

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 25 MARCH 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.50 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, UllaKarin Clark, Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray and Wayne Smith

Other Councillors Present

Pauline Helliar-Symons

107. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence received.

108. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 18 February 2021 and the Extraordinary Executive held on 25 February 2021 were confirmed as correct records and would be signed by the Leader of Council at a later date.

109. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillor John Kaiser declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 108, Delivering the Housing 1-4-5 +100 Challenge, by virtue of the fact that he was a Non-Executive Director of Wokingham Housing Ltd and Berry Brook Homes Ltd. Councillor Kaiser took part in discussions and voted on the matter.

Councillor UllaKarin Clark declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 108, Delivering the Housing 1-4-5 +100 Challenge, by virtue of the fact that she was a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes Ltd. Councillor Clark took part in discussions and voted on the matter.

Councillor Gregor Murray declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 107, Arts and Culture Strategy, by virtue of the fact that he was an unpaid Trustee of Wokingham More Arts. Councillor Murray took part in discussions but stated that he would not vote on the matter.

110. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader of Council made the following statement:

Tonight, is the last formal Council meeting of this Municipal Year, which is an opportunity to reflect on the last two years.

Of course, the pandemic has taken central stage. It was the anniversary of the beginning of the first lockdown two days ago. Our lives have changed, unrecognisably for some, and many lives have been so sadly lost. I can only restate my condolences for those who have suffered so much.

I am humbled by the support that we have received from the charity, voluntary sector and our many volunteers. I particularly want to thank them all. There has been a tremendous partnership work across the board.

Our GPs continue to be magnificent and a big thank yet again to all the carers, doctors, health staff, social care staff, health, police, fire, rescue, ambulance, teachers, school staff, charities, volunteers and our staff. In short everybody who has stepped up to the plate and made it possible for life to continue during these appalling times.

The weekly rate in Wokingham today is 40.9, which is well below the peak of 606 on the 4th January but still compares very badly to the below five in August. We suspect that we will hover around this figure for some time. Happily, both hospitalisations and deaths have declined substantially. Deaths within the UK for those who have been diagnosed with Covid within 28 days have risen above 126,000.

Please encourage everyone, your family, friends and colleagues to observe the rules. It is a crucial time with the third wave beckoning across the Channel.

Please join me again in a moment's silence for those who have died during this dreadful pandemic in Wokingham, the UK, and around the world, and those who have suffered not just the effect of the virus, but the problems which have accompanied it.

Please also remember in your thoughts the very sad and recent death of Jude Whyte; a very popular member of staff. She was a person who brought a ray of sunshine to everybody she met; I never heard her say a bad word about anybody, despite her handling some of the most difficult portfolios. She had been battling cancer in her inimitable and positive way for the last two years.

Thank you.

As I said tonight is the last formal meeting of the Municipal Year. Some of the election literature I have seen foretells that it will be my last in this seat, but there are also other fanciful claims.

Whilst Covid has been centre stage for the last two years, the Council has been addressing all of its responsibilities. Tonight's papers reflect the span of issues that the Council addresses.

But before I address policy issues, I would like to commend the Officers and Members of the Council who are fundamental to our achievement and our role. My objective was to encourage Officers and Members to be bold, take initiatives and innovate. To do that they have to be motivated, proud to work for the Borough, and confident and happy in what they do. Most importantly happy! They need to feel that whoever they work for will praise what they have achieved and recognise that in doing so they will make mistakes and in turn give that joy and support to those who report to them. There will be mistakes. No worries! We need to own them, correct them, and learn from our mistakes.

I have been very proud to lead you and you have done me proud and what has been achieved during the last two years is more than I could have wished for. It is a credit to the Officers and Members alike.

It is a huge acclaim to the amazing, decisive and inspirational leadership you have had, and they have had from Susan, your Chief Executive, supported by your Directors. It is also a credit to my Executive Members, committee chairmen and other members of my administration. Thank you to you all.

It is no accident that we are the healthiest place to live and one of the most desirable. It is a tribute to your Council, its Officers, and the administration. This has been achieved over many years hard work.

Our finances are enviably strong, and our medium plan funded and ambitious. CIPFA and Ernst and Young are both complementary of our financial management. It is this fact which allows us to be imaginative and bold in our future. We are not anticipating any service reductions as other Councils have done and are doing. We have seen few defaults in our income or council tax. Our Covid levels are comparatively low and our high streets relatively vibrant.

When we return in mid-May, we should be a few steps from the release of lockdown, and it will be necessary to work out where we go from here.

This administration worked very hard to restore the democratic processes after lockdown started and by and large we did. Some of it was halting and despite caveat lector's constant criticism we expanded transparency generally, the involvement of other groups particularly the Leaders and their deputies and the remit of Overview and Scrutiny particularly with regard to the budgeting process. Sometimes technology has failed us and sometimes the protocols which we have needed to adopt have been inadequate. But with all the comparators we restored meetings sooner and more comprehensively than other councils.

It is clear therefore that we shall return quite soon to some form of face-to-face meetings but also it is clear that there is no date in the future when everybody will be back in the office; if only for the fact that with any form of social distancing we shall not have the space. So, we shall need to inch our way to hybrid meetings, continuing with virtual meetings where appropriate and starting face-to-face where appropriate.

You may have heard me say that we, the Borough Council, are the golden thread which runs through the Borough, the indispensable partner. Our only purpose is to serve our residents as best we can. In that service, there are no real limits except the ones we set ourselves. We are here to do some great things, some spectacular things.

But we must focus on our Borough. I shy from global and national movements, which may in part represent us but also lead us down blind alleys. I shy from philosophical, political, or moral arguments.

We are not here to represent central Government but our residents. We have been very much on a limb on certain issues. I successfully led the opposition to the housing numbers White Paper last year, not only in the Borough but also in England. I took the decision to not accept transfers into care homes which were not Covid free against Government policy and we were at the limit of our discretion in helping businesses with grants. I am as yet not in the Tower but then who knows?

Simply if we can continuously improve the lot of our residents then we have achieved what we are here to do. And what does this mean: safe, secure, happy, and healthy. Everybody should be able to lead the life they chose without fear if they do no harm to others. We must encourage that uniqueness and support it. We should celebrate diversity, be anti-racist and do all we can to promote equality. We need to identify where there is a need and deprivation, and resolve the root causes if we can.

Our goal is an excellent and continuously improving wrap around service for our residents. We must leave the planet in a better shape than we found it and a place where our children can thrive.

However, any organisational strategy must be holistic, understanding how one objective impacts on others and within a financial framework which is affordable, and stress tested. The Medium Term Financial Plan is the enumeration of this strategy. This administration has the depth of experience and professionalism to ensure that this is the case.

Our plan set out in the Corporate Vision and at the front of the agenda but including Covid. There has been no other plan put forward by any other Group.

So Covid. We must:

- ensure the rapid rollout of the vaccination;
- provide lateral flow testing so life can return to normal;
- aid in every way in business recovery and job creation;
- create a safe but normal environment for the future;
- establish the shape of the new normality for our staff; and
- help our high streets return to normality.

We must enrich the lives of our residents:

- by getting every school in the Borough and Children's Services to a minimum of "Good" Ofsted and provide sufficient school places;
- build three new primary schools;
- create an environment and economy that encourages new businesses and helps small and medium sized businesses thrive;
- encourage active lifestyles with easily accessible leisure facilities and open spaces as well as art and culture across our Borough;
- promote Equality, celebrate diversity and be anti-racist; and
- identify the areas of need and tackle the causes of deprivation.

We must build safe and strong communities:

- continuously improve our care services with greater focus on individual need over statutory requirement;
- strategically invest in the future of all our communities, building opportunities to live, learn, work and grow across our Borough; and
- protect our communities, invest to keep our streets secure, maintain our low crime rates and reduce our anti-social behaviour.

We must change the way we work:

- deliver value for money and become less dependent on taxes for income, allowing us to fund improved services without additional cost to you our residents;
- making our services easier for all residents, regardless of ability or capability; and
- improve our communications and transparency so you know what we are spending your council tax on, and more importantly, why.

We must make a cleaner and greener Borough:

- dramatically reduce our carbon footprint to neutrality by 2030;
- increase our recycling rate to 70% and send zero waste to landfill;
- fight the causes and prosecute the perpetrators of fly-tipping;
- build solar farms to generate our own clean energy;
- invest in greenways, cycle paths and leisure centres; and
- plant 300,000 new trees across our Borough.

We must build the right homes in the right places:

- protect our green spaces and our natural environment;
- fight unnecessary speculative house building by all means;
- build one thousand new council, starter and key worker homes over the next four years, affordable in name and cost;
- build the infrastructure our communities deserve; and
- challenge our Government-imposed housing target by all means available.

We must keep our Borough moving:

- invest in the quality of our roads, pavements, paths and greenways;
- tackle traffic around our schools and combat congestion to ease journeys across the Borough;
- invest in sustainable alternative transport options for moving us across the Borough; and
- target areas of poor air quality.

We can only achieve these objectives as we have been diligent and astute financial management which has achieved balanced budgets for each of the last nineteen years. We come out of the pandemic with strong finances, which other authorities are envious of. We are anticipating no service cuts indeed service enhancements. Our balance sheet is strong with a very low and prudent level of current and future borrowings covered many times by saleable assets.

This administration has delivered in the past, been solid in the pandemic and has a great plan for the future.

During this evening's Executive it reflects all the work that we have done in the last two years where there has been an immense amount of activity with an unprecedented number of policy papers covering every aspect of our Council, but it is the tip of the iceberg as we are ambitious to step up the pace to achieve service excellence for our residents.

I am delighted to present tonight's agenda, which illustrates the enormous span of work going on in the Council; pretty typical of the last two years.

- The Community Vision and Corporate Plan Review, much of which I have already covered. It is however necessary in any organisation to have deliverables which are articulated and known to the organisation. This is a very detailed plan which is being rolled out organisationally with performance targets for each and every member of staff. KPIs have been developed and are being honed.

- The Housing Strategy 2020-24 which is designed to address and understand our housing needs, support our vulnerable residents through a range of housing options, improve the quality, sustainability and management of the Borough's homes and to enrich other people's lives. It is a key parameter of our poverty strategy but also a driver of the Local Plan Update expected later in this year.
- The Draft Leisure Strategy. The Borough's current Leisure Strategy focused on sports provision and in particular the Council's own leisure services. This new draft strategy broadens its scope to incorporate the many opportunities provided by the extensive and growing network of high quality open spaces. Embracing country parks, new 'greenways' linking our strategic development locations, children's play and encouraging active travel. It is a key contributor of being the healthiest place to live. That accolade did not come by accident.
- Arts and Culture Strategy. I am delighted to see this coming forward and thank you to Charlotte. I made a promise to Robin Copse. In the context of a growing population and the Borough's reputation as an excellent place to live with a high quality of life, the quality of the cultural offer will play a significant role in enhancing the Borough's reputation and enriching the lives of residents. Building from a strong base of events and activities the Strategy seeks to further develop the cultural offer and extend the many associated social and economic benefits.
- Delivering the Housing 1-4-5 +100 strategy. The Housing 1-4-5 Challenge aims to deliver 1,000 additional homes, led by the Council, over a 4-year period and providing an average of 5% return to the Council. The recent '+100' addition reflects an additional challenge identified as part of the current work around developing a robust new Local Plan. The Council is looking to lead on the development of an additional approximately 100 new homes a year, predominantly on brownfield sites.
- The pandemic is predicted to have a significant and long-lasting negative impact on the economy. These impacts will include increased unemployment and a challenging job market. Wokingham Borough does not have any DWP Job Centre Plus presence with residents having to travel to Reading or Bracknell to access support. This paper approves in principle the establishment of our employment hub.
- Home to school transport policy provides Members with an overview of the key outcomes from the public consultation and seeks agreement to amend the current Home to School Transport Appeals Process to ensure it is compliant with the national regulations.
- Wokingham School Arrangements. Wokingham Borough Council has statutory responsibilities for admissions to mainstream publicly funded schools (Academies, Free Schools and Maintained Schools) in the Wokingham Borough area. The Council is the admissions authority for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools in its area. Academies, Free Schools and Voluntary Aided Schools are the admissions authorities in their own right. Admissions authorities set the admissions arrangements (including the oversubscription criteria) and are responsible for managing appeals and mid-year applications. We will revisit this in the new year.
- Covid Winter Grant Scheme Supplementary Estimate. This report seeks a Supplementary Estimate of up to £100,000 to continue to support vulnerable

families and individuals who are struggling to meet the costs of food and utilities over the Winter months due to the Covid pandemic, supplementing the funds provided through the DWP Winter Grant. The DWP Grant allocated to Wokingham is £281k. The supplementary estimate, if fully spent, will bring total spend on supporting families and individuals over the Winter months to £381k.

This is the Council and this administration looking to the future to protect and defend our residents, whilst enhancing the quality of life.

Lastly, I would like to thank my very hard-working Executive particularly John, my indispensable and reliable deputy. I could not wish for better. Thank you all for your support in what have been very challenging times.

In particular Charlotte, who will certainly not be here in May. I thank you Charlotte for all your work over many years in Children's Services, as the Leader and latterly in Regeneration and the Arts and Culture Strategy. It is a great compliment to you that Wokingham town centre is as vibrant and resilient as it is.

This is a great Borough, the healthiest and one of the most desirable, we wish to make it even greater. We did not get here by accident.

Remember - The administration has delivered in the past, been solid in the pandemic and has a great plan for the future.

Why would you risk it?

111. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

111.1 Wesley Budd asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport the following question:

Question

For years, many Earley residents have raised concerns about speeding along Redhatch Drive. The road and neighbourhood design contribute to drivers regularly traveling in excess of 35mph on this road with its 30mph speed limit. Despite good visibility splays, the speed with which many vehicles travel make this very dangerous for vehicles entering from side streets. The Beech Lane end in particular is used by many school children. Many of the elderly residents living in Redhatch Drive and neighbouring roads finding it difficult, as pedestrians or drivers themselves, to accurately judge the speed of fast approaching vehicles. Earley Town Council's submission on the 22nd July 202 to a WBC speed limit consultation recommended with regards to Redhatch Drive to: retain the current 30 mph speed limit, but install appropriate VAS signage. Additional speed limit signage at the Elm Lane and Beech Lane ends of Redhatch Drive. Request WBC highways engineers investigate possibilities for traffic calming measures, such as chicanes and rumble strips. Will the Executive Member for Highways support Earley Town Council's recommendations for Redhatch Drive?

Answer

The Council is aware of two requests raised by residents of Redhatch Drive about traffic speeds and the submission from Earley Town Council as part of the Borough-wide Speed

Limit Review in 2020, and I have also seen one recently from the Town Council as a result of our speed limit consultations. We acknowledge the road safety concerns of residents and school children in particular using this road.

Despite common perceptions, the road has actually got a very good safety record, with one personal injury collision recorded by the police over the past 10 years. Whilst the Council's speed limit review has still to be concluded, I am able to confirm that speed data recorded for Redhatch Drive indicates that average vehicle speeds, upon which speed limits are based, are broadly compliant with the existing 30mph speed limit, during peak/off peak hours on all days across the week.

However, in the section between Wychwood Crescent and Collins Drive, 85thile speeds are in excess of the level normally used by Thames Valley Police for speed enforcement purposes and the likelihood of speeds higher than this occurring at times is acknowledged. As a result, I am able to confirm that Officers have already added Redhatch Drive to the Council's programme for temporary VAS signs and regular monitoring via the Council's Road Safety Dashboard.

In the event that recorded speeds remain unchanged as a result of the VAS signs and/or any deterioration is identified in the current safety record, we will investigate options for speed management measures appropriate to the residential environment and will consult with the residents, Town Council and elected Members.

Supplementary Question

It would be interesting to know what the next updates will be.

Supplementary Answer

Do you mean the next updates in terms of what we might do? I think we have a couple of problems with this road as the design of it means that it is very straight and therefore it is easy to speed on it. I think we would struggle with rumble strips because as you have seen with the speed limit humps in Beech Lane they cause a lot of noise to the residents that live by them and also if you put humps in they cause vibrations. So, for every resident that thinks they are a great idea there is another one who thinks they are terrible, and it actually increases the noise in people's houses. So, rumble strips and speed humps are probably not likely.

My experience with chicanes, which we have seen on Rushey Way, is that what they are essentially is a challenge to people to zig zag around them if you get them at the wrong distance. So, what happens is people, especially when the road is quiet, drive really fast and take it as a challenge to see if they can slalom round them and also with the ones opposite Hillside School the reason we reduced the distance between them is because you can actually build up quite a lot of speed between them. So, I am not entirely convinced that either chicanes or rumble strips or humps would help and think it might make it worse. But we will certainly keep monitoring it and will look at it again and we will certainly put the VAS in.

111.2 Mike Smith asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

This month a very large oak tree had to be felled in Earley to help prevent further substantial structural damage done to various properties, some of which were a

considerable distance from this tree. The damage to these properties has been very distressing and costly to the homeowners. However, from an environmental and aesthetic point of view, it is also very distressing to many other residents. This is not an isolated instance.

Obviously, such trees can have long reaching impacts stretching decades into the future and can affect many properties quite a distance away. Their preservation is also very important from a Climate Emergency point of view, in their role of sequestering carbon as well as ascetics.

One possible way to reduce the need to fell large, mature trees might be a change of planning policy whereby, the impact of trees on or adjacent to planning application properties must be considered in depth where appropriate – perhaps something like a Bat Survey for Trees.

Can the Executive Member for Planning consider this or look at other ways to help to mitigate the need to fell mature trees?

Answer

There has been a number of subsidence cases in relation to mature trees within the close proximity to properties over the last year. Felling of a mature tree due to subsidence is always a last resort and will always only be allowed if there is no suitable measure that can be implemented to protect both the tree and the property.

A number of procedures are in place to ensure that the current and future planning applications carefully consider the proximity of new housing to existing trees. The Trees and Landscapes Team review planning applications and consider how the development would impact on any trees. Where necessary, the Team will serve TPOs on valuable trees that are at the risk of felling.

Developers are required to submit a tree survey and Arboricultural Impact Assessment as part of their planning application, in order to comply with the current policy; which is CC03. Where a tree is protected by a TPO, the applicant will also be required to submit an Arboricultural Method Statement so that the Trees and Landscapes Team can be certain that the development or extension can be constructed without harm to the tree. If it is considered that the proposal will cause harm to the TPO tree and no technical solution will be acceptable, the application will be recommended for refusal.

Furthermore, the most recent draft Local Plan, that we put out for consultation in February last year, included new text within the Policy NE4 relating to the predicted growth of trees when assessing the layout of new development sites. This will help to ensure that new developments provide sufficient space to enable trees to grow and thrive; which is one of the main reasons why we are having the problem with subsidence.

Supplementary Question

We do need to urgently ensure we protect the trees in the Borough so it is good to hear about new developments, but it is also people sticking up inappropriate extensions near trees that seems to be an issue.

An example of the failure I think is the felling of 450 trees over at the Bearwood Estate on the grounds that they were an immediate health and safety risk. I think I am right in saying that the application was submitted urgently, and it was granted on the grounds of an

immediate risk, but it took them over a month to even start work. It is difficult to believe that all 450 trees presented an immediate risk given that they cover such a significant area. It is odd that the 2005 and 2015 statutory inspections did not mention it.

One of your colleagues was quoted in the press as saying that “the Council is working to ensure only the required removals have taken place”. That presumably means that an inspection has taken place. So, what is the result of that investigation and what is going to be done to replace the tragic loss?

Supplementary Answer

It certainly was not me that you are referring to that made that statement. What I will do is I will contact the Trees Team tomorrow and Parry and come back to you with an answer to your question.

111.3 Eileen Kessel asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport the following question:

Question

I am aware that residents are currently experiencing real issues with inconsiderate parking on Mill Lane, caused by motorists picking up children at Hawkedon School. Could the Executive Member for Highways and Transport set out what steps the Council can take to tackle this problem for people living in the area?

Answer

We acknowledge the concerns of residents living close to schools where inconsiderate parking and road use by parents causes access and safety issues. To deter this, we work with as many schools as we can to ensure their travel plans set out the most appropriate ways for parents to bring their children from school and we will back this up with localised traffic measures, especially to assist those walking and cycling from short distances away, where possible.

Where parking restrictions already exist, such as School Keep Clear markings, and yellow lines, we will target non-compliance using civil parking enforcement powers, and we do move the parking enforcement around schools quite regularly, in response to requests from schools or residents living nearby. However, when residents feel that there are problems in unrestricted roads that require firmer controls, they can request these through the Council’s website and Officers will investigate the potential for using Traffic Regulation Orders that can be enforced under CPE legislation, which in real terms probably means a single yellow line.

We are mindful, however, that these types of measures can simply result in a transfer of the problems to other streets and for this reason, any proposals are subject to formal consultation allowing any objections to be considered. As a result the process is very lengthy and can take between 10 and 12 months to complete.

In the case of the parking near Hawkedon School that you have mentioned and the parking up Mill Lane I arranged for the Highways Enforcement people to go and have a look at what was going on there, once I received your question, and they actually moved on two people who were parked on the single yellow lines. I have asked them to go back again and make sure that they continue to do this to reinforce the fact that parking on those lines is not acceptable.

111.4 Norman Jorgensen asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

Several areas of Wilderness Road in Earley were plagued with flooding at times of heavy rain and Wokingham Borough Council repaired sections of drains around Betchworth Avenue a couple of years ago. Residents at the Pepper Lane end of Wilderness Road still experienced flooding and the Council were investigating the reasons for this with the intention of fixing it. Please will you tell me how this is progressing?

Answer

Council Officers have been working extremely hard to resolve the flooding issues on this site and have been keen to work with the team to resolve the issues to benefit our residents locally. Following on from the work completed on Wilderness Road to resolve surface water flooding between the junctions of Betchworth Avenue and Hartsbourne Road, the drainage team have also been investigating flooding issues at the junction with Pepper Lane. Investigation works identified a problem with the pipework that runs from the roundabout with Pepper Lane, westwards towards Reeds Avenue. Pipe repairs and cleansing works have largely resolved the issues at this location. The drainage team have programmed a final pipe cleanse and CCTV survey of the system to ensure that the repair works have resolved all of the issues. These works are due to take place and to be completed in early April.

I am therefore confident that the flooding issues on this site will be resolved and the flooding issue will not trouble our residents going forward.

111.5 Daniel Hinton asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

This is related to the Housing Strategy. Can you please update me on the Council's progress on working with the Government to ensure the Borough has the right number of houses in the right places?

Answer

As you know, last summer the Government consulted on controversial changes to the way a councils' minimum housing need was calculated. In our case, the changes would have seen the need for the Borough to more than double to over 1,600 homes a year.

Wokingham Borough Council was the first in the line against the proposals, and as a Council we submitted the strongest possible objections as well as highlighting flaws in the approach. Councillor Halsall, the Leader of the Council, took a lead nationally on the issue, engaging with other Council leaders across England to share our concerns and encouraging others to do similar. When the proposals were debated in Parliament, Wokingham Borough MPs, including Theresa May, James Sunderland, and Matt Rodda joined others in strongly opposing the proposals.

I am delighted to confirm that thanks to Wokingham's lobbying, the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Robert Jenrick announced in December that the Government had decided not to follow through on the proposals, but instead continue with the approach with an additional focus on building in London and nine other areas and towns.

This is great news for Wokingham. Whilst the minimum housing need remains challenging at between 700-800 homes a year, the threat of significantly increasing the numbers has been removed.

The Housing Strategy and action plan highlights the on-going work developing a revised draft Wokingham Local Plan Update that needs to provide us with the required numbers over the lifetime of the Plan, whilst maintaining that ever important five year land supply.

I hope to bring forward a second draft Plan in the early autumn. Fundamental to the success of that will be the overall housing strategy remains that new housing delivery in the Borough is planned and built in sustainable locations through sustainable methods. It should address local housing priorities and can be accompanied by essential infrastructure to support it.

We believe that the Council itself can play a vital part in the delivery, setting the standard in terms of design, sustainability, affordability and liveability. As such, my colleague Councillor John Kaiser has set the Housing 1-4-5 Challenge for the Council to lead on the development of 1,000 homes over the next four years providing an overall return of 5%. In addition, I have requested that the teams identify a further 100 new homes per year on brownfield sites to meet the Government requirements; and that is ongoing.

I am pleased to say that we already have the potential of a forward programme of over 1,500 new Council homes with a substantial proportion of them affordable and delivered through either the Housing Revenue Account or the growing housing companies.

111.6 Anne Chadwick asked the Executive Member for Regeneration the following question:

Question

Relating to Community Vision and Corporate Plan Review – I am delighted that the Council, as part of its Corporate Plan, is investing in Woodley and other parts of the Borough. Does the Executive Member agree with me that building on the success of Wokingham's regeneration to fund investment in the rest of the Borough is good news for Woodley?

Answer

In short absolutely, yes!

It is incredibly important that we help our towns and villages to have a vibrant future. By creating and nurturing locally the right conditions for economic prosperity and growth we can make sure that residents can access the opportunities, jobs and facilities that they need in and around the Borough. This remains an important part of our shared Community Vision.

The regeneration of Wokingham town centre is proving a great success for all of our local residents. The new shops and businesses are generating an income of over £2million a year, and this will rise hopefully to over £6million a year as the costs of building are paid off.

This is income that can be used to fund projects and services for residents right across the Borough and, yes, in Woodley too.

It is the extra income, from projects like the regeneration of Wokingham Town centre, or the property investment fund, which allows us to continue to make improvements for our local libraries, or to fund services like social care, when so many other councils are paring back on services or even shutting them down. I take for instance Reading next door, with the closure of swimming pools and leisure facilities. Our approach has been very different, and I very much hope that you will have already benefitted from the investment in Woodley's new leisure facilities at Bulmershe, which have included a much bigger gym and swimming pool.

The regeneration has also bought about wider benefits for residents. The Council has built up an experienced investment and development team inhouse. Their skillset has been used to make sure that the Council's investment strategy is rolled out not just with an eye to securing income, but also with the strategic vision for the future, especially in regards to supporting our towns and villages, and longer term ambitions for wider regeneration.

A good example of this is the recent purchase of Woodley's Waitrose. In addition to this being a great business and financial investment, it also has secured an important site right in the heart of the town centre.

111.7 Philip Cunnington asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question

I understand Sports and Leisure staff are helping with the Covid recovery plan. Can you tell me how they are helping people get over the effects of the pandemic?

Answer

This is one part of our Covid recovery plan and it is called 'Moving with Confidence' and it is very much the awareness that through Covid many residents had to shield in their own homes and this has led to a loss of confidence, fitness and mobility and in my family I know people who had that experience and I am sure that many others have too. This has had a major impact on their well-being, putting them at risk of falls, social isolation and deteriorating health.

We have therefore started the 'Moving with Confidence' project with the Council's Sport and Leisure staff. This scheme takes referrals from across the system, Adult Social Care, the voluntary sector, One Front Door, the Intermediate Care Team and general practice.

Specially trained coaches will deliver 1:1 sessions to residents in their own homes, working through mobility exercises and building confidence. Already we have had 127 referrals initially from the WBC supported Friendship Alliance.

Towards the end of the sessions, (up to six) clients will be encouraged to join group based activities for those who are frail or have long term conditions. The scheme is linked to the Community Navigation Service and clients will be invited to a session with a Navigator to see how else they can be supported, in terms of social activities and other practical issues.

As I said at the start this is part of the Covid recovery plan which includes the mental health service, MIND, which is meant to open next month which will serve up to 1,200 clients when fully open across the Borough from Wokingham town centre and with our GPs.

Our expansion of our lateral flow testing, which now includes a mobile service which is initially based at Asda in Earley and Aldi in Wokingham and there are other measures including support roles as we move, hopefully, towards the end of the pandemic.

112. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

112.1 Pauline Helliar-Symons asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question:

Question

In respect to the Leisure Strategy, a large number of our residents choose to spend their leisure time outdoors enjoying nature in the many parks and woods that lay without our Council boundary. I know that laying our new, accessible woodland will be a priority as part of the Council's tree planting initiatives. Following the announcement of the £300,000 grant for tree planting from the Woodland Trust, can you confirm to me that any trees planted using this money will be maintained and looked after properly and not just planted and allowed to fend for themselves?

Answer

As you rightly say Wokingham Borough Council recently successfully bid for grant funding from the Woodland Trust Emergency Tree Fund. We were one of only 10 councils around the country to receive this funding and we have been awarded a grant of £300k. The Woodland Trust recently announced an ambitious plan to establish 50m more trees across Britain by 2025. We are very proud to become one of the first phase partners with them in achieving their and our ambitious climate plans. An additional benefit for Wokingham Borough is that the funding brings with it the invaluable advice and support of experts in conservation and largescale planting.

The ongoing maintenance of trees is a concern that is raised by residents to both Councillor Batth and myself on a regular basis and it is something that we specifically had to address as part of our bid with the Woodland Trust. We were able to demonstrate that our overall budget for the 250k trees included money both for planting and for their ongoing maintenance.

In addition to this, going forward we will have two additional dedicated Tree Officers specifically responsible for carrying out inspections and maintenance works for these and for the stock of other Council trees.

It is important to stress here that this grant award was not the work of a few weeks. Councillor Halsall and I met with the Woodland Trust shortly after Wokingham Borough declared a climate emergency in 2019. Since then, as a council, we have opened up a number of very productive conversations with the Woodland Trust around our vision and the types of trees we should be planting across the Borough and where we should be planting them around our Garden Forest project. All of which resulted in Wokingham being invited to bid for funding as part of the Emergency Tree Fund.

I stress this because I have seen today that Members of the Opposition have tried to take some of the credit for this relationship and bask in the reflected glow of what is a great achievement for Wokingham residents and for the Officers of this Council. With that said

this funding not only helps to kick start our tree planting programme but show that the Woodland Trust believes in both our planting programme and also in our future maintenance plan and I am very proud to say that I played a part in making it happen.

Supplementary Question

Are there any plans for community engagement on where they will be planted? Will residents be able to make suggestions and will we engage with schools, user groups and parish and town councils and how will they feed their ideas in?

Supplementary Answer

Yes, there are plans for engagement around it and I have spoken about the Garden Forest project already. That is our plan to put 10,000 trees into the homes and gardens of our residents and to hopefully give them an option of which type of trees that they will be able to choose from. We are doing that because we know it is a great way to make sure that those trees are maintained. Supplementary to that the Council's Climate Emergency Team have begun what we call 'drop in' sessions with all the town councils around Wokingham Borough where we educate them on the different projects that are going on and there has already been a drop in session on trees where the town councils were invited to come along, listen to our plans for planting the 250,000 trees and input their thoughts and feed back in terms of the areas where those trees could be planted.

Some of the bigger planting projects we have already identified space for where they are going to be but for the smaller scale plantings, 1,000-5,000 tree size projects, we do not know quite yet where they are going to be and we are inviting all sorts of feedback in terms of where they could be from anybody who wants to tell us.

The town and parish councils are all invited to the drop-in sessions. Whether they choose to attend or not that is their choice, but they are all invited to come along to listen to what the Officers are working on, feed in their thoughts and ideas and understand what it means specifically for them.

113. COMMUNITY VISION AND CORPORATE PLAN REVIEW

The Executive considered a report setting out the results of a review of the Community Vision and the state of delivery against the targets identified within the Corporate Delivery Plan.

The Leader of Council drew attention to the remarks he had made on the item during his earlier statement and confirmed that a review had been undertaken on the Community Vision and Corporate Delivery Plan and no major changes were being proposed.

RECOMMENDATION: That the challenges and opportunities which have arisen over the course of the year be noted and the recommendation that the Community Vision and Corporate Delivery Plan remain appropriate and relevant be endorsed.

114. HOUSING STRATEGY 2020 - 24

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposed Housing Strategy to cover the period 2020-2024.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing introduced the report and explained why housing was so important to him. He also informed the meeting that the number of homeless people in the Borough had been reduced, there were currently no rough sleepers except those who chose to be, the housing waiting list was low with the number

of people with real need being met by the number of affordable homes which the Council had built over the last few years and all social housing now met the decent home standard.

Councillor Kaiser reported on the work of the Council's housing companies to deliver affordable homes across the Borough and highlighted the Gorse Ride scheme. He also drew Members' attention to the impact of Covid, as set out in the report, and the fact that it was difficult to determine the longer-term problems that the Council might be faced with.

In response to a query Councillor Kaiser provided an update on phase 2 of Gorse Ride which involved decanting 160 families from their homes to other homes. It was expected that some of the families would want to return to Gorse Ride and some would want to move to new areas. It was confirmed that work on the scheme was on target.

Councillor Munro highlighted that when the furlough scheme and the grants come to an end there might be additional pressure on housing need and asked if there was a plan in place to address this possibility? Councillor Kaiser advised that there was a team within the Council who had been considering this issue and the Council was increasing the number of temporary homes, including the building of such homes in Grovelands. The intention was, whenever possible, to ensure people were kept in the Borough.

With regard to strategies to assist first time buyers to buy properties in Wokingham Councillor Kaiser confirmed that the Council was building affordable homes which were being offered as part buy, part rental and in future the Council would be looking to see if it could facilitate loans to assist people buying their own houses.

RECOMMENDATION: That Council be recommended to approve the adoption of the proposed Housing Strategy 2020-2024.

115. DRAFT LEISURE STRATEGY

The Executive considered a report setting out a draft Leisure Strategy which if approved would be consulted upon with residents and stakeholders.

The Executive Member for Environment and Leisure advised the meeting that the Council was committed to supporting and improving the health and wellbeing of its residents and the draft Leisure Strategy demonstrated the dedication to provide the best leisure provision and outdoor spaces to make Wokingham Borough the healthiest place to live in the country.

Councillor Batth advised that the Strategy set out plans for residents' physical and emotional wellbeing through the Council's leisure offering and partnership with a wide range of other organisations, including proposals to establish a new Active Wokingham Partnership to support connective efforts to ensure that high quality facilities and opportunities remain affordable, accessible, and sustainable. Councillor Batth highlighted the various investment leisure projects across the Borough, as set out in the report, that had either been invested in or committed to, amounting to over £50m e.g., Bulmershe Leisure Centre, Ryiesh Green and Arborfield leisure facilities etc.

In response to a query Councillor Batth confirmed that in order to ensure that the action plan met residents' needs it would be developed once responses were received to the public consultation and would be brought back to a future Executive.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) the principles and content of the draft Leisure Strategy be endorsed;
- 2) the draft Strategy be approved for consultation with residents and stakeholders;
- 3) the results of the consultation and any resulting changes to the draft Strategy to be considered at a future meeting of the Executive;
- 4) it be noted that an initial Action Plan for implementing the Strategy will be presented alongside the consultation feedback to the Executive.

116. ARTS & CULTURE STRATEGY

(Councillor Gregor Murray declared a personal interest in this item)

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposed Arts & Culture Strategy following consultation on the document.

During the introduction the Executive Member for Regeneration highlighted that Covid had demonstrated just how much people missed, in addition to other things, having arts and culture facilities in their lives and how important these were to people's health and wellbeing.

Councillor Haitham Taylor explained that one of the reasons why the Arts & Culture Strategy had been developed was because when speaking to businesses, a few years ago, many of them were saying at that time that a number of employees were leaving to move to other areas e.g. London and Bath because they had a better, more joined up and accessible leisure offer. Following these discussions, the Arts & Leisure Strategy was developed and taken out to consultation which led to some really interesting responses. Councillor Haitham Taylor advised that she had been disappointed that more young people had not responded to the consultation and in future it would be good to reach out to try and gain their views, particularly those under 18. It was noted that Overview and Scrutiny had praised the Strategy when considering it at its meeting held last month.

In addition, an Arts & Culture Alliance was set up, which was a partnership of key stakeholders i.e. cross party Members, Officers from departments across the Council, and partners from across the Borough and the different art and culture sectors to drive forward the Strategy and action plan. Councillor Haitham Taylor thanked Officers and Robin Copse for the amount of effort they had put into developing the Strategy.

Councillor Haitham Taylor also highlighted the six key priorities set out in the Strategy and advised that she hoped that these could be achieved within the 10 year life span of the document. It was noted that the Action Plan would constantly evolve as new things were included and others completed.

Councillor Haitham Taylor informed the meeting about the opportunities that were being developed for children and young people including discussions being held with Artsmark on the formation of a local cultural educational partnership.

Councillor Batth stated that the BME community within the Borough had an enriched arts and culture programme, including Black History Month, Diwali festival of lights, Eid celebrations etc and asked that these be taken on board when the arts and culture

programmes were being developed. Councillor Haitham Taylor stated that she would love to embrace all these activities and would like to see more representation from the BME Forum on the Alliance.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) the Arts & Culture Strategy, as set out in the report, be approved:
- 2) the appended Action Plan for implementing the Strategy over the coming year be noted;
- 3) the establishment and role of the Arts & Culture Alliance as the key strategic partnership for implementing the Strategy be endorsed.

117. DELIVERING THE HOUSING 1-4-5 + 100 CHALLENGE

(Councillor Clark and Councillor Kaiser declared personal interests in this item)

The Executive considered a report setting out an approval process for new housing projects that would contribute towards the Council's Housing 1-4-5 +100 challenge.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing informed the meeting about the background to the 1-4-5 +100 challenge and explained that the proposal within the report was to enable land that the Council owned to be identified and turned into decent homes. Councillor Kaiser highlighted the importance of the proposals as the sooner homes could be built the quicker people could be housed. When considering possible sites the Council wanted to ensure that homes were built in places where the infrastructure eg shops, schools, facilities etc was there to support the residents living in them.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) authority be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Lead Member for Finance and Housing, to approve the transfer of land or property to the Council's housing companies for the purposes of providing new homes to address agreed local housing need and where appropriate at less than market value in line with The General Housing Consents 2013 or subsequent amendments;
- 2) authority be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Lead Member for Finance and Housing, to approve the funding (grant and/or loans) of any new homes provided by the Council through its Housing Revenue Account or its housing companies provided the funding required has been approved as part of the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan and within existing borrowing approvals and the new homes contribute to the Housing 1-4-5 Challenge and address agreed local housing need;
- 3) authority be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with WBC (Holdings) Ltd, to approve the interest rate at which any long term loan is charged to the Council's housing companies for any new housing developments.

118. EMPLOYMENT HUB

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposal to establish an Employment Hub which would offer access to a range of services to assist people to overcome barriers and support them to access sustained employment or further education.

The Executive Member for Business and Economic Development introduced the report and highlighted the substantial increase, 227%, of people claiming unemployment benefits even before the full employment impact of the pandemic emerged. Included within these figures were a 312% increase in young people, aged between 18-24 in Wokingham, an increase of 265% of over 50s and also a 68% increase in young people, aged between 16-18, not in employment or education. It was therefore proposed to set up an Employment Hub which was intended to focus on those people with low or limited skills to enable them to compete in the very competitive labour market, young people to meet DWP funding requirements whilst offering an all-age service, retraining older people to get them back into work, recruiting people into caring professions and opportunities in growth sectors or where there was employer demand. In addition, short training opportunities for high demand employment sectors would also be provided.

Councillor Munro advised the meeting that he wished to put forward an amendment to recommendation 2 as it should state that final approval of detailed proposals should be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive and Director, Place and Growth, in consultation with the Executive Member for Business and Economic Development. This amendment was agreed.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) the establishment of an Employment Hub, as outlined in the report, be approved in principle;
- 2) the final approval of detailed proposals be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive and Director, Place and Growth, in consultation with the Executive Member for Business and Economic Development;
- 3) a supplementary estimate of £90k, to cover the implementation and first year running costs of the Employment Hub be approved and a £10k pa pressure regarding running costs in future years be noted.

119. HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY (5-16 YEARS) AND TRAVEL ASSISTANCE POLICY (16 YEARS + WITH SEND) CONSULTATION AND HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT APPEALS PROCESS UPDATE

The Executive considered a report setting out the key outcomes from the public consultation on the proposed new Home to School Transport (5-16 years) and Travel Assistance (16 years +) policies and amendments to the current Home to School Transport Appeals Process to ensure that it was compliant with national regulations.

The Executive Member for Children's Services introduced the report and advised that a review of the current Home to School Transport and Travel Assistance policies had been carried out in May 2020 following which a consultation was carried out with Members, key stakeholders, including representatives from the Parent Carer Forum (SEND Voices Wokingham) and the public. The meeting was advised that the report was the result of the public consultation and at this stage was only a draft and only required noting. Changes to the policies would be presented at a future Executive.

Councillor Clark highlighted the amended Home to School Transport appeals process, which was proposing that Stage 1 would be carried out by a single Officer and Stage 2 would be carried out by a Member panel. This would replace the current process which

was for an Officer panel to meet to consider Stage 1 of an appeal. The reason for the change was to make the Council compliant with national requirements.

Councillor Smith voiced his concern about the means by which children were travelling to school when they were not able to secure a place at their chosen school and the effect this was having on the Council's carbon footprint. In addition, he had concerns about the way that the distance between home to school was calculated as quite often that process did not take account of the inaccessibility of some routes, particularly at different times of the year. Councillor Smith also raised issues with the academy system and the difficulties some parents faced accessing their local schools.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) the content of the report following the public consultation on the proposed drafts of the Home to School Transport and Travel Assistance policies be noted and that a further report will be presented at a later Executive with recommendations for changes to the existing policies;
- 2) the amended arrangements for Home to School Transport Appeals, to ensure that WBC is compliant with national requirements (following the Ombudsman direction), be agreed.

120. WOKINGHAM SCHOOL ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS 2022/23

The Executive considered a report relating to Wokingham Borough's School Admissions arrangements for the 2022/2023 School Year.

The Executive Member for Children's Services informed the meeting that the secondary admissions process for entry into Wokingham secondary schools for the 2021/22 school year has been completed and reported that due to a large cohort, and increased numbers of Hong Kong nationals relocating to the area under the British Nationals Overseas Visa arrangements, the number of families receiving one of their four preferences was 93.51% which compared favourably to national and regional performance but was slightly down on the Council's performance last year, which was 94.64%. Members noted that by national offer day the Council had offered 2,320 places which was a higher number than the 2,157 places allocated at the same time last year. Councillor Clark advised that work would continue on late applications and any in-year applications to ensure that all children had a secondary school place.

Councillor Clark reported that the admissions process for primary phase education was due to conclude shortly. In addition, the Council was working to ensure that arrangements for supporting school admissions were reviewed and therefore a School Admissions Task and Finish Group, made up of elected Members, Officers and school leaders had been set up as part of the Schools' Forum arrangement. This body would explore how effective the local admission arrangements were, consider how to deal with difficult admission issues and advise admission authorities on ways their admission arrangements could be improved.

Following a query by the Leader of Council Councillor Clark confirmed that the Council had no authority or influence over Academies' admissions criteria and its role was limited to implementing the agreed criteria.

RECOMMENDATION: That the Wokingham Borough School Admissions arrangements for the 2022/23 School Year should be unchanged from those in force for the 2021/22 School Year.

121. COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposed supplementary estimate of up to £100,000 to continue to support vulnerable families and individuals who had struggled to meet the costs of food and utilities over the winter months due to the Covid pandemic.

Whilst introducing the report the Executive Member for Finance and Housing explained that the Executive had previously made a commitment that in the event that the Winter Grant provided by the Government did not meet all of people's requirements the Council would look to increase the amount available. It was therefore proposed to request a supplementary estimate of up to £100,000 to continue to support vulnerable families and individuals. Councillor Kaiser reminded the meeting that part of the Winter Grant had been used to fund school children's meals during the holiday period and also to assist with utility costs.

In light of the fact that the Council was having to increase the amount of money available Councillor Haitham Taylor queried whether the Council would be writing to the Secretary of State ahead of next year requesting that a larger grant be provided to cover these costs? Councillor Kaiser responded that the Council would be applying for a larger grant next year however as the grant was part of the package of assistance provided to mitigate the effects of Covid it was therefore unknown whether it would continue.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) a Supplementary Estimate of up to £100,000 be approved to allow vulnerable families and individuals who are struggling with the cost of food and utilities to continue to be supported once the Covid Winter Grant funds of £281k are exhausted;
- 2) it be noted that this will bring total spend on supporting families and individuals most in need in the Borough to £381k and will allow families and individuals to receive support up to the closing date of the scheme on 16th April 2021.