including in the Housing team, Children's Services, and Adult Services. Domestic abuse is often hidden. Many victims are survivors themselves, not recognising that they are suffering abuse from a perpetrator, and it is often difficult for those in professions such as social care, to identify that there is abuse. We have listened to feedback and recognise that having independent domestic violence advisors as part of these teams, is crucial to ensure that the domestic abuse lens is applied, protecting and providing support in the right places, and not allowing the abuse to continue or get worse.

Finally, I wanted to provide the news that we have got confirmation now from National Grid and Scottish and Southern Electric Network, that we can proceed to our original timeline on the Barkham Solar Farm. It has been a monumental effort. There have been about 1,300 projects in the country that were in the situation that we were in. We are one of just ten that have been given the green light to go ahead. The transmission issue has been rectified. I would like to thank firstly Bouygues as our contractor who have been absolutely brilliant through this. They have been patient, providing support and working with us to help on this issue. We are in conversations about getting them remobilised again once we have got the final details, and that contract variation. I would like to thank SSEN and National Grid as well. We have been holding tripartite discussion with them and they have been incredibly helpful. I would just like to pass on my thanks to them. Most importantly though, I want to give officers my heartfelt thanks, and many officers have been involved, but two in this room, our CEO and Deputy Chief Executive have been

involved in these discussions. The work that has gone into this, to be in that position, to be at the forefront of these changes that we are seeing in the Grid and what is happening, comes from the hard work that you have put in and the lobbying that has gone on. It has just been phenomenal. I just want to take a moment to thank you.

Prue Bray, Executive Member Children's Services:

I think that you all know that at the end of August the Executive approved a new Home to School Transport policy that will apply from September 2024. I am very grateful to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to officers and my fellow Executive Members for the work that they have put into the formulation of the new policy.

There is one aspect of that new policy that I would like to draw your attention to this evening because it has not had much of an airing, and I think it needs one, not least because without some form of explanation it risks being misunderstood. This is about how the policy deals with low income families. Where a child is eligible for free school meals or if a parent with whom they live is in receipt of Maximum Working Tax Credit, the rules for eligibility for free transport are slightly more generous than for other children. However, there will still be children who do not meet the criteria for free school transport but who attend a school beyond the maximum safe walking distance, and usually this is because their parents have chosen that school. In the past the Council's offering for these children has been a discount on the full cost of a farepayer place on a school bus. That offer was not written into the wording of the policy itself but did appear on the application form for a farepayer place. We will no longer be explicitly offering that discount. Before you all start expressing shock and horror, this is not because we want to make life more difficult for families who are struggling. I would ask you to note that a discount on a farepayer place is no good to anyone who lives in an area of the Borough where there is no Council operated bus that runs to your school, which is quite a lot of the Borough, or where there are not enough places left on school buses for all the people who want them, as is the case in Shinfield this year. To give you some idea of how many people actually use this discount, it was fewer than 1% of the children registered for free school meals. I would also point out that the discount we offered has in the past made the cost just a little bit cheaper than a Reading Buses bus pass, but that a farepayer place only entitles the child to get to school and back, for the official start and end of the school day, on that specific bus, whereas a bus pass is much more flexible. Finally, if a family is actually struggling with the cost of transport, the likelihood is that they are going to be struggling financially in other way, and the offer of a discount on a farepayer place, even if one is available may not really be the answer.

So, what are we doing instead? The answer is looking at it differently. Where a child is not entitled to free transport but is on free school meals or a parent that they live with, is on Maximum Working Tax Credit, we will look at directing them to sources of wider help if they request it. We also have the right to exercise discretion with regards to transport. This is written very clearly into the policy now. This is not, I am not making a promise that we will provide transport for people who are not eligible for it, but what I am doing is making a statement that we will consider the circumstances of every individual child and what is in their best interest, and do our best to help in a more holistic way than we have done up to now.

Imogen Shepherd-Dubey, Executive Member for Finance:

I thought it was about time that I gave you an update on our current financial situation. All councils are finding their finances are being subjected to significant unprecedented inflation, and we particularly receive inadequate levels of grant funding from Central Government. Like everyone else we are dealing with escalating costs but particularly in protecting and providing support for vulnerable adults and children. Councils across the country are having to make unpopular decisions, as we are doing, just to keep going, and I wonder how long it will take before this government actually acknowledges the crisis that our public services are having, which certainly includes local government.

Here in Wokingham Borough, we receive just over £400 less for an average household per year in our Government grant than other similar councils. Just think about that for a minute in terms of how much council tax we each pay. Our council tax is capped, and I would certainly not want to suggest rising it above that level, and it would disproportionately affect those less able to pay. The Government grant also does not factor in the reality of the high cost of living in Wokingham Borough, which makes the costs of council services higher too. Essentially the Government's method of calculating this grant has created a grossly unfair deal for our residents and we need a better deal.

So, since the Liberal Democrats took control of our Council finances, we have been working hard with our officers to reduce outgoings and to match our shrinking real terms income. We have also had to find funding to cover the holes in the budget left by the previous administration. One of the clear differences since the change of control is our external borrowing, which is now significantly under better control and much more manageable. We are using more of our residents' money to pay for what we need, rather than paying interest on external loans.

Wokingham Town Centre regeneration cost over £150million to build. It is not making anywhere near the amounts that we were promised when the regeneration started under the Conservatives. However, it currently has a manageable debt of now £95million and we are making around £2million per year after interest payments. We also have the investment properties in our Community Infrastructure Fund. This fund has sadly decreased in value by nearly £9million since the properties were purchased under the previous administration again. We are currently viewing the losses, but the portfolio as a whole is still generating nearly £4million per year in rental income for the Council. Going forwards the Liberal Democrats intend to only add to this portfolio if there is a property of community value to our residents in the Borough. Our recent care home acquisition was part of this, and will serve the residents by reducing our overall care costs.

Moving on to our Treasury Management. It has been publicly reported that we loaned £10million to Woking Borough Council, and it is certainly not a bad thing. We have actually loaned money to four different councils this year, and it is a very common practice amongst councils to lend each other funds, and it has been routinely happening here without incident for more than 20 years. These investments are agreed by all councillors on this Council as part of our Treasury Management Strategy in February Council meeting. These loans will bring in over

£1million of interest by the middle of next year and will help us plug our revenue deficit. If you have not realised, investing in Councils is not the same as investing in most businesses, or indeed Icelandic banks as the previous administration found out. This is because councils provide statutory services and are underwritten by Central Government using Public Works Loan Board for loans, and even if a Council is as broken as Woking with over £2billion debt caused by the Conservative administration, their existing contracts and financial commitments will be paid. Because no council has ever defaulted on its loans, and it is a factor that makes local authorities one of the safest places for us to invest Wokingham Borough Council's money. The only risk would be if Central Government as a whole was to go bankrupt, which with our current state of leadership is more of a possibility than I would like to think. In the Wokingham example we were getting the £10million returned in March with an additional £50,000 of interest. I cannot think of a bank that would offer that rate of return for a 9 month loan. Much of this money is part of ringfenced CIL money and grants, and are waiting for projects to start, but it makes far more financial sense for us to make this work for us in the meantime, and it is a good example of treasury management.

With all that is said we cannot and should not underestimate the size of the challenge of the financial deficit that we do have. We are additionally inviting residents to take part in our forthcoming budget engagement survey, where they can help us shape how the Council makes decisions to save taxpayers money. In all that we are doing we are committed to ensuring that there is minimal impact on our frontline services, and we are prioritising protecting those who need our help the most. It is for this journey that we have our officers to thank and all the hard work that they put into this every single day.

51. Statement from Council Owned Companies

Stephen Conway, Non-Executive Director, Loddon Homes and Wokingham Borough Council Holdings:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the Council owned companies, and of course I am going to focus on the housing companies, and I want to start by bringing Council's attention to the fact of the appointment of David Cornish as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and Wokingham Borough Council Holdings has been formally approved by their boards. David will make an excellent addition to these boards. He brings business experience, and his ward is one that has a great deal of social housing in it. He is going to be ideally placed I think to help these boards as we move forwards, so I warmly want to welcome David.

I also want to draw Council's attention to the increasing integration and close working between the Council's different housing companies. We are working quite hard to ensure that the companies are approaching the task of delivering social housing in a more integrated way. That has not always been the case in the past, and we want to try and improve the working together.

I also want to inform Council that we recently received a report on how the companies could operate more effectively in the future. I want to report further to Council at a future meeting on the changes we will be introducing in light of the recommendations made in the report, which I have to say are quite far reaching and quite fundamental in the way in which we might structure our use in these local

authority housing companies in the future, so when I am in a better position to give you some detailed feedback on this I will do so, but I want to give you some early warning that this is coming down the line.

52. Motions

52.1 Motion 506 submitted by Norman Jorgensen

Due to time constraints, this Motion was not considered.

52.2 Motion 507 submitted by Pauline Helliard-Symons

Due to time constraints, this Motion was not considered.

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