

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 22 SEPTEMBER 2022 FROM 7.30 PM TO 11.00 PM**

Members Present

Councillors: Caroline Smith (Mayor), Beth Rowland (Deputy Mayor), Sam Akhtar, Keith Baker, Parry Batth, Rachel Bishop-Firth, Laura Blumenthal, Chris Bowring, Shirley Boyt, Prue Bray, Rachel Burgess, Anne Chadwick, Stephen Conway, David Cornish, Gary Cowan, Andy Croy, Phil Cunningham, David Davies, Peter Dennis, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Paul Fishwick, Maria Gee, John Halsall, David Hare, Peter Harper, Graham Howe, Clive Jones, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, John Kaiser, Sarah Kerr, Abdul Loyes, Tahir Maher, Morag Malvern, Charles Margetts, Adrian Mather, Andrew Mickleburgh, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray, Alistair Neal, Ian Shenton, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Mike Smith, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane, Alison Swaddle and Shahid Younis

Members In Attendance Virtually

Councillors: Jim Frewin

42. Minutes' Silence

A minutes' silence was observed to mark the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

43. Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Pauline Helliard Symons, Rebecca Margetts and Jackie Rance.

44. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Council meeting held on 21 July 2022 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to the following amendments and signed by the Chair.

Page 25, Item 39 – substitute 'Local Policing Commander' for 'Police and Crime Commissioner'.

The inclusion of Keith Baker's apologies for absence.

45. Declarations of Interest

The following Members made a personal declaration of interest in relation to items on the Agenda:

- Prue Bray as a Director of Berry Brook Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.
- Stephen Conway as a Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd and a Trustee of the Polehampton.
- David Hare as a Director of Optalis Ltd.
- Clive Jones as a Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

46. Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor invited Members to pay tribute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

It was agreed that the time allocation for this item be extended to enable all tributes from Members to be heard.

Caroline Smith:

It is exactly a fortnight that we heard the sad news of the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. In this period so many words have been said by literally millions of people in condolences, thanks, memories, and tributes, that whatever I say will probably have been said already.

It is my great honour to begin tonight by leading the Council's own tributes to her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth. This great lady has been part of this nation's shared consciousness for so many years. Many of us here tonight, have only ever known this one great monarch. I am sure we have all shared our grief with the nation during the recent time of mourning. King Charles described his mother's life as 'a life well lived.' This is a fitting tribute to a woman who lived her life to the full, keeping her promise to the nation far beyond the expectations of one so young, before taking on the role of our Queen. We must also bear in mind that not only have we lost our Queen, but that her children have lost a beloved mother, their families have lost their wonderful grandmother and a great grandmother. It is terrible to lose one so loved.

One memory that really helps me remember our wonderful Queen, was a picture of her walking past Prince Philip who was dressed in the uniform of the Grenadier Guards, when a swarm of bees disrupted the smooth running of the ceremony at Windsor. The photographer captured the Queen perfectly in a fit of giggles. We will never forget how central our Queen was to all our lives, across Wokingham, the nation, the Commonwealth, and the world. We must remember and celebrate her life of service and devotion as we struggle with our loss. Thank you, Ma'am.

Clive Jones:

The passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II will have touched many people throughout the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, and indeed the whole world. Queen Elizabeth II was a towering global personality and an outstanding leader. She dedicated her life to making the nation, the Commonwealth, and the entire world, a better place. As a 21-year-old she dedicated her life to one of service to the people of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth – a promise she wonderfully kept. This is an example to so many people and a huge example to anyone in or aspiring to public service. She reminded us of important underrated qualities; duty, dedication, stability, an aim for unity, dignity, calm, unfaltering, a lengthy 70 years of a lifetime of service. Everyone will have special memories of her reign. Many will remember her parachuting in, to open the Olympic Games in 2012 with James Bond, and the celebration of her 70 years on the throne with a cup of tea and Paddington Bear. Even at 96 she was a thoroughly modern sovereign.

I was privileged to meet her during the Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1977. She did a walkabout after the service of thanksgiving at St Paul's Cathedral in London. I, and some of my friends had stood outside St Paul's all night. We had a very good place to watch as the dignitaries arrived to attend the service. When it finished, she appeared at the Cathedral door. She turned right and began to walk down the steps. I knew at that moment she was walking straight towards me. Seconds later she was standing in front of me. 'Where have you come from?' she asked. 'How

long have you been here?' 'Have you had a good time?' I was the first person that she spoke to following the service, and I have several books on the Royal Family that record that, which are certainly treasured memories for me.

She once famously said 'life is full of first meetings and final goodbyes.' She was so right. Everyone that met her will remember their meeting with her. I certainly did and will certainly remember our final goodbye with her on Monday. Many residents of Wokingham will also have treasured memories of meeting Her Majesty, which they will be recalling at this sad time. Many of them will also have attended the lying-in state in Westminster Hall and queued for many hours to pay their respects to her. Others will have lined the route of the funeral at Westminster Abbey. I know of neighbours who went to Windsor to stand along the Long Walk as the Queen came home to her final resting place in the Castle. There was a graceful dignity about all the proceedings, which would have touched many who attended these events, and watched them on television. Whilst we mourn the Queen, we should remember that her family have lost a mother, a grandmother and a great grandmother. The grief on the faces of the Royal Family was very clear for all of us to see. I thought King Charles' card which said, 'in loving and devoted memory', was very heartfelt. King Charles said thank you to his mother in his televised address to the nation last week. He was not just speaking for himself and his family, but also for the nation, the Commonwealth, and indeed the whole world when he thanked her for a lifetime of service. We should also be saying thank you to King Charles for the start of his reign, building on the tradition and modernisation of the monarchy, which was started by his mother. Many of us will have been impressed that he has been able to go amongst crowds, particularly in London, and share his grief with people who have been to Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle, and elsewhere to express their condolences. Queen Elizabeth made history, she was history, and Madam Mayor, she will never be forgotten.

Pauline Jorgensen:

I am honoured to be able to pay tribute to Her Majesty the Queen following her funeral this week. Her Majesty had a special place in our hearts, as was clearly demonstrated once more in the days following her death, with people of all generations, nationalities, creeds, and colours queuing across Edinburgh and then again across London for many hours to pay their respects. We owe her a tremendous debt of gratitude. She was always there for us during her 70-year reign. In good times and bad, she was truly dedicated to the people of the Commonwealth, working right up to her last days with dogged commitment. We will never forget her kindness, her dedication to her duty, and her lovely smile. May she rest in peace.

Rachel Burgess (on behalf of the Labour Group):

The late Queen Elizabeth's life of duty, service and dedication to our country has been an example to us all. Many of us have felt a major shift in our lives these past weeks as Queen Elizabeth has been an ever present, calm and wise presence in our lives for an astonishing 70 years. Even avowed republicans have shed tears at the news of the passing of this remarkable woman. These recent weeks have manifestly shown the extent to which she was loved and respected in Wokingham, the United Kingdom, and the world over. She approached her many years of service always with dignity and compassion. Our heart goes out to the Royal Family, and our thoughts are with them as they continue their period of mourning, along with the

many, many people whose lives she touched.

Jim Frewin:

Our Queen, we have much to thank you for – for being such a shining exemplar of dedication and to public service; for showing that historical organisations and long-standing plans can successfully evolve and adapt to meet changing times; for showing that successful leadership can be achieved with dignity, humility, compassion, and with humour; for showing that family can always be a priority no matter what. For all of these things we thank you, but most of all we simply thank you for being you, and for being our Queen. God bless and may you rest in peace.

Stephen Conway:

Whenever anyone we know dies, we feel a sense of loss. Sympathy for the family of the deceased mixed with memories of the loss of our own loved ones, and a heightened sense of our own mortality. In this case the enormous outpouring of grief indicates the high regard in which the Queen was held, not just in this country, but across the world. Many of us have been struck by the incredible sight of queues of people stretching for miles to see the Queen lying in state. The dedication of those people waiting patiently for hours and hours to pay their respects fills us with admiration and a sense that someone very important to so many lives has left the stage.

Over the last few days, I have been asking myself why the Queen's death has evoked such an impressive response. To mention her striking beauty as a princess and then as Queen, her captivating smile, her sense of humour, her warmth of personality, and ease of manner, is, I would suggest only to focus on the most superficial causes of her popularity. In part of course of the explanation, is the length of her reign. Very few of us were born when her father was on the throne. All of our lives she has been a reassuring constant in a rapidly changing world. She has been the mother, the grandmother, and great grandmother of the nation. To get to the essence of her appeal to so many people including many who are agnostic of the monarchy or even republican in sentiment, we have to recognise the quality that the Archbishop of Canterbury emphasised on Monday – her selfless sense of duty and her commitment to public service. If we can try in our own sphere to follow the lead that she has given, that would be our lasting tribute.

Beth Rowland:

Many years ago, I remember seeing 'The King is dead' on the boards outside the paper shop. I had learned to sing God Save the King at school although I did not understand who the King was. I think I was about 7. The following year 1953 my Nana bought a 9-inch black and white TV, and all the street came to celebrate in her house, the coronation of this beautiful lady, who was to be our new Queen. It was a fairy tale day, even on a tiny TV. I had a gold model of that beautiful gold coach, and a round jigsaw puzzle of the whole procession.

I went through my school life learning lots about kings and a few queens, hence my love of history today. When I married and moved to Windsor, I became even more interested as we lived in the flat across the road from the stunning castle. We visited regularly and saw the Royal Family in action on a regular basis. We saw them driving cars, the flag flying when they were in residence at the Castle, and of the

course the many shops selling memorabilia. I took a real interest in Royal history. You could go into the Castle for free in those days. Then I became interested in politics and was first elected in 1991, and to this authority in 1996, and could enjoy the beautiful pictures that we have.

In 2013 I was honoured to be invited to a Royal Garden Party. By then I was a wheelchair user, and I was given a parking space right across from Buckingham Palace, and only had to get across the road in my wheelchair, where I was provided with a young serviceman in full uniform to get me into the Royal Lawns. These were over a gravel pathway - a nightmare in a wheelchair. Only someone who appreciated fine detail and thought of others would appreciate this. Our Queen had this.

We enjoyed the Garden Party and being able to go around the beautiful gardens and enjoying the sandwiches and tea in a cup and saucer, and to see the great and the good. It was the year after the Olympics and there were lots of stars there. Towards the end of the event, all disabled guests were taken to one side and lined up against the side of the Palace – not worrying at all. The Royal party: princes and princesses, dukes, and duchesses, so many of the Royal Family were there. The Queen made a beeline for people in wheelchairs and spoke to each and every one of them. We were also allowed to take photographs. I have got a photograph of the Queen talking to me, and others in the party had the same. A day to remember. I saw the graciousness in practice. May our gracious Queen rest in peace. Thank you, Ma'am, for all those years of faithful service, and now God Save the King.

Prue Bray:

I met the Queen when I accompanied my parents to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party as an unmarried daughter, so many years ago I cannot actually work out what year it was. I think it was around 1980. I remember wishing that I had worn a hat, and that she seemed so much smaller than I had imagined. I also remember that despite all the people that she had already spoken to that afternoon, she managed to sound interested when she spoke to us. I remember that wonderful smile that lit up her face, as has been mentioned so many times in recent days. That encounter with the Queen lasted perhaps 30 seconds. I am one of perhaps hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions who met her over the course of the 70 years that she reigned. Like them I have never forgotten meeting her. If the media coverage is anything to go by like them, I find myself strangely and rather unexpectedly moved by the events of the last two weeks since her death was announced, including as I am speaking now. It all feels a bit surreal. It is hard to imagine this country without her. She promised to serve us all her days, and she fulfilled her promise. This is my chance to publicly say thank you Ma'am.

Imogen Shepherd-DuBey:

As a child I spent five years living in Fiji. One of our house servants insisted on taking me on a trip to her village on her own island. This involved a two-day boat trip across the Pacific followed by half a day walking over land to the village.

Now this was an island with no new-fangled technology such as, roads, electricity or a public water supply. The people in this village had heard of things like telephones, tv's and cars, but very few had actually seen one, never mind used one. Their lives

revolved around fishing, hunting and farming, but there on the wall of every hut was always a picture of the Queen.

Fiji became a republic in 1987, but the Queen was still held in such high regard that they maintained the Queen as their 'Tui Viti', effectively the Queen of Fiji - even though she had no constitutional or legal standing. I do not yet know if this status will remain with King Charles III.

I think the point of what I am saying is that our Queen was not just the queen of the United Kingdom, she was the queen for many, many people around the world – who honoured and venerated her and were inspired by her existence. I sometimes feel that the residents of Britain often forget the wider meaning of its monarchy.

It was in Fiji where I first met the Queen for the first time – away from big crowds and the mayhem you get in the big, industrialised countries. She treated everyone who came to see her with respect, no matter their wealth or status - and I think that should be how we think of her as her legacy.

'Moce Vinaka vaka levu' – is what I will say – meaning goodbye and thank-you very much.

Keith Baker:

I was extremely proud and privileged to meet the Queen when she awarded me my MBE. We were all trained as to what we had to do, typical British control, and that we should address her as 'Her Majesty'. You call her on the first conversation 'Her Majesty' and afterwards 'Ma'am.' Remember that anyone if you get to meet her, or the King should I say. It got to my time to approach her, and my nerves simply took over. I got to her, did my bowing, approached her, she shook my hand, and I immediately forgot the protocol on speaking to her. That had no effect on her. My wife who joined me on that day, said that I was talking to her for the longest of any recipient of award, but to this day I cannot remember our conversation except for one bit. She asked me where I came from and my response was 'just down the road from where you live, just outside Reading.' She came across with a warmth that I had not experienced before or since. For a wider perspective, she was the foundation or rock of that this great country of ours has been built on. Internationally she was revered not just in the Commonwealth but right across the world. I agree with Boris Johnson when he in his tribute called her Queen Elizabeth the Great. I really think she was the greatest woman that we have ever experienced. She will be sorely missed. She may be gone but she will live on in our hearts forever, and her legacy will be everlasting.

Shahid Younis:

Exactly a fortnight ago, on Thursday 8th September, we heard the sad news of passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. This sadness was shared by millions of people around the world, as she was admired not only in the United Kingdom, but around the commonwealth and beyond. Members of the Muslim community chanted the Arabic words of 'Inna Lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un' ("We surely belong to God and to Him we shall return"). This is mostly used when hearing news that a person has died). Her demise is a reminder for us all, that there is nothing eternal. We are on

borrowed time. Death is the only certain thing in life. Her 70 years of reign was indeed an embodiment of grace, elegance, and dignity. She saw leadership as an act of service and utter devotion to her duty to serve. It is a leadership type that is selfless and focuses on others.

As public figures, there are many leadership lessons we can take from her life. I shall mention just three: 1. Resilience and adaptability. During her remarkable time as a monarch, the Queen lived through war and peace, recessions and times of growth, family scandals and tragedies and a global pandemic. In total, she has appointed 15 different Prime Ministers and met 14 US presidents. She saw a mind blowing social, economic, and technological changes and challenges in her lifetime and has demonstrated an extraordinary level of resilience and adaptability. 2. Creating a solid circle. Being the Queen and being in a leadership role share many common traits. One of them is that although it looks like it is a one-person job, in reality, it requires a team effort. The Queen had a solid circle of advisers that she collaborated with before making a decision. She delegated tasks and shared responsibilities with other members of the Royal Family. A great leader understands the importance of having an excellent team to collaborate with and most importantly, making the most of their different areas of expertise, experiences, and points of view. 3. Work hard but find time to do what you love – the Queen's schedule was always manic. However, it is no secret that she always managed to balance her responsibilities with her hobbies; like football (like me, she was an Arsenal supporter), spending time with her corgis, visiting her horses, and eating sandwiches with raspberry jam (another one of my favourites). Balancing work and play, and to do the things that make you truly happy is an incredibly important lesson for busy leaders.

Lastly, our thoughts are with the Royal Family at this difficult time. Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II will be greatly missed by all. May she rest in peace.

47. Public Question Time

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

47.1 Tony Johnson asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

In Wokingham Borough Council's Constitution of 21st July 2022, the "Timing and Order of Business" for Annual Council and Full Council both say "Except as provided by Rule 4.2.2.1, the order of business at the Annual Meeting will be:" - before going on to define the order for the respective meeting.

As Rule 4.2.2.1 is itself the "Timing and Order of Business" for Full Council, should that reference really be to Rule 4.2.2.2 "Change to Order of Business" and has this reference been incorrect as far back as Wokingham Borough Council's Constitution of November 2015?

Answer:

Mr Johnson thank you very much for bringing this typographical error to our attention.

As you rightly state, in the extract included in your question, "Rule 4.2.2.1" should actually state "Rule 4.2.2.2" in both instances and yes, the error has appeared in the

Constitution since 2015.

We are intending to address this typographical error at our next Council meeting in October.

Thank you again for bringing it to our attention.

Supplementary Question:

It would appear that except for this meeting and the last one, this Council has been acting beyond the powers granted in its own Constitution in changing the order of past meetings.

Although addressed to the Leader, this supplementary is as much for all of you as Members. Would this Council prefer to behave and conduct itself in accordance with the existing Constitution or should you citizen Councillors find a tennis court somewhere and work out a more equitable Constitution which is not subject to the diktat of whichever autocrat or bureaucrat believes they are in charge? Vox Pop Vox Dei as one Member remarked recently, although in English.

Supplementary Answer:

Thank you very much Tony. I am sure I speak for everyone in the Chamber when I say that we would prefer to conduct ourselves in accordance with the Constitution. The substantive part of your question I will come back to you with a written answer.

47.2 Alan Davis asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

In implementing its current policies and processes for road maintenance, which result in priority given to roads with high traffic density, how does the Council actively manage the risk of injury to pedestrians and other road users (including consequent compensation claims) in poorly maintained roads with low traffic density, like South Close?

Answer:

The selection of roads to be included in the annual planned structural maintenance programme is based upon UK Pavement Management System (UKPMS) which includes annual Network Condition Surveys and our own internal design process (including site visits to check the condition survey scores and where required core sampling to establish the scale of intervention to be recommended). This is recognised by central government and the wider industry through its code of practice as the national standard for a well-managed highway infrastructure. Wokingham Borough Council structural maintenance programme is based on the condition score of each road. Schemes with the highest condition score are being prioritised first.

This approach ensures that the annual structural maintenance programme is based on meeting the highest priority needs on the WBC network within the funding available.

In addition to the annual UKPMS described earlier, the network is also subject to safety inspections as defined by the Wokingham's Highways Inspection Policy. These inspections are carried out by trained and competent inspectors at defined

frequencies to ensure it is safe for public use. In between inspections defects can be reported to the Borough Council, and these will be inspected and repaired if they meet the required criteria.

Supplementary Question;

I understand that roads like South Close are subject to this annual inspection to assess their condition, and it is those assessments which inform the Council's decisions on road maintenance priorities. They are therefore very important. Would Councillor Fishwick please be prepared to share the current inspection report for South Close with me, and then come and assess for himself with me, how closely that inspection report matches the reality?

Supplementary Answer:

I would be happy to meet you on site.

47.3 Andy Bailey asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan the following question:

Can the Executive Member for Planning please update me on the next phases of the Local Plan Update (LPU) including approximate dates?

Answer:

A new cross party Member Working Group has been established to consider options on how we might best plan for development going forward.

The Working Group has recently been briefed on the main issues raised by respondents to previous consultations and continues to be briefed on any new technical evidence as it emerges. The new group is currently in the process of familiarising themselves with larger scale promotions across the Borough. This will involve visiting each area and receiving a presentation from the promoters as to their vision. Work will then continue to review the options.

The programme for submitting a new Local Plan will be highly influenced by whether a further consultation is required before proceeding to confirm the strategy we wish to submit for examination. A further consultation is most likely should the decision be to vary significantly from the strategy previously consulted on.

I do not however expect to be in a position to confirm the detailed programme until early next year.

Supplementary Question;

Does this Administration support building houses beyond the planned period?

Supplementary Answer:

This is a very controversial question. I think there is a very important announcement from one of the interim Secretary of State's for Levelling Up. He raised the issue about flood resilience, and in particular flood resilience needed to be taken account of during the whole duration of a planning development. I find it very difficult to be able to consider the planning and flooding arrangements for a site close to a river, or any river for that matter, which takes us 20 years into the future.

48. Petitions

The following members of the public presented a petition in relation to the matters indicated.

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

Heather Murray	Heather Murray presented a petition with over 538 signatures regarding road safety on William Heelas Way. <i>To be forwarded to the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways.</i>
Alan Davis	Alan Davis presented a petition of all the residents of South Close regarding road and pavement repair, resurfacing and maintenance on South Close. <i>To be forwarded to the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways.</i>

49. Presentation by the Chief Fire Officer, Wayne Bowcock, Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Council received a presentation from Wayne Bowcock, Chief Fire Officer, Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service.

The presentation covered the following points:

- RBFRS performance – the response standard had increased from 68.9% in Q1 2021 to 70.1% in Q1 2022 but was still below the 75% target. Safe and well checks had increased significantly.
- Prevention – prevention proposals for 2020-2023 were outlined including –
 - Focus activities in support of children and young people through road and water safety education programmes, Fire Cadets and Fire Safe;
 - Within the Road Safety Programme targeted activity for motorcyclists based on risk;
 - Enhance the quality and quantity of referrals received through the Adults Referral Programme (ARP).
- Response – response proposals for 2020-2023 were outlined including
 - Undertake a review of our specialist water rescue capability to ensure it continues to be aligned to local risk and national best practice
 - In 2022/23, we propose to undertake a review of our incident support capability to ensure it continues to be aligned to local risk and reflects national best practice
- Protection –
 - Develop Risk-Based Inspection Programme methodology to look at both risk to property and risk of compliance.
 - Actively promote the use of sprinklers and suppression systems as part of

the overall fire safety solution to improve fire safety in both new and existing buildings.

- Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) – Members were informed of a forthcoming public consultation on the Corporate Risk Management Plan.
- Financial Position –
 - (2022/2023 Budget - £38.446 million)
 - Between April 2016 – March 2022 we have delivered the final efficiency plan target savings of £2.401 million
 - 2022/23 deficit forecast is £650k (1.7% of budget)
 - We are looking at unfunded pay awards where each 1% = £200k to base revenue
 - 4th lowest level of reserves as % of budget in England
 - In 8th lowest precepting Fire Authorities in England
- Sector wide challenges – e.g., climate challenge had seen an increase in wildfires and flooding incidents. Also, the challenge of ‘greening’ the organisation such as its infrastructure.

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

Question from Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

What plans are being made to make the Fire Service more environmentally friendly – solar panels on buildings, electric vehicles will make the fire service more energy efficient, but are you also using biodegradable foam and other materials?

Answer:

We are funding buildings, electric vehicles etc. that is probably slower than I would like, particularly on the estates side of the situation. I am very pleased to say that we have invested a lot of the capital side of the organisation in the development of three fire stations that all have photovoltaic cells, some have grey water recovery etc.

Where we can in new builds, we are developing the buildings to be more sustainable, and that has a significant impact on the revenue budget because we reduce our overheads as well. Unfortunately, the remainder of the estate, another 14 buildings, are significantly ageing, and we have a conditions survey that says we have to spend about £15million in a budget of about £1.2million to spend on those buildings. We are just about to reprofile that as a result of the sustainability audit and work out how we can accelerate the investment in the older estate on two parts. One is the environmental sustainability, and the second is on the inclusive facilities in those buildings. To attract a more diverse workforce we need to improve the facilities in those buildings as well. So, there is an audit currently being undertaken to support us in increasing the sustainability of the buildings.

In terms of the fleet, we have already purchased three electric vehicles, three hybrid vehicles and six new vehicles will come on to the fleet this year, but we have what we call a ‘white fleet’ and a ‘red fleet’, so the white fleet we would generally run around in every day, and the red fleet are the fire engines that run around. There is very little innovation at the moment in terms of either hydrogen or electric vehicles for firefighting. We are doing what we can in the white fleet, and we are keeping a close eye on some of the work in London and Oxfordshire around hydrogen and electric

vehicles for firefighting. We will build that into our Fleet Strategy.

Biodegradable foams and other materials, we have already improved the foam that we use. There is work to do but again I think it is, the innovation into this sector is very limited. Fire and rescue as a sector from either science or engineering is a very small sector, very low returns for the private sector, so we are often very slow to see the benefits of new technology coming into the sector. We have moved away from environmentally harmful foams which we were using as recently as 10 years ago. Now we are into more environmentally friendly foam solutions, but in terms of biodegradable we are not fully there yet.

Question from Parry Batth

A resident recently suffered abusive and threatening calls and text messages which were reported to the Police. Following extensive enquiries by TVP the issues were resolved and TVP informed the resident to contact the Fire Brigade to assess fire safety in her house. The resident then contacted Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) who were most helpful in installing fire alarms throughout her property and informed the resident that TVP should have contacted RBFRS to check fire safety at her house. Is there a communication disconnect between TVP and RBFRS, as TVP simply left it with the resident to contact RBFRS?

Answer:

First of all, I am sorry to hear that your constituent suffered that abuse, but also in answer to the question, I think of this occasion the service that your resident received was less than ideal. We have since taken that up with Thames Valley Police and have had quite a full answer to that question. I am pleased to say that we were able to support your resident as soon as we were made aware of the situation.

The results that I have had, would lead me to the answer of no there is not a communication breakdown between us and Thames Valley Police. They have been very well receiving of the question that we raised. They have identified that they have a high number of new Police Officers. A lot of them are young in their service, not in their years necessarily, but young in their service, who are learning the job, and often the amount of demand and how busy the Police are, some of the connections between organisations, if a new Police Officer is not familiar with them, can sometimes be missed. The response we have had from the Local Policing Area and the Chief Inspector there is that he is going to make sure those referral pathways and the expectations are made clear to his new officers, and that training takes place. He has thanked us very much for raising the issue with him, so I do not believe there is a communication breakdown. I think it is probably an experience and a reminder issue for policing.

Question from Michael Firmager:

In your presentation you said a number of restaurants and businesses, after a fire, do no restart. Do you work with the insurance industry and if so, how?

Answer:

No, we do not directly as an individual Fire and Rescue Service but as a sector more broadly it works with an organisation called the Fire Industry Association which is populated by a number of insurance companies who feed their information and

intelligence back in via the Fire Industry Association. That does find its way through to the Fire and Rescue Services so when we are engaging through our Protection Officers with businesses, we can use some of the data and trends that are coming from the insurance industry to inform them about risks to their business. So, there is a connection on a membership body national level, but not directly between Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service and individual insurers or the Insurance Agency. Part of the reason behind that, just very briefly, is obviously we have a primary enforcing authority status as well and there is a fine line to tread between the advice that we give and the work that we engage in with private industry where we may also have enforcement role under a piece of legislation.

Question from Phil Cunnington:

Could you tell us what are the primary causes of the 30% of call outs we do not manage to make in 10 minutes, and are there any measures particularly Wokingham could consider that might aid you in meeting those targets?

Answer:

There is a mix of the primary causes of those fires. We attend still a number of automatic fire alarms. We have reduced the number by revising our response strategy to automatic fire alarms, the cause of which is often a faulty alarm system, poor management of the property, or a smoke detector going off for a controllable or spurious reason. Once we deploy a fire appliance to an incident, we lose it until that incident is closed. Hypothetically if there was an incident in this building and a Wokingham fire appliance was deployed to an automatic fire alarm, you would get the next nearest appliance which would obviously affect the response standard.

The majority of our incidents are the lower severity incidents. For a broad mix you saw me talk about the secondary fires and automatic fire alarms. In terms of the support therefore around secondary fires particularly and automatic fire alarms, when we work with your Neighbourhood Teams or Education as well, making sure that both young people and the kind of design of simple things such as where you would put refuse bins or what happens when school children are moving in and out of school, that kind of thing, we can often identify hotspots of where incidents will occur. Working with the local authority we can design out traps or bottlenecks is something we very much welcome doing with local authorities. In terms of automatic fire alarms, again working with your Planning departments and Building Control teams, particularly planning departments around the design of buildings and making sure that the appropriate standard of fire direction, but also the management systems that are put in place within buildings which can be picked up, particularly with Building Safety regulations now, between Planning departments and Building Control functions, is definitely going to be a role where work closer together and we would very much appreciate local authority support in that space.

In accordance with Rule 4.2.2.1 it was agreed that the time limit for the item be extended by 10 minutes to allow further Member questions.

Question from Bill Soane:

The ambulance crew and fire crew were able to find exactly where she was [his wife who had had a fall in an inaccessible place] because she had what3words on her phone. I think at the time the call is put through the operator who takes the call asks

if they have what3words, and I would just like to say that it certainly worked as they were able to pinpoint exactly where she was, so it is something that the Fire Brigade would encourage people to have?

Answer:

Glad that we were able to help, and I wish your wife a speedy recovery. What3words is fantastic and I think that your example and your wife's experience is a fantastic example of when what3words can be extremely useful. If you have got a road name or a house number or a road number, it is very easy to pinpoint people. When people are out and about in rural areas or the countryside what3words really does come into its own as well as in those urban areas as well. We absolutely advocate the use of what3words. As you have stated we use it in our Thames Valley Fire Control Service. Control operators will ask if people if they use what3words. Unbelievably there are quite a lot of people who do not have the what3words app. I have a work phone and it is automatically installed on my work phone that is a control device, so yes, we fully endorse the use of what3words and your example exemplifies how useful it can be.

Question from Pauline Jorgensen:

I was very interested to hear you talk about the potential for extending the Fire Service's remit to help the ambulance service. I recall that was mentioned a few years ago, and I just wondered how long it will be before it actually happens?

Answer:

We did assist the Ambulance Service and continue to do so in some cases. We use firefighters or Fire and rescue staff who volunteer to actually drive ambulances and support South Central Ambulance Service when their crewing is short. That is something that was started through the pandemic. Prior to that there was a national pilot and trial and Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service took part in that in terms of employing fire engines to cardiac arrests or certain categories of medical emergency if we were closer than an ambulance. The thing I would stress very clearly is that the Fire and Rescue Service is not a replacement for the Ambulance Service. We do not have ambulances. We do not convey patients to hospital, and people that need an ambulance, those that genuinely call an ambulance for the right reasons, need definitive medical care, which is conveying to a hospital.

It has been talked about for a long time. I also stated that the terms and conditions of firefighters, so that is their role maps, their job descriptions, as well as the remuneration that they receive are nationally negotiated. This is something that has been kicked around much to my professional frustration for many, many years, and it seems to be at an impasse. The document that the National Fire Chiefs' Council together with the Local Government Association have produced, which is the future vision called Fit for the Future, includes renegotiating or redeveloping the job description of a firefighter, addressing the funding formula of how Fire and Rescue Authorities are funded across England, which is partly through revenue support grant from the government, and then predominantly through the Council Tax precept. Addressing that funding formula, both of those things together would lead to the job description being evaluated and the stumbling block being the appropriate level of pay for firefighters to take on that additional skill set, receive the right training, and then be able to formally support ambulance services where they need it up and down

the country. A long way of saying I do not know how long that piece of string is, but it is frustratingly long and has been around a long time. At least we now have a coherent vision strategy that has been put forward to Government to see what their response to that is.

Question from John Kaiser:

There was a very serious fire in my ward about 18 months ago, where a block of flats burnt down and are currently sitting there condemned. There are 9 blocks of these flats, 54 homes, which are all rented, owned by a large insurance company. What I am asking is who is responsible for checking those flat because we still have 24-hour fire marshals wandering around those flats. I am getting a lot of flack from people with regards to the quality of the Fire Marshals looking into their windows, all those sorts of things, but they are living very much petrified. It is affordable housing basically, so they do not have the resource basically to just up sticks and move away. I would like to know what responsibility the Fire Service has for that?

Answer:

The legal responsibility rests with the Responsible Person who either owns or operates the building, so they are required to produce a Fire Assessment if the building falls under the Fire Safety Order. They will have done that because our responsibility as a Fire and Rescue Service then is for Fire Safety Inspecting Officer to go out and carry out what we call an audit on the fire risk assessment that is in place. There are clearly some kind of issues in those buildings if the Responsible Person believes that they need to have a Fire Warden or a waiting watch or whatever it is, but any remedial measures such as Fire Wardens will have been agreed with the Fire Safety Inspecting Officers as being adequate in order to underpin the Fire Risk Assessment that the building has in place. Effectively as long as the Fire Risk Assessment is suitable and sufficient then in terms of legislation there is little or nothing that the Fire and Rescue Service can do. It is when the Fire Risk Assessment is not suitable and sufficient then we would take action, either by issuing an enforcement notice, prohibiting parts of the building or taking legal action against that Responsible Person. What I can guarantee is that because there was a fire in one of the other buildings there, my Fire Protection Team will absolutely have carried out audits on that building and they will be up to date. If I can take the names of those buildings from you, I will also go back and double check that, that is the case.

Those Members' whose questions could not be answered due to time constraints were requested to send them to Democratic Services for a written answer.

At this point in the meeting a short adjournment was held prior to the meeting continuing.

50. Treasury Management Outturn Report 2021-22

Council considered the Treasury Management Outturn Report 2021-22, set out at Agenda pages 33 to 44.

It was proposed by Imogen Shepherd-Dubey and seconded by Clive Jones that the recommendations contained within the report be agreed, subject to the deletion of recommendation 2 and renumbering of the subsequent recommendations.

Imogen Shepherd-DuBey commented it was a good news story as it showed that the amount of external borrowing that the Council was predicted to need, had declined, reducing some of the potential impact on the General Fund. The report showed that the investments that the Council had were of benefit to it. However, the internal borrowing to capital financial requirement was outside of the target meaning that the Council had used more of its own internal money to finance its needs.

David Davies objected to the amendment of the recommendations.

John Kaiser thanked officers for the work that they had undertaken. He believed that the Conservatives had left the Council in the very best place possible to deal with the issues.

RESOLVED: That:

- 1) It be noted the Treasury Management Mid-Year report was considered and agreed by the Audit Committee at their meeting on Wednesday 27 July 2022; The Audit Committee approved recommendation 1) ("that all approved indicators set out in the treasury management strategy have been adhered to") but wanted it noted that in fact the indicator for % of internal borrowing to CFR (29%) had not been met, with the outturn indicator at 44%. It was agreed this was in fact a positive reflecting a 33 - 44 reduction in required external borrowing (reprofiling of the capital programme) and increase in cashflow of grants received;
- 2) the contents of "Table A", as set out in the report, which shows the net benefit per council tax band D equivalent, from the income generated less the financing costs on all borrowing to date equates to £22.25 per band D for 2021/22, be noted. This credit provides income to the Council to invest in its priority services;
- 3) it be noted that as at the end of March 2022, the total external general fund debt was £196m, which reduces to £72m after taking into account cash balances (net indebtedness);
- 4) it be noted that the Council's realisable asset value of approximately £443m, of which its commercial assets are estimated at approximately £249m.

51. Climate Emergency Action Plan Annual Progress Report 2022 July
Council considered the Climate Emergency Action Plan Annual Progress Report 2022 July, as set out on Agenda pages 45 to 178.

It was proposed by Sarah Kerr and seconded by Andrew Mickleburgh, that the recommendations set out within the report be approved.

Sarah Kerr thanked Members and those who had been Members in 2019 when a climate emergency had been unanimously declared, and Gregor Murray, the previous Executive Member, and the officer team for their hard work. She also thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and Andy Croy for their involvement.

Sarah Kerr reported that there was still work to do including the incorporation of a

roadmap but that the comments from scrutiny and previous Task and Finish Groups had been taken on board and SMART targets developed with a clear review of what the projected carbon savings would be, with actions within the plan. There was a significant gap which still needed to be addressed. There were three ways in which this could be done - do more as a local authority directly; work in partnership to form a one Wokingham approach; and lobby government to remove the existing barriers. Business cases were being put together for new initiatives.

Andrew Mickleburgh commented that there was much to be pleased about. The Action Plan would not currently achieve net zero by the target date and meaningful action was required. He supported the call to lobby for greater government support and referred to the Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee which had been proposed. Andrew Mickleburgh emphasised that Overview and Scrutiny's concerns were being addressed and a road map was under consideration for future iterations of the Plan.

Gregor Murray commented that there were very few dedicated Climate Officers within the Council. He indicated that recently Climate Emergency UK had undertaken an independent 6 month review of the Climate Action Plans of every authority in the UK. Initially the Council had been rated 8th out of 400, an excellent achievement. However, this had been downgraded to 22nd following consideration of information provided by an unknown individual. He felt that this had undermined the officers' hard work.

Prue Bray commented that last year Members had not been satisfied with the content of the Plan as it had not covered all it had needed to. She stressed that it was time to act as a Council and a Borough and the Plan needed to be taken to the next level. It was still a work in progress.

Andy Croy commented that he appreciated the openness and transparency. He felt that a key recommendation was that a more ambitious approach be taken as measures still fell short. It would be vital to persuade more people to use public transport. He emphasised the need for a Citizen's Assembly.

Stephen Conway stated that it was fundamental to all residents and less progress would be made, the more the issue was politicised.

Keith Baker sought clarification around the funding of the Local Cycling, and Walking Infrastructure Plan.

Pauline Jorgensen clarified that the proposal for the BSIP funding included bus priority at lights and other bus priority schemes. Bus lanes had not been included. With regards to the Local Cycling, and Walking Infrastructure Plan, she commented that it contained many positive measures but also some that would increase pollution and carbon emissions.

Gary Cowan stated that he had some issues with the Plan and that it did not adequately address the Council's plan for future housing development and its impact on climate emergency.

Lindsay Ferris indicated that the second session of the Local Plan Update Working Group had recently been held, the topic of which had been climate change.

Upon being put to the vote, it was:

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The progress made in the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) third progress report be noted;
- 2) it be noted that updates made from previous reports to demonstrate the expected trajectory that we calculate existing projects will deliver;
- 3) it be noted that a more ambitious approach will be required going forward to enable WBC to play as full a role as possible in achieving a net zero carbon borough by 2030;
- 4) it be noted that this remains a live document and will continue to be updated as more details become available to support decision making.

52. Single Use Plastics and Food Waste

Council considered a report regarding a decision taken in relation to Single Use Plastics and Food Waste, as set out on Agenda pages 179 to 184.

It was proposed by Prue Bray and seconded by Maria Gee, that the recommendations set out within the report be approved.

Prue Bray reminded Members that the report related to the process followed for a decision and not about whether they agreed or disagreed with the decision itself. A request had been submitted for a report to Council, which argued that a key decision had been made without being properly advertised. Officers had made the decision believing it not to be a key decision. It had not been possible to state with clarity as to whether it was a key decision and the Officer had withdrawn the decision. A decision would be made at the next Executive.

Pauline Jorgensen commented that the removal of free caddy liners was likely to damage the level of food recycling within the Borough, and the removal would cost more than it saved.

Keith Baker questioned where the business case for the removal was. He felt that a call in was inevitable to a due a lack of transparency.

Norman Jorgensen expressed concerns about the process adopted and the decision itself. He felt it likely that food recycling would decrease. He highlighted that the budget papers were first considered by Overview and Scrutiny and suggested that had there been a saving to be made it would have been identified at this stage.

Gregor Murray commented that residents had been told that the decision had been made to tackle the climate emergency, reducing the Borough's use of single use plastics, and saving money. He felt that the solution was not to remove caddy bin

liners but to find an alternative source for them.

Stephen Conway reemphasised that the report referred to process.

Maria Gee highlighted that voting against the recommendations would not mean that the report would not be considered by the Executive.

53. Continuation of the meeting

At this point in the meeting, 10.06pm, in accordance with Procedure Rule 4.2.12 (m), the Council considered a Motion to continue the meeting beyond 10.30pm for a maximum of 30 minutes to enable further business on the Agenda to be transacted. The Motion was proposed by Prue Bray and seconded by Stephen Conway.

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

54. Single Use Plastics and Food Waste

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That the recommendations contained within the report not be approved.

55. Member Question Time

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

55.1 Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

When he was Executive Member for Climate Emergency Councillor Murray following my introduction was working to provide Freely Fruity with land at the Barkham Solar Farm site to use as a permanent base for their fruit tree and vegetable growing charity. What will the new Executive Member do to ensure that Councillor Murray's commitment to this amazing charity is delivered on?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Michael and introducing Freely Fruity to the Council. Establishing and maintaining strong partnerships is a priority for this Administration. Sometimes as a local authority we have done things to our community rather than with them, and we must recognise that partnership working allows us to collectively achieve a lot more for the benefit of our community.

I have been meeting and talking regularly with Freely Fruity about their work and aspirations and I have been really impressed with the work that they do. I am pleased that the Council is working with a vibrant ambitious charity which shares our objectives and commitments to addressing the climate emergency and our social values.

Our discussions with the charity are ongoing. We are currently reviewing the business case to plant a community orchard, whilst considering the legal requirements for the use of the land, as well as being able to meet all the operational requirements that Freely Fruity require. We need to ensure that we are being

diligent with Council assets to secure best value for our residents. In short, we are supporting their request in principle subject to the agreement of technical details.

Supplementary Question:

Freely Fruity recently won an award for their mission to plant more fruit trees in our community. As Wokingham looks to plant hundreds of thousands more trees in the coming years, what proportion will be native fruit trees?

Supplementary Answer:

I cannot answer that at this moment in time and I will have to get you a written answer, but it is a good question so I will provide it in writing.

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

Can Wokingham Borough Council use a confidentiality clause or 'gagging clause' if an elected councillor is the whistleblower and if so, can they legally stop the elected councillor from making a protected disclosure even if the Council's own constitution suggests it can?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Gary.

The Whistleblowing policy and guidance arrangements in the Constitution applies only to Council employees, former employees, agency staff and contractors engaged by the Council. The policy protects their employment if they raise a concern about perceived danger or illegality by the Council that affects others. It does not apply to elected Members, and therefore the protected disclosure rules will not apply to them as a Member has no employment to 'protect'.

Any person including a Member should bring notice to the Council if they perceive any wrongdoing by the Council.

The Council must be seen to support whistle blowers, this is an important part of the democratic process.

Supplementary Question:

Section 9 of the Code of Conduct which covers Whistleblowing and Ethics, appears to be, if you read it, biased to the Council and its officers, not elected Councillors. The examples are an officer can report an elected Councillor to the Standards Board and the Monitoring Officer, but an elected Councillor does not have the same rights. Also, a senior officer can withdraw an elected Member's rights to access junior officers. There is a reference as well to 'has the elected Councillor apologised to the officer?', but there is no reference to 'has the officer apologised to the elected Councillor?' This would imply that wrongdoing is one sided. Officers can use the word confidential on any document, but an elected Councillor cannot do so, at risk of disciplinary action, if they breach the confidentiality applied to a document. Finally, if a critical comment is made by an elected councillor and the Council considers that it is not in the public interest... Very simply should this matter be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as on the surface it would appear to be not fit for purpose?

Supplementary Answer:

Thank you very much for your supplementary Gary. I think you make some good points. If its ok with you, I will get back to you in writing.

55.3 Laura Blumenthal asked the Executive Member for Housing the following question:

When Councillor John Kaiser held the housing portfolio, he was exploring with officers to increase the percentage of social and affordable housing to 50% on all new sites. He was working towards including this as a policy amendment to the emerging Local Plan. This was to reflect the shortage of affordable homes in the Borough. Please can you share if you agree that this is a good idea to help tackle the housing crisis for those on lower income and will you be supporting this target yourself?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Laura. I greatly admired John Kaiser's work when he held the housing portfolio and I have spoken with him on housing matters since I succeeded him.

On the specific point about the 50% target for social and affordable housing on new sites, I too have been exploring this with officers.

A 50% target makes sense given that about half of new housing would need to be affordable if it were to meet local demand, as revealed in our own housing needs assessment, and of course in light of the number of residents waiting for suitable accommodation on the Council's housing register.

Whether we can achieve 50%, or some percentage higher than the current 35% on major strategic developments locations, will depend on whether the viability of development at such a percentage can be demonstrated to the Local Plan Inspector. It is important to remember that he or she is the final decision maker on this. We have to balance, obviously, our requirement and desire for more affordable housing with other infrastructure requirements that we want developers to provide to mitigate the impact of new dwellings, such as highways improvements and new schools, as well as improving environmental performance.

Currently on most sites we do try and achieve a balance of affordable housing between primarily social rented housing which is about 70% of all affordable housing provision) and shared ownership which is around 30% of all affordable housing provision). First Homes will soon come into play on some sites (as an affordable housing tenure), providing discounted market housing for first time buyers. In an area such as ours however much of the discounted market housing will not be truly affordable to many of those who need accommodation. Much of my effort, therefore, is directed to trying to maximize the social rented component of the affordable housing that we secure through the planning process.

Supplementary Question:

The previous Conservative Administration made a commitment to deliver an additional 1,000 affordable homes in the next 5 years using Council resources and the Council was on target to achieve this. Is it your intention to maintain momentum and fulfil this commitment?

Supplementary Answer:

It most certainly is my intention to maintain momentum and in fact if it is possible, I would like to increase the pace.

55.4 Graham Howe asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

In 2019 the Conservative Administration started the Solar on Schools project. The economic rationale is that schools typically spend 84% of their budget on labour costs, 5% on standing costs and as at 2019, 5% on energy leaving only 6% for discretionary educational spend. By installing solar on schools, the installations to date have shown savings which reduce energy to 3% of budget, therefore increase discretionary educational spend from 6% to 8%. Thanks to President Putin the world has changed. We must address ourselves to those things we can do something about. It is obvious the tripling in energy prices and no cap for schools, puts all schools into deficit. The council can do something about this by catalysing the solar on schools' programme by adding batteries and monitoring systems to make greater utility energy savings.

On the premise of addressing our energies to things we can do something about, will the Lead Member for Children's Services make sure the current Solar on Schools programme is accelerated to a full programme on all our 66 schools for the benefit of our 22,000 children, with immediate effect and inform Ward members of the scheduling progress within their wards?

Answer

I thank Councillor Howe for this question, and I share his interest and concern for ensuring that schools and other settings are able to make the most of renewable energies, especially at a time of significant fuel price rises nationally.

As the Councillor will know, school governing bodies and trustees make decisions as they relate to the utilisation of their school resources rather than we as the council directing such measures, and as such we shall continue to encourage schools to explore the use of Solar Power as potential solutions to the issues you have rightly highlighted.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for that answer and I know that we would be aligned in our objectives. You are absolutely right that it is the governors that do make those decisions, and with all of our secondary schools and three quarters of our primary schools being academies, then that is even more applicable, but there are things that we could do with Salix Finance for example, and financial packaging, to create encouragement for this to happen. In light of the Green Agenda, we all want to follow then I ask you please to do that and make it a key part of the strategy within Children's Services.

Supplementary Answer:

I would be very happy to work with Sarah Kerr, who is the lead on Climate Emergency, to do what we can to progress this programme because it is important. We have just had that debate on the CEAP, and we do need to do all we can to encourage movement in that direction.

55.5 Shahid Younis asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Housing:

With inflation rocketing, will the Administration commit to freezing or below inflation rent rises for the Council's social housing tenants?

Answer

As you know, the ringfenced Housing Revenue Account relies on rent and social housing tenants to provide the money to repair and maintain existing rental properties. The HRA also supports business plans to expand our social housing stock, such as the Gorse Ride project. As an Executive Member I have to be mindful of the need to ensure the long term viability of the HRA which is not immune from the serious challenges we are experiencing across the Council; high inflation, rising demand for services, and shortfalls in anticipated income. Even so, this Administration, is committed to focusing what support it can give on those who are least well off in our community. I am very aware of the hardship faced by many of our tenants who are not supported by housing benefit or other state payments. That constitutes about a third of the total of our HRA tenants, and therefore working with our officers to produce the lowest level of rent rise for existing tenants in a way that will protect the long term viability of the HRA.

Supplementary Question:

I think these are the most vulnerable people in our community. I was expecting maybe a more firm commitment. I understand the financial pressures as well, but hopefully you can give us some more of a firm commitment that definitely we will take some action, and the burden is reduced. They are having to choose between putting food on the table or actually paying the rent.

Supplementary Answer:

I can assure you I am taking this very seriously indeed. It is my ambition to ensure that we have the lowest level rise that we can possibly get. I am very well aware of all of those issues that you talked about in terms of the human impact of all this, on vulnerable people in our community.

Of course, I will do everything I can to ensure that any rent increase is a minimal one. I cannot say much more than that at the moment. I am going through a period of proper consultation, including with our tenants, with TLIP. We have a process we have to go through. There is a government consultation on proposed caps coming up soon which we have to submit a formal response to. You will perhaps see a little bit more of the thinking of the Administration in that response, and we have to of course wait for a final decision towards the end of the year. That is when we will be able to firm this up, but I am very much in sympathy with what you are saying, and I will be doing my very best to ensure that we protect our tenants.

55.6 Stuart Munro asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

At a recent meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee you stated that the town centre regeneration programme did not make money and therefore did not benefit the whole Borough. Can you please clarify this as this statement is very clearly incorrect?

Answer:

My comments made at Overview and Scrutiny Management were made in relation to a question about opportunities to regenerate other areas of the Borough now, on the back of the Wokingham Town Centre regeneration programme. To clarify, the Wokingham Town Centre regeneration programme was a large investment for the authority and the income generated by this scheme is currently paying off the costs of the investment including debt repayment. The income envisaged at the creation of the scheme is currently not being realised.

Supplementary Question:

I do not think that it is the case. I think you will find that the debt is now being paid faster. My question is are you sure that is correct because I do not think that that is true?

Supplementary Answer:

I think it is true Stuart, but I will check and I will get back to you.

55.7 Keith Baker asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services, the following question:

In January, this Council unanimously passed the Anti Abuse Charter. The motion said progress updates would go to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny panel twice a year. When will it go to Overview and Scrutiny?

Answer

It has been recommended to Council's Corporate and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review the work on the Anti-Abuse Charter as part of a Violence Against Women and Girls update at the November 2022 meeting and a further update on progress has been recommended as part of the March 2023 committee meeting.

55.8 Jackie Rance asked the Leader of the Council the following question. Due to her inability to attend the meeting the following written answer was provided:

At the elections of 2022, the Leader of the Council campaigned vigorously against housing at Halls Farm, and the electorate believed him. Please could Mr. Jones assure everyone that there will indeed be no development ever at Halls Farm.

Answer

As I and the Executive Member, Councillor Ferris have previously explained in answers to similar questions in May, June and July, our Administration is working closely with officers to look carefully at options for how we can best plan for our housing and development needs going forward in ways that ensure that our new local plan will pass as 'sound' at public examination.

I cannot pre-determine this process.

This is a similar answer to a similar question given by your former leader on 23rd September 2021, when he said, " I don't believe that I am capable of answering that because it would be predetermination".

55.9 Peter Harper asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport

and Highways the following question:

Since the last consultation with the people of Finchampstead, the plans for the changes to California Crossroads have been changed and hence the results of that consultation are no longer valid.

Considering the length of time that has passed since the last consultation, will the Executive Member for Highways commit to carrying out a consultation on the proposed changes to the junction at California Crossroads?

Answer

The scheme is funded by S106 developer contributions tied to legal agreements from the Arborfield SDL and it can only be allocated to that project.

The scheme has been delayed for the last two years due to a combination of Covid and the Ridges being shut, otherwise it would have already been constructed.

The consultation that happened in late 2018/early 2019 is still valid as the designs have been based on that feedback. The design has considered the feedback from the consultation and are shown in the latest plans. We have been working closely with the Parish Council, Members and other stakeholders on the design and hope to begin construction next year.

56. Minutes of Committee Meetings and Ward Matters

56.1 Alison Swaddle asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Residents of Woodley are concerned by the dangerous cyclists in the pedestrianised town centre, and it does feel as if it is only a matter of time until someone is seriously injured. I would like to ask what the Executive Member for Highways can do to deter cycling through the shopping area to improve safety for my residents?

Answer:

I have actually seen cyclists going through Woodley town centre. It is something I will certainly look into for you, and I will get back to you.

56.2 Shirley Boyt asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

I am speaking about Bulmershe Leisure Centre which is in my ward. I have had reports about increases in the cost of swimming which are huge. I would like to ask the Executive Member, Ian Shenton if he could speak to Places Leisure to find out why the cost of a family swim has increased in certain age groups by 42%, which seems to be an extraordinary amount of money, and also in this climate people will just think 'oh we can't afford to teach our children to swim', and I find that very worrying, particularly in light of what the Fire Officer said earlier about the dangers of water. So, could we just look into why we have these draconian increases for swimming at Bulmershe Leisure Centre?

Answer:

I am already looking into that following some exchanges of emails in the last week or so. I am just waiting for answers at the moment, but I will get back to you and to

Councillor Baker who was also involved.

56.3 Peter Dennis asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Bearing in mind the petition we had earlier about Floreat School and the dangers there, I will note that there are issues with the crossing, traffic and pupil safety, so I would like to ask the Executive Member to do a site visit with me and an appropriate officer during a school drop off to actually observe and see the issues that we are aware of?

Answer:

I would be happy to meet you on site with an officer at school drop off time.

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

Parents are calling for pedestrian crossings to be installed along Fairwater Drive near Highgate Road. This is a dangerous place for children to cross to get to school. Will you support the parents' call for a crossing? There has already been a site visit with an officer.

Answer:

I will look to see if it is actually listed at the moment on the Integrated Transport Schedule, and then see where that is, and if any surveys have been done. I will come back to you on that.

56.5 Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

The residents of Lenham Close have been looking for some double yellow lines on their road, between Old Forest Road and the flats. I just wanted to know why it is not in the present roll up Traffic Regulation Order that was just put out please?

Answer:

Amendment 5 which is currently being consulted on, was set up under the previous Administration, so I am not sure why it has not been included, but I will find out where it is on the list, and whether it is going to be in Amendment 6.

56.6 Rachel Burgess asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

On the new Keep Hatch Gardens development in Norreys, there is a fenced off balancing pond on the corner of Oak Avenue and Binfield Road which includes much needed footpaths around that pond, which allow pedestrians to walk away from the busy road where there is no pavement. This pond has been fenced off for months and months with weeds growing between the new paths around the pond and lots of fresh planting has died. More importantly because the footpaths remain fenced off, there is no safe pedestrian route for those walking along Binfield Road. They end up walking in the road because there is no pavement or footpath. I receive frequent pleas from residents to resolve this, so can the Executive Member follow this up with the relevant Officer and Developer to get these paths finally open, and to protect the safety of pedestrians walking through this area of Norreys?

Answer:

I will certainly follow that up. It sounds like it has not been adopted yet, so I will come back to you on that.

56.7 Pauline Jorgensen asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

I would like an update please on the progress on the Laurel Park car park gates. The securing of the gates has been managed by residents for more than ten years. It is a long-standing issue. We have had a series of email conversations on it, and I did email you on 12 September following your promise to give me an update on it. I was just wondering if you could tell me how it is progressing as I do not seem to have had an answer?

Answer:

I did update you in early August on that very subject. We have been in the holiday silly season, so it has been difficult to get a further update, but I have requested a further update on where we currently stand. As soon as I get it, I will pass it on.

56.8 Andrew Mickleburgh asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

In January 2021, the very large membership of the Earley Environmental Group presented a wonderful proposal to WBC that could extend the existing protection of the much valued green corridor along Lower Earley Way, by its designation as a local nature reserve. Strengthened environmental designation would massively benefit the flora and fauna, our own Borough, and residents, and protect against attempts to build on this vital green space. Could you please provide an update on WBC's response to this important proposal?

Answer:

We very much appreciate the proposal from the Earley Environmental Group. I assure you we are keen to improve the protection of biodiversity in Earley, and the other points that you mentioned. We will undertake a detailed assessment of the proposal and consider how best to take it forwards in the coming months.

I must acknowledge that progress on this request has been slow, and I would like to thank the EEG for patience, but the Council has recently bought in an additional Ecology Officer which should enable us to progress this type of request in a much more timely manner going forward.

56.9 Shahid Younis asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

I have a number of cases in my ward where a number of children have been unable to find places in their preferred schools. Some of them literally live 100 yards from the school but instead they have got places which are right the other side of the Borough. As a result, children are travelling to schools which are allocated far away, and some parents have actually decided to home school them because they would rather not send them to the schools. This is obviously detrimental to the environment and also for the children concerned as well. This situation seems to be worse this year. I have not seen the situation so bad for a number of years. What steps are being taken to find school places near to where the children are living?

This is obviously not a short term; this is a permanent solution that we need to find.

Answer:

You are right. It is not a short term solution. One of the reasons why it is getting worse is that there are more and more children coming into the Borough from outside, particularly from Hong Kong. Wokingham seems to be a very attractive place for Hong Kong people to come to live, which is fine, but it is putting unprecedented pressure on our school places. We also have something like 150 Ukrainian children, who we have had to put in our schools, which is slightly more than we were anticipating. The rate of applications is not letting up.

We have a situation where the schools are not necessarily where the pupils are. We also have a situation where we have a lower birth rate so the bottom end of schools coming into Reception, we do not have pressure on school places. That makes it difficult to open some of the new schools without unbalancing and destabilising the schools that already exist because they would be taking the Reception and Year 1 pupils and so on, away from other schools rather than filling up naturally from the populations. It is a very complicated dance that the Officers are trying to do.

We have got some money in place to expand secondary schools but that is not going to solve it completely. Of course, there is parental preference also comes into play and where people live, so it is really complicated and it would be really helpful if you could give me the names of the schools so I can give you an answer that applies to those particular residents in your ward and not just a general principle because it is going to be hard to solve. We are actually running out of school places even with the Fair Access Protocol under which we move the additional children into schools. I think I will leave it there.

56.10 Stephen Conway asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

I have asked so many ward questions on the new Twyford library over the years that it is going to come as no surprise I expect that I am asking another one tonight on the same subject. This time however I am rather more confident of a positive response than I have in the past.

Will the Executive Member for Climate Change and Residents Services accept my thanks and that of a great many people in the community that I represent for her help in securing the long awaited new library in Twyford?

Answer:

I actually really think that, that thanks goes elsewhere though. The ward councillors that have campaigned for this for 20 odd years. Obviously, thanks need to go to the Officers as well that have got it to this stage. Most importantly thanks needs to go to the Polehampton Trust charitees particularly the late Dave Turner, and of course the community who have petitioned and backed this from the start, so that is where the thanks should go so thank you.

56.11 Keith Baker asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

During the month of August, I contacted a variety of officers and asked a number of questions prompted by residents in my ward. I am sure we all have. They included

planning, listing of a planning application, leisure, holiday camps and Bulmershe Leisure Centre, parking to do with verge parking, parking again, status of submissions for two yellow lines, streetlights, streetlights enveloped by vegetation (I have reported it twice), trees; request for an examination of a tree of maybe coppicing. We are now approaching the end of September and I have not had a reply on any of them, not even an acknowledgement of receipt of my emails. This experience is not new and has been repeated many times in the past, and I believe my experience has been experienced by many others in this Chamber. This lack of response is not limited to one department, as my examples above clearly illustrate. It is beginning to evolve into an institutionalised contempt for elected councillors. Does Councillor Jones agree with me that elected councillors deserve better than this, and what steps will he take to make sure all officers respond to all councillors in a timely fashion?

Answer:

You say that you have asked these questions since August but that the lack of response has actually been going on for quite some time. Has it been going on for one month? Two months? Three months? Four? Five? Six? Seven? Any indication? Years ok.

If you would like to copy me with all of those, I will chase them up with officers because I think you are absolutely 100% right that we should get timely answers to questions from all councillors.

Sarah Kerr added the following:

I have got the Customer Excellence programme and we are very conscious, obviously councillors as well are customers as well as the public, and the public get timely responses. We are developing the Customer Excellence programme at the moment that puts the customer front and centre. We recognise that there is a problem across a number of departments and not getting these timely responses. This also includes updating the CRM system as well to make sure we do not lose things in the process. There is a huge amount of work being done on that, and I am more than happy to have a chat with you offline about this Keith. I totally agree with you but we are addressing it.

Under Rule 4.2.13.16, Alison Swaddle sought a response from a senior officer, the Chief Executive, on the matter. The Chief Executive asked for the examples that Keith Baker had referred to in his question. She appreciated that councillors may not always receive the answers that they wanted in the time that they wanted them. She pointed out that there were often reasons why answers could not be provided in a timely fashion. Many officers did respond in a timely fashion and an improvement programme was being put in place to further improve matters.

57. Statements by the Leader of the Council, Executive Members, and Deputy Executive Members

Clive Jones, Leader of the Council,:

This Council finds itself in the most difficult period of the last 40 years. There is raging inflation, energy costs are rising, as are food costs. Fuel prices and the cost of other goods in our shops have also been rising for months. We have a cost of living crisis. The value of the pound has plummeted making our imports very

expensive, therefore increasing costs everywhere. Only today interest rates have risen to their highest level in 14 years at 2.25%, adding further pressure to the budgets of residents and the Council.

These are unprecedented times, where we as an Administration of the Council have to make many difficult decisions. We will not shy away from those decisions. Our first priority has to be to balance the Budget. Councillor John Halsall, the former Conservative leader only a few months ago said that reserves were for a rainy day, and it is now raining. Inflation was then around 5%. How things have moved on. Inflation has nearly doubled and is forecast by many to reach 18% next year. Things were so bad the previous Administration used £2million of reserves to plug the gap in the Budget. This is the equivalent of a nearly 2% increase in Council Tax.

It is no longer raining. We are in the storm and there is thunder and lightening everywhere. There is massive uncertainty in the economy, and the Council is not immune to these difficulties, but we will rise to the challenge of balancing our Budget and maintaining vital services and helping the vulnerable in the Borough the best we can. Along with Councillor Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, the Executive Member for Finance, I and the rest of the Executive and senior Officers are working very hard to maintain services. A number of services were not properly budgeted for by the previous Administration. This included the 18 bus service. We were advised of this budget shortfall 10 minutes after taking over the running of the Council. The Winnersh Triangle extension was not properly budgeted for, and there was no provision for food caddy liners.

In addition to this there are serious shortfalls in revenue targets set by the previous Administration. There will be shortfall in the Revenue Budget in Leisure Services, and as massive shortfall from car park charges. This could be up to £800,000. This year's budget for the provision of blue waste bags was the same as last year's. Why did anyone think that there would not be a rise in the cost of blue bags?

There are also pressures from rising demands for Council services across the board, including many statutory services that we must support. We have decided to support Free School Meals during school holidays for families who usually receive them. This helps over 2,100 families within the Borough. Over the coming months the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be looking at the Budget for the next 3 years. Councillors of all parties will be able to look at what is being considered for the next few years before the Budget is finalised in January. I encourage all councillors to take part in this process. There is now a new Secretary of State for Levelling Up, and I will be writing to him to ask for a meeting to discuss housing numbers within the Borough. This will be the third Secretary of State that we have had in the last 4 months. Hopefully we will be able to do something to reduce housing number forced on us by the Conservative government. I am also writing to other Secretaries of States including the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Transport, and the Secretary of State for Health.

Madam Mayor, as I have said, we are living in very challenging times, but this Liberal Democrat Administration will rise to the challenge, protect services as best we can, and balance our budgets demonstrating financial competence.

Stephen Conway, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Housing:

The new Administration is very much aware that the Council needs to work in a partnership of equals with a wide variety of external bodies if our residents and businesses are to be properly supported and the Borough is to continue to be a great place to live and work.

I want to take this opportunity to report to Council on the work we have been undertaking to develop, strengthen, and in some cases repair, relationships with external partners. Rachel Bishop-Firth and I have been working Senior Council Officers to develop an involvement with the Hardship Alliance of local voluntary and charitable bodies to help mobilise and coordinate efforts to address the local impact of the cost of living crisis. As the Council, like our residents, is feeling the pinch financially with double digit inflation, rising demand for services and significant shortfall in anticipated income, we are not in a position to give the Alliance substantial amounts of money. But we are doing our bit to mobilise resources in a joint effort to help those in our community who are most vulnerable to the pressures created by the current crisis. To this end, a fund or donation from businesses, charities and individuals will soon be established, and I urge all councillors to make their own contributions to that fund. Our work in the Hardship Alliance is an example of the benefits that can come from reflective partnerships.

We have also been devoting time and effort to rebuilding relations with the Town and Parish Councils. We started recently with a very productive meeting with the Town and Parish clerks. We hope that the Borough/Parish Liaison Group will also be able to play a significant part in developing our partnership in ways that bring real improvements in our community. There is still much to do, not least in gearing the Borough Council itself up to more reflective and productive partnership working. We have some excellent examples of good practice, and we want these successes to set the benchmark for more effective partnership working across the Council.

58. Statement from Council Owned Companies

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

59. Motions

59.1 Motion 486 submitted by Norman Jorgensen

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

59.2 Motion 487 submitted by Charles Margetts

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.

59.3 Motion 488 submitted by Laura Blumenthal

Due to time constraints this item was not considered.