

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 16 NOVEMBER 2023 FROM 7.30 PM TO 10.40 PM**

Members Present

Councillors: 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, 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, Alistair Neal, Stephen Newton, Ian Pittock, Jackie Rance, Ian Shenton, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Tony Skuse, Caroline Smith, Mike Smith, Bill Soane, Alison Swaddle, Marie-Louise Weighill and Shahid Younis

Members in Attendance Virtually

Councillors Stuart Munro and Beth Rowland

69. Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Gary Cowan, Peter Dennis, Graham Howe and Wayne Smith.

Councillors Stuart Munro and Beth Rowland attended the meeting on Microsoft Teams.

70. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting of the Council meeting held on 19 October 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Deputy Mayor.

71. Declarations of Interest

Prue Bray declared a personal interest in Item 86 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Berry Brook Homes, Wokingham Housing Ltd. and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Stephen Conway declared a personal interest in Item 86 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

David Cornish declared a personal interest in Item 86 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

David Hare declared a personal interest in Item 86 (Statement from Council-owned companies) as a Non-Executive Director of Optalis Ltd.

72. Mayor's Announcements

In the Mayor's absence, the Deputy-Mayor informed Members that collections for the Mayor's charity were continuing. Donations of food or money were still welcome.

73. Public Question Time

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

73.1 George Evans asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

In previous years Wokingham Borough Council, under Conservative administration, has incentivised shopping in Wokingham and Woodley towns in the weeks running up to Christmas by making car parking on Saturdays free - it has recently been announced this will not be happening this year. Now that car parking charges have doubled and chargeable periods expanded to include evenings and Sundays, what steps is the Council taking to mitigate impacts on businesses and incentivise visiting our towns?

Answer

Thank you, George, for your question.

As stated recently in media releases the Council cannot afford to lose an estimated £30,000 in revenue to fund free parking on three Saturdays before Christmas. As local councils across the country struggle, the situation in Wokingham Borough is stark. We receive £30 million less per year than the average local unitary authority. That is £400 less per household per year than the average.

Considering the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan and Active Travel Policy, the Council, using funding grants available, will be offering free bus travel on Reading and Thames Valley buses on the six Saturdays leading up to Christmas, starting on 18 November.

In addition funding, through an Economic Development Grant, has enabled free town centre parking for those attending Christmas events in Wokingham (the Winter Carnival on Sunday, November 26), and Woodley's Winter Extravaganza on Sunday, December 3. Also, free bus travel has been extended to cover each of these events using the Lion 4 and X4 for Wokingham and the Orange 13 and 14 for Woodley. These will help support local traders and the events.

Supplementary Question:

I attended a forum last Monday for businesses operating in the town centre. They all said the same thing, that since the roll out of the increased parking charges and chargeable periods, they had experienced heavy-handed enforcement and significant reductions in footfall and revenue, between 20 and 40%. They are comparing to sister stores in neighbouring towns and in Wokingham they are underperforming in recent months.

What exercise has the Council completed to understand the negative impacts on businesses since the car parking charge increases? What analysis have you carried out to forecast the impact of the measures that you have just mentioned running up to Christmas, and will you commit to releasing data that the Council has on car

parking usage, revenue, and costs in 2023?

Supplementary Answer:

We are currently going through a 3 month review of the car parking since the charges went up. The off street car parking report is not quite finished yet, but the data indicates that the overall introduction of the new charges has not seen a negative impact on car parking usage, and footfall has not fallen.

74. Petitions

The following member of the public presented a petition in relation to the matter indicated.

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

Chris Hartnell	Dangerous driving on Meadow Road. 98% of residents on the road had signed the petition which requested the introduction of a 20mph speed limit and restoration of the speed camera. Refer to the Highways team.
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75. Outcome of Code of Conduct Complaint

Council considered a report, set out in the Agenda, which stated that, following a complaint against Councillor Keith Baker, an investigation had been conducted. The outcome of the investigation was that Councillor Baker was found to be in breach of one clause of Wokingham Borough Council’s Code of Conduct (Paragraph 9.2.8.1 – “respect”).

Councillor Baker had been asked to make a written apology to the complainant and three witnesses, which he had done, and would also receive training on aspects of the Code of Conduct.

In accordance with Rule 9.1.13.3 of the Borough Council’s Constitution, the decision notice was published on the Council’s website on 11 October 2023. A copy of the decision notice had been sent to the complainant, the Subject Member and the Independent Person. The Constitution also required that the matter was reported to a meeting of the Council where the report would be noted with no discussion on the item. In relation to the complaint, no further action was required.

RESOLVED: That Council notes that Councillor Keith Baker has been found to be in breach of the Member Code of Conduct.

76. Presentation by the Youth Council

Council considered a presentation by the Youth Council. Members of the Youth Council, Holly Mackinnon (Chair), Anika Dixit and Presley Shearer attended the meeting to deliver the presentation and answer Member questions.

The presentation stated that young people were becoming more involved in local decision making. After positive engagement through the Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Youth Politics Event, Wokingham Youth

Council had decided an important next step in encouraging the youth voice in Wokingham was to put into writing ideas to improve the Borough – the Youth Charter. The charter was not a list of complaints; it was a detailed plan to improve the quality of life for young people. It was a manifesto for change in how young people and adult decision makers could collaborate to create a better Wokingham Borough.

The Youth Charter included a number of proposals, including:

- more consistent youth engagement with local decision makers and young people through the Youth Council;
- the creation of a Youth Portal Online Careers and Enrichment Platform for all young people in Wokingham;
- the return of youth clubs across the Borough to promote a sense of security and community for young people;
- introduction of an annual Culture Day, including exhibitions, stalls and talks from local equality groups;
- more affordable bus services across the Borough, with affordable fares for young people.

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

Councillor Andrew Mickleburgh

Question

I was wondering if our Youth Council is aware of what could be a great opportunity to broaden its interaction with others and its increase its impacts – locally and nationally. Specifically, I have been very impressed with information I have read about the British Youth Council. [British Youth Council | Home \(byc.org.uk\)](https://www.byc.org.uk)

The British Youth Council is a national network of almost 200 youth -focused organisations, including some Youth Councils, working together to empower young people to be involved in decision making, and to develop themselves as leaders and advocates.

I am sure Wokingham Youth Council could use its experience to contribute massively if it chose to join the British Youth Council and that membership would bring benefits locally. Is this membership something that has already been explored and if not, whether our Youth Council might wish to explore possible membership?

Answer

Holly Mackinnon confirmed that the local Youth Council was already a member of the British Youth Council. Holly and another member had attended the Youth Con which contributed to the Food for Learning Bill, to be debated by the Youth Parliament in the House of Commons Chamber on 17 November 2023.

Councillor Prue Bray

The Youth Charter is welcomed and will be circulated to all Members after the meeting. In the meantime, when are you going to invite me to talk to the Youth Council? I would be delighted to do that.

Answer

Holly Mackinnon confirmed that Councillor Bray was welcome to attend the next meeting of the Youth Council. Any other Members interested in attending a meeting would also be welcome.

Councillor Stephen Conway thanked the Youth Council members for the presentation and confirmed that the Council would welcome more consistent and frequent engagement. The Council would also be happy to support the type of community events set out in the Youth Charter.

Councillor Keith Baker stated that Woodley Town Council was in the process of developing a Youth Strategy and invited the Youth Council to nominate a representative to sit on the relevant group.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Holly Mackinnon, Anika Dixit and Presley Shearer be thanked for attending the meeting to deliver the Youth Charter presentation and answer Member questions;
- 2) the Youth Charter presentation be noted and be used to inform the Council's strategic decision making.

77. Presentation by Thames Valley Police, Crime Commissioner and Chief Constable

Council received a presentation from the Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police (Jason Hogg), supported by Matthew Barber (Police and Crime Commissioner) and Andrew Cranidge (Local Police Area Commander - Bracknell and Wokingham).

Matthew Barber introduced the item by referring to the comments made by the Youth Council representatives. Mr Barber was engaging with young people about ways to involve them in some of the Thames Valley Police (TVP) independent advisory groups.

Mr Barber stated that one specific area of concern was knife crime. TVP were currently participating in a national week of action to address knife crime. Over the past year knife crime in the TVP area had reduced by 4% which was good news. Levels of violent crime in the area were also amongst the lowest in the country. In order to tackle knife crime, the force had developed a tougher approach to those found in possession of knives. Steps had also been taken to pilot the speeding up of intervention from the Youth Offending Team. This would be rolled out across Berkshire over the next 12 months in partnership with local authorities.

Mr Barber referred to the Crime Fighters Plan, launched earlier in 2023. This aimed to improve public contact with the police, for example using the 101 number. Another current issue was retail crime which was being addressed through new systems to enable easier crime reporting by businesses. Finally, work with the Family Drug and Alcohol Courts had reduced demands on the police and local authorities. Judicial powers were being used to reduce reoffending and keep families together.

Jason Hogg delivered the presentation which included the following points:

- Thames Valley Police in Numbers
- TVP Staffing – 4,970 police officers and 3,571 police staff
- Force Review – new Local Command Unit Structure
- Doubling the number of Neighbourhood police officers
- Right Care, Right Person – response to incidents involving mental health, medical or social care
- Force Activity – April to September 2023 – 508k contacts from the public, police attended 81k incidents
- Wokingham Local Policing Area – burglary, drugs, retail theft, bike theft, car meets, anti-social behaviour and E scooters.

Following the presentation, Councillor Stephen Conway thanked Mr Barber and the TVP representatives for attending the meeting and answering Member questions. Councillor Conway welcomed the comments on the importance of prevention and early intervention and the emphasis on partnership working. Finally, Councillor Conway thanked TVP for their work in keeping residents of the Borough safe.

Members then asked the following questions:

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen

Question:

Talking to shopkeepers and the police in Woodley, I have been told that there is a problem with shoplifting. I understand that there will be more local police resources - will we see more in Woodley shopping precinct where they can respond quickly to issues? What is going to happen there and are there any other actions the Council or local communities can take to help you in dealing with this issue?

Answer:

Matthew Barber – one of the things that TVP are doing is to use the Assessment and Investigation Unit to handle a lot of the volume crime. The creation of what was, effectively, a Business Crime Team, with dedicated PCs and civilian staff, will make a real difference in identifying prolific offenders. Mr Barber had had discussions with the industry about this. Arguably, around 65% of offences were down to prolific offenders. Organised crime fell within this area. In terms of practical improvements, stores would receive a shoplifting pack which asked them to provide CCTV and other evidence. TVP were working with businesses to agree how this process could be made easier. Everyone should recognise that this is about partnership, not just about the police doing more. It is about businesses reporting more effectively and taking on board the crime prevention advice being provided. I am aware of an example where an off-duty police officer intervened and detained a shoplifter. When asked to report the incident, the shopkeeper declined as the goods had been recovered. There is more we can do, working with the Council, to build that strong ecostructure.

Jason Hogg – Partnership working is the key. Some of the big national stores report crimes but do not provide details of what was stolen or CCTV footage. Work is ongoing to develop a joint protocol, with the stores setting out how they can work

together with the police. Analysts are working to link offenders to the offences. By the end of the month it is expected that shoplifting CCTV will be linked to retrospective facial recognition software via the Police National Database. This will lead to more offenders being identified more quickly. It is important that the stores play their part in this process. TVP can't step in to cover gaps in the private sector but we are committed to standing up to the challenges relating to the number of arrests and positive outcomes, including people being brought to justice.

Councillor Clive Jones

Question:

Shoplifting is a major concern for residents of the Borough. This week I witnessed a shoplifter walking out of Morrisons with armfuls of unpaid-for food. The person is a regular visitor to the store and is well known to staff, but nothing was done about it. A number of shop managers are now telling me that it is not just individuals, it is becoming more and more organised crime. Do you have the necessary resources to tackle shoplifting, not just by individuals but by organised crime?

Answer:

Unfortunately, I don't have enough resources to do everything that I would like to do. As mentioned earlier, a key aspect is developing stronger partnerships with local and national retailers around crime prevention and reporting. In terms of organised crime, there is a new initiative called Operation Pegasus which will allow the police to identify organised crime groups operating across police force areas. This will involve running CCTV images of suspected shoplifters through the national crime database. The results will tell us where organised gangs are operating and allow us to target resources accordingly.

Councillor Stephen Newton

Question:

A few months back at a meeting of the Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel, I asked you about the number of officers per 100,000 population as the Government report published on 1 December 2022 showed Thames Valley as 32nd out of the 42 police forces in England and Wales with just 180 police officers per 100,000 of population, whereas the top 21 forces all had over 200 officers per 100,000 of population.

You will recall that I was concerned about how this might impact response times and the ability to follow up on reported crimes and you mentioned that Thames Valley Police had been recruiting since this report was published.

My questions are:

- What is the current number of Thames Valley Police officers per 100,000 of population?
- What is your target number of officers per 100,000 of population and when do

you anticipate achieving this on a sustainable basis?

- What improvement have you seen in response times and/or prosecution rates with the additional headcount and are you satisfied with these outcomes?

Answer

The funding formula is the biggest issue which the Home Office could address. From conversations with Ministers it appeared that it was not the Home Office but the Treasury. It is not about getting more money, it is about how the pie is sliced up. If we received the average settlement the force could reach 250 officers per 100k population. Would that be the target? The Chief Constable has stated that he would like to get to 500, but we have to be realistic. A useful metric is the number of charges, which has risen by 3.7% from last year to this. Charge rates are important, but it is also about the outcomes for the public. As an example, charges for burglaries were lower than the force would like but burglaries were down by 37% across the Thames Valley. The preventative work, mentioned earlier, was really important and we are starting to see some benefits from those increased police numbers.

Councillor Morag Malvern

Question:

A local business has had two thefts of maintenance equipment, and despite clear details of the vehicle used in the first theft being available, the Police did not attend. Residents in the development off Matthewsgreen Road, elsewhere in the same ward, are reporting that night after night the same small group of men are visiting the estate and systematically trying the doors of cars parked in driveways. I understand that many residents have provided the Police with security camera footage of these men's activities, along with information on the hours they operate. This has been going on for more than two months and has greatly increased in the last three weeks. As you'll appreciate residents are very worried. What is the best way of making Thames Valley Police fully aware of what's happening? What re-assurance can you offer our residents and businesses on the action to be taken by the Police?

Answer:

Andrew Cranidge – We are aware of this issue. Each morning we review a series of crime types, one of which is theft and theft from vehicles. The Priority Crime Team reviews the data and carries out visits as necessary. In the past week there has been a spike in vehicle crime. Sometimes this relates to organised crime groups and sometimes it is local offenders. If you can pass on the exact details, I will look into it. The fact that residents are reporting these incidents is really important as it helps to focus our resources, for example through targeted patrols in local areas.

Councillor Rachel Bishop Firth

Question:

I'm sure that all of us, as Councillors, are deeply disturbed by the signs that conflict in the Middle East is spilling into community relations here in the UK. I know that many of us felt personally affected by the scenes that we saw over the weekend which led to over 100 arrests. I have had residents raise with me that they are now

concerned for the personal safety of themselves, their family, and their friends.

What steps are the police taking to ensure that all residents are kept safe – whatever their beliefs, ethnic origins, or birthplace - and that wherever possible positive action is taken to build understanding and respect between communities, and what support can we, as Councillors, provide?

Answer

Matthew Barber – What is happening internationally is concerning to us all. Many people did not think that it would spill out onto our streets the way it has done in the past months. TVP has made great efforts to reach out to synagogues and mosques, proactively making contact and making it easier to raise concerns. There have been a few isolated incidents across the Thames Valley, but nothing on a major scale, as reported elsewhere. Sometimes, people see incidents in London and assume that they are happening everywhere, but this is not the case. TVP have a good track record of managing protests of all kinds. A number of recent events have been managed well, particularly over the past weekend. The best way forwards is for level heads to prevail, to reassure people and to make people aware of the increase police presence without scaring people into thinking that they need a police presence every time they go to the synagogue or mosque. This is not what we are seeing on the ground. Any issues relating to offences linked to protests and attacks on religious groups are being addressed by the CID and local response officers.

Jason Hogg – We have a command structure in place with daily reporting of hate crime. I hosted a recent visit from members of the Jewish community with the Head of the Community Safety Trust. I have received many letters of thanks from people who attended protests from different backgrounds, religions and beliefs. TVP has dealt with more protests than any force outside the Met. Staff are very experienced. The role of the police is to facilitate peaceful protest but, at the same time, to be robust in enforcing the law. There have been no serious issues at any of the protests held since 7 October.

Councillor Andrew Mickleburgh

Question:

The Wokingham Today newspaper dated 8th December included a lengthy article concerning the release, the previous day, of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services' Child Protection Services Report.

You are reported in that newspaper as saying that while this report recognises some of the good work being done, there were [quote] “clearly some serious concerns. I'd expect the Chief Constable to be making those changes as quickly as possible.” Could you please summarise the concerns that were identified and what processes are in place within Thames Valley Police to support, monitor progress and evaluate the effectiveness of measures that you are expecting to be implemented?

Answer:

Matthew Barber – If you read the full report, it does talk about some good work and some good cultures, which are the most important thing in relation to child protection. It is a challenging area. Local authorities have the same experience with Ofsted

reports which present challenges. Most of the recommendations are around governance processes aimed at ensuring that the work being done is properly captured, analysed and is subject to proper oversight. One of the areas relates to data sharing of child abuse images and the sharing of other safeguarding information. Some of that has already been addressed because the inspectors came in in May 2023. Also over the summer, some of the backlogs have been addressed. The force has implemented some robotic automation through the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Hopefully, this will minimise backlogs in the future. Some of the actions are done, which is encouraging, but I do not want to minimise some of the issues that need to be addressed. The Chief Constable and I have regular liaison meetings as well as the more public performance and accountability meetings, where we look at those recommendations. There is also a Gold group, chaired by the Deputy Chief Constable, which works through the recommendations line by line. Some of the recommendations have time limits, so we will seek to meet those. I have to respond to the inspectors in addition to the Chief Constable. I would also say that, just because HMIC has made a recommendation, it is not necessarily a requirement. Sometimes it is right to look at recommendations and say “we hear what you say, but think not”, because we are doing things in a different way. I am not sure that this applies here, but I am careful not to say that we accept everything, otherwise we are not critically analysing the recommendations and understanding what is being asked.

Councillor Michael Firmager

Question:

I did put in a question about police numbers, but it has been answered through the presentation. To add to that, where do you want to be with regard to police numbers moving forwards. What are your requirements?

Answer:

Matthew Barber – I would love to be at 500 officers per 100k population. I am sure that the Chief Constable would be delighted with that but it is aspirational. I have said that I want to achieve the Home Office number, which we have done, but moving forwards I would like to grow our numbers in line with the growth in population. Going back to the point made earlier, it is important not to slip back. We know that our population will continue to grow, so that is the minimum I want to get to. Ultimately, the big win will be changing the funding formula to enable us to have significant growth. At the moment, the only other headroom I have is by taxing local taxpayers that bit more. With the budget pressures we have our inflation costs are likely to be about £22m this year. That is a significant cost and there is only so much we can do in that incremental rise through the Council Tax. What I really want is a review of the funding formula which would allow us to recruit more heavily.

Councillor Rebecca Margetts

Question:

Residents from the Gorse Ride Community in Finchampstead do not always get responses when reporting anti-social behaviour incidents to the Police. Can you advise the best way for residents to report incidents and what can be done if they do not get a response?

Answer:

Andrew Cranidge – The best way to report it is by dialing 101 or using the on-line web form. The Council also has an Anti-Social Behaviour team which works closely with TVP. That team provides another reporting route – their process is via email which is monitored. If you can't make contact, it is probably best to contact me if it is a local issue, explaining that the system is not working properly. The increasing number of Neighbourhood officers will also provide another point of contact. In relation to E scooters, we will be starting work on this issue as a force. Quite often, young people should not be using E scooters and there is an issue around parents not understanding the law. We will use the 3 E's approach – engage, explain then, ultimately, enforce. This should become more visible through December and January. We will also work with Road Policing colleagues to tackle any traffic offences. If you can share the details, I will discuss with the Neighbourhood Team and report back to you.

Councillor Jackie Rance

I wanted to say that it is comforting to hear that, in relation to knife crime, the offender is brought in the next day and is dealt with. I was a Berkshire magistrate for 15 years. In those days, it would have to wait for bail and then would come back to court. In terms of sentencing, the guidelines were knife equals prison, so it is very comforting to get them off the street.

Councillor Sam Akhtar**Question:**

From the presentation, it is good to see that the number of burglaries and break-ins to dwellings are down. One of the things I notice in my ward, Charvil, and the neighbouring wards of Sonning and Wargrave, is that more and more thefts from homes do not involve break-ins – this is to do with an increase in thefts of cars. It would be good to know what the police are doing to promote the use of Faraday Pouches and to tackle the role of organised crime in these keyless car thefts.

Answer:

Andrew Cranidge – You hit the nail on the head. This is the work of organised crime groups who find opportunities after watching residents. As with burglary, this is about how we share intelligence across TVP and neighbouring forces. These organised groups move around the country. We have done some work with the motor manufacturers on the sale of cars with Faraday pouches. We also use Thames Valley Alert to raise awareness in local communities. We use local intelligence to decide where to put our resources. This includes marked vehicles and plain clothes officers. Roaming officers are able to help with those patrols. We have had some success in getting organised criminals locked up for some time.

Councillor David Cornish**Question:**

I would like to read an email to the Chief Constable, sent to me just last week by a resident of Nine Mile Ride in Finchampstead.

"We and four of our near neighbours had our garden sheds broken into and a range of goods and tools stolen, with a value of about £1k per household.

My next-door neighbour and I both reported the crime to Thames Valley Police. The others said that there would be absolutely no point in doing so. Unfortunately, they were proved to be correct. About six hours after reporting the crime using the TVP online system, we received an email which in essence said: "you haven't given us a photo or CCTV, or a name of the criminals, so the case is closed". They made no attempt to discuss the crime with us or make a visit.

I can understand the operational challenges you have in responding to every crime in person. But, given your comments earlier about the figures for burglary showing a downward trend and that, in this instance, three victims out of five did not report the crime at all, does this provide some explanation as to why that trend is there?

What can we actually do, you and us as Members, to reassure our residents that household burglary is not, in effect, being decriminalised?

Answer:

Jason Hogg – I believe that you are referring to sheds rather than house burglaries. We do have a different response to the theft of tools as opposed to house burglaries. One of the challenges we have faced for a couple of years is the new entry routes into policing where officers need to have a degree when they join us or get a degree when they join. This means that we have had to release officers in order to spend time studying. The impact of that is that between 30% and 90% of the time of our Neighbourhood teams has been spent backfilling our Response teams. So, we haven't had many Neighbourhood officers on our streets over the past two years. On a positive note, we made announcements yesterday about changing our entry routes and removing protected learning time, thereby reducing the need to backfill. By January 2024 we will have a 90% reduction in the staff needed to cover. From January, our Neighbourhood officers will be out in our communities, doubling the numbers. That, in itself, will make a difference. It is important for people to report crimes to us. We won't investigate every single crime, but we can look for the links. I live in a rural area where there have been a number of attacks on garages and sheds. Residents have formed a WhatsApp group and report suspicious people or vehicles to the PCSO who checks them on their behalf. We feel that fear of crime has decreased as we have a strong connection with local communities. Taking photos or keeping details of the contents of sheds and garages is useful. We recover stolen property all the time but it is often difficult to return it to the owners without the relevant details. The Neighbourhood team will be happy to visit residents. We can also provide crime prevention advice and free shed alarms.

Councillor Caroline Smith

Question:

Many residents have well-founded concerns about the very dangerous way in which electric scooters and some of the more powerful electric bikes are sometimes being ridden. Can you please clarify what advice is currently being given to Police Officers in situations where the use of these items is being done in a demonstrably dangerous and sometimes illegal manner? Specifically, where circumstances would

allow for the confiscation of the scooter or bikes, are Officers being encouraged to do so – or to adopt a different approach?

Answer:

Jason Hogg – I get more letters about E scooters than anything else. It is a challenge. There is a gap in the law. Local Police Area Commanders met recently to consider this issue. In December we will be running a publicity campaign aimed at parents, encouraging them not to buy E scooters for Xmas. I am sure that some people riding E scooters do not know that they are illegal. They can only be ridden on the road or pavement as part of a Council accredited scheme. You would need a driving license, insurance and a helmet. You cannot get insurance for an E scooter, so they are illegal. We will be moving to enforcement quickly and will be prosecuting the parents. We will be seizing a lot of these scooters. This is a subject of public concern. There have been two high profile cases, in Wales and Salford, where police officers have been investigated after pursuing youths on scooters. I am not prepared to put my officers in a situation where they could lose their livelihoods. There is a gap in the legislation here which the Government is looking at. We will be proactive in prosecuting offenders and taking E scooters off the streets.

At the conclusion of the Q&A session, the Deputy Mayor thanked the Police and Crime Commissioner and police representatives for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Matthew Barber, Jason Hogg and Andrew Cranidge be thanked for attending the meeting to give the presentation and answer Member questions;
- 2) the presentation slides be circulated to all Members.

78. Changes to the Constitution - Health and Wellbeing Board Terms of Reference

Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 49 to 59, which gave details of proposed changes to the Council Constitution, specifically relating to the Health and Wellbeing Board's Terms of Reference.

The report stated that, at its meeting on 12 October 2023, the Wokingham Borough Wellbeing Board agreed to change its name to the "Wokingham Health and Wellbeing Board". This change brought the Board into line with the descriptor used by many other councils. The Board also reviewed its Terms of Reference to ensure that it was up to date and reflected current ways of working. The proposed amended Terms of Reference were appended to the report.

RESOLVED: That Council approves the changes to the Wokingham Borough Health and Wellbeing Board, set out in the Appendix to the report and recommended by the Board.

79. Member Question Time

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

79.1 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question. Due to his inability to attend the following written answer was provided:

Question:

Just 31 British councils, under 10 per cent of the total, have released audited accounts for 2022/23. The deadline for audited accounts was the 30th September.

97 councils failed to publish any accounts in 2022/23. The deadline for draft accounts was the 31st May. A total of 658 audited statements of accounts are overdue over the last four financial years

Records held by the Tax payers Alliance shows that Statements of accounts submitted by local authorities, 2019/20 - 2022/23:

With Accounts checked as of 16th October 2023, Wokingham's last audited account was 2019/20.

- 20/21 was unknown.
- 21/22 is in draft
- 22/23 is not published.

My question is when at what cost will audited accounts for the various years 20/21 to now will be published?

Answer

I can confirm that the 2020/21 accounts were signed off in July 2023. A number of external factors impact the timing of the sign-off including delays from a national accounting clarification requirement around infrastructure and most recently the audit of the Pensions body's accounts (The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead are the administering body for the fund and these delays affect all Berkshire authorities).

Work is well underway on the auditing of 2021/22 accounts, and we expect to be mostly complete in November 2023. We will however require the Pensions body's audit to be progressed in order to achieve final sign-off and the council and our external auditors are working with them to understand their progress.

From that work we will be in a better position to fully understand timing for 2022/23 – but expect that to be mid year 2023 (again pending external factors).

The 2020/21 final accounts, and the latest 2021/22 accounts are available on the Council website. We expect the draft 2022/23 accounts to be published in the coming weeks, but have focused on earlier years and ensuring therefore that any required amendments can be reflected in the later periods accounts.

79.2 Pauline Helliar-Symons asked the Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:**Question:**

As you will be aware a number of children in Wokingham Without were unable to get into a local secondary school this September. Some were offered places as far away as Oakbank at the other end of the Borough, and Yateley. There is pressure

on secondary school places in the south of the Borough generally.

What are you doing to ensure there are enough places for all our children closer to their homes in the south of the Borough, and specifically in Wokingham Without?

Answer:

I understand that there is a significant issue for many families living in the Wokingham Without ward – and there has been for some time. They rely on Edgbarrow School, in Bracknell Forest for local secondary school places. However, the school is not currently able to offer places to all Wokingham Without children. Officers have discussed this with the Bracknell Forest counterpart, the school and the DfE. The Corvus Trust who run the school are keen to help but need financial assistance. Bracknell Forest cannot assist as they do not have a shortage of places for their children. The DfE have advised us that we cannot use our school budget to fund places. I appreciate that this national rule is frustrating, but beyond our control.

Other Wokingham schools could make changes to their admissions arrangements, to help Wokingham Without residents. However, judging by 2023 outcomes, these changes would have little effect. By September, over three quarters of the Wokingham Without children had been allocated Edgbarrow School. Twelve children were allocated accessible (by public transport) out of borough schools, in Bracknell and Hampshire. Nine children (not all of whom live close to Edgbarrow School) have been allocated Wokingham town and Winnersh schools. No alternative Wokingham school is within walking distance by a safe walking route, so while the number allocated specific schools might change with amended arrangements, there is no good reason to think the end result would be very different if the other schools changed their arrangements.

I also note that even with the planned and proposed new homes in the north of the Wokingham Without area, there will be insufficient children to justify a new secondary school in the area.

That said, the Council has an active programme working with the local schools' trusts to increase the number of Year 7 places across the Borough. In the south, Bohunt, St Crispins and Emmbrook Schools are all expected to be able to offer additional places in future, through partnership arrangements. The conversion of the Forest School to co-educational status will ensure that all places at that school can be used from next year.

Supplementary Question:

Edgbarrow is our designated school, but it is full as you say Councillor Bray. As are St Crispin's, the Holt, and Bohunt, the only other ones acceptable distances from people's homes. Are you aware that if the radius used next year is the same as that used this year, then 36 roads within my ward, that are within the designated area, will not be eligible, plus 1,750 new houses due to be built in the ward. These are Wokingham children. They are not Bracknell's responsibility. Please will you look again with all urgency at building a new secondary school in the south of the Borough?

Supplementary Answer:

I think you heard me say that even with the planned and proposed new homes, there will be insufficient children in the south of the Borough to justify a new secondary school in the area. We are, however, working on a secondary school strategy. We are expanding the schools which are currently the closest, but we cannot work miracles and wave a magic wand, and invent a secondary school. The difficulty in addition is that even if Edgbarrow do expand, there is no guarantee that those places would go to children in our Borough, if more children from Bracknell applied, and they happened to live closer. So, it is a very difficult one to solve. It has not been solved in all the years that we have been here up to now, and we will do our best for the people who live in Wokingham Without, but I cannot promise you that every single child will get into Edgbarrow. It is just not possible.

79.3 Alison Swaddle asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport & Highways the following question:

Question:

The Council announced last week that a central government grant was being used to fund the restoration of the Saturday bus service from Winnersh Park and Ride to Reading until March 2024. The lead Member rightly encouraged residents to use the service if they want to keep it in an effort to encourage use and make it commercially viable.

What will happen if use does not hit the required level and the bus service ceases when the grant runs out?

Answer:

Before the Covid pandemic, Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride was operated with a commercial bus service provided by Reading Buses. The success of the park and ride provision attracted grant funding from the Thames Valley Enterprise Partnership (LEP), this allowed for the site's expansion.

During the pandemic, Park and Ride services nationally saw a significant reduction in passenger levels and similar was true for the Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride service, which at that time was relocated to Thames Valley Park due to the ongoing construction works at Winnersh Triangle. The service eventually had to be stepped down and then withdrawn due to low use. It was the Borough's intention for a new service to begin following the completion of construction at Winnersh Triangle, however, because that service was commercial (i.e., with no subsidy provided by the Council) the decision to restart the service was with Reading Buses.

Reading Buses determined that there would not be sufficient demand for the service given the change in travel habits and lack of use of Park and Rides nationally. The strategy is to use grant funding to kick-start the service at a time when passenger numbers are historically at their highest, whilst limiting the cost of resource to give the service the best chance.

However, if the required level of use is not achieved by the time the grant funding runs out the bus service will stop, and the current situation will resume. Using the Lime 4 and X4 still remains an option. The car park would continue to operate serving the adjacent railway station, with Electric Vehicle charge points, but alternative uses would need to be considered at that time.

Supplementary Question:

I want to ask about what we are doing to promote the service, bearing in mind we are also offering free travel on buses on Saturdays. Also, I do think Reading Borough Council needs to be doing more to help. Their own new transport strategy talks about adding a lot more bus services to Winnersh. Will Wokingham Borough Council be pressing Reading Borough Council and pressing Reading Buses to help subsidise and promote this route as it certainly benefits Reading financially as it is literally driving passengers to shop there?

Supplementary Answer:

Yes, promotion is going to be through our website, it is going to be through the media. Promotion by Reading Buses is already taking place. They have got that on their website as well. We will be promoting it through social media, and those particular areas. Reading Borough Council are aware of this, and I will be pushing them to promote it as well, because quite rightly as you say, they will actually be benefiting through their economy.

79.4 David Cornish asked the Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan the following question:**Question:**

The last version of the Local Plan Update, the 'Revised Growth Strategy' was published for consultation in November 2021. The plan listed sites suitable for development and gave a capacity for each site. For example: "Location X has been identified for 10 dwellings". That is a clear and unambiguous statement and yet, when discussing Planning Applications for some of these sites with officers, I was advised that these site capacity numbers should be seen as 'indicative' or even, the 'minimum' number.

I can find no statement in the Revised Growth Strategy to support this. I understand that the LPU is a working document, with numbers therein used as part of a broad calculation.

But that is not what the public understand. If a site is included in a consultation with a site capacity indicated against it, then the public will base their responses accordingly. To tell them later that the number means something quite different is blatantly misleading.

Could I ask the Executive Member for Planning to work with officers to ensure that when the next version of the LPU is published, the meaning of statements about site capacity is made much clearer.

Answer:

I agree that policy should provide as clear an indication as possible as to how the Council proposes a site to be developed and I will work with officers to this end. However there are limits on what can be achieved.

To explain, policy wording cannot be written as an absolute with experience being that it must be drafted as an approximate number of homes, or a figure in the order

of a number of homes. Such wording is 'tried and tested', and consistently supported by Planning Inspectors. Plans that do not use this form of wording will likely be modified by Inspectors at examination in any event.

We have also to recognise that a landowner has the right to submit a planning application for any form of development. This will be assessed against our policies as a whole. When an application is put forward for a greater number of homes than expected by policy, this will be considered, however the primary consideration will be whether the proposal achieved quality design and placemaking. Proposals which do not achieve this will be refused.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you, Lindsay, for your answer which is very informative, but I think it speaks to perhaps a wider issue of how the Council communicates in general about planning issues to the public. There is clearly an enormous gap between the precision and the professionalism required by the Council in addressing planning issues, and the understanding of the general public. This gap in understanding works to the detriment of us all, and I think the next question from Councillor Margetts is along a similar sort of line. Could I therefore ask Lindsay that he facilitate a meeting when convenient between, he, myself and the Director for Place and Growth to discuss in broad terms how we might possibly work together to improve some of our communications on this?

Supplementary Answer:

Yes, David, I would be quite happy to do that.

79.5 Charles Margetts asked the Executive Member for Planning and the Local Plan the following question:

Question:

The Council is planning to develop two SEND schools, a solar farm and a Covid wood alongside Barkham Ride. There are also planning applications with the Council for close to 100 houses to be built on a site on the same stretch of road. Much of this work is scheduled to take place in 2024/2025. Barkham Ride is a narrow secondary road. At the junction with Commonfield lane a car driver has to stop if a bus / lorry is coming the other way as the road is not wide enough for two lines of traffic. The drainage system under the road is poor and based on figures from WBC highways there have been 60 sets of roadworks on the drainage on this road since 2019. What work is planned to improve Barkham ride to manage this additional traffic?

Answer:

In the first instance, it is important to note that the Covid Memorial Wood will be provided as an extension to California Country Park which is not accessed from Barkham Ride. In addition, the solar farm, when operational, will generate few traffic movements.

Turning to the other matters you raise. The planning applications for housing are currently under consideration and, therefore, it is not appropriate for me to specifically comment on them. Notwithstanding, you will be aware that the impacts

of a proposed development on the highway and traffic is an important consideration in the planning application process. Mitigation is requested where it is necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms.

Whilst the planning application will consider matters in detail, I note that the sites on which the planning applications for housing have been received, were included as proposed allocations within the Local Plan Update Revised: Growth Strategy Consultation in 2021, approved by the previous administration, and having been assessed for their traffic impacts.

The proposal for the SEND schools is not yet subject to a formal planning application. A transport assessment will be prepared and considered in association with any planning application submitted in due course.

In addition to its role as a regulatory authority, the Council is the construction client for the solar farm and the SEND Schools which heightens our ability to manage and coordinate construction activities to help minimise the impact of construction as far as possible.

Lastly, on the matters of road works, records show that 73% of roadworks on Barkham Ride, during the period you mentioned, were associated with utility companies.

Supplementary Question:

I think the concern of my residents is that there is a significant amount of development land here, and they are concerned that this all going to turn the area into a complete gridlock. I note that there was no plan mentioned there for any upgrade to Barkham Ride, to cope with that. My view is that the infrastructure should be upgraded to match development.

There are two concerns here – the quality of this road, which has been referred to, and the capacity. Now myself and Councillor Cornish, met planning and highways officers last week, and I share many of the comments that Councillor Cornish has made earlier in his question. We requested that highways and planning officers come up with a plan to actually manage the development of this area, so that there is a proper plan and residents can be reassured that the Council is not going to leave them in gridlock and limbo whilst construction is going on, and secondly after construction is finished.

I would ask that Councillor Ferris considers the request, which is not just from me but from members of his party too, who are just concerned for the sake of their local residents, and considers whether some kind of plan can be put in place and actually liaison take place with local Members to make sure that the area is represented and looked after properly?

Supplementary Answer:

I am happy to be involved on a cross Member activity. I have got to remember that we are still in the middle of putting the Local Plan together, and as I said, I cannot specifically talk about this issue. But we need to remember that this particular site originally had 270 homes on Rooks Nest Farm which would have had about three

years of development, so there was work taking place at that time, but I am more than willing to be involved with the local Members in the area to come through as the particular planning actions and activities come into play. As I touched on in my original answer, the last part of which was as the authority involved, we are putting a solar farm together and the SEND schools. We would be aiming to do the minimum so that we could make sure that it works in a way. So, the answer to that would be yes I am more than happy to do that, but there are things in place that I cannot talk about.

79.6 Jackie Rance asked the Executive Member for Business and Economic Development the following question:

Question:

The Council is claiming that there is no reduction in footfall in our town centres. The experience of business people in the town centre is very different. How do you explain this?

Answer:

The sensors in the town centre are showing an increase in pedestrians from 2020 to 2023. Data prior to 2020 is not available.

We want to encourage people to use our town centres. That is why we are providing free bus travel on the six Saturdays leading up to Christmas using ring-fenced grants for public transport. In addition, we have used funds from the Economic Development fund to provide free town centre parking for the Winter Carnival in Wokingham on Sunday November 26th and for the Woodley winter extravaganza on Sunday December 3rd. I am sure you will welcome both of these two initiatives to encourage people to use our town centres.

I understand the very real pressures on our retailers and indeed all businesses in the Borough. The pressure that has been massively increased by the cost of living crisis caused by your government. A crisis that has seen inflation at over 10% for quite some time, although it is now 4.6% it is still way above the Bank of England's target of 2%. We have also seen a more than doubling of energy costs in the last two years adding £1,000 to household bills in Wokingham. On top of this mortgage rates have increased since Liz Truss' budget in 2022. A household remortgaging in Wokingham is seeing extra interest costs of around £500 a month. Food costs have risen by 30% over the last two years. This all adds up to increases in costs for many households in Wokingham of well over £6,000 a year. That is £6,000 that can't be spent with local businesses and local retailers.

Supplementary Question:

The Liberal Democrats have considerably extended the charging hours in the mornings, evenings and weekends, so total ticket sales including these times will skew the data, and not demonstrate a fair comparison with previous years, alongside total number of ticket sales. Will you commit to publishing data for times that can be directly compared with previous charging times?

Supplementary Answer:

Yes, we will do.

79.7 Abdul Loyes asked the Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Housing the following question:

Question:

How many instances of anti-social behaviour by Council tenants have there been in the last year and how many evictions has this resulted in?

Answer:

I'm not sure where you are going with this question, Abdul, but I hope you will share my view that the role of responsible politicians, at local as well as national level, is to bring people together not drive them apart. There is an implication in your question, which I am sure that you did not intend, that Council tenants are very different kinds of people from other residents. Anyone who has worked with our tenants would be able to tell you that is not the case; the overwhelming majority are good, law-abiding and decent members of our community. At a recent presentation on the Tenants' Charter, we heard representatives from the Tenant and Landlord Improvement Panel tell us about the need to end the stigmatisation of Council tenants. I fear your question is not helping to advance that objective.

But to answer you directly, there have been 978 incidents of anti-social behaviour, of all types, in relation to council tenants in the last year. That does not mean, of course, that 978 tenants have been involved; the figures include repeat offenders. Two evictions have taken place due to anti-social behaviour.

Eviction is, of course, the last resort, and only used when all other methods have been exhausted. In low-level ASB cases, and that is the vast majority of the 978 just referenced, eviction would be a totally disproportionate response. Our aim is always to prevent low-level cases from becoming more serious ones that might ultimately require eviction. To that end, housing officers have recently been adopting an early intervention approach, to nip problem behaviour in the bud. Should that behaviour continue, then an active case will be opened to investigate a potential tenancy breach. If cases are judged to be sufficiently serious, Community Safety specialist ASB officers make an assessment of evidence and undertake any required enforcement action. Over the last year, the Community Safety team took enforcement action, short of eviction, in 27 cases.

Supplementary Question:

You have answered half of it. You said 978 and thank you for that, but however, would you agree with me that anti social behaviour has serious consequences for local communities? How do you justify this lack of action?

Supplementary Answer:

I have to say that is quite a disgraceful imputation that our officers have not been taking action, and I hope you will actually reconsider that question and think about withdrawing that slur on our officers. I think that was really below the belt, and you ought to be stopping to reflect I think on the implications of what you say. I am afraid that has taken my breath away, in its accusation of lack of action. I have just given you a detailed response of what officers are doing to tackle this problem, and your

response is how are you going to explain your lack of action? That is quite disgraceful, quite disgraceful, and I hope you will reflect on that and never ask such a kind of question again.

At this point in the meeting Prue Bray proposed that the Member Question Time be extended to allow all question to be put. This was seconded by Imogen Shepherd-Dubey. Upon being put to the vote this was agreed.

79.8 Phil Cunnington asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question:

A number of public statements by the Lib Dem leader and others recently have said that excess spending in Adult Social Care is jeopardising the Council's financial stability.

Can you explain which areas of ASC have overspent the budget agreed by Council and by how much in the year to date?

Answer:

The Local Government Association estimates that councils in England face a funding gap of almost £3 billion over the next two years just to keep services standing still. The majority of this funding gap, as experienced in Wokingham, relates to pressures in Social Care for Adult and Children's Services.

Wokingham is a well-run efficient council, providing valuable service to residents. We use our limited funding wisely and Adults Services provide good care and support, making a positive difference to many people, enabling them to live their lives in ways that matter to them. However, after more than a decade of chronic underfunding of core services for vulnerable Adults and Children, coupled recently with unfinanced inflation, we now face a financial precipice.

In respect of the overall allocation of funding to Adults Social Care, we require greater weighting to be given towards recognising the basic cost of delivering services when determining need, as opposed to steering funding elsewhere as a result of recognising specific factors such as deprivation. In 2023/24, Wokingham has once again received one of the lowest percentages of Settlement Funding Assessment Grant as a share of its total income, of any unitary authority.

The Adult Services budget in 2023/24 was £65.9million, 36.5% of the total Council budget. We are currently forecasting a net overspend of £476,000 for the 2023/24 financial year. This represents a 0.7% overspend against budget. Inflation was a lot more than that.

The overspend in Adult Services is being driven by demand for services, the availability of care alongside the increased placement costs across Adult Social Care, caused principally by inflation.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for that answer, not as specific as I would have liked but thank you all the

same. I am aware of two streams of funding that we have coming into the Council, the Better Care Fund and from Continuing Healthcare, which you will be very well aware of. I hope that you can tell me that we have been as a council receiving these monies so far this year, because obviously not to receive them would be very difficult first of all, but secondly it means that the Council would be funding some additional services that the NHS have not yet paid for, and it is my concern that if we do not collect that money then we will find ourselves further in debt. Can you please tell me if that has not been collected what procedures you would put in place in order to pick up the debts that may be owed to us by the NHS?

Supplementary Answer:

As you know the NHS is not the most generous of payers, and certainly we have not found it easy. I cannot say specific things, but certainly our officers are going after that, but it would be good if you and I got together and we can put some more pressure on the NHS, because certainly I know for instance, they have not paid some of our money which is amounting to almost £2million. We need to have that now and that would certainly help us.

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

Question:

Reintroducing women's only swimming was signed off by this Council a year and a half ago but still hasn't started again. The current plans are a million miles away from the vision of it being a convenient and pleasant experience to get more women being active. Plans include it being held at The Forest School, only available between the times of 8am - 9am Tuesdays and Wednesdays, during term time. Women will also have to hire the facility themselves, to open and close it and organise a volunteer lifeguard. What consultation have you done with women to know that this is what they want, this works for them, and it'll be a success?

Answer:

Since Places Leisure began operating our Leisure Centres in 2018 there have been no women only swim sessions. Prior to the redevelopment of Bulmershe Leisure Centre, the Town Council operated the site for swimming, which included women only sessions. However, when the site was rebuilt, the pool was relocated, with windows adjacent to housing. The pool is also overlooked by the café viewing area and so is no longer appropriate for women only sessions.

S106 funding was secured as part of the Winnersh developments, and an agreement was reached with Forest School to fund works including pool refurbishment. Work was scheduled to commence in late 2022, but delays were experienced meaning that the pool work was only completed in June this year.

The agreement at the time with the school was restricted due to school safeguarding procedures. Swimming sessions were allocated two hours per week before the school day begins, as the pool is booked every evening for local swim schools and is also used in the day for Forest Pupils and nine local primary schools.

In line with the school hiring and safeguarding procedures, usage must be as a group, and a lifeguard must be provided by those booking the session. Officers are

currently progressing discussions with the school and are seeking local groups within the community to utilise the offered sessions, in consultation with the Equalities and Diversity Forum.

Supplementary Question:

My question is how are women supposed to feel, that this is the best offer that the administration can give them? How are women supposed to feel that they have not been consulted nor has the Councillor who has championed this for them, Councillor Shahid Younis, or informed of the progress? How are women supposed to feel that this looks like it has been set up to fail, and look like there was no demand from women at all, because it is inconvenient 8am-9am? We know that women are going to work or getting children ready to go to school. This is a chance for the Council to show that they prioritise women's health and needs, and this offer is not it. How are women supposed to feel that they are just being offered the scrapings of the barrel, and an offer they do not deserve?

Supplementary Answer:

I do not know Laura, how did women feel when your administration relocated Bulmershe Pool, where there were already established women only sessions, to a position where they could no longer be held? The windows directly adjacent to housing and with a viewing area from the café. How did women feel about that? Did you consult women about doing that?

80. Minutes of Committee Meetings and Ward Matters

80.1 Andy Croy asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question:

Addington School, which is in my ward, is a special school for children with special educational needs. Historically, the Borough has appointed a person to the board of governors, and I think the last person who held that role, and held it for many years, was Councillor Baker. I have a vague memory of that vote coming to Council at one point. I do note that Councillor Baker, since September, has no longer been on the board of governors. So, I guess my concern is are we sure that Democratic Services and the Educational team, and I guess this is to Prue, have not lost sight of the fact that we have had an appointee to the school, and we no longer have that person on the board, so would Prue look at that, and make sure that we are not missing out on an appointee that we have historically had?

Answer:

I do not know the exact details. I am not sure whether we have been informed of anything. We will look into it and see what transpires. I do not know anything about it, I am afraid.

Councillor Baker raised a point of personal explanation and explained that the role of a local authority appointed governor had disappeared some time ago. He had continued as a governor in his own capacity and not as a Council appointee.

80.2 Ian Pittock asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question:

When we set up the Arborfield SDL and what became Bohunt School, instead of

building a separate leisure centre for the public and a standard sized school sports hall, we instead acquired the large MoD sports centre using S106 monies. This contained a huge main hall, a large climbing wall, two dance studios and three squash courts. The intention was that the school would use the facility during the day and the residents of Finchampstead, Arborfield and Barkham at all other times. We also built into this a small gym to be used by the public in the school day and until such time as the main facility was opened up properly. The public access to the main facilities is yet to be made available many years later for out of school use.

Can you tell us please what your intentions are now regarding the entire facility, and will you commit to publishing a plan by the end of January to show how the long delayed full access will be given to residents?

Answer:

First, I think I must say that it is greatly to your credit as a ward Councillor who was only elected in May, that you have been trying to resolve a very, very long standing issue. I can tell you that our colleague Lindsay Ferris, the Executive Member for Planning will be visiting the site to investigate. As soon as he has done so I think that it would be wise that you met with Lindsay and myself so that we can discuss next steps. My intention is that Lindsay will lead on this because it is fundamentally about the fulfilling of planning obligations, but I am that he will want to involve you in the formulation of a plan of action.

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

Question:

For the last couple of days, I have been doing my walk-around speaking to the business community in the precinct area. Here are a few examples that they have shared with me. These are not from the Council, these are the actual business community. I have got the names of the businesses, but I do not want to say in the public domain, but I have got them if you need them.

Number one their sales figures have gone down since the car parking charges have gone up; you see what I am talking about. Since the car parking charges have gone up, their sales figures have gone down 12-15%. They have lost most of the customers who are spending £10 or £10-15, so they are only getting the bigger spenders. The £10-15 are not coming in.

In addition to that they have lost, obviously the Police Commissioner knows, they lose 5-7% because of shoplifting as well. So as a result, and combination of this, what has happened is that they have had to reduce the number of staff because they can no longer afford to pay them.

So, my question is what would your advice and response be to the business community who are facing the hardship because of increased car parking charges, and what steps are the Council taking to mitigate those losses?

Answer:

I think a lot of it is to do with the cost of living. Sales figures are down in quite a number of town centres and city centres, but what we are doing is putting on free

bus travel for weekends on Saturdays, and we have also got the free car parking on the Extravaganza as well as free bus travel on those particular days, 3rd December.

As you know we are currently doing a report looking at the impact of the increase in charging, and as I said already back to George Evans, the member of the public, there has not actually been any impact at all, and the numbers have not gone down. Footfall has actually not gone down at all in Wokingham where we have got some sensors. So, we are doing as much as we can to attract people into our town centres. We cannot do anymore. We have a budget that we have to meet. Previously we had a shortfall of £600,000-£800,000 last year, hence why the charges had to go up. That was the only way of fulfilling the shortfall in our budget. They had not gone up for over 5 years. If they had gone up in small steps, we would not have had that same impact. So, I think a lot of it is down to the cost of living.

80.4 Rachel Burgess asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

Many residents in my ward of Norreys who are able or less able, walk to St Crispin's Leisure Centre to take part in various fitness related activities such as standing exercise to music or pilates. They are unable to walk to Montage Park for example and they are unable to walk to Carnival Hub for example, and they do not drive.

In the recent consultation on the future of the leisure centre, a total of 156 respondents stated that they would stop exercising completely if there were no facilities at St Crispins and over half of these stated location as the cause. However, in the recent Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny meeting and the report regarding this, there were no guarantees that appropriate facilities or financing would be available for these activities should the centre be transferred to St Crispin's School. The voice of these residents was clear in the consultation, but it seems as if the needs of these residents and the detrimental impact on their physical health and wellbeing has been ignored.

My question is what does the Executive Member suggest that I say to the many older or less able residents in my ward who value this important community asset, and who fear that it is being taken away from them through the actions of Wokingham Borough Council?

Answer:

I do agree that there is a significant percentage of the respondents to the consultation, I have read it verbatim, and that is what struck me as coming through very strongly. We are as you know, we have been to Overview and Scrutiny with a report. It is being reconsidered at Overview and Scrutiny after further work. There will be information added for that. All I can say for the time being is that you will have to wait until it has been to Overview and Scrutiny and then to the Executive.

80.5 Jane Ainslie asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question:

Can the Leader of the Council update us on any responses from the Management Company for Montague Park with respect to the issues have been facing with the company?

Answer:

The Management Company you are referring to is FirstPort. I wrote to them some while ago. I have now finally received a response, and that response is actually broadly positive. It does show some commitment to trying to address the concerns raised by the leaseholders, and I am very happy to share that response with you if that is helpful.

80.6 Peter Harper asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

I have been approached by a Neighbourhood Watch Coordinator covering sheltered housing in Finchampstead about changes to the hedge cutting schedule which has gone from twice a year, April and October, to once a year in December. This reduced cutting schedule creates an untidy and unkempt environment which attracts anti-social behaviour and criminal activity.

Will you reconsider this reduction in cuts where it causes an impact on neighbourhood safety?

Answer:

There has been no reduction in hedge cutting in the last couple of years. What happened before that, I do not know. If you could send an email to me with the details of the specific location I will get the team to have a look at it.

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

Question:

Some residents in Maiden Erlegh have applied to the Council for a licence to look after a green area within the ward which turns out to be part of the adopted public highway which creates some complications. Their intention was to try and beautify the area, reduce the burden on the Council and to provide a focus for community cohesion. I wonder if the Executive Member could please commit officers to work constructively with the residents to support such initiatives, taking into account reasonable requirements for safety and working practices etc?

Answer:

Section 142 of the Highways Act actually cover cultivation of highways by third parties. What I will do is work with yourself and get officers to work with us to overcome any particular issues. There are conditions, there always are, and certainly it will be a £5million public liability insurance that will be required, but I will commit to working with you to try and get this off the ground.

80.8 Phil Cunnington has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

One of my residents is involved in arranging fairs which are held at that [St Crispin's] leisure centre. He advises me that he has been told that he cannot make bookings for those fares to continue after December. Now in my question to you at Executive, I asked about continued community use, and you assured me that, that would

continue. So, does this mean that actually that, is not going to happen, and community use will not continue, and with regards to your comment that the decision had not been pre-made and so you could not prejudge it, does that actually mean that the decision has been made, you just cannot say?

Answer:

I do not know if you actually went through the whole report which went to Overview and Scrutiny. If you did you will have seen that there is an intention there on our part to do everything we can to maintain public access, not only for fairs, but in other ways too. Until that has been seen again, the revised report has been seen by Overview and Scrutiny and gone to Executive, I cannot make any commitment at this point.

80.9 Catherine Glover has asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

In Shinfield South many residents really appreciate the improved bus service we have had since last year, when the Mere oak Park and Ride 600 service was extended to Riseley and Thames Valley Science Park. How long do you anticipate the funding will last for the supported bus service in Shinfield, like the 600 and the Leopard number 3 in the evening?

Answer:

These are supported bus services. They are supported through a combination of council tax and S106 funding. Recently we let a new contract which extends to 31 August 2026, and hopefully that will give surety to businesses and residents who live in the area. There is a more detailed report which went to the Executive in February this year and if I refer that to you if you have any further questions after you have read that, please come back to me.

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

Question:

I was contacted about six weeks ago by a couple of residents in my ward who had noticed extensive tree cutting going on, on site on Barkham Ride. As this site had a history of cutting down TPO trees in the past I contacted the officers and asked them to look into it. In fairness to them they dealt with it very quickly and went to the site, and checked out what was going on and there was no TPO tree cutting.

My then follow up was to say could they please inspect all the remaining trees and make sure that any of any value which would be protected. The answers were vague and non-committal. Further pressing of officers then revealed, about a couple of weeks later, there had been a two/three month period where the Council had no ability to serve TPOs due to a problem of a mapping software system. I am told that is now resolved. I found out recently that the same site has a pre app for housing on it, therefore my question is, can you please check into the situation and check that TPOs can be issued, and if I write to you with details of the site, can you make sure that it is prioritised for inspection as soon as possible due to the housing situation?

Answer:

Yes, please do write to me because I want to stop any tree being cut down if I can, but we have so many trees that are not protected that it would take us years, literally, with the resources we have, and at the moment we cannot increase that resource. Anything that any councillor thinks is in urgent need of protection because of speculators in the area, please let me know and we will prioritise those areas.

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

Question:

Could the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways please provide an update on the latest situation concerning the plans to upgrade California Crossroads? Could he also offer reassurance that consultations prior to the start of work will demonstrate to local businesses how the necessary levels of access for their customers will be maintained during this period in fully practical terms?

Answer:

The trial holes have been completed. They are currently being analysed. Businesses will be contacted in the next couple of weeks by the team, and all the ones surrounding California Crossroads. They will go into discussions with business owners to look at their accessibility, how they get into the property, how they have deliveries etc., to gather information to then put into the programme. The works actually will start, the physical works on the first phase, in February 2024. Letters will also go out to all residents in the area as well, and a meeting is planned for the middle of December, which people will then be invited to, to understand what the latest information is, and if they have any further questions. Before the works start businesses will be contacted again and the contractor and the team will go around all the businesses to make sure everybody understands what phases are going in first, the work that is being undertaken, and make sure that everything is ok. The team will also be on hand when the works commence on site with the contractor if there is any particular issues that come up.

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

Question:

The Council did good work earlier this year putting down yellow lines on a junction in my ward, which I requested, which is by Highwood Primary School. Unfortunately, parents are still parking there at pick time and also on the grass verges next to it, and residents were saying what is the point of putting them down if they are not being enforced. Civil Parking Enforcement Officers say that they visit the school once a month, which really is too low for this area. So I know that resources are tight, but could you please look into if we can increase the number of visits to this school, because I see officers in car parks and Wokingham Town Centre all the time, I wave to them, but if we could get some more focus on this school it would be appreciated.

Answer:

I will certainly look to get the CPE officers down to that particular school to visit more frequently.

**81. Statements by the Leader of the Council and Executive Members
Stephen Conway, Leader of the Council:**

I would like to update Council on the strategic partnership we have agreed with the University of Reading. It has long been my ambition to secure, for the Council, the advantages of having a world class university in the Borough. Over the last few months we have been able to engage very fruitfully with the University on ways we can work together on areas of common interest. We have recently had the first meeting of the newly formed strategic partnership board, comprising the Vice Chancellor and his Head of Community Engagement on the University side and the Chief Executive and me in my capacity as Leader, representing the Council. We heard reports of work underway in four separate areas; climate emergency, arts and culture, economic development and participatory research. Each of these work streams is led by a senior academic and a senior council officer. We stand to gain much from tapping into the expertise available at the University, but the University can be a winner too, as being able to demonstrate that its research is having an impact on public policy, will help it acquire grants for further research projects.

I should also like to inform Council that Clive Jones, the Executive Member for Business and Economic Development has asked to be released from his role so that he can devote more time to his campaign to become the next MP for Wokingham. I want to thank Clive for all his work on the Executive and wish him well on his parliamentary endeavours. I am delighted that David Cornish has agreed to replace Clive on the Executive. David has been shadowing Clive for some months, and his business experience will be invaluable in this new role. David joining the Executive means, of course, that he can no longer be involved in Overview and Scrutiny. I am pleased to report that his place on the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be taken by Catherine Glover, while Al Neal will replace David on the Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Clive has kindly agreed to act as substitute on these committees and also as substitute on the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee. These changes come into effect from 1 December.

Clive Jones, Executive Member for Business and Economic Development:

We have a really good team of officers working hard to energise the business and economic development function within the Council. We are developing a new Business and Economic Development Strategy, which should be ready in the later part of 2024. In September we held a job fayre that was seen as a huge success both by exhibitors and the 250 or so people who attended the event. We hope to do a similar event in Woodley early in 2024. Much more is also going on to improve our local economy, which is much needed to offset the impact on consumers of this Conservative government's increases in personal taxes, doubling of energy bills, 30% increases in food costs, and an average increase in a mortgage in Wokingham of £6,000 a year. That is £6,000 a year that cannot be spent on the local economy.

Mr Deputy Mayor, I stepped down from being Leader of the Council and the Executive Member for Business and Economic Development, so I could concentrate on my role as the Lib Dem parliamentary candidate for Wokingham. I retain the Business and Economic Development portfolio. However, it is now time for me to relinquish this role so that it will give me more time to the task of leading the campaign to ensure that the first ever Liberal Democrat MP for Wokingham is elected.

At this point in the meeting Councillor Andy Croy indicated that Section 4.2.23 Statements by the Leader of the Council, Executive Members and Deputy Executive Members, indicated that speeches by the Leader of the Council, Executive Members and Deputy Executive Members should not be of a party political nature.

Clive Jones, Executive Member for Business and Economic Development (continued):

I am delighted that Councillor David Cornish is going to take over the portfolio. I have very much enjoyed working with him over the last six months and I am sure that he will be a very capable and effective Executive Member for Business and Economic Development.

Paul Fishwick, Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways:

One Day Travelcard. Saved. I was unable to support the Mayor's proposal to withdraw the Travel Card and urged the Mayor to reconsider the true impacts of the scheme. I also agreed to sign a joint letter from the Campaign for Better Transport, one of 20 local authorities to do so, opposing the plans. I was delighted to hear the news that Transport for London would retain the One Day Travel Card.

Rail ticket offices closures withdrawn. On 31 August I approved a response from this Council to strongly oppose the planned, poorly thought out, closure of ticket offices across the country, including here in Wokingham Borough. It was welcome news that this ridiculous plan was withdrawn last month.

Buses to start from Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride. Two weeks ago I approved grant funding to operate a bus service from Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride to Reading Town Centre on Saturdays starting on Saturday 25 November and continuing until at least mid-April 2024.

Talking of Park and Rides, we inherited a Conservative financial white elephant known as Coppid Beech Park and Ride. That had a poor and flaky benefit/cost ratio. This costs valuable money to be closed, so I have approved its opening from 27th November using the Lion 4 and X4 bus service, and an EV charging station to try and reduce the shortfall and expenditure.

Free bus travel across Wokingham Borough. Last week I approved free bus travel on Saturdays from 18th November and during December until 23rd and on Sunday 26 November for the Wokingham Winter Carnival and Sunday 3rd December for the Woodley Christmas Extravaganza. This should be a great help for a lot of our residents. Free bus travel will help people who do not drive, prefer not to drive, or are struggling to afford their car at the moment, whether visiting family and friends, shopping or getting to and from work. This is a great opportunity to take the bus and see what you have been missing. This all fits in with our objectives contained within our Bus Service Improvement Plan to grow patronage, and hopefully many residents will continue to use the bus in the future.

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

Violence against women and girls is a fundamental human rights violation which harms the lives of millions. There will be hardly anyone in this Chamber who will be

unaffected by this. I still remember the first time I was cat-called. My value as a person determined simply on how I looked. I was 12 years old and since then I have had multiple experiences from cat calling, being groped, stalked, and even attempted rape. We all have our own stories but the common thing running through all of them is that men are the perpetrators and women are dehumanised, treated as objects, and this stops women and girls living the lives they would choose for themselves. It is not all men and in fact it is not most men, but all men have a moral duty to be part of the solution. No more should we be requiring women to change their behaviours in order to avoid abuse and violence. We need men to actively call out misogynistic behaviour and toxic masculinity that are prevalent in society. Those behaviours provide a platform to the minority of men who commit violence against women. So, to ignore or excuse misogynistic behaviours only serves the perpetrators and puts women's lives at risk. The added benefit is tackling toxic masculinity also makes the lives of men and boys better as well. Never again shall I have to hear my son being told to 'man up.' In little over a week's time 25th November is the international day for the elimination of violence against women, and the start of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

25th November is also White Ribbon day. As this Council Chamber will also be aware, White Ribbon is specifically about raising awareness of the role that men play in eliminating violence against women and girls as part of the wider broad agenda. I am delighted to announce this evening that following our application to White Ribbon UK, Wokingham Borough Council is now White Ribbon accredited. This means that we have demonstrated to White Ribbon UK that we have the strategic buy-in and the governance framework in place to continuously enable us to work towards culture change. We have set up a steering group to lead on this vital work which includes ambassadors and champions from the organisation, including Councillor Hare and Councillor Croy. Thank you both for your commitment to this. I would like to specifically mention and thank three members of our Corporate Leadership Team, Matt Pope, George Framalocco and Graham Ebers. Matt, George and Graham have taken it in turn to be the organisation's White Ribbon Strategic Leads, rotating on an annual basis, with Matt taking the lead for the first year. Having this kind of corporate level buy in and leadership demonstrates the priority given to this important agenda and I would like to personally thank you.

And finally, a huge thank you to Phil Stoneman who has done all the ground work to get us to this point. He has done a fantastic job. As we approach 25th November and the 16 days of activism, there will be a series of events across the Borough including a vigil in Market Place on 1 December at 7pm. I urge everyone here this evening to get involved in some way. Silence only serves those who oppress, so do not be silent.

82. Statement from Council Owned Companies

There were no statements from the Council owned companies.

83. Motions

83.1 Motion 510 submitted by Pauline Helliard-Symons

Council considered the following Motion, submitted by Councillor Pauline Helliard-Symons and seconded by Councillor Michael Firmager.

'While recognising concerns about clean air and congestion, there has to be a

balance with supporting the local economy, therefore this Council is committed not to introduce ULEZ (Ultra Low Emissions Zone) charges in any part of the Borough of Wokingham.'

It was moved by Councillor Andy Croy and seconded by Councillor Paul Fishwick, that the Motion be amended as follows (in bold):

'While recognising concerns about clean air and congestion, there has to be a balance with supporting the local economy, therefore this Council is committed not to introduce ULEZ (Ultra Low Emissions Zone) charges in any part of the Borough of Wokingham, **but if the quality of air in the area were to give rise to a health requirement to improve air quality Council would, of course, reconsider its position.**'

Councillor Helliard-Symons indicated that the proposed amendment was acceptable.

Upon being put to the vote, the Deputy-Mayor announced that the amendment had been carried.

Upon being put to the vote, the Deputy Mayor announced that the substantive Motion had been approved and it was:

RESOLVED: That, while recognising concerns about clean air and congestion, there has to be a balance with supporting the local economy, therefore this Council is committed not to introduce ULEZ (Ultra Low Emissions Zone) charges in any part of the Borough of Wokingham, but if the quality of air in the area were to give rise to a health requirement to improve air quality Council would, of course, reconsider its position.

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