

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON 18 MARCH 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.30 PM**

Members Present

Councillors: Malcolm Richards (Mayor), Keith Baker (Deputy Mayor), Parry Batth, Rachel Bishop-Firth, Laura Blumenthal, Chris Bowring, Shirley Boyt, Prue Bray, Rachel Burgess, Jenny Cheng, UllaKarin Clark, Stephen Conway, Gary Cowan, Andy Croy, Richard Dolinski, Carl Doran, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Paul Fishwick, Jim Frewin, Maria Gee, Guy Grandison, Charlotte Haitham Taylor, John Halsall, David Hare, Pauline Helliard-Symons, Emma Hobbs, Graham Howe, Clive Jones, Pauline Jorgensen, John Kaiser, Sarah Kerr, Dianne King, Abdul Loyes, Tahir Maher, Charles Margetts, Adrian Mather, Ken Miall, Andrew Mickleburgh, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray, Barrie Patman, Angus Ross, Daniel Sargeant, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Caroline Smith, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane, Alison Swaddle and Simon Weeks

109. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Oliver Whittle.

110. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 18 February 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and will be signed by the Mayor at the next available opportunity.

111. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Members declared a general personal interest on items on the agenda.

Councillor Emma Hobbs declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that she was a Trustee of the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Councillor Maria Gee declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that she was a Trustee of the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Councillor John Kaiser declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that he was a Non-Executive Director of WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Lindsay Ferris declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that he was a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes.

Councillor John Halsall declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that he was a Non-Executive Director of Optalis Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Stuart Munro declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that he was a Non-Executive Director of WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Wayne Smith declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that he was a Non-Executive Director of WBC Holdings Ltd.

Councillor Daniel Sargeant declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that he was a Non-Executive Director of Wokingham Housing and Berry Brook Homes.

Councillor UllaKarin Clark declared a Personal Interest on the grounds that she was a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes.

112. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Mayor informed Members that he had attended a number of online meetings throughout his time as Mayor.

The Mayor indicated that his charity had organised an art competition for children aged 4-11 years old, the results of which would be announced shortly. During April there would be a photographic competition for juniors and adults.

113. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

113.1 Jim Murphy asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

I am horrified at the recent destruction of healthy, mature trees at Gravel Pit Hill Lane and the surrounding area. My understanding is that this was permitted under health and safety grounds related to the raised Reservoir which is claimed to be a 'Category A' Dam (LLR). I was unaware that the lake was categorised as such. Yet, despite this categorisation, I cannot find any documentation showing this in the form of a Functioning Local Resilience Form (LRF), that has publicly reported on Population at Risk (PAR) or/and Likely Loss of Life (LLOL). Neither can I find any Reservoir Plan or specific reference to it in the Borough Strategic Flood Risk Assessment. Can you please confirm these plans exist and advise how I can gain access to them?

Answer

The Environment Agency are the statutory authority responsible for monitoring compliance, in relation to reservoir safety and reservoir flood risk in England. Reservoirs capable of holding above 25,000m³ of water are regulated under the Reservoirs Act 1975. To perform its role in monitoring compliance, the Environment Agency maintains a register of regulated reservoirs and acts as a repository for various reports and certificates that are completed by the appointed reservoir engineers for each reservoir. The Environment Agency also holds reservoir flood inundation maps which show the route of flooding if a reservoir dam were to breach. These maps are publicly available via the Environment Agency website.

Supplementary Question:

I accept that the Environment Agency has a role to play but so does the local authority and I am convinced that ironically the justification to grant this emergency planning application permitted the destruction of these mature trees. Bear in mind that some of these are 300 year old oak trees. It is a consequence of some unacceptable previous failure to properly recognise account and report the known risks of this reservoir, because I refer to the fact that this decision exposes and calls into question whether the planning application for the Reading Football Club training ground and if it would have been granted if the known categorisation and resulting inundation risk of the reservoir had been properly accounted for. I believe you need to undertake a full, transparent investigation of this, and my question is will you do that?

Supplementary Answer:

I take your points of view Mr Murphy but health and safety comes first. Wokingham

Borough Council does carry out its duty as per its procedures and we follow them to the letter. I can assure you that we will not do anything underhand or anything like that. We follow the rules and the health and safety comes first on top of everything else.

113.2 Liz Mayers asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

On 18th February 2021, at the last Full Council meeting, you said that the WBC Equality plan utilised the existing LGA Equality Framework. The Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) has been successfully implemented by other councils. Based on EFLG process map and WBC's self-analysis, what is WBC's assessment of its current level and what is the projected timeframe for attaining each of the subsequent levels i.e. Developing, Achieving and Excellent?

Answer

Thank you for your question, the LGA framework is a useful tool for Local Government to use to identify areas of activity that need to be addressed to deliver good equality outcomes and provides a framework for monitoring and measuring progress. We used the LGA Equality Framework for the basis of the Equalities Audit that was carried out through 2019/2020. Whilst this did not provide an overall rating it did identify areas for improvement. The revised Equality Plan and first year action plan have been informed by the LGA framework and also through stakeholder engagement and consultation.

As set out in the plan, it is intended that we will carry out a self-assessment in quarter 4 of the first-year plan period. This will provide us with a self-analysis rating.

As I have shared before, my focus is to create the architecture within the Council and the Borough to make meaningful progress in tackling inequality. We know that not everybody shares equally in the benefits of living here – and we are committed to tackling that issue. Inequality can be suffered for a whole range of reasons – age, gender, sexuality, race and disability among others – but it is never acceptable, and I believe the draft plan we have is a comprehensive guide to tackling all of these.

May I say as a footnote how delighted I am that there is so much interest in the Equalities Policy tonight with five questions. We are all on the same side. Diversity, equality, anti-racism and addressing need must be part of everything we do and the example we set. No rational person would take any other point of view and no responsible person would play politics with this issue. Every one of our residents must be able to live the life that he or she wishes without fear from harm or harming others. The Equality Policy that we put before you today is the first step in this continuous journey, which every day we must strive to do better. There is no magic bullet. It is a continuous work on architecture which I hope will be my legacy when I am all but forgotten.

Supplementary Question

Despite your encouraging words and claims of progress and intention around equality, it is widely recognised through my engagement and others with the Council, from the CEO down, that there have been massive failures including disability, gender and racial discrimination, evidenced by recent tribunals, complaints, your pay gap reporting, all of which needs to be addressed with meaningful action not just some more comforting words. So, what budget and resources are you committing to create some competent activity not just another tick box exercise, which is actually going to improve inequality in the Borough?

Supplementary Answer

It is certainly not a tick box exercise Liz. Certainly not. The Equalities engagement has to be across the whole Borough. We have a budget of some £150million in the General Fund and we spend some £600million. So, all of that is committed to the Equalities Policy. It is not singled out as something which is separate. You really need to take this up with me personally Liz rather than the Council because the Mayor is going to chop me off in my prime.

113.3 Kiran Nar asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

I, along with other Wokingham Residents were invited to participate in WBC's Equality review, after a summer of unrest due to the Council's attitude about the Black Lives Matter movement. We complained and made representation to the Council which gained negative media attention. Did you invite us to participate in the Review so that you can keep us quiet and on-side?

Answer

Thank you for the question. You were certainly not invited to join the review to be kept quiet – completely the opposite, you were invited to take part in the review because we want to hear and understand your opinions and experiences – along with those of others - so that these can help make our equalities plans and practices better.

I very much appreciate the time you gave to this and hope that you will be able to continue your involvement. As regards to being on-side, I certainly hope we are on the same side as what I want is a Borough Council that tackles inequality, celebrates diversity and challenges all discrimination.

As the Equality Plan being discussed tonight sets out, we are committed to ongoing improvement through collaboration with the community. This is an ongoing challenge that needs external scrutiny as well as support and I sincerely hope you will continue to be part of that. The more engagement we have as a Council with groups with protected characteristics and our residents generally the better we will be able to make progress in this vital area. I hope it continues at a working level and not limited to Council questions. The work can only progress with consent with genuine wish to improve the lives of our residents and with cooperation of the whole community. We need all of you to actively participate in the solutions enthusiastically, cooperatively and collegiately.

Supplementary Question

Invitations and promises about the equality initiatives and review are very encouraging and I agree your residents should have a voice and be at the heart of decision making. Whilst I recognise the work that has been done so far, I am concerned that it is not truly representative of our diverse communities. The Equalities Survey had 563 responses and the Equality Plan has been built on those responses alongside broad data points. However, the ethnic majority population in the Borough is over 17,500. So, a) how can the Equality Plan be built on 563 responses, not all of which are from non white residents? b) without any consultation from the BME Forum who are meant to be your critical friends in these matters and c) without full engagement of claimed community groups?

Supplementary Answer

I fully accept that we do not have all the answers at the moment. We are on the initial

steps of a very long journey, and that is what we are trying to do in all good faith. You can criticise us easily for not having done enough and I criticise us for not having done enough, but we are on that journey and we would like your cooperation and help to put us on a course that will generate continuous improvement.

113.4 Beth Rowland asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

I would like to ask a question regarding disability groups and the new style paper collection bags. Please will you tell me how many disability groups were consulted as part of this work, and what difficulties did they raise regarding using these bags?

Answer

As part of the process of assessing the suitability of the green recycling bags a full Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken which was included as part of the decision on 11 September. This demonstrated that all groups were carefully considered in assessing the impact of this minor change to the waste collection service.

Consultation with protected characteristic groups was not undertaken as the method of collection has not significantly changed and therefore it is not a substantial alteration to the existing service. However, testing has shown that the empty bags weigh a little bit less than the current boxes so will be easier to handle because they are softer. The assisted collection service, which I think you benefit from, will continue as well as providing advice for residents who may have specific issues. I am therefore confident that these new containers are very convenient, practicable and in some ways easier to use for those who are elderly or have a disability.

Supplementary Question

Parry when I last brought up a question around the new bags you promised to contact me, and you did not. Last week a lady arrived at my door with one bag. She did not know why she was bringing it and neither did I. I had been promised one to try last year. I did try it this week and I could not even open the velcro. I have severe arthritis in my hands as I am sure a lot of other residents do, so the bag to me to begin with, I cannot open it, so it is absolutely useless. Neither can I cut or fold cardboard to go in it, so I do not know quite what I am going to do with all my cardboard. The assisted collection is really good. The men know that I cannot fold it and anything I cannot deal with, I leave, and they deal with it on my behalf very kindly, but I cannot see that I will be able to get anything in the bag at all.

Supplementary Answer

Once again, the assisted collection is there for people who may have difficulty in putting the card in and they will assist you. That is what the assisted collection service is there for, for residents who are having difficulty, so they will assist you.

113.5 Peter Humphreys asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

Question

Normally when a major planning application to build houses is submitted developers are required to provide around 35% affordable housing. Yet, when the Council granted itself permission to destroy Elms Field, it excluded itself from this requirement on the grounds

that the development was not viable.

At last months' Council meeting, you provided a glowing account of the finances and stated income will cover costs in each of the next three years, even though there are numerous empty units and of the occupied ones, many are in the rent free period. You later stated profits are set to rise to £6m per annum.

In fact, you painted such a rosy picture of the development claiming 90% of the units have been let, and as can be seen businesses are so keen to be a part of the place that they are not even bothering to fit-out their empty units ahead of the lifting of lockdown restrictions.

In view of this, would you please state how much affordable housing could be built per annum, with the £6m per year profits and explain why this is not being done?

Answer

Throughout, the Council has been completely open and transparent about the limited amount of affordable housing in the town centre regeneration and very specifically why this is the case.

The regeneration, which consists of three sites, has already provided 22 affordable key worker homes as part of the Peach Place phase. We have not included further homes as the community benefits of the regeneration scheme are so much greater than anything anyone who was not the local authority would have been able to provide.

Instead, the funds, that other private developers would have expected to use towards providing affordable homes, are being fully utilised to pay for all of the non-profit making elements of the scheme. These are things like the new park and destination play area, new open and pedestrianised spaces for events, public toilets, water fountains, the new road and, when it opens next year, a brand new swimming pool, leisure and library hub, which will also help cater for community and cultural events.

Being able to reinvest these funds into the scheme has also helped with making lettings decisions that have put the town and community before pure profit margins. This has allowed us to bring in a new cinema to the town for example, and make choices to let to an independent boutique rather than generic high street clones, who arguably would pay more, but would contribute little towards creating a great future for the town.

In regards to vacant units, the picture this question paints is strange. A simple walk around the town would show anyone that the majority of the regeneration units are already up and trading, or simply waiting for permission, post lockdown, to reopen their doors.

The few that have not started fit out expect to do so soon, although the impact of Covid-19 remains an issue for the industry, with many tenants waiting for factories to begin manufacturing specialist equipment again, or for their contractors to start again as existing jobs are taking longer than planned.

But right now, when our businesses have suffered so much, when livelihoods, and much more are on the line, we should all be 100% behind our businesses. For two Council meetings in a row now, you seem to be down on Wokingham, and down on its businesses. Some of these businesses are very new and just about to open up in our town and we welcome them warmly. My message is very clear tonight on behalf of this Council. I am for

this town and for its success.

Supplementary Question

The Council has always pointed out that these are separate schemes so there is in fact no affordable housing in Elms, so make a note of that. Moving on to what you just said, in one of the shop units at Elms Field, the internal flooring area is about half a metre higher than the pavement outside, making it impossible to open the front door inwards. Access is obviously impossible for wheelchair users and difficult and dangerous for the able bodied. Why have the Council accepted a building that does not meet the requirements of health and safety legislation, and are any steps being taken to get the developer to fix this at their expense? All those units facing the field are still empty as a matter of interest.

Supplementary Answer

The units facing the field may be empty at the moment, not all of them are actually, but the ones to which you are referring, some of them are actually already let but are waiting for fit outs at the moment. Just to give you an example at the moment, one unit in the regeneration scheme, we have had three offers for it on the table last week, so it is not all doom and gloom. In terms of what you are saying in terms of the different floor levels I do not know very precisely about that, but I can look into it. Do you know exactly which unit it is because I do not know exactly to which one you are referring to, but I am very happy to look into it. [next to Starbucks]

113.6 Louise Timlin asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question. Due to the Executive Member's inability to connect to the meeting written answers were provided:

Question

I have heard anecdotally that some local child care providers are struggling financially due to a number of issues related to the pandemic; including furloughed parents not needing childcare or parents reluctant to take up child care places due to lack of COVID testing available in Early Years settings. What actions, in addition to those already taken, are the Council planning to further support the viability of the local child care sector, so that working parents will have access to local, affordable, high quality care after the pandemic?

Answer

No settings have closed due to the effects of the pandemic, nor are we aware of any that are threatened with closure. The Early Years and Childcare service continues to maintain a good oversight of sufficiency and take up rates across the Borough.

At February 2021, settings reported they were at 90% occupancy rates. Year-on-year there has been a 2% decline in the number of funded places claimed for. WBC has maintained funding levels at 100% of take up, regardless of whether a child has been attending, or not.

A £100,000 grant fund has also been made available for settings who are struggling financially due to the effects of the pandemic, however there has been limited requests to this fund that is suggestive that settings are obtaining support via government and other sources.

Extended hours at our community testing sites have been offered, to support asymptomatic testing access by those working in settings, and following recent announcements those working within the Early Years sector will be able to access home

based test kits.

Our normal training offer for providers has this year been offered free of charge, to ensure that finance does not present a barrier to the provision of quality.

Whilst this has no doubt been a challenging year for Early Years settings, we have done much to support providers, and provision has been maintained so as to ensure that working parents will have access to local, affordable, high quality care after the pandemic.

Supplementary Question

Is the Council planning to do an assessment of supply and demand childcare provision to ensure that a lack of spaces is not a factor in preventing parents, which is usually mothers, from returning to work post pandemic?

113.7 Extension of Public Question Time

It was proposed by Andy Croy and seconded by Rachel Burgess that the Public Question Time be extended to allow responses to the remaining public questions.

Upon being put to the vote the proposal was carried.

113.8 Keith Kerr asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

My question relates to the Equality Plan on this evening's agenda. In May 2021 there will be local elections in Wokingham Borough for Councillors and a Thames Valley Police Commissioner. The control of Wokingham Borough Council is likely to be on a knife edge and therefore, keenly contested. Just under 12% of Wokingham Borough Council Residents are non-whites and they are generally clustered in concentrated areas of the Borough. As the current Leader of the Council what will you tell them about how you and the Conservative led Council has positively engaged with the non-white community since their indignation about your Facebook post and your negative statements about Black Lives Matter last Spring/Summer?

Answer

Thank you for your question, although I have to say I find it very odd that you link the Council's proposed Equality Plan with party politics and local elections. It is disappointing that a question introduced as 'relating to the Equality Plan' in fact does no such thing, because we do honestly and earnestly want questions and scrutiny on the plan itself.

However, to answer your question: since last summer I have repeatedly stated, at every available opportunity, my own and the Council's commitment to tackling racism. We have consulted the public on what we need to do to eradicate racism and celebrate diversity; we have signed the Race at Work Charter to increase equality for our staff, and just as a footnote I would say that we have had a pandemic which has occupied our staff very much and ourselves. I have met you and other interested residents to positively engage on these issues and will continue to do so; we have worked to restore the BME Forum, including by funding an independent, highly experienced facilitator to help the forum function well for everybody; and we have ensured that our commitment to stamping out racism is at the heart of the Equality Plan that is on tonight's agenda.

We have also engaged closely with ethnic minority groups and others in the community who are deemed to be at greater risk from Covid 19. This has included providing regular,

targeted advice and support in many ways including with faith groups.

Despite what you may imply, this has nothing to do with party politics and everything to do with protecting and serving all our residents to the best of our abilities. I sincerely hope that you can find it within yourself to work with us and help us improve and enact our Equality Plan and our anti-racist stance.

Supplementary Question

I have a signed agreement with you about engaging the community and the processes by which the Council will adopt, which has been ignored. When these people come to me, people of colour come to me, and say what should we do? How should we vote? What are they doing for us? Should I say to them that you and the Council you lead are incompetent, untrustworthy or duplicitous? Which?

Supplementary Answer

Neither Keith. Your questions are always leading questions so you really should not use this agenda for party politics. It is very, very dangerous. You are certainly a man who understands that. Whoever is in this position will have an Equality Policy that they need to take forward, and I am determined that we will take it forward.

113.9 Pol Exeter asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

The BME Forum was “paused for the Council to find and fund an independent facilitator to take stock and reflect on its direction” by the acting Chair five months ago. What was the outcome of the independent facilitator’s reflection and when will the conclusions be made public?

Answer

I can confirm that an independent facilitator has been engaged to undertake this work. The work will include one to one sessions and focus groups and Councillor Parry Bath has written to many stakeholders to invite them to join. The opportunity to take part is still open as we need to hear from all those concerned, and so would encourage anybody, including yourself, who is interested, to contact us. The findings will be due in May, and at that stage we will work with the BME Forum to implement the recommendations.

Supplementary Question

We understand today from the Wokingham Times that you have consulted several BME organisations, including the St Vincent and The Grenadines Friends Association of which I am the Chairman, on the Equality Policy, but we did not receive your consultation. You then proceeded unilaterally to appoint Judeline Nicholas Associates to work with the BME representatives to decide the future of the BME Forum. Are you, Leader, happy with the way you have consulted the BME groups, and is this what you call partnership working?

Supplementary Answer

Up to when you have raised this query. I have been happy yes. Obviously now that you have raised the query, I will follow this up, and see why you were not invited, or why you were not contacted.

113.10 Jeffrey Hinds asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

As Leader of Wokingham Borough Council, you claimed that equality was hard wired into the Council's DNA. Of the £129,697,410 (million) budget of the Council for 2020/21, what percentage was allotted for equality initiatives, and how much was spent on equality initiatives for those with protect characters as defined under the Equalities Act 2010?

Answer

Thank you for the question and I hope this starts a real dialogue between us. The answer to your question is all of it. We spend not only £130million but we spend about £600million in a year, and it should all be with equalities and diversity policy in mind.

As you quote, equality is hard-wired into our DNA and so everything we do should contribute to it in some way and we should be mindful of equalities. Unfortunately, that makes the details of your question impossible to answer – for example, when we build roads, schools, leisure facilities, parks and play areas, we do so following an assessment of their impact on equalities.

However, I can say that about 35% of the £129,697,410 budget went on adult social care - that's more than £45million. The core aims of this service include ensuring that older residents and people with disabilities (both protected characteristics) are safe and cared for, and are free from fear and harm so that they can live, learn and thrive. I believe it is reasonable to define that as money allocated for equality initiatives.

There are also specific services and initiatives, on top of this £45million-plus, which should be mentioned; this is not a comprehensive list but gives an indication of our commitment:

- Disabled facility grants – for adapting the homes of people with disabilities to enable them to live independently
- Provision of Gypsy Roma Traveller (protected characteristic race) accommodation pitches and outreach workers that ensure families are able to access education.

And I go on, there is a whole series of initiatives Jeff.

In addition to these and the many other initiatives we undertake, the Council has also established an Equalities Steering Group and a Tackling Racism Matters working group both of which have a significant dedicated officer resource.

What I would say if I may is, please engage. My phone is there. I take calls to everybody. I have spoken to Keith on a number of occasions, and I am really, really keen to get know you and buy you lunch when we are allowed to.

114. PETITIONS

The following Member and member of the public presented petitions in relation to the matters indicated.

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

Pauline Helliar-Symons	Pauline Helliar-Symons presented a petition on the closure of the local primary school for polling day containing 362 signatures. <i>To be forwarded to the Returning Officer</i>
Robert Comber	Robert Comber presented a petition containing

	<p>197 signatures relating to Safe Walking and Cycling on the South Wokingham Distributor Road.</p> <p><i>To be forwarded to the Executive Member for Highways and Transport</i></p>
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115. TRADING STANDARDS, ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND LICENSING

The Council considered a report regarding Trading Standards, Environmental Health and Licensing, set out at Agenda pages 47 to 56.

It was proposed by John Halsall and seconded by Parry Bath that the recommendations, as set out in the report, be agreed.

John Halsall commented that Wokingham Borough was the lowest funded authority area and also one of the healthiest. The Council's limited resources were focused where the greatest benefit could be achieved. It was the Council's ambition to provide a wraparound service to residents that kept them safe, secure and happy. The Council aimed to tailor a service at locality level which would allow a cohesive response to residents' issues such as anti-social behaviour, fly tipping, unauthorised encampments, noise, bonfires and neighbourhood disputes. The delivery would be integrated into other Council services such as Localities, Community Safety, Legal, Children's Services and Adults Services, making better use of the capacity of the existing Locality Officers, offering early intervention and prevention. John Halsall went on to state that the Council would undoubtedly need to use outside agencies for some services, which might include the Public Protection Partnership.

It was proposed by Lindsay Ferris and seconded by Prue Bray that the recommendations be amended as follows:

RECOMMENDATION That:

- 1) the Council serves formal notice on the Public Protection Partnership before 31st March 2021, which if effected would take place on 31st March 2022;
- 2) the delegation to PPP in respect to the Executive and Council functions and duties (including environmental health, licensing and trading standards) will end and will be exercised by the Council directly from 1st April 2022 ***if no satisfactory alternative has been identified;***
- 3) The Director of Place and Growth and Deputy Chief Executive (and Section 151 Officer), in consultation with the Lead Member for Environment and Lead Member for Finance & Housing, are authorised to commence design of the new services structure and any resulting negotiations on an Exit Plan and to address timeframe (including earlier dates than stated in recommendation 1 and 2 if agreed by the Councils), mitigation of risks and costs, key milestones, ongoing resources and staffing implications for a successful departure from the partnership ***or other suitable reconfiguration of the services;***
- 4) The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Place and Growth create and work with a ***cross-party*** task force of Officers and Members to create the new in-house service ***or other service delivery structure;***

- 5) it be noted that a special item of £500k, spread over financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23, was included in the Medium Term Financial Plan to fund a safe and effective transition.
- 6) ***the proposals made under recommendations 3) and 4) will come back to Council in or before September 2021, accompanied by a full business case, for a final decision on implementation.***

Lindsay Ferris stated that the Liberal Democrats agreed that the Public Protection Partnership in its current format no longer met the needs of residents or the Council. However, they had concerns about how the changes proposed would be achieved and felt that it was important to have a backup set of arrangements in place should the move to a standalone service encounter problems achieving the timescales or in finding the appropriate staff to perform the new function. He emphasised that the proposed Working Group should look at all possible options including whether it was possible to improve the current service, whether it would be possible to use elements of the Public Protection Partnership Service, or whether a standalone service was achievable. Lindsay Ferris expressed concerns regarding the likely additional costs of developing a standalone service and sought further clarification on that issue.

Prue Bray stated that not enough had been done to resolve the issues with the Partnership before taking irreversible action. The Shared Service had originally been put in place because an in-house service had not been working. She was of the view that the proposals would result in a less resilient service with less specialist staff. Nevertheless, she felt that there were things which could be done in-house to improve service delivery to residents, but a proper plan and costings was required.

John Halsall, proposer of the original recommendations, did not accept the amendments.

Stephen Conway commented that leaving the Public Protection Partnership may be the correct action but there was a need to establish if this was the case.

John Kaiser stated that he was in favour of the original recommendations and that nothing could be progressed until notice had been served. He felt that bringing the service in-house would help to create a stronger enforcement service.

Gary Cowan agreed with John Kaiser regarding enforcement but felt that more time needed to be taken to look at the different options available.

John Halsall emphasised that there was a wish to retain the parts of the service that worked well. However, under the existing agreement negotiations were not permitted until notice had been served. There was a need to choose local priorities and he believed that the proposed amendment would increase costs.

Upon being put to the vote, the amendment was lost.

Rachel Burgess commented that whilst insourcing could help develop public services, she questioned why the Public Partnership had been in place for so long if it were considered not fit for purpose. She also expressed concern regarding the additional £500,000 required to fund the transition. She went on to question whether there would be any detrimental effects on staffing.

Andy Croy expressed concern that the Public Protection Partnership had not been scrutinised and the proposals had not been through Scrutiny.

John Halsall emphasised that staff were a core resource and that there was a need to have control of decision making.

Parry Bath stated that the time was right to bring services back inhouse.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the Council serves formal notice on the Public Protection Partnership before 31st March 2021, which if effected would take place on 31st March 2022;
- 2) the delegation to PPP in respect to the Executive and Council functions and duties (including environmental health, licensing and trading standards) will end and will be exercised by the Council directly from 1st April 2022;
- 3) The Director of Place and Growth and Deputy Chief Executive (and Section 151 Officer), in consultation with the Lead Member for Environment and Lead Member for Finance & Housing, are authorised to commence design of the new services structure and any resulting negotiations on an Exit Plan and to address timeframe (including earlier dates than stated in recommendation 1 and 2 if agreed by the Councils), mitigation of risks and costs, key milestones, ongoing resources and staffing implications for a successful departure from the partnership;
- 4) The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Place and Growth create and work with a task force of Officers and Members to create the new in-house service;
- 5) it be noted that a special item of £500k, spread over financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23, was included in the Medium Term Financial Plan to fund a safe and effective transition.

116. EQUALITY PLAN

The Council considered the Equality Plan, set out at Agenda pages 57 to 90.

It was proposed by John Halsall and seconded by Laura Blumenthal that the recommendation, as set out in the report, be agreed.

John Halsall stated that diversity, equality, anti-racism and addressing need must be at the heart of everything that the Council did. The Equality Policy was a first step in a continuous journey. The Plan had been developed in line with the Council's vision and Corporate Delivery Plan and outlined the Council's ambition to tackle inequality. He indicated that an online survey had been held and a number of engagement sessions with community groups, staff and Members. The qualitative feedback had provided insight that more could be done within the internal workings of the Council as well as what could be done to deliver more inclusive services for residents. John Halsall went on to outline the Plan's priorities.

Laura Blumenthal commented that equality was an important issue. The Plan had the right balance of targets and timelines and the flexibility such a complex issue required. Using the Local Government Association Framework ensured a nationally recognised measure and would help benchmark performance against other councils, helping residents and the scrutiny committees know the direction of travel being taken. The Plan itself was a living document and would be reviewed annually. Laura Blumenthal emphasised that the views of over two hundred community organisations, community groups and service providers, had already been sought. She thanked the Officers and the Cross Party Working Group involved in the development of the Plan, for their work.

Shirley Boyt stated that she had asked for the Plan to be written in plain English but felt that was not reflected in the final version and that this could be discriminatory to some. She felt that the Plan was a work in progress and needed further work. Shirley Boyt thanked the Members and Officers involved for their work.

Richard Dolinski thanked Officers and Members for their hard work within a tight timescale. He too felt that the Plan was unfinished but that the Action Plan went some way to address this.

Andy Croy was of the view that the Plan had been rushed and initiated in response to mitigate reputational damage.

John Kaiser stated that it was a work in progress, but that every journey started with one first step.

Imogen Shepherd-DuBey felt that the purpose of the Plan was to fulfil the Council's legal obligation in publishing a plan every four years on how it met the Public Sector Equality Duty. She commented that whilst the Plan involved a lot of good work in a short period of time, it had been rushed and did not go far enough. Imogen Shepherd-DuBey stated that there needed to be regular meetings about progress, a proper complaints process for tackling public inequality issues and internal escalation points, and for ongoing plans from each directorate on how they would improve their areas with regards to equality.

John Halsall commented that equality was an ongoing issue, and the Council could only strive to eliminate inequality.

RESOLVED: That the Equality Plan (2021-2025) and Associated Action Plan (2021-22) be approved.

117. TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REPORT 2020-21

The Council considered the Treasury Management Mid Year Report 2020-21, set out at Agenda pages 91 to 102.

It was proposed by John Kaiser and seconded by Daniel Sargeant that the recommendations, as set out in the report, be agreed.

John Kaiser praised the Council's financial position.

Daniel Sargeant commented that the report demonstrated the Council's excellent financial management. He welcomed the constitutional clarification by Officers but commented that this had also been provided at the Audit Committee previously.

Rachel Burgess stated that the definition of the net cost of borrowing presented within the report, kept changing and that there was no consistency. The £7.52 figure was the net cost of borrowing once it had been reduced by netting off other incomes such as treasury investment income. She questioned the inclusion of recommendation three in the report.

Maria Gee stated that it was important to gauge trends in performance and this was difficult if the presentation changed year on year. She requested transparency in future reports.

John Halsall stated that the presentation was determined by Ernst & Young and CIPFA.

RESOLVED: That Council note:

- 1) Appendix A, the Treasury Management Mid-Year report which was agreed at Audit Committee on 23rd November 2020;
- 2) All approved indicators set out in the Treasury Management Strategy have been adhered to and that prudent and safe management has been maintained

and;
- 3) That the Council's Chief Finance Officer is able to appraise Council of any supplementary information considered to be relevant to their consideration

118. OFFICER RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORT - WBC'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Council considered the Officer Response to the Recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Report – WBC's response to the Covid 19 pandemic, set out at Agenda pages 103 to 140.

It was proposed by Pauline Helliard-Symons and seconded by Charles Margetts that the recommendations, as set out in the report, be agreed.

Pauline Helliard-Symons praised the large amount of work undertaken by the scrutiny committees in the production of the report and the input from various organisations and partners such as the NHS and the Citizens Advice Bureau. The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee had been provided with the results of the residents' survey, which had been very positive towards the Council's response to the pandemic. She praised the cross party working that had been undertaken during the review. Pauline Helliard-Symons emphasised the need for good work to continue and referred to the three most important priorities for the future, identified in the residents' survey; support for local business, mental health and addressing loneliness. The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee would continue to monitor progress.

Charles Margetts commented that the pandemic had had a wide ranging impact. The report outlined work undertaken up to July but work still continued. Charles Margetts advised that 19,000 welfare calls had been made to those who had been shielding, the clinically vulnerable and carers. Wokingham Volunteer Centre had recruited 63 volunteers who had carried out 917 prescription runs. 504 volunteers had been recruited to support the vaccination programme and 220 of those had assisted in the Lateral Flow Testing programme. He went on to outline some of the support provided to residents during the pandemic.

Sarah Kerr commented that the response from the Council and the community, to the pandemic had been phenomenal. She expressed concern regarding the response to some of the recommendations and felt that issues such as poverty should have been on the agenda at an earlier stage.

Andy Croy stated that it had been suggested that the Council work with poverty fighting charities, but this had not been agreed and included in the final report.

John Kaiser referred to the additional £1.2million allocated to support the response to the pandemic.

Jim Frewin stated that the Council should be applauded for the cross party working and partnership working that had been undertaken. His comments were echoed by Pauline Jorgensen.

Pauline Helliard-Symons commented that the recommendation around working with poverty charities had not been included in the report as the Poverty Strategy was already under development.

RESOLVED: That Council:

- 1) note the Officers' responses and the recommendations as set out in the Overview and Scrutiny report and contained within this report and as agreed by the Executive;
- 2) note the Officers' responses to the two additional recommendations submitted by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at its meeting on 20 January 2021 and as agreed by the Executive.

119. ANNUAL REPORT FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE AND THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES 2020/21

The Council considered the Annual report from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and Overview and Scrutiny Committees, set out at Agenda pages 141 to 158.

It was proposed by Pauline Helliard-Symons and seconded by Alison Swaddle that the report be noted.

Pauline Helliard-Symons thanked the Members and Officers for their work over the past year and advised that a huge range of topics had been covered.

Andy Croy thanked Democratic Services for supporting the scrutiny committees. He added that the role of scrutiny was to help shape and improve the way the Council operated and suggested that Chairmen should not always be from the ruling group.

Alison Swaddle commented that the purpose of scrutiny was to add value.

RESOLVED: That the annual report from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees be noted.

120. STANDARDS COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

The Council considered the Standards Committee Annual report 2020/21, set out at Agenda pages 159 to 166.

It was proposed by John Kaiser and seconded by Abdul Loyes that the report be noted.

John Kaiser outlined the activity undertaken by the Standards Committee throughout the year. At the meeting on 11 January a question had been raised with regards to the composition of the Committee. A review had been undertaken and legal advice sought. The Chief Executive had summarised the Council's position in a letter to all Members. It was acknowledged that the appointments did depart from the Council's Constitution. However, the appointments had been made by Full Council and as such the Committee members had been properly appointed and decisions made not unconstitutional. It was proposed that the letter from the Chief Executive be added as an addendum to the report. John Kaiser thanked the Borough Councillors, Town and Parish Councillors, Independent Persons and Officers for their contribution throughout the year.

Prue Bray was of the opinion that the report sanitised the fact that the Standards Committee had been wrongly constituted for 20 months.

Andy Croy asked that the Constitution Review Working Group consider adding something to the Constitution which stated that the Constitution could only be rewritten if it was stated as an explicit aim as part of a Motion or resolution, or if there was a certain threshold applied.

John Halsall indicated that the Leader had to make a large number of appointments in a short period of time. He apologised for the mistake made in the appointments.

Andy Croy proposed that the following amendment be made, which was seconded by Rachel Burgess.

RECOMMENDATION

That:

- 1) the letter from the Chief Executive "SP Letter re Standards 140121.pdf" emailed to all Members on 15th January be added to the report.**
- 2) the report from the Standards Committee be noted.

This was accepted by John Kaiser.

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the letter from the Chief Executive "SP Letter re Standards 140121.pdf" emailed to all Members on 15th January be added to the report.
- 2) the report from the Standards Committee be noted.

121. REPORTS FROM MEMBERS APPOINTED TO OUTSIDE BODIES

The Council considered the reports from Members appointed to Outside Bodies, set out at Agenda pages 167 to 202.

It was proposed by John Halsall and seconded by John Kaiser that the reports from Members appointed to Outside Bodies be noted.

John Halsall and John Kaiser thanked Members for giving up their time and attending meetings on behalf of the Council.

With regards to the Keep Mobile report, Pauline Jorgensen indicated that she would take forward the issue regarding the bus stop, referred to within the report.

Shirley Boyt noted that a report had not been included from the Wokingham Waterside Centre.

122. EXTENSION OF THE MEETING

At 10.02pm it was proposed by Prue Bray and seconded by Stephen Conway that, in line with Rule 4.2.8, the meeting be extended by an extra 30 minutes, up to 11.00pm.

Upon being put to the vote, the proposal was lost.

123. CONTINUATION OF REPORTS FROM MEMBERS APPOINTED TO OUTSIDE BODIES

Andy Croy was of the opinion that the most appropriate Member was not always appointed to the Outside Bodies. He commented that the representatives on the Woodley Town Centre Initiative did not have Woodley Town Centre within their wards. Bill Soane stated that he was heavily involved in the work of Woodley Town Centre.

Jim Frewin agreed that the most appropriate Members should be appointed to the Outside Bodies.

Guy Grandison indicated that his report had been late due to seeking clarification on an issue.

Michael Firmager clarified that he was the representative of the Sonning & District Welfare and Educational Trust due to being the Ward Member for Sonning.

RESOLVED: That the reports from Members appointed to Outside Bodies be noted.

124. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

124.1 Pauline Helliard-Symons asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

Please can you tell me what the Borough is doing for cyclists, and what progress has there been on the Greenways programme?

Answer

The Council is doing a significant amount of work to ensure that cyclists are catered for within the Borough and there are a wide range of services, cycle routes, clubs and organisations in the Borough that are available to help residents access cycling as a mode of transport, and a fun way to exercise.

The Council's award-winning My Journey Team continue to promote active and sustainable travel, as well as provide training for children and adults to help people ride

more confidently and safely.

The ongoing Greenways programme, once completed will provide a network of traffic-free, multi-user greenway routes connecting the Strategic Development Locations of Arborfield, Shinfield, North and South Wokingham. Route I, running through California Country Park has already been completed, and we are now focussing on the delivery of Route B which links Wokingham to Arborfield. The first section of route B, running through Cantley Park, is currently under construction and due for completion by the end of April 2021.

Supplementary Question:

Can you tell me what progress there has been in putting a cycle route through Gorrick Woods to link up with Byway 28 that Wokingham Without Parish Council has surfaced, thus linking Wokingham Without cyclists and walkers right through to Wokingham Town?

Supplementary Answer:

Wokingham Borough Council is working with Wokingham Without Parish Council to continue the surfacing work along Byway 28 through Gorrick Woods. This will provide a much-improved surface for cyclists and walkers. The works are planned to be completed in early summer of this year.

124.2 Paul Fishwick asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure:

Question

Bearwood Park Planning Applications

On 1st April 2015, Wokingham Borough Council gave the developer Reading Football Club planning approval with conditions attached to create a training ground at Bearwood Park.

Conditions included several areas around the Environment and Biodiversity including condition 28 which prohibits works or removal of trees, shrubs or hedges without written consent, and if any work is required, they should be replaced.

The approved plans demonstrate that all the trees around the Bearwood Lake including on the dam are to be retained and covered by a TPO.

On 8th December 2020, the developer submitted another application for various works on TPO trees.

The application was devoid of any detail on why any single tree needed to be felled and went against all the previous conditions related to the Environment, Biodiversity, Climate Change and Air Quality.

So why did this Council allow a developer to destroy between 400 and 500 protected trees without question? The majority of which were mature and included at least 9 veteran trees listed by the Wokingham District Veteran Tree Association.

Answer

The felling of trees at this location was carried out by the landowner, as you rightly say, as part of the essential safety works to the dam, required under the Reservoirs Act 1975. The Council were notified of these works via a 5 day notification, as they are required to do so, under regulation 14(2) of the Tree Regulations. A 14(2) 5 day notification gives a

landowner the ability to carry out works in order to comply with a statutory obligation or to carry out urgent safety works, and this was the case as there was health and safety issues in particular there, without needing consent from the Local Planning Authority. It is an urgent notification, which the Council cannot determine, our hands are tied, nor can we condition the terms on which it was made, because it was purely a health and safety issue on the reservoir issue.

Supplementary Question:

I do disagree with quite a lot of things that you have said there but my supplementary is, this Council has allowed a developer to destroy an irreplaceable, historic parkland of semi mature, mature and veteran trees, some of which are up to 300 years old. They were covered by a Tree Preservation Order, yet it claims that it is tackling climate change, protecting the environment, and wants to improve air quality and biodiversity. It has taken 150 years from the creation of Bearwood Lake to where we were before the park was destroyed. We do not have 150 years, we have less than 30 years. Wokingham Borough Council has allowed this to happen. What is it going to do to replace it, and it now requires an investigation by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, would you agree?

Supplementary Answer:

Paul, this was a health and safety issue. I have checked it all the way through and we had to allow permission to be given to the owner. They took the decision purely on health and safety grounds, and that is where we are at the moment. Certainly, I can discuss it with you outside of this meeting, by all means on a one to one basis, and involve the relevant officers as well. To be quite honest I do sympathise with what you say but we had to allow it on health and safety grounds, and we did so.

124.3 Rachel Bishop-Firth asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question

The number of people in the UK living with dementia is forecast to nearly double during the next 20 years. I am therefore pleased to see that the council is proposing to build a new care home, specialising in the provision of care for people with dementia, within Emmbrook ward. While we have a number of questions about the site, in particular about safe access, in principle an increase in care provision has to be welcomed.

Can you please confirm that this care home is in addition to Suffolk Lodge and not a replacement?

Answer

It is true that the number of our older people with dementia is expected to increase. We have identified a need for affordable provision locally to support the needs of the community.

Suffolk Lodge currently provides residential care for 36 older people living with dementia who need the support of a secure environment and a higher level of care from staff. Suffolk Lodge is run by Optalis Ltd and was rated as 'Good' in its most recent inspection.

While Suffolk Lodge has served the community well since the 1980s, the building itself does not provide the level of facilities to meet the projected need for the community. This includes sufficient provision of nursing care.

Subject to planning permission, it is anticipated that the proposed care home will be delivered in late 2023. We envisage that the home will provide Wokingham with the additional capacity to meet both the existing need and future need for residential and nursing dementia care. The proposed care home will provide 68 beds and will be designed to meet the care needs of older people specifically with dementia. The delivery of the new care home will result in the closure of Suffolk Lodge, with residents being accommodated within the new care home within Emmbrook.

We will obviously work, and are in the process of working with residents, families and colleagues at Suffolk Lodge to ensure that the best interests of all parties are represented.

Supplementary Question:

The closure of a dementia care home is a difficult and sensitive issue, as moving these vulnerable older people out of their home can be a frightening and distressing experience for them. Wokingham's team of Adult Social Care Officers is caring and proactive and we can be certain that they will do their best to care for these patients and their families. When the old Fosters care home in Woodley was closed a few years' ago I know these were a deeply worrying time for residents, families and staff who were affected. Many did not want the closure to go ahead, and residents were moved to private care homes, at considerable cost to patients. The concerns reached BBC News. What has the Council learned from that experience which could make the transition easier when Suffolk Lodge is closed?

Supplementary Answer:

I was not obviously in post when Fosters was closed so it is quite hard for me to comment off the bat, basically about that situation. I am happy to come back to you with a written answer. What I would say is already discussions have taken place with staff, residents and with families to make this move as smooth as possible. We are very aware of the need to do that properly, hence the fact that whilst this is still in its very, very, early stages, as I said to late 2023 and subject to planning and business case. There is a lot of things that could change that. We are already engaging with people to make sure that this is as smooth as possible, but what I would also say is that whilst I fully understand and appreciate that it would be disruptive for people, this new investment in this much improved home, basically will be a big step forward for the quality of life and the quality of experience for these people when it opens. I do hear your comments and concerns and it is taken on board, and I will come back to you on the Fosters point.

124.4 Tahir Maher asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport the following question:

Question

I was very pleased to see that Betchworth Avenue has been resurfaced, this resurfacing was needed, and we had been calling for it to be done for some time. Silverdale Road starts at the end of Betchworth Avenue and I was a little disappointed that it wasn't included as part of the resurfacing programme for Earley.

I have highlighted the issue of the state of the Silverdale Road several times especially the part from Sevenoaks Road to Allendale Road. The road is at best patchy with numerous badly worn 'joint lines' which run from one side of the road to the other. The zebra crossing which is heavily used by children who attend Maiden Erlegh and Aldrynton schools is in a poor state and needs repair.

As the Executive member for Highways, will you arrange to have the resurfacing of this small stretch of the Silverdale Road done sooner rather than later or have the whole of Silverdale Road included in the resurfacing programme for Earley?

Answer

The resurfacing plan that you talk about, there is not an Earley resurfacing programme. There is of course a Borough resurfacing programme.

The selection of roads to be included in the annual planned structural maintenance programme is based upon UK Pavement Management System (UKPMS) which includes annual Network Surveys and our own internal design process (including site visits to check the condition survey scores and where required core sampling to establish the scale of intervention to be recommended). We also actually do slip and skid resistance testing using a vehicle, with wheels slightly off kilter on them to see where the major issues on the roads are.

This is recognised by central government and the wider industry through its code of practice as the national standard for a well-managed highway infrastructure. This approach ensures that the annual structural maintenance programme is based on meeting the highest priority needs on WBC network within the funding available.

Silverdale Road, between Allendale Road and Sevenoaks Road, currently shows a condition score of 306.57, which would indicate medium priority, i.e., maintenance in the next 2-5 years, subject to any new condition surveys or updates in the future.

In the meantime, the road will be regularly inspected and kept safe for public use. The Council team works very hard on road repairs. If you report potholes and other issues online, they will be dealt with, as you can see by the fact that we completed 1,882 repairs in the last year and 192 in February alone. Next year because of our intervention in the Budget we will spend even more on resurfacing, £4.8million, and we will resurface based on the Pavement Management Condition Surveys that I mentioned. If you have any dangerous potholes or anything that you think requires reporting in the meantime, please do it on the website. When Silverdale Road gets to the stage that it is at the top of the list it will be done.

124.5 Sarah Kerr asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question. Due to time constraints the following written answer was provided:

Question

In autumn 2020, the Climate Emergency Task & Finish Group from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee presented a report to the Executive that advised that "the commitments in the current WBC Capital Programme would increase the number of vehicle miles travelled, thereby increasing CO2 emissions whilst not reducing the level of traffic congestion across the Borough." This advice was based upon the "fundamental law of traffic congestion" developed by academics. The Executive seems to have ignored this advice and doubled down on its error, increasing to £17m investment in making driving easier within the climate emergency budget.

My question is; what is the predicted reduction in CO2 emissions from this £17m investment, and what is the methodology by which it has been estimated?

Answer

The announcement that the Council seeks to fund as many carbon saving projects as possible demonstrates its desire and intent to support climate emergency activities and achieve its ambition of playing as full a role as possible in reducing our carbon footprint to be net carbon zero by 2030.

The £17m investment is for reducing congestion which means that there will be fewer cars travelling slowly, heavily braking or accelerating, or idling in traffic queues across the Borough. The project makes use of existing capacity and aims to improve and smooth flows, reducing journey times for cars as well as for buses as the funding also enables us to upgrade our signals to facilitate bus priority. This will result in air quality improvements as well CO2 savings as vehicles making their journeys will be travelling for less time.

Additionally, by making bus journeys more attractive, we will be encouraging an increase in bus usage as we recover from the impacts of Covid-19.

We must accept that there are many who cannot, or choose not to, travel by more sustainable means. Our aim is to assist these people whilst also providing for those who would travel by other modes if they found them more attractive. This is likely to reduce the likelihood of them choosing to drive on their shorter journeys.

Carbon accounting is an emerging discipline and whilst we are sure that this project will have an impact in terms of a carbon emissions and air quality it is amongst the hardest to quantify, and consequently we have not included any of these savings in the Climate Emergency Action Plan at this stage.

We believe that reducing congestion will reduce idling time, reduce braking and accelerating time, ease movement across our Borough, reduce carbon emissions and improve air quality. All positive benefits for our residents and for our environment.

Following recommendations in the Climate Emergency Task & Finish group report approved last September the Council is introducing an assessment tool which will be used to estimate the carbon savings of all major council decisions, including budget decisions going forward.

In demonstrating its commitment to funding new projects that can help reduce carbon emissions, the Council seeks to encourage its residents, businesses and schools to also do what they can to reduce their own carbon emissions.

124.6 Stephen Conway asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question. Due to time constraints the following written answer was provided:

Question

Will the Executive Member responsible for schools meet with my colleague Lindsay Ferris and me, as a matter of urgency, to try to find a solution to the difficult situation experienced by nearly sixty families in southern Twyford, that have discovered that their children cannot get into the Piggott Secondary School? I appreciate that academies such as the Piggott have control over their own admissions policy, but the Local Education Authority has a duty to ensure all children have access to an appropriate school. The Piggott is Twyford's secondary school and is much closer to families in southern Twyford than the alternatives offered in Woodley and Wokingham.

Answer

Thank you Councillor Conway. Further to our meeting with Councillor Ferris and others on the 5th March I will clarify the current circumstances.

It is the case that The Piggott School recently updated their admissions policy, however it should be noted that that change has had limited impact on the current challenge. The primary issue is that this year is a bulge year in terms of pupils moving from year 6 into year 7, and as such making offers at preferred schools has been difficult as schools Published Admissions Numbers are met.

We have operated within the school admissions arrangements and the Admissions Code in order to make offers on 1st March, which is national offer day. Within the Borough we have allocated a total of 2,320 places with 93.51%, receiving one of their four preferences. However, we do expect that there will be some churn during the next few weeks, as parents choose whether to accept places, or place children in private provision or access grammar schools. This may free up spaces which will enable schools to draw from their wait lists, and therefore offer places that were not available on National Offer day.

As we agreed we will keep colleagues and parents updated as the situation and immediate challenge changes.

124.7 Rachel Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport the following question. Due to time constraints the following written answer was provided:

Question

When will the Council finish the process of reducing the speed limit from 40 to 30 on Bearwood Road; from the Pub to the roundabout at Old Road King Street Lane, which was started 3 years ago?

Answer

The speed limit in this section of Bearwood Road is 40mph, reducing to a part-time 20mph speed limit when the school is in operation. Data shows a high level of compliance with these limits at relevant times and a generally good road safety record, with 3 slight injury collisions over a 10 year period, none of which occurred outside the school.

As Members will recall, the intention to reduce the speed limit on Bearwood Road is related to the opportunity to introduce a formal pedestrian crossing facility for residents and parents/pupils accessing the adjacent Bearwood Primary School which was under consideration following the offer of financial contribution from a local business.

Progress towards this objective has been delayed, partly by issues associated with connecting pedestrian links to the nearby Winnersh Community Centre, where parents are encouraged to park as part of the School's Travel Plan arrangements, and the need to achieve appropriate roadside surface water drainage, and partly by the impacts of Covid which has changed road user behaviour and needs to be reassessed once schools have reopened and normal traffic conditions have resumed.

Notwithstanding these issues, officers are progressing the design of the crossing and will liaise with Thames Valley Police over the speed limit reduction, as soon as on-site inspections are possible. This is being progressed alongside discussion over other speed

limit adjustments in the Borough, following the recent review of speed limits on our A & B road network.

124.8 Clive Jones asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question. Due to time constraints the following written answer was provided by the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions:

Question

I am delighted that in a Conservative leaflet distributed in Earley in the last couple of weeks, the Executive Member for Transport says that she and her colleagues are committed to protect Chalfont Woods (Area DD) from being built on. Of course, this was not always the Conservative's position and that when the 'about face' was announced after the Conservative loses in the 2019 local elections your commitment then was only for the life of the current Council.

I am concerned, though, that the leaflet refers to planting more trees and to 'cleaning' the existing woodland in Chalfont Woods. My understanding is that this may be the last remaining pocket of vegetation of its specific type in Earley, making very important contributions to biodiversity. Cleaning the site might harm this important ecological niche. Is there an ecologist's report that can be shared publicly to show that this was considered before the announcement was made in this leaflet, and demonstrate that what is proposed will be of benefit ecologically and helping to tackle climate change?

Answer

Very shortly after I was given my current portfolio Councillor Jorgensen came to me specifically to talk to me about how I could support her in her work to protect Area DD from any future speculative development. Since 1992 Councillor Jorgensen has been actively working to protect this area of land. It started with her campaign to prevent Great Mills from building a DIY store on site.

Having discussed the site with Councillor Jorgensen, and subsequently visited the site, it is clear to me that in order to protect this site, one of the most important things to do is to clean it up. That does not mean to clear back the brush, disrupt the wildlife or cut down any of the trees, bushes or shrubs.

What it means is that we intend to clean up the plastic bags, the discarded plastic bottles, and drinks cans, remove the litter and rubbish from the site and to generally clean it up. While I am sure that this is a site that is important to ecology, wildlife and is of great significance to the area, I am sure you will agree with me that leaving the site as a litter trap and rubbish dump is not beneficial to the wildlife, to the flora or fauna or to the vast biodiversity that call this area home.

So, there is no ecologist report. I did not think we needed one for litter picking. But if you want the opinion of an ecologist, I will give you one from internationally renowned American Ecologist and Oceanographer Charles Moore who said "Only we humans make waste that nature can't digest." Councillor Jorgensen and I believe that we owe it to the nature and the biodiversity of Area DD to get rid of the human generated waste at this important site of nature. I hope to see you there helping with the clean up one day very soon.

124.9 Jim Frewin asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question. Due to time constraints the following written answer was provided:

Question

I would like to recognise the Council Senior Officers, the Leaders of the all the political parties and the Independents, who have worked closely together throughout the pandemic. Forgetting politics and collaborating to help protect Wokingham residents, they have met on a regular basis to ensure clarity of direction, consistency of message and alignment of effort. This collaborative approach should be applauded and perhaps more widely used in the future.

I was however, deeply disturbed to hear that recently one of these vital meetings was refocused at the very last minute and without notification, to be given over to a development planning presentation. This taking priority over Covid issues.

The landowner and their agents were allowed the opportunity to present to the most senior level of both Council Officers and political party leadership, prior to submitting an application.

Question: - Is this level of preplanning 'consultation' going to be offered to other planning applicants?

Answer

I'm sure you would agree that a Member briefing is important as indeed you were briefed by the developer at a presentation on 27 January 2021 before any other group including myself as Executive Member.

I can confirm that, in appropriate cases, where there are novel and major development proposals emerging, it is normal to seek to ensure that all parties are briefed. Any similar proposals could be subject to similar briefing measures.

124.10 Shirley Boyt asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question. Due to time constraints the following written answer was provided:

Question

According to the Royal Horticultural Society, the optimum time for planting trees is between October and April. Trees planted at this time have a greater chance of survival and need less watering than those planted at any other time of year. How many of the promised quarter of a million trees has the Council planted during the last six months?

Answer

Wokingham Borough Council has gratefully received a grant of £300,000 from Woodland Trust to allow it to plant over 250,000 trees across the Borough. The project is still within the preliminary phases and we are currently identifying the most suitable locations within the Borough to plant these trees.

This funding, which is part of the Woodlands Trust's £2.9 million campaign delivered from the charity's new Emergency Tree Fund, will provide much needed support to local authorities including Wokingham Borough to boost tree cover and tackle climate change. And I thank my fellow Executive Members John Halsall and Gregor Murray in securing this

grant funding.

The Council declared a climate emergency in July 2019 and committed to play as full a role as possible in achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, 20 years sooner than the government's target of 2050.

Growing trees can help remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Not only is wood a great way of storing carbon but the right tree in the right place can help restore the soil around it and a significant amount of carbon dioxide can be sequestered here. Trees can also help communities to adapt to a changed climate by providing a cooling shade.

And I would agree that the best window of time to plant trees is between November and March.

124.11 Andy Croy asked the Leader of the Council the following question. Due to time constraints the following written answer was provided:

Question

On 9th March 2020, I wrote to the Property Investment Group asking the Group to consider investing in the land associated with the Good Companions public house and adjacent businesses in Woodley.

I have not received a reply.

Has the Property Investment Group considered this investment?

Answer

Apologies if a formal response was not provided at the time when the Investment Group (and the entire Council) were covering a lot of extra bases at the onset the Pandemic a year ago. In fact, this was one of five opportunities the Group was reviewing in Woodley (alone) around that time.

In response to the inevitable economic shock of the Pandemic the Investment Group quite rightly decided to focus on high quality assets that provide long-term high-quality income from strong tenant covenants. Outside of this category of quality asset the team was very nervous about buying anything that might be vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic and provide a poor return on taxpayers' money.

The Greene King pub was reported to be under threat from residential development which meant that if we were to buy it, we would have to outbid the developers and pay more than investment value. That would be difficult for the Council to justify and ultimately show a poor return on the funds invested.

As you will be aware, a short time later the Council purchased Waitrose in Woodley town centre which has performed well through the pandemic. By contrast the hospitality sector has suffered severely as a result of lockdowns and tiered controls for much of the last year. So, with the benefit of hindsight, it is probably doubly fortunate that the Council decided not to pursue this pub as an investment vehicle last year.

The pub website currently states that they are preparing to "make a comeback" post pandemic, which will be seen as good news for the community.

125. MINUTES OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS AND WARD MATTERS

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

**126. STATEMENTS BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL, EXECUTIVE MEMBERS
AND DEPUTY EXECUTIVE MEMBERS**

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

127. MOTIONS

127.1 Motion 454 submitted by Clive Jones

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

127.2 Motion 455 submitted by Gregor Murray

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

127.3 Motion 456 submitted by Pauline Helliard-Symons

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

127.4 Motion 457 submitted by Shirley Boyt

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.