

**MINUTES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON 19 JANUARY 2018 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.10 PM**

Members Present

Councillors: Rob Stanton (Mayor), John Kaiser (Deputy Mayor), Alistair Auty, Keith Baker, Laura Blumenthal, David Chopping, UllaKarin Clark, Gary Cowan, Andy Croy, Richard Dolinski, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Mike Haines, Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Pauline Helliar-Symons, Emma Hobbs, Tim Holton, John Jarvis, Clive Jones, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, Dianne King, David Lee, Abdul Loyes, Julian McGhee-Sumner, Ken Miall, Philip Mirfin, Stuart Munro, Barrie Patman, Malcolm Richards, Angus Ross, David Sleight, Chris Smith, Wayne Smith and Oliver Whittle

64. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Parry Batth, Chris Bowring, Prue Bray, Kate Haines, John Halsall, Philip Houldsworth, Charles Margetts, Ian Pittock, Bob Pitts, Beth Rowland, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Alison Swaddle, Paul Swaddle, Bill Soane and Shahid Younis.

65. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

66. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The Leader announced that Councillor Oliver Whittle had resigned as Executive Member for Finance due to personal reasons. She thanked him for his hard work and expressed gratitude at his efforts in preparing the budget for the next year. She announced that Councillor Julian McGhee-Sumner would assume the role of Executive Member for Finance. In addition Councillor Richard Dolinski would assume the role of Executive Member for Adults Services and a new Deputy Executive Member for Adults Services would be announced at a future Council meeting. The Leader also announced that she had appointed Councillor Keith Baker as Executive Member for Highways and Transport and had asked Councillor Chris Bowring to take on the new role of Deputy Executive Member for Strategic Highways and Planning.

67. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Mayor invited a member of the public to submit a question to the appropriate Member.

67.1 Helen Power asked the Executive Member for Strategic Highways and Planning the following question:

Question

When the Southern Distributor road is being built the A321 Finchampstead Road will be closed at the railway bridge between Tesco and Molly Millars Lane. What plans do you have in place to ensure the traffic chaos currently being experienced due to the closure of other main town centre roads is avoided and this closure does not cause gridlock on other roads?

Answer

This question sounds more suited to something we are going to look at later on. In fact some of us struggled through the traffic tonight, on a large coach coming back from a visit

to Bristol, so I have every sympathy. However, it is difficult in all honesty to totally say how we can resolve this issue whilst we are currently regenerating the town and actually putting the new roads in, especially the one that is going in around the Town Hall.

However, what I would say is that the Council is progressing the Southern Distributor Road (SDR) project and as part of this, is currently reviewing the junction options for the 'western connection' (that is the A321 link with Molly Millars Lane). The project team are working closely with Network Rail and other stakeholders in considering network resilience, both during the construction phase and after. Once a final scheme has been worked up, programming of the works upon the highway will be progressed with the Council's Streetworks Team in accordance with the New Roads and StreetWorks Act to ensure that the correct Traffic Management and network planning have been considered. All works and any associated road closures will be clearly demonstrated on roadworks.org, that is our website, as well as appropriate communication being advertised to the public in advance of the works commencing with a view to ensure that road users are aware well in advance of start of the works.

Supplementary Question:

Given the problems that the existing roadworks are causing and also as part of the experience I have had as a resident of Finchampstead Road of the Finchampstead Road closures and including the impact of the diversions affecting Langborough Road at the moment, will you undertake to run your future plans for similar works when you are planning them, past Town and Parish Councils, Neighbourhood Action Groups and Residents' Forums for a sanity check, well in advance?

Supplementary Answer:

I would suggest that if you stay with us tonight for the rest of the Council meeting you might find that there is something which is being proposed at this Council which will achieve all those objectives. The one thing I can say is, in a place such as Wokingham, a market town, it is very difficult if not impossible to have smoothly flowing traffic unless we build four lane highways over the top of the existing buildings. There is very little that can be done until the work progresses or until people give up the high usage of cars that we have in this Borough.

68. PETITION

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

68.1 Petition submitted by Clive Chafer

The Mayor announced that a petition had been received on 23 November 2017 in relation to traffic within Wokingham town centre and that he had agreed that this be debated at the Council meeting.

Clive Chafer, the petition organiser, presented the petition the wording of which was:

"Wokingham is being strangled by traffic. Two main roads (A329 and A321) meet in the centre. But so far the only effort that has been made to relieve this and make the centre an attractive place to meet, walk and shop is to put all the through traffic onto existing small streets and roads (Wellington, Rectory, Langborough, Murdoch ...) near the centre. These roads were never built to take through traffic, and the narrow streets in the centre (Peach, Denmark...) are certainly not up to the job. We need a plan to take this traffic out of the centre, give us back our market town, and make living, shopping and socialising here a pleasure again. Less noise, less pollution, less danger, less frustration. We have

the power to make the change.”

Clive Chafer addressed the meeting and set out the background to the petition. He commented that he had started the petition in response to a discussion which had been begun on the Community Neighbourhood bulletin board. A large number of residents had expressed extreme frustration with difficulties they were experiencing getting to and through Wokingham. He highlighted Finchampstead Road as an area of particular difficulty. He commented that the road had over 2 miles of standing traffic every morning and evening and that there were queues along the road even during the middle of the day. He commented that residents had experienced journeys of 45 minutes between Finchampstead Road and London Road. Members were informed that pollution levels exceeding EU limits had been recorded along Finchampstead Road. Mr Chafer commented that the cause of the problem was the volume of traffic and that this would only worsen with further development which would increase the number of cars accessing the area.

Mr Chafer commented that people were beginning to avoid the town centre because it was difficult to get around. Denmark Street and Peach Street in particular were very narrow. He suggested that the town centre be pedestrianised to make it a more attractive space. He highlighted Reading, Bracknell and Woodley town centres as successful pedestrianised areas. Mr Chafer commented that pedestrianising the town centre would require additional road capacity outside of the town centre. He suggested the extension of the Southern Distributor Road to Handpost Corner and a spur between Reading Road and Barkham Road, reopening Woosehill Lane.

Members discussed the petition. It was highlighted that traffic congestion was a national issue. Locally it was a Borough wide issue and not limited to Wokingham town centre. Members referred to traffic congestion in areas such as Earley, Arborfield, Woodley and Shinfield. A Member commented that traffic restrictions put in place by neighbouring local authorities close to the boundary exacerbated traffic congestion within the Borough as did traffic improvements works on the M4 implemented by Highways England.

Several Members commented that increased development would cause an increase in the volume of traffic and that this needed to be addressed. New developments would be supported by new infrastructure. A Member commented that the Council was working with the five other Berkshire unitaries to send a clear message to the government that the county currently contributed greatly to the economy but had large amounts of development in the area.

Members highlighted plans that were in place to deal with congestion. The Northern and Southern Distributor Roads were under construction. The Southern Distributor Road would offer an alternative route for large, high sided vehicles, removing the need to use Peach Street and Denmark Street. The Local Transport Plan encouraged cycling and a cycling route was being developed along the A329 corridor. Cycle routes were an important part of the planning of new developments in the Borough. The Plan also set out greater use of rail services. A Member commented that the Borough had a good bus service. However, traffic congestion also slowed down bus services, which could make it a less attractive option. Whilst ideally more bus priority measures such as bus lanes would be implemented, there were limitations such as conflicting demands for road space, frequency of service and width of the individual roads.

A Member emphasised that the Borough's road network required continual maintenance

and that this had an impact on traffic flow as could emergency repairs or utility emergencies which could not be scheduled for.

Members stressed that a Borough wide approach needed to be taken.

The following Motion was proposed by David Lee and seconded by Lindsay Ferris.

‘This Council will set up a working group to discuss all current highway plans and proposals under the existing Core Strategy. This group will in addition discuss and assess the current highway completions and ideas/proposals to alleviate the traffic challenges we have in the Borough especially considering the level of car ownership. This working group would be cross party and include a small number of residents who have shown a great and constructive interest in highway issues. This group should have one highway officer in attendance to provide necessary advice.’

Upon being put to the vote, the Motion was declared by the Mayor to be carried.

RESOLVED: That this Council will set up a working group to discuss all current highway plans and proposals under the existing Core Strategy. This group will in addition discuss and assess the current highway completions and ideas/proposals to alleviate the traffic challenges we have in the Borough especially considering the level of car ownership. This working group would be cross party and include a small number of residents who have shown a great and constructive interest in highway issues. This group should have one highway officer in attendance to provide necessary advice.

69. COUNCIL TAX BASE 2018/19

The Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 7 to 10 regarding the setting of the Council Tax Base for 2018/19 in respect of the whole Borough and all constituent parts so that each precepting parish could subsequently set their Council Tax budgets for the year.

It was proposed by Oliver Whittle and seconded by Charlotte Haitham Taylor that the recommendations set out in the report be agreed.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the proposed Council Tax Base, for the whole area and by Parish, as set out in the report, be agreed;
- 2) the proposed allocation of £40,000 grant to the parishes in respect of Council Tax reduction as set out in the Council Tax Base table be approved.

70. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

The Council considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 11 to 14 regarding the adoption of a Localised Council Tax Reduction Scheme which would ensure that all working age Borough residents who might experience financial difficulties in paying their council tax liabilities had access to a scheme of assistance, designed locally, offering financial help to them.

It was proposed by Oliver Whittle and seconded by Charlotte Haitham Taylor that the recommendations set out in the report be agreed.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That

- 1) a local Council Tax Reduction scheme for 2018/19 be adopted on the same basis as the 2017/18 scheme;
- 2) all applicable amounts, premiums, allowances, disregards and deductions used in the calculation of entitlements be uprated in line with the same increases applied to the Government set Prescribed and Default Council Tax Reduction schemes, along with any other legislative changes;
- 3) the full disregard currently allowed for War Widows and War Disability Pensions be continued from 1 April 2018 in respect of the Prescribed and Local Council Tax Reduction and Housing Benefit schemes;
- 4) funds be made available to the hardship fund, known as Section 13A, for those who cannot pay their Council Tax liabilities. This sum will be funded from the general fund and spend for 2018/19 is estimated at £18,000.