

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 24 JUNE 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.35 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray, Wayne Smith and Bill Soane

Other Councillors Present

Gary Cowan
Lindsay Ferris
Michael Firmager
Sarah Kerr
Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Graham Howe.

2. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader of Council made the following statement:

Good evening and welcome to the first Executive meeting of the municipal year.

We are now in the sixteenth month of Covid, and things are now inexorably returning to normal.

We are also a year away from the horrific murders of James Furlong, Joe Ritchie-Bennett and David Wails in Forbury Gardens Reading.

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

As you are aware we have had an increase in Corona cases of the delta variety. We responded with surge testing and surge vaccinations. A truly magnificent effort mounted at very short notice, and all credit to our Officers. As of lunchtime today we have had 3,288 jabs done at Bulmershe, 17,544 PCR tests, including residents, schools and businesses, which have resulted in 46 positive cases who were people without symptoms. These individuals are now isolating. 14,441 doors were knocked on in four wards and 1,000 vulnerable adults supported with testing. 33 families were visited by Children's Services and 931 businesses contacted. Case rates peaked at 96.4 on the 7th June and is now down to 74.8 on the 18th June. It is difficult to know what the rates would have been if we not undertaken all this work but the upward trajectory we were on was alarming to say the least; so without doubt it made a significant impact.

Since the last Executive we have had local elections and they were a demonstration of our residents' faith in this Conservative administration. Our majority has stayed the same, despite the opposition's confident predictions of no overall control.

We won a larger share of the vote than any other party and our share went up! So how does the expression go "...aaaah....Conservatives are winning here! "

I am delighted to see that we are now not only the healthiest local authority but also the most prosperous, having for a long time been one of the most desirable places to live. This is despite being the lowest funded with the lowest level of deprivation. A huge testament to this administration but not a moment for complacency. Whilst I am Leader of the Council, the Executive will strive every day to make this Borough the greatest, safest and happiest place to live, work and bring up a family.

This is a wonderful Borough with a great future. We have some of the finest Officers and Directors, well led by the Chief Executive.

We have a huge, ambitious and detailed programme to deliver for our residents and I wish to highlight just one in this preamble, the local plan.

I imagine the flawed but persistent public criticism of our finances was to ensure that on gaining control the opposition could disingenuously claim that magically our finances had been instantaneously fixed. Let me repeat there is nothing to fix! Our finances are strong, transparent and in rude health as you will see later on this evening.

I am a great believer in democracy which needs to have an administration, an opposition and a free press.

Ideally, the administration must:

- have a track record of delivering;
- be solid in a crisis, like the pandemic;
- be stable;
- have a great plan for the future;
- be experienced and professional,

We are blessed in having such an administration.

The opposition does not have to have, nor does it have any of these attributes; they can look both ways at the same time. We are blessed in having such an opposition.

We are also blessed in having a vibrant press.

Some roles are semi-judicial. Recently Members appear to have taken a political stance rather than a judicial one. Members of the Planning Committee must decide. This will not please everybody and may not please anybody, but they need to do so. Abstentions on party lines make a mockery of the process much to the distain of the public.

Nationally, both the Liberal Democrats and the Tories committed to building 300,000 homes per year in their 2019 manifestos. It is disingenuous to pretend that this is a new Conservative policy. The Labour Party committed to “regenerate housing” and building one million new homes, which is more or less the same as the other parties.

There is a consensus within the Borough Council that whilst we note Parliament’s apparently settled view the minimum of these new homes should be in Wokingham Borough consistent with our need to provide more affordable housing and social housing.

There is no conflict between the climate emergency agenda and the housing agenda, we must do both.

The administration has recently published its housing and its 1-4-5 plus 100 strategies. We also worked very hard last year to successfully dissuade the Government from a housing number which would have been more than 1,600 per annum to a more reasonable number between 600-800. We are still working on whittling down this number.

Being the healthiest and most prosperous local authority, with the lowest deprivation and great schools is a great success; a testament to nineteen years of Conservative administration. However, there is a downside which is that it is a very desirable place to live. I doubt that there is a square inch of the Borough which does not have a developer's option on it. To counter the threat of unrestrained speculative development, we cannot just say we won't allow it as this position will be overturned.

We must have a current local plan which conforms to the criteria of the time. We will be presenting one in the Autumn. We will engage in a "community-led approach, putting local residents at the heart of the system where residents are taken notice of and listened to, not taken for granted or even worse simply ignored and certainly not a free for all for landowners and developers."; I quote.

Opposition to this plan will be support for unrestricted development, which is entirely irresponsible and will be a developer's charter. Local authorities who have taken a different view (mostly Lib Dems) have found that their planning decisions have been taken out of their local authority hands and placed with the MHCLG and speculative development has been permitted by the planning inspectorate in the absence of a local plan.

Failure to develop a local plan as the opposition suggest will ensure that decisions are not made by local residents and communities but by developers, the planning inspectorate and the MHCLG.

WBC's opposition Leader will ensure "that homes will be dumped near you".

3. STATEMENT BY THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HEALTH, WELLBEING AND ADULT SERVICES

Just wanted to really pick up a couple of points. I mean John has been over the key statistics which are very impressive and a testament to all the hard work that has gone on here. It is worth remembering it is only Monday 7th June that surge testing started in Wokingham. On that day we wrote to the CCG and the Regional Director of the NHS. Then we had surge testing and it was now time for surge vaccination. The Friday of that week surge vaccination was approved. The Tuesday we had our surge vaccination centre open and jabbed around 300 people. This has been an incredible effort by all staff connected to the Council, our partners in the NHS, and all those people who have worked with us. I want to extend my real thanks for this co-operation.

The vaccination centre, as John said, has jabbed so far 3,288 people. We saw some data from the NHS which showed the real difference that this has meant in the wards where Covid was strongest. Which is that vaccination rates in the 18-24 age group have gone up from around 16-17% to over 50% in two weeks, which is real evidence on the ground, as we know that the only way to defeat this is vaccinations. It is real evidence of the concrete progress this has made.

Our surge testing programme has found 46 positive cases. I think it is worth noting again the importance of surge testing. This means that there were 46 people in the Borough

carrying Covid who did not necessarily know they had it and each one of those could have spread it to 2, 3, possibly more people. Thanks to this we have managed to identify these people and they are now isolating. We wish them a speedy recovery.

The other side of the coin though is that with nearly 18,000 tests back and only 46 cases it means we do not have an uncontrolled runaway situation here. The case rate is beginning to come down. We must remain watchful and cautious going forward but the situation is coming under control.

Obviously finding these 46 cases means the case rate over the next week or two may rise slightly as they work through the figures, but this is not a cause for alarm.

I think in summary I would say again my thanks to all the partners who worked with us to deliver this and any advice we can give to people, which will be familiar to many in the Borough already, to stop the spread of Covid is take a lateral flow test twice a week at home, which will be familiar to anyone who has got children at secondary school. Get vaccinated as soon as you can. If you are offered the opportunity, go and get the vaccine, it is the only defence and if you are asked to isolate please do it properly.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the Extraordinary meeting of the Executive held on 18 March 2021 and the Executive meeting held on 25 March 2021 were confirmed as correct records and signed by the Leader of Council.

5. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillor John Halsall declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7, Revenue Monitoring 2020/21 – Outturn, by virtue of the fact that he was the Treasurer of Thames Rowing Club which had received Covid support from the Council. Councillor Halsall took part in discussions and voted on the matter.

Councillor John Kaiser declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7, Revenue Monitoring 2020/21 – Outturn, by virtue of the fact that he was a remunerated Non-Executive Director of WBC (Holdings) Ltd, Wokingham Housing Ltd and Berry Brook Homes Ltd. Councillor Kaiser took part in discussions and voted on the matter.

Councillors Stuart Munro and Wayne Smith declared personal interests in Agenda Item 7, Revenue Monitoring 2020/21 – Outturn, by virtue of the fact that they were Non-Executive Directors of WBC (Holdings) Ltd. Councillors Munro and Smith took part in discussions and voted on the matter.

6. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

6.1 Daniel Hinton asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question:

Question

Like many interested parties across the Borough The members and followers of Greener Wokingham are looking forward to WBC running one, or more local deliberative processes. Can you tell residents what progress has been made in determining which LDP are right for our Climate Emergency and what the likely topics of the LDPs will be?

Answer

Local deliberative processes aim to help us better understand the views of our residents and community groups on the Council's response to climate change.

Tackling the climate emergency in Wokingham will require active participation from our residents, all of whom have a big part to play in delivering the big changes that are needed on our journey to decarbonisation.

Through the right consultative and participation methods, the Council will be able to hear their voices, collect their views and gather insight to inform future decisions.

To advise on which deliberative processes to use, significant research and consultation have been undertaken both internally and externally.

Fifteen community engagement options recently used for climate emergency were reviewed and scored based on the policy stage, length of the process, number of participants, participant selection, delivery form and cost. These include crowd sourcing, citizen's assemblies, juries and panels, advisory groups, polling e-panels, to name but a few.

This comparison not only highlights the breadth of options available but also enables us to identify the most suitable solutions to use to engage the community with the different aspects of our climate emergency agenda.

Successful case studies from other local authorities engaging residents with climate emergency were sourced to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of these approaches.

These examples vary in terms of the number of residents involved, the length of process and the cost of delivery. They also produce similar results on engaging the community, producing recommendations and actions and informing the climate emergency panels.

Following this research, a detailed proposal to deliver community deliberative processes is being developed, which will come towards this Executive in the coming months, to provide comprehensive information on how these methods will be set up and delivered.

Some of the potential topics for discussion will reflect the behaviour change needed to achieve net zero, and this includes:

- Our vision for future living across Wokingham Borough;
- modal shift in transport;
- reducing energy consumption through behaviour, technology and home improvements;
- reducing the amount of waste we generate and improving our recycling behaviours;
- reducing food waste and supporting sustainable consumption; and also
- Conscious consumption. So shopping local, using less plastic, avoiding fast fashions and taking staycations.

This process will involve a diverse and unbiased range of participants to obtain the best quality feedback from balanced discussions. The results will then be openly fed back into the Council and also back to the community.

Supplementary Question

Can I put a request in that we look at how we can increase biodiversity in the Borough and see if we can get this as one of the subjects of the early LDPs as you go forward?

Supplementary Answer

Yes, I can certainly confirm that we can do that. I think it is a great thing to add to our list of local deliberative processes for the future. Increasing biodiversity is really important to us as a Council.

Yes, absolutely I think getting our residents' views and opinions on how we do that would be very valuable to our community and our climate emergency going forward.

6.2 Nick Dyer had asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written response was provided:

Question

Since 2013 the monthly membership fee (currently £30 per month/£360 p.a.) has allowed squash players to book off-peak courts at no additional cost. On 11th May 2021, without prior consultation, members were advised that with effect from 1st June that IN ADDITION to the monthly fee, a charge of £5.50 would be levied for every off-peak booking.

This means ADDITIONAL COST as follows:

- 1 court booking per week = £286 p.a.
- 2 court bookings per week = £572 p.a.
- 3 court bookings per week = £858 p.a.
- 4 court bookings per week = £1144 p.a.

Not many people play 4 times a week, but I and a number of others do (we were described by PFP as "abnormal members"!) but the impact on us is huge. The group I represent are mainly senior citizens for whom this is our main source of exercise which is now being discouraged. We believe some members will cancel and the rest of us will significantly reduce usage emerging from a pandemic.

I would like to know what impact analysis on INDIVIDUALS was carried out by the Council before they sanctioned these draconian price increases by Places for People and how they can be justified.

Answer

Within the existing terms and conditions for those that hold a membership with Places Leisure (PFP), changes can be made to memberships and at this point members will be notified and consulted prior to any changes and can, if they wish, cancel their membership.

Proposed price changes that are not deemed core pricing sessions (which are increased yearly as per inflation and agreed with the Sport and Leisure team) are put forward for discussion and review and once agreed PFP will initiate the changes in line with their terms and conditions.

Background and supporting details for the change by PFP:

Place Leisure inherited the previous contractor's membership and racket sport pricing structures in May 2018 and not a current membership option that PFP offer within their pricing structure. The legacy memberships were honoured for over three years whilst refurbishment & improvement works were carried out across all Wokingham sites.

The membership implemented for those that were on a legacy 1Life membership is not a rackets membership, as mentioned above there is no such membership that PFP offer. The implemented membership is excellent value when combined with usage of the gym, fitness classes, swimming & 50% off racket sports usage.

Racket Sport hire price has not increased from 1st June 2019, instead the booking structure for members has been reviewed and amended in June 2021, the headline membership rate of £41 a month unlimited use has not been increased this year, and there are no plans to review this until 2022. On average, members book a racket court 1-2 times weekly. This frequency of use ensures their membership is still excellent value.

After consultation, Mr Dyer was immediately transferred to a more suitable senior (over 60's) membership, benefiting from unlimited access to the gym, group exercise classes along with the 50% reduction on courts at St Crispin's LC for £29.00 a month.

Recommendations are also encouraged that members split the price of a squash court with their playing partner, rather than paying for the court in full themselves, reducing the racket usage costs by half.

The over 60's membership reduction also supports all those residents that Mr Dyer mentions, supporting and encouraging older residents within the Borough an affordable membership option for all activities offered.

Places Leisure pricing remains extremely competitive and in many areas versus other like-for-like leisure providers in the local area (e.g. Everyone Active in Bracknell and GLL in Reading) and provides excellent value for money in which we encourage for the residents of Wokingham.

7. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

7.1 Gary Cowan asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

I participated in a workshop recently which looked at building over 4,500 houses, 3 schools, community centres, new roads etc at Hall Farm stretching to and including parts of Winnersh.

When asked a senior Officer at the workshop suggested that the evolving local plan was to provide 700 to 750 houses a year until 2036 but in the local Wokingham Paper you are quoted as stating the number each year would be in the region of 14,000 plus a year to 2036.

Was the 700 to 750 the housing number the Council would like to put in the Hall Farm Arborfield to Winnersh and the 14,000 plus the number for the Borough as a whole?

Can the Leader of the Council update me on the actual or approximate housing numbers the Council are planning for the Borough in the evolving housing plan to 2036?

Answer

First of all I would just like to point out Gary that I cannot be responsible for what is printed in the press.

As the mastermind behind the current plan, you are well aware what the paradigms around a local plan process are. Indeed, you were the Executive Member to whom could be attributed the four SDLs and all the development for the last decade. I can therefore assume that you are familiar with the process.

You are also correct in describing the local plan as evolving.

Government policy requires all local authorities to set out plans to deliver new housing, and Wokingham Borough Council is no different. This is a central issue to be grappled with through the new local plan.

Unfortunately, due to the change in the emergency planning arrangements around AWE Burghfield we are no longer able to rely on providing for most of the new housing need through the creation of the Grazeley garden town, as proposed in the Draft Local Plan consultation last year, and we are having to review alternative possible approaches. The meeting you attended is part of an evidence gathering exercise, considering how development might be managed on a strategic scale, should this approach be taken. Information on this process is available on our website.

I should stress at this juncture that no decisions have been made as to what the alternative approach will be recommended for consultations and all options remain on the table.

Returning to your question, the figures you quote are confusing the amount of housing the Government requires to be built each year within Wokingham Borough with the amount of housing that needs to be managed by the local plan over its entire period.

You will recall that last year the Government White Paper proposals were that Wokingham Borough would have to provide in excess of 1,600 per annum, which with buffers would have been around 2,000 per annum. You were sceptical that this would and could be eased. But a Conservative administration is capable of having a dialogue with a Conservative Government and I can say without fear of contradiction that the policy was abandoned because of our opposition. At the time it was said that I was notorious in Whitehall.

The applicable Government policy calculates the amount of housing a local authority needs to enable through a standard method. For Wokingham Borough, the standard method currently calculates the housing need as 768 dwellings per year. This figure is recalculated each year as you know but it has generally been in the range of 760-820 dwellings.

You may recall that when you were Lead Member for Planning at the time the 2010 Local Plan was accepted with a figure of 623 new homes per year.

The Draft Local Plan we consulted on last year covered the period 2018 to 2035/36, an 18-year period. 768 dwellings per year for 18 years is just under 14,000 dwellings. There is no requirement to provide 14,000 dwellings each year.

For completeness, much of the required 14,000 dwellings will be met from sites which already have planning permission. For example 9,000 dwellings have already been completed, are under construction or have planning permission as part of the four Strategic Development Locations defined by your adopted Core Strategy local plan In 2010, on which you were instrumental.

I am in discussions with MHCLG to ameliorate the requirement by seeking clarification on exceptional circumstances and the five year land supply.

Consultation on the new local plan is anticipated in the autumn.

Supplementary Question

I was looking at the Wokingham Borough Council Managing Development Local Plan Document, which was adopted in February 2014 and was signed off by the then Executive Member for Planning, which was Councillor Keith Baker. Looking at Appendix 14 it makes reference to South Wokingham SDL and the requirement to build 2,490 houses by 2026, which is the end of the Plan. I think the same line would apply to all four SDLs. I attended a planning meeting briefing on South Wokingham and its evolution fairly recently and in that the developers and Officers said that once planning permission had been granted for the remainder of the work it would take at least 10 years to complete the project. If all of those houses are supposed to be built by 2026, 10 years on takes it up into 2030, 31, 32 and this really will apply, I would think, to all the SDLs.

So my concern is, and the question is, if you lump the incomplete houses in the existing Local Plan will they be added to the numbers that you will be agreeing in the new Local Plan and so whatever the number will be it will be plus all of the incomplete ones in the existing Local Plan?

Supplementary Answer

I think you are assuming parts of the evolving Local Plan which are yet to evolve and I think you will have to wait for that position unless Wayne can provide anything further.

Councillor Wayne Smith provided the following response:

I think you are right Gary. I think the issue we have had in South Wokingham is the delay in getting the scheme off the ground. So, I think you are right but it will not be in addition to, they will be negative numbers off the overall plan.

7.2 Imogen Shepherd DuBey asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Having looked at the Recovery Strategy document, I am having trouble seeing what WBC are doing, over and above the business-as-usual items that are mentioned in this document. This document seems to cover the work that WBC would be doing anyway, but it does not demonstrate what additional funding is being made available to help local Businesses recover and how it might be used. Even Wokingham Town Council has

managed to find funding for advertising and banners promoting businesses in Wokingham Town Centre, but at this critical time, we have seen no wider help at all from WBC.

Please can you identify what additional funding is being allocated to business recovery and how is going to be used?

Answer

In sending you our proposed Recovery Strategy earlier than the usual date of distribution, I was hoping you would come up with something useful that we could expand on the comprehensive Recovery Strategy we already have in place. Sadly, you have not but it is really good to have Wokingham Town Council coming to the party, albeit late in the day.

Taking your specific point regarding Wokingham Town. Rather than just hang up some bunting and banners we will continue to regenerate the Town Centre in the context of Business Recovery at a total investment of approximately £150m. This will involve working hard with our resources to bring in attractive retailers by encouraging them that this is a great place to come and set up a business. We have already been successful in doing this during the pandemic. We will continue to administer support schemes available to businesses and ensure our businesses across the whole Borough receive any restart support available in addition to the £66m support we have already distributed. Additional staffing resources have been secured to reach out to our businesses in this regard.

We know that one of the best ways to bounce back is to create vibrancy within the Town, which we will do through attracting desirable retailers as I have previously mentioned, creating the right environment and facilitating events to draw people in.

Our regeneration activity will include the completion and sale of the homes we are building around Elms Field and surrounding areas, a new hub for leisure, swimming and other events, including a new library. You will also be aware from this agenda that we are even investing sizeably in a boxing hub in the town centre, which we are expecting to be of great appeal across age ranges and genders.

All of this considerable investment and resource will be directed into; building out the town centre assets and facilities to create an attractive business environment; supporting current businesses to bounce back; attracting desirable retailers and facilitating the environment and events to draw people into the town. These endeavours stretch into the 100s of million pounds and are without a doubt on top of business as usual for any local authority. But we know this is the right thing to do as our businesses deserve every opportunity to rise and thrive following such a difficult time. Who knows, we might also put up a bit of bunting.

Supplementary Question

Your answer doesn't really answer my question. There was no budget line in the budget meeting that we had in February to talk about recovery at all. I know that there has been grant funding from central Government and that has been distributed and that is great. But I want to know what additional costs the Covid recovery is having on Wokingham and I don't see any sign of that in this report. Also, I wasn't aware that we were allowed to comment on this report as it seemed to have got dumped on us. So, this is why we are asking the question now.

Aside from the grants that central Government has given us what funding has come from Wokingham Borough Council? How much money has it cost us for this Covid recovery plan because it was not in the budget for this year?

Supplementary Answer

I correct you it is all in the budget. We have been working on the recovery plan for the last 12 months and it is all encompassed in the MTFP.

As I said I am delighted to hear that Wokingham Town Council is finally coming to the party.

As far as I can tell both Wokingham and Earley Town Councils have slept for sixteen months, having delegated all the functions to the Officers. There is no evidence that either body has done anything material in that time. Whilst not doing anything it has kept all the Officers on full pay at the residents' cost. No identifiable furlough has occurred and no recovery plan has been published.

It is appalling that Earley Town Council have not in two years been able to finish the transfer of Sibley Park Woods and grass areas from Persimmon Homes whilst suggesting that they should be custodians of more land.

If my memory serves me correctly the Lib Dems were against developing Elms Field which is now and has been throughout the pandemic a centre of vibrant activity. Any day it is literally full reflecting the popularity of the facility.

Our regeneration of the Wokingham town centre has kept it alive free of the voids which other town centres have suffered. Again, if my memory serves me correctly your former Leader and your party was against redevelopment but proposed no shops but a dark warehouse from which goods could be collected.

£150m has been spent in the town centre providing a cinema, car parking, a swimming pool, new shops, a hotel, a leisure centre, a theatre, etc, etc. We Conservatives have led in Wokingham Town, Woodley, Earley and Twyford. Every improvement has been opposed by the Lib Dems who after the event have claimed responsibility.

The Twyford library was completely devoid of any Lib Dem involvement, it is a Tory achievement of which I am proud.

Oh no, I do you a misjustice the Lib Dem Leader is very concerned about spending and would wish to curtail presumably cancelling the library, Carnival Pool etc etc. Central to your question was increasing spending. The Lib Dems only see issues in terms of spending and every proposal made increases it.

Wokingham Town, despite Covid, is vibrant and I entreat Wokingham Town Council to welcome shoppers and visitors to use it. You should be doing all in your power to revitalise this wonderful asset that the Tory Borough Council has developed. The residents expect it.

It is truly good for our residents that the Lib Dems are in opposition. I concur with the assertion that Lib Dem questions are whatever they are.

7.3 Shahid Younis had asked the Deputy Executive Member for Equalities, Poverty, the Arts and Climate Emergency a question which was withdrawn prior to the meeting.

**7.4 Lindsay Ferris asked the Leader of the Council the following question:
Question**

When you gave your Budget Speech in February this year, there was no mention of a Recovery Plan, something, you may remember I commented on in my speech in response to your proposals. I have been through the current proposals and I can still see no Budget commitments within the Document, only a broad comment about working within the financial restrictions of the Council. That seems to confirm no specific financial allowance has been made to perform any of the proposals, such as they are, mentioned within the Document.

Is this document nothing more than an after-thought?

Answer

It is true about the Lib Dem questions. Thank you Lindsay for your question. It will obviously surprise you to know that we have been working with our Officers since the early months of lockdown in March 2020 on the Council's response to recovery. This predates your rhetoric at Council in February 2021 by about 10 months. Although, quite rightly, our primary attention during the pandemic has been on our response and saving lives, there has been 'shadow' Gold meetings chaired by our Deputy Chief Executive which has focused on recovery. Work has been going on across the Council for over a year and this document simply brings this together in a formal way. The only way in which I would refer to this document and the huge work that sits beside it, as an after-thought, is that throughout the pandemic it has been the thought that we have been saving lives, communities and businesses.

As for budgets for recovery, here are some financial commitments that were incorporated in the MTFP in February 2021:

- completion of £150m investment in Wokingham Town Centre regeneration and recovery;
- climate emergency investment in seeking to become carbon neutral as part of recovery £71m over 3 years;
- investing in our contain and outbreak management plan to enable recovery over £2m;
- £250k as an initial pilot to support those with low level mental health issues, to help those who need it recover from the impact of the pandemic;
- £160k over the next 2 years to enhance our approach to domestic abuse which is another area which will need greater support as a result of the pandemic.

As I said these are just some, there are plenty more that I could cite. However more significantly you are missing the fundamental point of this Strategy. All of the Council's resources will be utilised with these Pillars in mind as these Pillars are considered to be the most significant areas that need attending to in delivering successfully on our Council Plan.

The Recovery Strategy is also clear on its status as being a flexible, dynamic, evolving strategy, informed by the data and insight we gather along the way. No one can know all the specific issues and challenges our community will face over the next five years. You

will be aware from the approach that we have taken to the pandemic; we will act clearly and decisively to do what needs to be done, we will target Council resources to where it is most important and will not be shy in seeking additional budgetary resources if and where it is needed.

Supplementary Question

I think I can make a similar comment about responses to questions as well as you made earlier. I think you have missed the point of what we have been saying particularly the Covid recovery plan because what you have mentioned mostly this evening is our activities which have been going on for 3, 4, 5 years. We as a result of the problem with Covid have had a significant number of businesses struggling, a lot of people being laid off and at the Community and Corporate O&S meeting you admitted that it was a reaction to the situation.

What are you actually doing to deal with the extra requirements associated with having a Covid problem? We have all those extra problems. What is it extra that you are doing as a result of Covid?

Supplementary Answer

We generally live within the budget that we set in the MTFP and that is good financial management. I have always been rather appalled by the financial literacy of the opposition. We will come back to the Executive or Council if we need further budgetary additions to that envelope. So, we will live within that envelope.

7.5 Sarah Kerr asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

Who was involved in the decision-making process for the price increases at St Crispin's Leisure Centre that has led to in some cases, a 4-fold increase in cost for some users?

Answer

Within the existing terms and conditions for those that hold a membership with Places Leisure (or PFP for short), changes can be made to memberships and at this point members will be notified prior to any changes and can, if they wish, review their membership options or cancel their membership.

Proposed price changes that are not deemed core pricing sessions (which are increased yearly as per inflation and agreed with the Sport and Leisure Team) are put forward for discussion and review and once agreed PFP will initiate the changes in line with their terms and conditions.

The change in cost relates to a legacy membership inherited by PFP from the previous contractors in May 2018 and not a current membership option that PFP offer within their pricing structure. The legacy memberships were honoured for over three years whilst refurbishment and improvement works were carried out across all Wokingham sites.

The membership implemented for those that were on a legacy 1Life membership is not a rackets membership, as mentioned above and there is no such membership that PFP offer. The implemented membership is excellent value when combined with usage of the gym, fitness classes, swimming and 50% off racket sports usage.

Racket sport hire prices have not increased since 1st June 2019, instead the booking structure for members has been reviewed and amended in June 2021, the headline membership rate is £41 a month unlimited use and has not been increased this year, and there are no plans to review it until next year. On average, members book a racket court once or twice a week. The frequency of use ensures that membership is still excellent value.

The members that were affected and have raised concerns and are eligible were immediately transferred to a more suitable senior (over 60's) membership, benefiting from unlimited access to the gym, group exercise and classes along with the 50% reduction on courts at St Crispin's Leisure Centre and for only £29.00 a month.

Recommendations are also encouraged that those members split the price of a squash court with their playing partner, rather than paying for it themselves, therefore reducing the racket usage by half.

Places Leisure pricing remains extremely competitive and in many areas versus other like-for-like leisure providers in the local area (for instance Everyone Active in Bracknell and GLL in Reading) and we provide excellent value for money in which we encourage the residents of Wokingham to use these fantastic facilities and they are of the best in the country..

Supplementary Question

I am quite surprised by your answer. I mean you have already highlighted that these price increases particularly affect squash players as you are aware. We have actually crunched the numbers and it is more expensive now to use the squash courts at St Crispin's than Wellington Health and Fitness Club.

A much better facility at Wellington Health and Fitness Club is actually cheaper than St Crispin's. St Crispin's is a Council owned facility.

My question is how are you intending to fulfil the Council's Leisure Strategy, of increasing participation in sports and leisure activities, when you price people out of using facilities run supposedly for public benefit?

Supplementary Answer

I think that I did explain that these were legacy charges which were not there, people enjoyed free sessions off-peak and those sessions have lasted for three years and we do not intend to carry these on. The PFP have implemented a price for those off-peak sessions. Squash is a fantastic game unfortunately we have to be competitive.

As you are aware Sarah Wokingham Borough Council is the lowest funded authority in the Country and we rely solely on the increased income that we get through our council tax paid by our fantastic residents. We want to use these funds wisely to provide our sports and facilities which are the best in the country and as such all of our residents to enjoy these facilities through paying appropriate and competitive prices.

So, I do not know where you are going to get your forward price increases and really I am at a loss to understand that.

7.6 Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Relating to Revenue Monitoring 2020/21 – Outturn: The report shows that there were real pressures placed on the Council's finances last year, which we nonetheless were able to handle successfully due to strong financial management. Can you tell me what the plans are for progress on the Local Plan this year and how this will affect the current budget in light of continuing COVID pressures?

Answer

A review of the adopted plans is being undertaken to ensure that the Council's planning policies continue to be effective in managing decisions on development proposals.

The Council is currently involved in the process of preparing two local plans: the Central and East Berkshire Joint Minerals and Waste Local Plan; and the Local Plan Update.

The Central and East Berkshire Joint Minerals and Waste Local Plan is being undertaken in partnership with Reading Borough Council, Bracknell Forest Council and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. The Plan was submitted for examination in February and we are awaiting the programme from the appointed Inspector.

The programme for the Local Plan Update has unfortunately needed to be changed. This reflects the need to revisit and consult on a revised strategy to manage the growth following the extension of the emergency planning arrangements around AWE Burghfield in 2020. This change in circumstances meant that the strategy outlined in the Draft Local Plan from February last year is no longer practically achievable.

Consultation on a revised strategy for the Local Plan will be held this autumn. This will formally be set out in an update and the Local Development Scheme due for consideration by the Executive in July, next month.

We all recognise the importance of preparing new local plans to ensure we continue to have effective planning policies. Budgets already exist for both plans which are sufficient to cover the costs of their preparation, including procuring all the evidence.

8. WBC RECOVERY STRATEGY

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposed strategy for the Council that addresses the key issues arising from the pandemic and attends to 'recovery' in the context of delivering the Corporate Plan.

The Leader of Council introduced the report and advised that the Recovery Strategy had been worked up during the pandemic and most of the financial consequences set out in the Strategy had been included in the Medium Term Financial Plan. If additional funding was required then proposals would be brought back to the Executive in the form of supplementary estimates.

Whilst the Council could never have predicted the course of the pandemic, it was clear that it would do damage to the Borough and its economy therefore whilst there was a team within the Council dealing with the requirements of the pandemic there was also a team working on the aftermath.

Councillor Halsall advised that the pandemic had been approached in three phases: response, recovery, and reorientation. He also highlighted and provided additional detail on the nine key pillars and the three key principles, as set out in the Strategy.

Gregor Murray stated that given that Covid had brought with it a reduction in the particulates that adversely affected our air and also an increase in home working, which provided benefits for the environment, he was pleased to see that the Strategy included an additional focus on maintaining the lower particulate rate and also working with residents and local businesses to maintain some of that home working which had a great carbon benefit. Councillor Murray also welcomed the fact that the Council was making investments in mental health as it was known that this was going to be an area of concern for a lot of residents post Covid.

RESOLVED that the Wokingham Borough Council Recovery Strategy be approved and the challenges of recovery in a changing landscape and the need to be agile in approach be noted.

9. REVENUE MONITORING 2020/21 - OUTTURN

(Councillors John Halsall, John Kaiser, Stuart Munro and Wayne Smith declared personal interests in this item)

The Executive considered a report setting out the revenue outturn position of the Council for the 20/21 financial year.

During his introduction, the Executive Member for Finance and Housing reminded the meeting that the Council was the lowest funded unitary council in the UK with regards to Government grants. This had meant that over the past 10 years the Council had to reduce its spending in real terms by around £35m, however it had managed to continue offering high levels of service and end up with a general reserve balance which at the start of the pandemic was £12.4m. Councillor Kaiser went into detail on the programmes that had been embarked upon during this time which included the setting up of the Council owned housing companies, which not only delivered affordable homes but also made a profit to be reinvested back into services, investing in Wokingham town centre, and commercial investments which were performing well.

Councillor Kaiser further highlighted some of the projects that had been completed as part of the capital programme. This included five new primary schools, one new secondary school and six major road projects. The road projects consisted of Arborfield relief road, which was delivered on time, the new bridge at Barkham, relief roads in Winnersh and Shinfield, the start of the new southern and northern relief roads as well as the new station and new station link roads. He went on to mention the 700 new affordable and social homes that had been completed over the last two years and the regeneration and replacement of Gorse Ride in Finchampstead which would deliver over 200 new homes.

Councillor Kaiser went on to inform the meeting about the work that had been carried out to ensure that during the pandemic those who were homeless were looked after and taken off the streets as well as providing information on the action and support that had been provided to the poorest and most vulnerable in the Borough and to businesses.

As set out in the report Councillor Kaiser highlighted that despite the challenges that had been faced during the pandemic the Council had come in under budget for the 20/21 financial year both on business as usual (£1.2m) and overall including Covid 19 costs in the sum of £800k. The HRA was showing a surplus of £1.4m and general reserves were

standing at £10.4m. The only area where an increase of costs was showing was the Dedicated School Grant which was due to the increase in costs for children with special needs. The Council had been working with the DfE to address this issue and had plans to deliver additional in-Borough provision to arrest these costs going forward.

Councillor Kaiser paid tribute to the Chief Executive, the Chief Finance Officer, the senior management and the commitment of all staff to deliver services on time and on or in some cases below budget with no reduction in the quality of services to residents. He also thanked the charity sector for their contribution.

Following a query by Councillor Jorgensen it was confirmed that the Council's net debt was £131m.

Councillor Margetts highlighted that the actions taken during the pandemic all cost money eg purchasing PPE privately when it was not available from central Government, setting up vaccination centres, etc, and these had only been possible because of the strong financial position of the Council.

With regard to the carry forward requests, amounting to £7.4m, Councillor Kaiser clarified that the budget for these had been approved in the 2020/21 budget agreed by Council therefore they would not create any additional pressure on the 2021/22 budgets.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the outturn position of the revenue budget and the level of balances in respect of the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account and Schools Block be noted;
- 2) the General Fund carry forward requests of £7,464,939, as set out in Appendix B to the report, be agreed;
- 3) a supplementary estimate of £16,000 for the Digital Infrastructure Group be approved.

10. CAPITAL OUTTURN 2020/2021

The Executive considered a report setting out the Capital Programme outturn for 2020/2021.

In addition to the information provided during the revenue monitoring outturn item the Executive Member for Finance and Housing drew Members' attention to the fact that the Council had managed to spend £171m during the year, which was only £3m below target and which was a major achievement given the pandemic.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the outturn position of the capital programme for 2020/21, as summarised in the report below and set out in detail in Appendix A, be noted;
- 2) the proposed fourth quarter carry forwards into the 2021/22 Capital Programme, as set out in Appendix B, be noted and approved;
- 3) the Quarter 4 budget adjustments to the 2020/21 capital programme which include:

- a. £4.22m of ringfenced funded capital budget provisionally programmed for 2021/22 is brought forward into the current year (2020/21), for the acceleration of the delivery of the SCAPE – Road Infrastructure project;
- b. Reduction in capital programme budget of £114k across schools devolved programme, due to the reduction in the funding from the devolved schools grant; be noted and approved.

11. IMPLEMENTING THE LEISURE STRATEGY

The Executive considered a report which proposed two new leisure developments which would take forward the draft Leisure Strategy by further enhancing the Council's facilities to increase physical activity and improve wellbeing.

The Executive Member for Environment and Leisure introduced the report and highlighted the proposal for a boxing fitness hub. He advised that local research had shown that combat sports and fitness sessions attendances were on the rise. In line with the town centre regeneration an opportunity for a high-end fitness studio with classes as its main attraction had become available. Focus would be on combat exercise classes and fee-box sessions for training and exercise purposes.

Councillor Batth went on to provide information on the proposal for a 3G pitch and additional car parking at Laurel Park. It was noted that data from the current Playing Pitch Strategy showed that Wokingham had over 540 football teams and there was a need for additional 3G pitches. Laurel Park's pitches were rated as 'poor' within the Strategy and maintenance work is being carried out on the pitches to improve them. Installing a new 3G pitch and additional parking would mean that players would not have to travel outside the Borough.

Councillor Jorgensen was pleased to see the proposal for a 3G pitch at Laurel Park as there were issues with the current pitches on that site. She highlighted that local residents had problems with people parking and the traffic on matchday so asked if a solution to this issue could be considered whilst building the 3G pitch.

Due to the shortage of cricket pitches in the area Councillor Jorgensen asked if consideration could also be given to the inclusion of an astroturf cricket square at Laurel Park. Councillor Batth welcomed these suggestions and advised that between 40-50 parking bays were being proposed at Laurel Park, subject to planning permission, which should assist with the issues local residents were facing. He agreed to look at the possibility of including a cricket square.

Given the physical and mental health benefits of boxing Councillor Murray welcomed the proposal of setting up a boxing fitness hub into the community and particularly the introduction of self-defence classes for women. He asked that a commitment be made that these classes would be prioritised as part of the club's activities and that they would be well promoted and publicised, particularly in schools, and run at various times of the day to make sure that anybody who wanted to attend was able to do so. Councillor Batth confirmed his commitment and support for Councillor Murray requests.

RESOLVED that the following be approved:

- 1) a new boxing fitness hub based in a first floor unit in Peach Place, Wokingham. This is to be managed by WBC Sport and Leisure Team and approval for all associated fees and charges to be agreed for the hub as set in Schedule 1;

- 2) the borrowing of £630k for the hub which will be funded by income from the activities, resulting in a surplus after all costs on average of £80k p.a.;
- 3) a new 3G pitch and additional car parking located at Laurel Park, subject to funding and planning, and borrowing of £300k to be self-financed by project.

12. COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGY 2021-2024

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposed Community Safety Partnership Strategy and priorities covering the period 2021-2024.

The Leader of Council highlighted the work that was being carried out to address residents' safety and their environment. This included appointing a Community Safety Manager, a Domestic Violence Manager and an Anti-Social Behaviour Manager.

In addition, environmental health, trading standards and licensing, together with more than 150 pieces of legislation, were being brought back under the Council's control. The Licensing and Appeals Committee, which would be renamed the Licensing, Trading Standards and Appeals Committee, and would develop, over a number of years, a Wokingham Borough Council policy for each of these services.

Councillor Halsall advised the meeting of the work that would be carried out by the Community Safety Partnership, environmental health, trading standards, licensing with health partners and towns and parishes to provide a consistent and joined up approach and also the creation of a responsive and out of hours service.

With regard to the Community Safety Strategy Councillor Halsall drew Members' attention to the priorities for the Community Safety Partnership and the five delivery areas as set out in the report.

The Executive Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods advised the meeting that the Community Safety Strategy was deferred from the previous Executive meeting in order that additional public and stakeholder consultation could be undertaken. The current Strategy and priorities came to an end in March 2021 and legislation states that the Community Safety Partnership must have in place:

- a strategy for crime and disorder, including anti-social behaviour, combatting the misuse of drugs, alcohol and other substances in the area;
- a strategy for the reduction of re-offending in Wokingham Borough; and
- a system for monitoring the strategy for effectiveness and make any changes where necessary and expedient.

With regard to the development of the Strategy Councillor Soane highlighted the workshop that had taken place on 10th December 2020, as set out in Appendix 2, the consultation that had been carried out over a period of five weeks in February/March with residents and stakeholders and the input of Members and Officers of the Council. It was noted that although the Strategy had an end date of 2024 it would be reviewed annually.

RESOLVED: That the Community Safety Partnership Strategy and new priorities for 2021-2024 be endorsed for implementation on 1 July 2021.

13. COMMERCIAL HOSPITALITY OPPORTUNITY FOR DINTON PASTURES COUNTRY PARK

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposal to commence a contract opportunity for the provision of hospitality services at Dinton Pastures Country Park.

The Executive Member for Environment and Leisure explained that the intention was that the contracted hospitality services would provide an outstanding customer experience, innovative food/drinks offer and increased income for the Council. The expectation was that the contract would commence on April 2022 and would be based on a five-year term with the possibility of a five-year extension. There was currently only one café at Dinton Pastures and one upcoming café which would form part of the new Activity Centre.

Councillor Batth went through the various stages of the tender process which included giving the shortlisted candidates the opportunity to pitch their business cases to a panel. This was an exciting opportunity to develop and realise the Council's commercial ambitions whilst delivering excellent customer service for the thousands of visitors who attend the Country Park annually.

Following a query by Councillor Jorgensen it was confirmed that the official opening of the Activity Centre would be 11 September however a soft opening was proposed at the end of July.

Councillor Kaiser queried whether there was an opportunity to open a restaurant for use in the evenings as he felt that would be very successful. Councillor Batth confirmed that the proposal was for a café upstairs in the activity centre and a high class restaurant on the site which was currently occupied by the Dragonfly café.

RESOLVED: That the commencement of the procurement process to select a contractor who will provide outstanding hospitality services at Dinton Pastures Country Park (i.e. the Dragonfly Café and new Dinton Activity Centre Café) from April 2022 be approved.

14. ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP

The Executive considered a report relating to the proposed establishment of an Enhanced Partnership (EP) under the Bus Services Act 2017.

The Executive Member for Highways and Transport introduced the report and explained that the proposal was intended to improve the Council's working relationships with the various local transport operators, including commercial, community and voluntary, in the Borough. Councillor Jorgensen clarified that the first stage of the process was merely to give notice of the Council's intention to establish an Enhanced Partnership which was not legally binding. The Enhanced Partnership agreement, which would be legally binding, would be brought back to the Executive once the working party had agreed the key requirements for the bus service improvement plan and the EP agreement and discussions had been held with the local transport operators.

Given that bus services had been significantly impacted by Covid and a shift towards public transport was necessary to meet climate aims Councillor Murray queried what would happen if the Council did not sign up to the Enhanced Partnership and what opportunities would be provided if it did sign up over and above those that were currently available? Councillor Jorgensen stated that the Council would lose its Covid bus funding if it did not, at least, give notice of its intention to form an Enhanced Partnership. Signing up would give the opportunity to have more influence on the bus providers and therefore the

bus routes, both commercial and subsidised and also hopefully lead to a better relationship with the major bus companies in the area. It was hoped that this would also give the Council more negotiating power in the rural areas.

RESOLVED: That it be agreed that Wokingham Borough Council give notice to establishing an Enhanced Partnership under the Bus Services Act 2017.