MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 17 NOVEMBER 2022 FROM 7.30 PM TO 10.50 PM

Members Present
Councillors: Caroline Smith (Mayor), Beth Rowland (Deputy Mayor), Keith Baker, Rachel Bishop-Firth, Laura Blumenthal, Chris Bowring, Shirley Boyt, Prue Bray, Rachel Burgess, Anne Chadwick, Stephen Conway, David Cornish, Gary Cowan, Andy Croy, Phil Cunnington, David Davies, Peter Dennis, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Paul Fishwick, Jim Frewin, Maria Gee, John Halsall, David Hare, Peter Harper, Clive Jones, Norman Jorgensen, Pauline Jorgensen, John Kaiser, Sarah Kerr, Abdul Loyes, Tahir Maher, Morag Malvern, Charles Margetts, Rebecca 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: Pauline Helliar-Symons

75. Apologies
Apologies for absence were submitted from Sam Akhtar, Parry Batth, Graham Howe, Chris Johnson and Jackie Rance.

Pauline Helliar-Symons attended the meeting on Microsoft Teams.

76. Minutes of Previous Meeting
The Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 20 October 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

77. Declarations of Interest
Declarations of interest were submitted as follows:

Prue Bray submitted a Personal Interest in Item 81 – Statement from Council Owned Companies - as a Non-Executive Director of Berry Brook Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Stephen Conway submitted a Personal Interest in Item 81 – Statement from Council Owned Companies - as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

David Hare submitted a Personal Interest in Item 81 – Statement from Council Owned Companies - as a Non-Executive Director of Optalis Ltd.

Clive Jones submitted a Personal Interest in Item 81 – Statement from Council Owned Companies - as a Non-Executive Director of Loddon Homes and WBC Holdings Ltd.

Gregor Murray submitted a Personal Interest in Item 82 – Motions – as a local resident impacted by Motion 495.

78. Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor informed Members of the recent death of Sam Rahmouni, former Borough and Woodley Town Councillor. Stephen Conway spoke in tribute to former Councillor Rahmouni.

The Mayor gave details of the most recent recipients of the Mayor's Award, viz:

- Beverley Knight – a key part of the Finchampstead village community. Beverley was an event organiser and fundraiser for local schools and good causes.

- Dexter Rose – aged only 10, Dexter was involved in fundraising for the Royal Berks Hospital and helped to organise foodbank collections.

- Link Visiting – the service utilised 400 volunteers to combat loneliness amongst vulnerable and older residents. The service was already making preparations for a busy Christmas period.

Finally, the Mayor thanked all those who had made contributions to the reverse advent calendar.

79. Public Question Time

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

79.1 David Portus asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

The Football Facility plan is founded on the premise that it needs to be within the Wokingham Borough area. It is stated that teams have to travel outside this area to play.

Wokingham Borough only came about by dissolution of Berkshire County Council and its borders are arbitrary and run through urban and suburban areas.

Residents of Earley and Wokingham Borough will typically travel outside the nominal boundary for work, shopping, leisure, health care and education on a daily basis. Many of these journeys are within walking distance. In fact, Maiden Erlegh School has two sites in Earley and even these are in separate Boroughs.

The technical appraisal did not initially identify Maiden Erlegh as the most suitable location. In fact, that was Laurel Park recreation ground, now rejected for the same reasons which make Maiden Erlegh School an inappropriate site. So why did the site appraisal deliberately disregard the nearby Sol Joel Playing Fields, which were bequeathed to the Town specifically for sport and leisure use?

Answer

Sol Joel Park was bequeathed to a trust, the trustees now being Reading Borough Council. Earley Town Council have a 50-year lease from Reading, which started in 2001, and can only operate the park within the terms of their lease. Any building work must be approved by the lessor and must be within the rules of the trust.

Supplementary Question

Why did the consultation recommend a school site that already has sufficient all

weather playing areas? Approximately 50% of the school's available playing areas are already covered in all-weather playing surfaces. The proposed pitch would be unavailable for community use during school hours. The residential setting would almost certainly require mitigation on the hours of use, further restricting community access and making the cost involved unviable. Surely, the money could be better spent on a site which allows unrestricted community use and actually augments existing facilities at Maiden Erlegh?

Supplementary Answer
I cannot tell you why Maiden Erlegh was chosen as it was chosen before we took over control of the Council.

79.2 Sandra Spencer asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

We are all aware that Wokingham Borough Council is in a dire financial situation, and is seeking to reduce costs wherever possible. The proposed 3G pitch at Maiden Erlegh School in Earley was priced at £800,000 before recent inflation - to be paid for by the Football Association and the Council. Bearing in mind building projects can run seriously over budget, and that the school has perfectly adequate sports facilities for all the pupils on roll both on site and at the nearby Sol Joel playing fields, is it wise to press ahead with the plan - and who will be liable for any shortfall if there are unexpected extra costs?

Answer
The school have advised the Council that the facilities provided for students are at capacity. The existing sand-dressed Astro pitch is considered to not be adequate to accommodate the present volume of students, and if the pitch is unsafe due to freezing in colder conditions, the PE curriculum is affected. The grass fields are also not suitable for PE activities according to the Head of the school and a 3G pitch would have benefits for both the school and local partner football clubs.

The Council did make capital provision for the project and would work in partnership with the Football Foundation to arrive at a point where the Council's contribution and the Foundation's contribution fully cover the build and unexpected costs.

Whilst officers have been in discussion with the Football Foundation in relation to provision of more community football facilities in the local area, no application has been made as full planning permission would first be required. In turn, a planning application will be contingent upon the outcome of the review that we are in the process of conducting. The review will closely examine the financial viability of the project in the worsening economic circumstances of the Council.

Supplementary Question
Since putting the question, I have read the Council's financial plan from last February, when the preferred location of the pitch was Laurel Park. In that plan, the Council doubled its potential contribution to £600k. That was before this year's inflation. Laurel Park would not have needed expensive levelling of the playing field, retaining walls, a complicated drainage tank, noise abatement or so many surveys. So, I can only presume that the figure of £300k from the Council for Maiden Erlegh, as quoted at the consultation evening in September, is wildly optimistic.

Councillor Clive Jones recently said that the cost of the 3G pitch was going up and up and up. Then Councillor Ian Shenton said that the weekly refuse collections were costing too much money to continue. He asked “where are we going to find the money?” I would suggest that you start with the pot for the unnecessary 3G pitch.

So, how much is the Council’s current estimate for the pitch and will it be viewed as the Council squandering money at a time when many people are so desperate that they are turning to food banks, sitting in cold homes, worrying about how to pay the bills, and the Council says it can no longer afford basic services such as weekly bin collections?

Supplementary Answer
Effectively, the Council has two major budgets. One is the Capital budget and one is known as Revenue, which is where the recurring, day-to-day expenses are funded from. The two are not interchangeable. A 3G pitch, whether it is located in Earley or anywhere else, would be funded by Capital, not by Revenue.

79.3 Jeremey Evershed asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Thank you for your previous commitment to closely scrutinise the Business Case for the plastic pitch given the Council’s financial situation.

The Council can’t afford this proposal to become a burden on the public purse with ongoing maintenance, administration and £25,000 per annum sinking fund commitment, given the threats elsewhere to services.

I don’t believe you responded to my question on potential Noise Reduction fences previously; but in response to other ‘Noise’ questions, did suggest that Service Level Agreements would apply to people using pitches.

I am familiar with SLA in commercial scenarios where an under-performing supplier is penalised. Can you please elaborate on how SLA’s would work in the Maiden Erlegh setting, giving examples where the Council has applied penalties (and received payment) and at the same time retained their Sports customers over the last 10 years, to demonstrate how this is a successful strategy, as I’m not convinced?

Answer
The Service Level Agreement provides a framework on how the partners will work together to promote and develop football and sport within the community. The SLA also outlines the commitment that key partners must make to support the project from a hiring perspective, such as paying for usage and committing to a Programme of Use. The agreement covers a host of elements that include the operational and management side of the site, the noise management plan, hirer behaviour, code of conduct, school usage, club usage and the no smoking and No Dogs policy.

The Council have not had to deal with any serious issues or introduce penalties at other managed 3G sites due to the guidelines the SLAs set out. Clubs are aware of the scarcity of floodlit 3G facilities and work with their members to ensure that they

do not jeopardise their bookings.

Supplementary Question
Do you think that this is a realistic position, that you will not get any complaints at all relating to this pitch and others throughout the Borough?

Supplementary Answer
I can only reiterate that the Council has not had to deal with any situations like that, so far, and has not had to impose penalties. We can't predict the future.

79.4 On behalf of David Walker, Sandra Spencer asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

In order to create a level base for the proposed 3G pitch at Maiden Erlegh School, an area shown as over 8,500 square metres, it may be necessary to transport and spread over 6,000 cubic metres of foundation material on the School field before the artificial pitch can be laid.

Taking into account the many Maiden Erlegh residents' strongly voiced concerns to Council Members about issues of public safety, environmental damage and health matters relating to this proposal, does the Council believe that such a costly and intrusive project can be justified?

Answer
We would retain the base of the existing Astro pitch to minimise the amount of base material needing to be brought in. That material would be checked for adequacy and re-laid in accordance with the new 3G specification. The project would then bring into the site base material for the remaining 60% of the area of the new 3G pitch, to the same level as the existing Astro pitch.

We recognise that this would potentially be disruptive, but this aspect of the work would take a maximum of two weeks to be completed, which would limit both the environmental and safety concerns. That this would be part of the work needed to provide a new 3G pitch is one of the aspects being taken into consideration as we review the viability of the project, alongside the financial viability and a detailed analysis of the consultation responses.

79.5 Helen Palmer asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

Will Wokingham Council support the Climate and Ecology Bill?

A recent report from the Natural History Museum with RSPB rated England as the 7th most nature depleted country in the world. UK woodland cover is just 13% of land area compared to a European average of 38%. Our bare uplands contribute to lowland flooding. Government plans to plant woodland at a rate that will take 10 years to increase cover from 13% to 14%.

The new Environment Act is a post-Brexit Bill designed to tidy up loose ends, looking at selected issues, but does not tackle the core problems at the heart of the ecological crisis and has nothing whatsoever to do with climate change.

Climate and nature are inextricably connected, and in the CE Bill they are addressed together via a joined up, whole of government approach. The Bill, drafted by scientists, legal experts, ecological economists, requires the UK to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, to actively restore biodiverse habitats, rather than merely protect them and to stop damaging our natural world.

The Bill now has support of MPs across 8 political parties and of 203 Councils, including in Oxford, Oxfordshire and Henley. Will Wokingham Borough Council become the 204th?

Answer
The UK has failed to meet 17 of the 20 Aichi biodiversity targets and has gone backwards on six of them. We are the most nature-depleted G7 country which is truly shocking.

I am aware that this question has previously been raised at a Council meeting in September 2021. The response had been, that even though the Council did recognise the intrinsic link between climate change and ecology, and the relevance of the Bill, the Bill itself would have not provided the Council with the statutory powers and responsibilities we needed to address the climate and ecological emergency. In addition to this, it was felt at the time that the Council had multiple plans already in place to address the climate and ecological emergency - including the Climate Change Action Plan, and the Biodiversity Action Plan - and would have imminently been subject to additional legislation on this, including the Environment Bill. In consideration of this, it was decided that Wokingham Borough Council would have not committed its support to the Bill.

As things stand, there is a new administration in front of you. The Biodiversity Action Plan has, sadly, been collecting dust for some time, with many actions not happening. My colleague, Ian Shenton, is working on rectifying this, making action on improving nature a priority.

We still believe that more statutory powers need to be given to Local Authorities to address the climate and ecological emergencies. However, the Bill aims to set binding targets for Central Government. If approved, this would require additional powers, as well as funding, devolved to Local Authorities, to ensure the delivery of those targets. Supporting the introduction of legally binding targets sends a clear message that Wokingham Borough Council takes the climate and ecological emergency seriously. Therefore, I agree to commit Wokingham Borough Council to publicly support the Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill.

We hope that you will join us in lobbying to ensure that included in the Bill is an amendment to provide local government with the powers and funding needed to make it a success.

79.6 Peter Humphreys asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Having declared a climate emergency and announced a black hole in the finances it is perplexing that every night for the past year the Council has floodlit the white elephant unopened can’t park, can’t ride facility at Coppid Beech. Indeed, the

flashing electric charge points are switched on 24/7 but also can't be used due to large blocks of concrete in front of them. At such a prominent spot adjacent to the principal approach route to the town this sends out completely the wrong message and is both highly embarrassing and costly.

With no publicly announced plan to ever open the P&R and with the green gap destroyed the Council needs to consider repurposing the site. A high-rise block of flats would make a significant contribution to the housing target imposed on the Borough and reduce the amount of virgin countryside that needs to be concreted over. Unlike most of the new housing developments around the town there are road links directly onto the motorway network and direct bus links to the town and Bracknell. As a brownfield site this clearly makes for a better development location than a green-field location.

Does the Council have a view on this?

Answer
The Park and Ride site was allocated as part of the planning for all of the housing for the area and was paid for by a combination of the developers and the Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). A business case was approved by the LEP, however, Covid has changed travel patterns, and has particularly impacted Park and Ride sites which have yet to show any signs of recovery in the short term.

We are looking at options for use of the site, including those wishing to use the charge points, or to park and share a journey, for instance. However, with bus use at park and ride sites as it currently stands, we will not be funding a bus at this time. We continue to monitor Park and Ride usage in the area, as well as nationally, to determine how things are changing as we emerge from Covid-19.

The lights are 'dimmed' at the site and are activated during hours of darkness for both safety and security. They are LED and are designed to meet the minimum illumination level required for the site to enable CCTV to operate, as well as being energy efficient.

Supplementary Question
They may well be dimmed at night but, compared to the pub car park next door, they are significantly brighter. As for security, there is nothing to destroy, just a load of tarmac. So, surely the Council should cut its losses now, with the financial black hole, and make better use of the site. For instance, the 3G pitch that everyone has been talking about tonight, or the housing that I suggested?

Supplementary Answer
Thank you for your suggestions. We will take them into account. As I said, watch this space.

79.7 Jim Badoo asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sports, and Leisure the following question:

During the recent consultation evenings at Maiden Erlegh School regarding the 3G pitch, it was explained to us that the ground level close to residential properties would be raised to create a level surface since the current ground slopes towards the

properties. It has also been explained that acoustic fencing will be put in place in an attempt to reduce noise levels. Can you please explain a) how high the ground will be raised by b) how high the fencing will be and c) how close it will be to residential properties?

Answer
The ground would be raised to the same height as the existing Astro pitch, which is approximately 1.5 metres higher than it currently is at the lowest point. This would be confirmed in the design stage of the project.

The acoustic fencing height for the pitch would be 3 metres, in addition to which there would be a strong mesh fence of 4.5 metres with the purpose of ball retention as well as supporting the security of the pitch from unauthorised entry. Finally, the exact location would be confirmed if the project were to proceed to the detailed planning and design stage, but it would be approximately 8 metres to the rear boundary of the closest residential properties.

Supplementary Question
Thank you for your answer, which leads to the following observations:

1. The Committee report of 12 October 2018, for the Emmbrook 3G pitch, states that it is 33m from residential garden boundaries compared with the much closer 8m stated for Maiden Erlegh.
2. Sound propagation follows an inverse square law which means that the outdoor sound level in residential gardens, in Maiden Erlegh, will be a factor of 17 or 12 decibels higher than at Emmbrook.
3. The Committee report for Emmbrook stated that the outdoor sound levels would only be one decibel below the World Health Organisation (WHO) sound limit. This means that at Maiden Erlegh it will be at least 11 decibels higher than the WHO limit.

How can the Council justify spending public money on a proposal that is at high risk of failure at the planning stage due to the impact on residential amenity (for example visual amenity) and outdoor noise levels which are much higher than the limits set by the WHO?

Supplementary Answer
Factors like that are being highlighted as a result of the consultation and are going to be looked at very closely. We are looking at every aspect – I can't say any more than that. We are concerned and are considering every aspect that the consultation has raised, the responses and your own questions.

79.8 Karen Brown asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport, and Leisure the following question:

We are told the Football Foundation identified 524 football teams in the Borough, but we have not seen this mysterious list. Apparently, footballers will be encouraged to walk or cycle to Maiden Erlegh school, but we have no idea how many live close enough for this to be realistic. We are told the remainder will be within a 45-minute drive to Maiden Erlegh, which means they will be coming from far and wide. When will you publish the full list of teams, detailing what facilities they have already,

whether the same players are included in multiple teams, what ages they are, why their needs cannot be met more locally and how often they play?

Answer
The Football Foundation prepared a Local Football Plan in 2019 and found that Wokingham Borough had a total of 524 teams at that time. This plan is readily available on the Football Foundation website by clicking “Find Your Local Plan” and searching for Wokingham. The 524 included 83 adult male teams, 14 adult female teams, 144 male youth teams, 50 female youth teams, 3 disability teams and 230 mini soccer teams. Some clubs already benefit from our investment in modern floodlit 3G pitches to train on midweek and to host games at weekends. However, many teams still train in environments such as noisy indoor halls, sand-dressed Astro pitches, school courts or expensive commercial sites.

Local to Maiden Erlegh, Laurel Park FC has 33 teams, 46% of their members being female. They train at the school and use the grass pitches at Laurel Park to play league fixtures on Saturdays. Whiteknights FC have 18 teams defined by age. They train in indoor halls, hockey Astro pitches, school courts and commercial sites. From September to April, our teams are likely to train once a week and play a fixture at weekends. Team players are mostly local, as I can attest from the number of emails I have received from parents of children in the teams. Teams visiting for fixtures will be traveling from further away.

Supplementary Question
How many 3G pitches will be required to keep the Football Foundation happy and how much land are you prepared to cover in rubber to placate them?

Supplementary Answer
We are carrying out a full analysis at the moment. Officers have been tasked to do this. This will itemise every single sport asset that we have, their position within the Borough and proximity to population centres. When that is done, we will know where there are shortfalls and where there aren’t.

80. Petitions
The following Members presented a petition in relation to the matter indicated.

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

Mike Smith	Mike Smith presented an electronic petition relating to a request from residents for the installation of a new traffic light controlled pedestrian crossing to allow safe crossing of Wokingham Road in the area between Kenton Road and Station Road in Earley. The petition was supported by Earley Town Council. To be submitted to the Highways team.
Rebecca Margetts	Rebecca Margetts presented a petition signed by over 700 residents of Arborfield Green, calling on the Council and Crest Nicholson to progress the construction of the

	village centre in line with the relevant S106 agreement. Note: Andy Croy raised a point of order on the grounds that the petition called upon WBC to not approve planning applications from Crest Nicholson until an application was received for the proposed village centre. Councillor Croy felt that this was a breach of Sections 3.5.1, 3.5.2, 8.3.5, 8.3.8, 9.2.5 and 9.2.8 of the Constitution. The Mayor ruled that the petition could be presented and that further advice would then be sought on its admissibility.

81. Petition Debate

The Council considered a petition which had been submitted to the meeting on 20 October 2022. The petition, which contained over 1,500 signatures stated:

"From January 2023 Wokingham Borough Council will double most car parking charges. It will also start charging for parking on Sundays, Bank Holidays and in the evenings up to 10pm.

We call on the Council to drop these punitive increases for the following reasons:

- Residents face significant cost increases in every part of their lives due to the Cost of Living crisis. It is wrong to raise charges at this time.

- Retailers in our town centre are recovering from the effects of Covid. They do not need their trade damaged by punitive car parking charges.

- It is in the interests of every resident that we have a vibrant and active town centre which draws people to visit. These charges will be a disincentive to visiting your local town and damaging to the local economy."

Keith Baker presented the petition and addressed the Council as follows.

The Liberal Democrats have gone on record to say that they are the listening party and will operate in an open and transparent way. So, how are they doing to date? One of the most important Key Decision principles is consultation. Normally, consultation takes place before a decision is made. The results of that consultation are then used to shape the decision. The Conservative administration carried out consultation in 2018 over a small price change. The Liberal Democrats did it over the Woodlands Avenue cycleway proposals, the LCWIP plans and waste collection. So, they do know how to do consultations.

Why did the Liberal Democrats not consult over these exorbitant increases? Who knows? Maybe they knew what the result was going to be. So, we did it for them. The petition, with over 4,000 signatures is one of the largest expressions of

disagreement on a change ever received. A new petition (not submitted) signed by 40 businesses in Woodley town centre highlights the impact of the proposed changes on them. These businesses include independent retailers, the hospitality sector and nationals like Waitrose, LIDL and Boots.

So, how did the Liberal Democrats wriggle out of this requirement? At the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, the Executive Member stated that the Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) would satisfy the consultation requirement. A TRO has never been used like this before. A TRO is the legal process to implement changes and includes a 28 day period when comments can be made. No date has been provided for the publication of the TRO. I do hope that they are not trying to sneak it out to minimise comments. I wonder if they will ignore those comments as well.

No business case in support of the decision has been made available to Councillors or the public. The only financial statement available refers to a shortfall of £600k in the parking services income. We will probably hear this about 20 times when the Liberal Democrats speak. Part of the business case would refer to the options considered, so that they can be scrutinised. It was confirmed that other options were considered but not published, in spite of the obligation for the Executive to do so. To date, in spite of repeated requests for the business case to be published, we get complete silence.

What did emerge was that parking services included the off street car parks and the park and ride facilities. The income loss was almost exclusively from the park and rides. Off street parking income was around 90% of pre-pandemic levels, even higher in Woodley. Off street parking increases are subsidising the loss-making park and rides. Even worse, park and ride charges are not being increased at all. I wonder if there was an option to close the park and rides or increase their charges instead? I welcome Labour Councillor Shirley Boyt's question later, suggesting exactly that. I wonder if she will join us in voting against these increases.

Repeatedly, claims have been made that these increases would not have been needed if charges had increased each year. Wrong. Using Bank of England inflation rates, charges would be 34% to 92% lower than proposed. Repeatedly, claims have also been made that the new charges would be similar to neighbouring areas and are competitive. Wrong again. The Lexicon, a huge new shopping centre in Bracknell, runs the Princess Square Car Park, where charges are between 25 to 80% lower than our new charges. Even in Wokingham, the Elms Road NCP car park remains at the same level as our current charges, so will be significantly lower than the new charges.

Do the Liberal Democrats listen to residents? No – they ignore the views of over 4,000 residents and 40 businesses and are likely to ignore the TRO comments. Do the Liberal Democrats operate in an open way? No – they hide the business case from public scrutiny. Do the Liberal Democrats operate in a transparent way? No – they hide the fact that the park and rides are the problem with the off street car parks subsidising their losses.

In the ensuing debate, Members made the following points:

Charles Margetts stated that the proposals were against the best interests of residents and businesses. The Council needed to attract visitors to our town centres, yet no survey had been carried out to model the impact of the new charges on footfall. The bulk of the budget gap related to the operation of the park and ride sites – this issue could continue into future years. The budget shortfall could be tackled in other ways, for example by freezing job vacancies (currently 35 on the WBC website) and reviewing the number of interim managers on the payroll.

Paul Fishwick stated that the cost of the car parking service was £2.5m per annum. This included the off street car parks and the park and ride sites. Two of the park and ride sites were closed – Winnersh Triangle (under construction) and the Conservative-approved financial white elephant at Coppid Beech. Although the sites were closed, operational costs continued – ongoing maintenance, insurance and business rates. With zero income, Mereoak only operating at 25% and off street car parking at 90% of pre-Covid levels, they did not cover the cost of running the service. To cover these revenue costs, the Council needed to raise income from car parking charges. Any shortfall would need to be covered by taking other revenue, funded by Council Tax, which was needed for the most vulnerable in our community. At the July 2022 Executive meeting it was reported that there was a forecast budget deficit of £600k to £800k. This has not changed. Without taking urgent steps to close the gap, the Council would need to raise additional income or cut services. The latter could impact on the most vulnerable.

Councillor Fishwick stated that the previous Conservative administration did consider raising car park charges - £500k of additional income was forecast in the draft MTFP presented to Overview and Scrutiny in November 2021. However, for whatever reason, the previous administration did not proceed with this and, instead, dipped into reserves to cover it with £2.2m. Taking funding from reserves was not an option now as the reserves were too low. The Council cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of central Government, like Slough and Thurrock, as the consequences would be devastating. Instead of helpful ideas, the Conservative Group's response has been a petition to freeze the car park charges, which clearly will not work. Residents expect their roads and footways to be maintained to a high standard. This can only be achieved if funding is available. If car park charges are not increased, the Council's ability to continue to maintain the highway to the current standard will be significantly compromised along with cuts in essential services which affect the most vulnerable in our community.

Alison Swaddle stated that the new evening charges would impact on clubs and societies which met in the evenings, such as the groups who met at the Oakwood Centre in Woodley. There was also an additional risk for women who had to stop to use the ticket machines during the hours of darkness.

Andy Croy reminded Members of John Kaiser's statement that a "broke Council was no good to anyone". The previous administration knew about the potential budget shortfall but did nothing about it. The Council had a responsibility to balance the books.

Gregor Murray stated that he had extensive experience in the retail sector. Footfall was not a right – it had to be earned. The proposals amounted to a tax on shoppers

and low income workers. As mentioned earlier, other savings options could be considered.

Prue Bray stated that the concerns of residents and businesses were understood, but there were no alternatives. There was an overall budget gap of £4m and only limited options for savings. The Council had to minimise the impact on the most vulnerable in our communities. The current administration was implementing the Medium Term Financial Plan agreed by the Conservative administration.

Pauline Jorgensen stated that the Conservative administration did consider increasing off street parking charges in the previous year. The Conservative Group had not committed to reversing the current proposed increases as they had not seen the business case. The Group was working on an alternative budget for 2023/24 which would not include increases in charges at the same level.

Imogen Shepherd-Dubey stated that residents had signed the petition in good faith but were not informed of the consequences of maintaining the existing level of charges. WBC, along with every Council was facing difficult decisions. The top priority must be to protect the most vulnerable.

Phil Cunnington stated that the cost of living crisis was impacting on visitors to the Borough's towns. Visitors with less disposable income may decide to go elsewhere. The imposition of Sunday charging would impact on low paid workers such as baristas working in cafes. If asked, businesses would have shared their concerns at the proposed charges.

Clive Jones stated that the concerns expressed were understood. No one wanted to increase the car park charges. Councillor Jones had spoken to many retailers to understand their views. However, the Council's finances had been left in a poor state by the previous administration and the shortfall in parking income had to be addressed. The impact of recent Government actions (such as mortgage rate rises) were likely to have a much bigger impact than the increase in parking charges.

Andrew Mickleburgh referred to an article in the Sunday Times by the Chancellor. In the current climate facing the Borough, difficult decisions were necessary in order to prevent a negative impact on frontline services. Members had to be honest about the situation facing the Council.

Chris Bowring stated that the situation was very challenging. The Liberal Democrats had stated that the proposals were necessary to address the budget deficit. However, this was the worst response – they should think again.

Stephen Conway stated that many councils were facing huge financial challenges, with up to one in six being close to insolvency. WBC received one of the lowest levels of Government funding and tough decisions were necessary. The previous administration had been able to use reserves to paper over the cracks. This option was no longer available.

John Halsall stated that the Conservative Group had managed to balance the budget for 20 years whilst delivering £30m of savings. Increasing car parking charges by the

amount proposed was not a necessity. Other options should be considered.

Norman Jorgensen stated that the Liberal Democrats had stated that there was no other choice but to increase the car park charges substantially. However, there was always a choice. The proposals were not based on a wider view of the local economy. The proposals may drive away local businesses with a negative impact on the Council's rent income.

In responding to the debate, Keith Baker referred to the number of comments made about increasing car park charges in order to protect essential services such as Children's Services. However, it was possible to find savings in other highways services, for example by closing park and rides. That would generate a saving. One of the big issues was the lack of a business case. A proper business case would have looked at options and consequences. Increased charges would lead to a reduction in demand, as borne out by previous experience. That was common sense. The last time that car park charges were increased (by 10p on a one hour charge) the result was a 15% reduction in usage. Demand did not recover for two years. The national increase in mortgage rates was very difficult for residents. However, the proposed increase in car park charges would only make the situation worse for our residents.

It was proposed by Keith Baker and seconded by Pauline Jorgensen that the petition be supported.

In accordance with Section 4.2.15.5 a recorded vote was requested on the petition.

The result of the voting was as follows:

FOR	**AGAINST**	**ABSTAIN**
Keith Baker	Rachel Bishop-Firth	Jim Frewin
Laura Blumenthal	Shirley Boyt	
Chris Bowring	Prue Bray	
Anne Chadwick	Rachel Burgess	
Phil Cunnington	Stephen Conway	
David Davies	David Cornish	
Michael Firmager	Gary Cowan	
John Halsall	Andy Croy	
Peter Harper	Peter Dennis	
Norman Jorgensen	Lindsay Ferris	
Pauline Jorgensen	Paul Fishwick	
John Kaiser	Maria Gee	
Abdul Loyes	David Hare	
Charles Margetts	Clive Jones	
Rebecca Margetts	Sarah Kerr	
Stuart Munro	Tahir Maher	
Gregor Murray	Morag Malvern	
Wayne Smith	Adrian Mather	
Bill Soane	Andrew Mickleburgh	

Alison Swaddle	Alistair Neal	
Shahid Younis	Beth Rowland	
	Ian Shenton	
	Imogen Shepherd-Dubey	
	Rachelle Shepherd-Dubey	
	Caroline Smith	
	Mike Smith	

The Mayor announced that, following the vote, the petition was not supported.

It was then proposed by Pauline Jorgensen and seconded by Gregor Murray:

“That the petition be sent back to the Executive and that the Executive consider the feedback from residents, the feedback from businesses and also options and the impact assessment of increasing the charges and what that will actually do to revenue in order to come up with a more thought-through proposal.”

Clive Jones stated that referral of the petition to the Executive, at its meeting on 24 November 2022, was acceptable.

Upon being put to the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That the petition be sent back to the Executive and that the Executive consider the feedback from residents, the feedback from businesses and also options and the impact assessment of increasing the charges and what that will actually do to revenue in order to come up with a more thought-through proposal.

82. Member Question Time

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

82.1 Shirley Boyt asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport, and Highways the following question:

The Park and Ride on Thames Valley Park is an expensive white elephant.
And worse still it attracts ASB in the form of illegal car meets. The likelihood of the MRT rearing its head again is extremely unlikely in the post-Covid environment, where far fewer work-related journeys are being made. The car park should be put to an alternative use, and I would suggest turning it into a solar farm. Please can officers be instructed to carry out a feasibility study into this at the earliest opportunity?

Answer

Thames Valley Park and Ride is currently being used by the hospital as a Park and Ride for staff, operating between Thames Valley Park – Royal Berkshire Hospital and the Mereoak Park and Ride site. Income from the hospital will allow the site to break even under the current arrangement. Discussions are taking place to grow this use further next year.

We are continually reviewing options for encouraging greater use or increasing revenue to ensure that the site is not costing the Council any money. The site could have the potential for some renewable energy generation, which could include solar,

but this would be subject to detailed feasibility assessment and funding availability.

As I said in a response to an earlier question, officers are also looking at options for the Coppid Beech Park and Ride.

Supplementary Question
Are you saying that there will be a feasibility study on the park and ride at Thames Valley Park?

Supplementary Answer
As I stated, we are currently in an arrangement with the hospital. It is breaking even. We are looking at expanding that.

Note: Pauline Jorgensen raised a point of order under Rule 4.2.13.15 and requested that an officer confirm where the income from the arrangement with the NHS appeared in the Budget. Paul Fishwick confirmed that the income appeared in the budget line for parking services and park and rides.

82.2 Sam Akhtar asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

What steps has the Council taken to reduce the carbon footprint of Council properties?

In Councillor Akhtar's absence, Sarah Kerr provided the following response.

Answer
As stated in our Climate Emergency Action Plan, the Council aims to retrofit to carbon neutral standards all Council commercial buildings. We are taking a fabric first approach whereby we aim to reduce energy consumption on each site as much as possible, through a wide range of energy efficiency improvements. We then aim to move towards energy self-sufficiency, through on-site generation of renewable energy, such as solar panels. This not only is better from a carbon reduction point of view, but it reduces our ongoing costs and provides energy security.

At present, around 15% of our buildings have been retrofitted to carbon neutral standards. There is money allocated for some of these works within our current capital programme, but the future implementation programme for our whole estate will be subject to the availability of funding in future years.

With regards to our social housing, the Council aims for all houses to have an energy performance certificate (EPC) type C by 2025, five years ahead of the Government target of 2030. The first tranche of an EPC stock survey has been undertaken this year. We have around 2,600 properties and were able to access and survey around 80% of them in the first tranche. The information we have received so far indicates that:

- Over 2,200 properties already have an EPC type C;
- Around 350 properties have an EPC type D;
- Five properties have an EPC type E or F.

For the type E and F properties, these are already being retrofitted to bring them up to EPC C. For the type D properties, we are aiming to fund and deliver some of the improvements through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, which we are in the process of applying for this month through the Department for BEIS.

In short, we have a plan and we've identified potential funding sources for that plan. Our plan could be even more ambitious if government was prepared to further invest. Not only would it help with carbon reduction but would significantly help with the cost of living crisis and provide energy security. I am hoping that everyone here will help us to lobby the Government on this matter.

82.3 Adrian Mather asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways, the following question:

On the 1st of October a Thames Water lorry fell into a sinkhole caused by a collapsed sewer in Evendons Lane. This has caused significant disruption to the residents of the whole area. In addition, Evendons school, the teachers, pupils, parents and carers have been disrupted.

This is not the first time that a Thames Water lorry has fallen into a sinkhole. In November 2021 a similar lorry fell into another sinkhole in Elms Field for the same reasons. I understand that the Elms Field situation is still not fully resolved by Thames Water.

Please can the Executive Member for Highways confirm that Thames Water is doing all it can to resolve the Evendon's Lane disruption?

Answer
The work to repair the collapsed sewer – which caused the sinkhole – is ongoing and difficult due to the ground conditions in Evendons Lane and the depth of the sewer (4.3 metres). The first excavation only found remnants of the sewer so a second deep excavation is required but to do this safely the ground water level needs to be reduced so that the sides of the excavation do not collapse and cause more damage to the surrounding area.

To achieve this, Thames Water have sunk 16 individual boreholes and hope now to commence digging the second excavation and then to commence the repairs to the sewer.

Thames Water are working on site 7 days a week to complete the repairs as quickly as possible and the Council's Streetworks Team are having weekly progress meetings as well as regular on-site meetings to make sure progress continues positively. WBC and Thames Water continue to liaise with Evendons Primary School and are working to ensure that the community is fully informed via direct communication and via social media channels.

Supplementary Question
I regard this as a maintenance issue. Can the Executive Member request that a survey be carried out by Thames Water on the sewers in the whole area so that we don't get a third lorry falling down another sinkhole?

Supplementary Answer
It is not our apparatus, it belongs to Thames Water. Thames Water is a private company. We can ask the question, but I do not know what answer we will get.

82.4 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan the following question:

What is the meaning of the term “on balance” used by the Borough Council’s Planning Officers regularly at Planning Committee Meetings?

Answer
Planning law requires that applications for planning permission be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

The term ‘balance’ is shorthand for this requirement, simply reflecting that the decision maker must consider how a proposed development sits with regard to the development plan and then proceed to consider other material factors, both the adverse impacts and any benefits that might arise.

Officers will often use the term ‘on balance’ before concluding their analysis.

Supplementary Question
Under the Council’s Constitution, Members are instructed, when making decisions, to only consider planning merits and to exercise their judgement solely based on planning merits. Yet this does not appear to apply to Planning officers in these cases. There are many examples of this, but it is not just slight variations, as the following example will show. When officers were recommending a planning applications and using the “on balance” words, so that the proposal was considered not to fully accord with the development plan due to conflict with countryside policies. However, on balance the scheme was recommended for approval as the harm to the rural character and the impact on the designated countryside was considered to be outweighed by the special circumstances and needs of the applicant. Does such a system, which ties that hands of Committee members and ward members (at the same time as it gives Planning officers a free hand) imply that the Council’s Planning Department is not fit for purpose?

Supplementary Answer
What I can say, based on my time on the Planning Committee a few years ago, where we had a number of planning applications which included “on balance”, is that it allowed members of the Planning Committee to decide whether they should accept the planning position or not. I remember on a number of occasions we actually refused applications where “on balance” was used. I’m not sure if there have been changes since I was on the Planning Committee but I will come back to you if there is anything further.

82.5 Keith Baker asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

“What has exacerbated the higher increase is that there hasn’t been an increase in

car parking charges in Wokingham for nearly five years. Had there been then the increase would not have been such a shock." Said Cllr Fishwick in his "From the Chamber" article in the Wokingham Today paper on 27th October. This mantra has been repeated many times by Cllr Fishwick and others at meetings, the press and social media.

Using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator, applying accumulative inflation from 2018 until September 2022, you get this data.

	Inflation adjusted	New Charges
1 hour	£0.97	£1.30
2 hour	£1.45	£2.50
4 hour	£2.34	£4.50
6 hour	£3.51	£6.50
0ver 6 hour	£4.67	£9.00

It is clear from this chart that the actual inflation adjusted charges are significantly lower than the charges the Liberal Democrat Executive are imposing on our residents and businesses. Apart from the 1 hour rate which is a 34% increase all the others are between 72% and 92%. Clearly your statement about the regular increase not being such a shock is totally wrong. Could you explain how you have got this so dramatically wrong?

Answer
On a point of clarification – the figures you have quoted are for Wokingham town, not outside of Wokingham, for example Woodley, which has a lower charge.

The cost of the parking service is around £2.5m. The Council needs to cover the cost of the service by raising revenue funding that will come from parking fees and any shortfall will need to come from other revenue raised, including through Council Tax. A simple increase over the past years in line with inflation, which has not been done, will not cover the costs of operation. Therefore, the service must cover its own costs.

The council finds itself under the severest of financial pressures as do most other local authorities and must look at all aspects to balance its books, which includes parking charges above standard inflation rates. Without these increases, essential services would need to be cut, and we are trying to find ways to protect the most vulnerable in our community.

If the previous administration had raised the car parking charges along the lines that it had proposed to the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 24th November 2021 and looking to raise circa £500,000 in this financial year that would have helped towards covering the majority of the financial hole in the car parking budget that we now have.

Supplementary Question
You have stated that these increased charges will be similar to neighbouring areas which have increased their charges every year and are competitive. There is a new shopping centre in Bracknell called the Lexicon. This complex is massive.

Wokingham has nothing remotely like this. The Lexicon runs the car park associated with this complex, called Princess Square. Would it surprise you to know that the charges at Princess Square are all lower than the new charges in the Borough, ranging from 25% to 80% cheaper? For example, one hour would be £1 not £1.30; two hours would be £2 not £2.50; three hours would be £3 not £4.50. Can you explain why anyone would go to Wokingham town centre when they can go to the Lexicon and pay significantly smaller car parking charges?

Supplementary Answer
The car park for the Lexicon shopping centre in Bracknell is, as you said, Princess Square. That is a private area, so it covers its own costs in whatever way it needs to. We need to cover the costs of the car parking and park and ride services on our budget line. That is what we need to cover.

82.6 Abdul Loyes asked the Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty the following question:

How has the Council ensured that everyone entitled to the £150 rebate to help with the cost of energy bills received it before the September deadline?

Answer
There have been two Council Tax Energy Rebate schemes. The first was for those who live in property in bands A-D. This is the scheme which initially ended on the 30th September 2022. The Government has now allowed an extension of this until 30th November, but Wokingham Borough Council made payments to all eligible persons on our records before the 30th September deadline. There is another scheme for discretionary payments which ends at the end of this month, but I'm assuming that you're asking here about the Band A-D scheme.

Wokingham Borough Council made over 36,000 payments for residents via the scheme for those living in properties banded A-D. In the majority of cases these payments were made directly into the bank accounts of those who pay their Council Tax by direct debit, as this is the quickest and simplest way of getting the money to them.

Where the Council Tax payer does not pay by direct debit, we had to get proof of identify and bank details so that we could make the payment.

To reach these residents, we sent leaflets to 9,000 eligible households as well as publicising this extensively on both social and traditional media sent out to Because of this we were able to make payments to a further 4,184 people.

Where we were still unable to reach people despite these efforts, we directly credited the £150 payment to their council tax account and issued revised bills. We have made council tax credits to 4636 households. This was not our preferred way of getting the money to residents, as it's faster to get them the money via as a transfer of funds, and so was our last resort where we were unable to reach residents in other ways. This means that everyone who was on Wokingham Borough Council's records as eligible for the payment, has now been paid the money.

Supplementary Question
Do you have a figure for the number of people, without access to the direct debit system, who have been paid?

Supplementary Answer
Yes we do. It was paid in payments to two different groups of people. Firstly, those we were able to reach – 4,184 people. Secondly, those we were unable to reach, where we paid directly into the Council Tax accounts – 4,636 people.

82.7 Alison Swaddle asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Residents in my ward are concerned about the increases in cost of off-street parking. Does the Leader of the Council agree that the following statement should apply to the policies of this Council, "trust individuals to make their own decisions about how they live their lives?"

Answer
Yes.

Supplementary Question
That is a quote from a Liberal Democrat publication in 2021, entitled "What Liberal Democrats Believe". How do you square that with the Council's policy of discouraging inappropriate car journeys, as described in the September Executive report on the off street car park charges? Why is the Council better placed to make this judgement rather than our residents, who have felt their budgets squeezed, including when filling their cars.

Supplementary Answer
Car parking charges have not gone up for the past five years. They weren't increased in 2018, 2019 or 2020. They clearly weren't going to go up in the Covid years. We have got to do something about the deficit of £600k to £800k in the car parking budget.

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

Please can you tell me how much Wokingham Borough Council paid for emergency accommodation for residents in the last year?

Answer
The final spend outturn for 2021/22 was £975,000, as compared with the projected spend of £1.2 million at the start of the year. To have contained the spend is a major achievement of our very committed housing team, which was able to finalise the lease of Crown House to expand our temporary accommodation, and otherwise manage the pressure on emergency costs. Their work has led to a fall in the number of people in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation from 47 at the start of the year to 25 now.

Supplementary Question
Thank you for your response, it is a huge figure. In light of that, I wanted to know if

you think it wise for your administration to explore cutting the number of Wokingham Borough Council News editions to residents. This is the publication that goes to all households in the Borough and frequently tells people about how to get support when they are struggling. This can potentially prevent people from falling deeper into crises. All for the sake of saving £30k per year.

Supplementary Answer
I am slightly puzzled as to how you make a connection between the emergency accommodation costs and the Council's Borough News. The Borough News is read by many people who are in very little, if any, danger of requiring emergency accommodation. We do need to find savings. This has been a theme throughout the evening. If that requires us to reduce the number of issues of the Borough News, we will have to think about doing that. No decision has been made on that, but it is something we have to contemplate.

82.9 Pauline Jorgensen asked the Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Housing the following question:

Nationally the Liberal Democrat Party has pledged to build 300,000 houses per year, the same amount as the Government, why should residents believe that the administration will be able to reduce the numbers of houses when they have made no progress so far?

Answer
All political parties recognise there is a national housing crisis and support significant house building to address it. The crucial matter for consideration here is where and how those new homes should be delivered.

The Government's current method to calculate where housing should be built is, in my opinion, flawed. There is no consideration as to where housing could be best delivered to support the levelling up of opportunity for northern communities that are crying out for investment. There is no consideration of what the environmental impact or infrastructure consequences might be for an area such as ours. There is no consideration of the level of change communities have experienced in the recent past.

I know that the previous administration here at Wokingham, of which you were a member, lobbied for a reduction in the housing allocation for the Borough without success. But there are good reasons to make a renewed effort now.

Our own lobbying efforts have been hampered by the rapid turnover of secretaries of state in a period of chaos and dysfunction at national government level. But I believe that the Government, now that we seem to have a permanent Government, has started to understand, with the newly restored Secretary of State, Michael Gove, recently referring to the need for a fairer way of allocating housing that takes account of changes in population. He has also acknowledged that some of the calculations that have been made in the past have been wrong.

In this context, it is imperative that we continue to raise our residents' concerns over the scale of housing in the Borough required by the Government. I would hope that Members of all political parties would support our efforts, just as we supported yours.

Supplementary Question
Thank you for that. I completely agree with you. I would like to offer the support of the Conservative Group, as you did with us (unlike Labour) when we were trying to get the numbers reduced. Actually, we were successful, thanks to our Leader. We would be happy to accompany you to lobby Government ministers. I have already talked to all the MPs in the area and I would be very happy to join you if you would be happy to have our support.

Supplementary Answer
I would be delighted to have your support. We have been asking for constructive engagement with the Opposition and, if you are prepared to help us on this, I am sure that help will be gratefully received.

82.10 Chris Bowring asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Wokingham Without Parish Council members and the police strongly agree that the current speed limits on Honey Hill in Wokingham Without ward are excessive and dangerous to road users including pedestrians. Would the Executive Member be willing to attend a site visit with local Borough and Parish Councillors to apprise him of the perceived problems?

Answer
As you may be aware the Council's Traffic Management team have been involved in discussions regarding Honey Hill for some time now. We are deeply surprised at the comment you have made regarding the statement 'the police strongly agree that the current speed limits on Honey Hill in Wokingham Without ward are excessive and dangerous to road users including pedestrians', and we would welcome seeing any correspondence you have from the police advising of this.

As you are aware the enforcement of traffic speed is a police function. At present, there is no evidence, by way of speeding or personal injury accidents that would indicate there to be a speeding or safety issue on this road.

However, I am happy to meet local ward and parish Councillors on site.

Supplementary Question
I understand that at Church Lane, in Shinfield, the speed limit was reduced to 30mph from 60mph in anticipation of growth in traffic from the SDL housing. We have a similar situation in Honey Hill with the South of Wokingham 1,800 houses yet to be built. Would you take that into account when you arrive at your final decision?

Supplementary Answer
Yes, I certainly will.

82.11 Andy Croy asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

The Conservatives are trying to disenfranchise many people in the Borough by making it harder to vote.

The ID restrictions, and allowable IDs, have been described as worse than voter suppression measures seen in parts of the United States.

What steps will WBC be taking to ensure not a single resident is deterred from exercising their democratic right to vote the next time they go to the polling station?

Answer
I agree with you that we need to take every step to ensure that residents are informed of this new requirement and are not deterred from voting.

I think it's very sad that the Government are forcing these changes upon us. We therefore have to make this work as best we can.

We are already publicising these changes on the Council's website in advance of the Electoral Commission's national publicity campaign that will start in January 2023.

The voter ID provisions are due to be in place for local elections in England in May 2023 and at any UK Parliamentary election held after that date. The types of ID to be allowed are set out in the Elections Act 2022 and include passports, photographic driving licences, biometric immigration documents and some concessionary travel passes. Free voter cards, to be called a Voter Authority Certificate, will be made available for those without any other form of photographic ID. People are likely to be able to apply for these from January 2023. I would have liked to have seen ID used by younger people also accepted.

Officers are working closely with the Electoral Commission to ensure a successful implementation of this new requirement and to mitigate the risk of any voter in Wokingham Borough being disenfranchised, but it would be better if we didn't need to do this.

Supplementary Question
I am sure that none our local Conservatives would support this rather Trumpian attempt to interfere with the hard won democratic right to vote. So, would you consider writing a letter from all the Group Leaders to all of the Borough's MPs to make it clear that every single one of us here supports democracy and is opposed to the introduction of mandatory voter ID?

Supplementary Answer
I would be delighted to write such a letter and would hope that the Group Leaders would support that.

82.12 Charles Margetts asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport & Highways the following question:

The previous Conservative administration allocated £20 million some years ago into an anti-congestion budget. The purpose of this was to improve vehicle flow through key road bottlenecks to ease congestion. Officers had worked up a scheme to improve traffic flow on London Road and were planning to move onto several other schemes across the Borough. It is my understanding that £12 million was unallocated at the time of the May election and available for this work. I have been advised by officers that this budget has been renamed the active travel budget. Can you tell me which of the original schemes planned at the time of the local election are still progressing and which new active travel schemes have been incorporated in this

programme?

Answer
Whilst £20m may have been allocated by the previous Conservative administration the money is not available without furthering the Council's borrowings. As such the value being referenced is not available and a significantly lesser amount is now being worked with under the new heading 'Active Travel and Bus Priority'

Schemes that had previously been identified and which we believe will serve the best benefit to all users of the highway network, is by targeting the Department for Transport's own findings that nearly 60% of short journeys are taken by car and could be taken by active travel (walking and cycling) linking to this Council's emerging Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan or public transport bus and rail linking with this Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan which is currently being amended.

With a good standard of infrastructure in place many of these short journeys can be transferred from the car leaving spare capacity on the network for essential journeys such as freight as well as car journeys that cannot be transferred to active travel or public transport.

However, some schemes can be revised and converted to the active travel and bus priority and these include the likes of Active Travel (Walking / Cycling) on London Road between Binfield Road and Seaford Road junctions, and also Active Travel and bus priority measures at the Binfield Road junction with improvements to the signals. Measures are also being considered at Winnersh Crossroads with a signal optimisation scheme to reflect the new traffic patterns as a result of the Winnersh Relief Road, these measures could also including bus priority and improved pedestrian and cycle connectivity.

As highlighted already tonight, the Council finds itself under the severest of financial pressures as do most other local authorities and must look at all aspects to balance its books.

Supplementary Question
You mentioned a different amount to the amount I quoted, I wonder if you could clarify what the amount was? You also mentioned some schemes which were moving forward, one at the Twyford crossroads. It was confirmed to me by an officer in June as being considered – is that on? And, when can we expect a formal announcement on this?

Supplementary Answer
As I said previously, the amount of money which you thought was available is not, because that would require further borrowing on the Capital budget, which we cannot afford. There is a smaller amount in the Active Travel and Bus Priority budget which is currently going through the MTFP iterations. I will come back to you on Twyford crossroads. I have given you a flavour of some of the schemes in the programme.

82.13 Phil Cunnington asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

This Agenda includes public questions, member questions, motions, and a petition on the increase in parking charges brought by the Conservative Group. Why, when there is not another meeting until January, has the administration brought no business to this meeting?

Due to time constraints, the following written answer was provided.

Answer
The simple answer is that there are no business items scheduled or due for November Council. However, as you state, the Agenda includes other significant items allowing residents and members to fully participate in the work of the Council. Not least are the three Motions at the end of the Agenda, two of which are from your Group which have been on previous Agenda but have not been debated due to running out of time. I would have thought your Group therefore would be pleased to see a slightly shorter Agenda.

I am very happy that we are able to devote time to a proper debate about car park charges. I would have thought you shared that view. I am also pleased that we should be able to get through all the public and Member questions. We should also be able to get through all the Motions, something that failed to happen time after time under the previous Conservative administration. That clearly didn't bother you and your colleagues because you continually voted against extensions to the time allowed for Council meetings.

I very much hope this evening that we get the opportunity to debate these Motions and that your question does not unduly delay us.

83. Continuation of the Meeting

At this point in the meeting (10.01pm) 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 approved.

Note: It was confirmed that, following a recent rule change, future meetings would run through to 11.00pm without the need for a continuation Motion.

84. Minutes of Committee Meetings and Ward Matters

84.1 Keith Baker asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Highways and Transport the following question:

At the Overview and Scrutiny Committee call-in, which was minuted, we were told that the official consultation on the increase in car park charges would be the Traffic Regulation Order (TRO). I have asked when this TRO will be published and promoted to our residents so that they are aware that they can comment. As of now, I have not had any suggested dates from officers. With the Xmas period coming up, when residents are not particularly interested in responding to consultations, I fear for the value of such a consultation. Bearing in mind that there is a window of 28 days to comment, it would be unfortunate if that period included the Xmas break. I am assuming that you will want to complete this consultation and get the new

charges implemented. So, I would expect that you would have some idea of a target date, not the actual date, for the publication of the TRO. Can you let Councillors know what that date might be? Also, it is essential that residents are aware of this consultation. So, can you tell me what plans you have to promote this TRO on social media?

Answer
Our target date is the end of next week. There will be communications to the media, social media and on the WBC website next week.

84.2 Maria Gee asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

There is a school in my ward, now part of the Trust for the Chiltern Way Academy. In previous years it was a failing school. I am interested to hear of any progress following the change of the Trustee Board.

Answer
It was a failing school. Councillor Mickleburgh and I were part of the Emergency Board which tried to keep it going, succeeding until Chiltern Way took it over. It has been my great pleasure to visit the school quite recently and it is transformed. They are doing a really good job. They have had visits from the office of the Regional Schools Commissioner as well. Everyone is delighted with the progress. What I saw was a completely different environment to what was there before and I am really looking forward to us being able to work with them for the benefit of all our children. They have a nearly full school. All the children are in school. Their attendance record has shot up. They are doing qualifications now which they were not doing before. It is showing great signs of improvement. I was really pleased to see it.

84.3 John Kaiser asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

There is a lake, which has become a permanent feature, on the corner of Langley Common Road and Eversley Road. I think that it may be partly in Gary Cowan's ward. It is very dangerous. We have not had any ice yet but, if we do, it will become even more dangerous. Can you please get it sorted out?

Answer
The number of lakes are growing by the sound of things. Yes we are aware of it. I will do my utmost to get it sorted as soon as possible. I do understand the concerns you have with the cold weather coming.

84.4 John Halsall asked the Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Housing the following question:

The Coalition undertook to protect the Green Belt in 2022. Can you confirm that this is still true and that no discussions are being held by officers or Members which would make this untrue?

Answer
I seem to recall when I asked a similar question of you, when we were in opposition and you were running the Council. You replied, quite correctly, that it was not appropriate to say anything that would pre-judge a process that is complicated and

involves many parties. It is imperative that we bear in mind that when the Local Plan comes forward for the inquiry in public, no opportunity has been given to any developer to say that their proposals were not treated fairly. So that is the position you outlined when you were Leader of the Council and it is the position now. You explained the situation when you were Leader of the Council. I am explaining the situation now. I am not the Leader of the Council but, for some reason, you have asked me this question. You seem to assume that I am responsible for the Local Plan which is flattering but wrong, just as Pauline Jorgensen seems to assume that I am responsible for the Local Plan. My colleague Lindsay Ferris is responsible for the Local Plan. I am responsible for Affordable and Social Housing, but I am happy to try to answer your question.

84.5 Charles Margetts asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

My question relates to the California Crossroads. At the last Council meeting my colleague, Peter Harper, asked you whether you would consider running this consultation again. It was previously done in 2018/19. We have had quite a bit of correspondence from some of the traders at California Crossroads since then. The dentist, who wasn't even in Finchampstead then said "I was completely unaware of these changes. The Council have not communicated them or consulted with me". Cresswells Garage stated "we had a visit from an officer in March with a new and revised plan, asking to buy land. We have heard nothing since". The owners of the convenience store and fish and chip shop stated "I had no idea that this was progressing. I had no contact from the Council. They have not asked my opinion". The Co-op stated "this is the first time that we have heard about this scheme. It is of no benefit to the area and we have not been consulted". I realise that this was before your time, when the scheme was proposed and that you had nothing to do with its development. It is a request that many things have changed since 2018/19. Would you consider these facts and another consultation in order to make sure that the scheme that does go ahead reflects the views of the world in 2022, not the views of the world in 2018/19?

Answer
Yes, it was some time ago when the consultations were undertaken. On the back of those consultations, detailed designs have been undertaken and completed. A lot of money has been spent and I do not want to go down the road of opening it up and having redesigns done. We are now going out to tender for the works and everything is now finalised. So, that is where it stands.

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

You may remember the last full Council meeting when I asked you about the Council's consultation which included potential proposals to remove the roundabouts in Nightingale Road in Woodley. I would like to know when the outcome of that consultation will be published so they know if the Council does plan to remove the roundabouts or not?

Answer
That was all part of the LCWIP consultation. They were high level ideas. They are not concrete at all. We are currently analysing all the results, which is a large

number. There will be a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29 November, which I believe you sit on. So you will get some information there. Once we have gone through that we will go for adoption of the LCWIP, with prioritisation of the main routes, which we will then be bidding on. If Nightingale Road is one of those then we will go out to consultation again on a design for that particular road.

84.7 Phil Cunnington asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

There are two potential crossings that have been requested multiple times over the years when I have been involved in campaigning, before I was elected. One across Warren House Road which joins the Mulberry View estate into Ashridge. One on Keephatch Road which joins Dowles Green estate into the Ashridge area. Both of these estates have been built outside of the main hub of Ashridge but both contain numbers of children who travel to school every day in the centre of Ashridge. Particularly, those two areas are highly dangerous to cross because of the bends and difficulty in seeing cars. Could you confirm that these two crossings are still on the list for consideration and, if so, when we might expect some action on them?

Answer

I can confirm that they are on the list. Warren House Road is the location where surveys were going to be undertaken but SGN have been undertaking utility works. Therefore, traffic patterns have been different. So, that has been postponed until next year, once SGN have gone. The second location, I will need to find out that status and where that has got to.

84.8 Rebecca Margetts asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Thank you for your latest update, received yesterday, on the funding issues for the 6th form at Bohunt School. Potential parents in Finchampstead are genuinely concerned about this for the children who could, potentially, go to this 6th form. They are worried that their children may be taught in temporary classrooms from September next year. Can you confirm if this is true?

Answer

The genuine answer is that we do not know how quickly we can get this done. The aim is still to have everything done for September opening but, as you will have recognised over the past six months, costs have changed slightly. We are working as hard as we can to deliver it. There is no backing off by anybody, but it is a tight financial squeeze and we will do our best to do it.

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

Prue Bray – Executive Member for Children's Services

I think that we all know by now that Wokingham Borough Council is the lowest funded unitary authority in the country. What you may not know is that our schools are in a similar situation. Schools in our area are the third worst funded in the country, behind only Rutland and Leicestershire. Before today's autumn fiscal event/statement, teaching unions and Tory MPs (a rather unlikely alliance) were calling on Jeremy Hunt not to further cut education funding as previous decisions were leading to cuts in school budgets in 2023. The exact impact of these varies

from school to school but, on average, schools in Wokingham were being predicted to lose £176 per pupil next September. That is a bigger drop than any other area in Berkshire except Slough and a bigger drop than Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Surrey and Hampshire. This would make the funding gap between our schools and our neighbours' schools even worse.

I have not had time to digest the impact of what was said today, but more money does seem to have been promised for schools for the next two years. We do not know what that will mean for our schools locally, but perhaps it means a slight easing of the position. So, our Borough's schools deliver amazing education with lower funding than almost everyone else. We need to do what we can to support them. That is why I am pleased to announce that, today, we have joined F40, an organisation which is lobbying for fairer schools funding. It gets its name from the 40 authorities with the lowest funded schools. Despite having been at the bottom of the funding table for the entire time they were in charge, the Conservatives chose not to participate in this organisation. For the princely sum of less than £400 for the rest of the financial year, we have now put that right. I look forward to us doing whatever we can to support fairer funding for all the Borough's schools.

Clive Jones – Leader of the Council
We have a cost of living crisis. Much of it is the responsibility of Downing Street. It is estimated that the Truss/Kwarteng/Redwood Budget of a few weeks ago added £30bn to the black hole, or what is now often referred to as the "blue hole" of £30bn that was already there. I include John Redwood with responsibility as he was clearly fully behind Liz Truss. He was the only MP prepared to defend her on TV and radio. Only this week, we have heard from the leaders of two of the largest county councils in the country – Kent and Hampshire, both currently controlled by the Conservatives. Their leaders said that whilst they recognised a very difficult national picture, they were calling on the Prime Minister to fund councils properly. Both leaders said that they faced budget deficits in coming years of a scale they had never seen before. If Ministers do not step in with immediate emergency help for councils and a new long-term proper funding plan then it is entirely likely that these two councils will join the list of councils going bust.

We are doing all that we can to ensure that WBC does not go bust, even though we are and have been for over eight years the lowest funded unitary authority in the country. WBC has been starved of cash by the Conservative Government for far too long. We are a responsible administration and we do not want to go the same way as Slough and Conservative controlled Thurrock who have both sadly gone bust. In Wokingham, we have the added pressure of being left with a huge budget shortfall of £2.2m by the Conservatives when they left power in May. They also did not properly budget for the Winnersh Park and Ride scheme which meant a shortfall of £1.3m and left no funding for 18 bus services after October 2022.

We are expecting our settlement from the Government a few days before Xmas. A few weeks ago I wrote to the Chancellor asking for a proper settlement before the end of the year so that we can plan our budget properly for next year. No answer. It does not look like the Government will find more money for local councils in today's budget, although we are not clear about that yet. We do need more money from the Government for Wokingham, which receives around £24m less than similar unitary

authorities every year. That is £24m that we are unable to spend on local services such as road repairs, schools and adult social care for our residents. WBC must be properly funded by the Government and we must send this message to the Government very loudly and very clearly. This extra funding is something that has to come from the Government.

Sarah Kerr – Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services.
Brenda Blainey, Judith Armstrong, Freda Walker, Marlene Doyle, Lauren Malt, Yasmin Chkaifi, Mariam Kamara, Lucy Powell, Marena Shaban, Lesma Jackson. These 10 women were all murdered. These 10 women were all murdered in January of this year. Since January, 85 women in the UK have been killed by a man, or a man has been the principal suspect. In the year 2000, the United Nations designated the 25th of November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The date is based on the 1960 assassination of the Mirabal sisters in the Dominican Republic. For a number of years before the UN resolution, the date had been marked by activists all over the world to raise awareness and combat violence against women. On 10 December we have International Human Rights Day. In between these two dates we have the international 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. Each year, the 16 days of activism has a theme. This year the theme is “Ending Femicide”, femicide being the killing of a woman or girl, in particular by a man on account of her gender.

The 25th of November is also White Ribbon Day. It is designed to coincide with the International day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. As this Council Chamber will be aware, White Ribbon is specifically about raising awareness about the role that men play in eliminating violence against women and girls. This is part of the wider VAWG agenda. The onus needs to shift away from what women need to do to keep themselves safe to tackling male behaviours. It is a minority of men, but all men can be part of calling it out, ending misogyny, promoting equality and respect and making society safer for women and girls. I am delighted that we have committed as an organisation to taking a strategic approach to tackling violence against women and girls. I encourage you all to play as full a part as possible in this. The 25th of November is approaching. In fact, it is a week tomorrow. There are a number of events being held across the Borough to raise awareness of the 16 days of activism, by both WBC and our partner organisations. In particular, a vigil is being held on 25 November at 7pm in Wokingham town market place. This will be a chance to reflect and to remember those we have lost in the past year due to femicide. I hope to see many of you there.

Rachel Bishop-Firth – Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty
Supporting our residents through the Cost of Living Crisis is one of the Council’s main priorities this winter. As part of the Hardship Alliance we are doing all we can to support residents who are struggling with rocketing bills for food, fuel and now housing. We are supporting a network of warm spaces where residents can go during the coldest months to keep warm, enjoy activities with others and, if they need to, ask for help with the issues they are facing. We are distributing vouchers under the Household Support Fund to ensure that families who rely on free school meals during term time can continue to feed their children in the school holidays. As well,

we are using the Household Support Fund to help other residents who cannot afford essentials with grants and vouchers. Officers, along with Councillor Sarah Kerr have launched a scheme to issue free reusable period products to those who cannot afford this basic essential. This initiative helps to fight poverty and the climate emergency. We are also distributing other essentials such as blankets and energy efficient slow cookers to help people to keep warm this winter.

The demands on Council officers and the voluntary sector are huge. Queries and referrals to their services have increased dramatically. Library staff will be helping to provide advice to residents. The old library building will be used as a vital storage space. We are asking residents, if you can help in any way please volunteer either with time or donations.

We are also looking ahead to the spring. The cost of providing Wokingham families who rely on free school meals with vouchers to cover meals in holidays is £600k each year going forwards. We can only afford to provide this vital support to our most vulnerable children because we have Government funding through the Household Support Fund. Our current allocation runs out at the end of March and, at present, we have no guarantee of any further funding. The Liberal Democrats have committed to funding vouchers for eligible families to cover the period up to and including May half term holiday in 2023. But, with the gap between spending on essential services and the Council's income, we will not be able to continue to provide these vouchers beyond May 2023 without help from the Government. The autumn statement today referred to the continuation of the Household Support Fund. We will confirm what this means for Wokingham as soon as we can.

Paul Fishwick – Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways
"Safe Drive, Stay Alive". I was fortunate to attend the Thames Valley Area Safe Drive, Stay Alive event held at the Hexagon, Reading on 2 November. The event was attended by many 6th forms and colleges from across the region and was aimed at young people. There was a film about a series of serious and life changing events that was broken by hard hitting real life talks given by staff representing Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue, Thames valley Police, ambulance service, an NHS surgeon, the mother of a 19 year old daughter involved in a fatal accident, a lady who had been speeding and left with lifelong injuries, a court judge and a person who had been jailed for causing death by dangerous driving. The event was opened and closed by an officer from WBC. The points that were highlighted in Safe Drive, Stay Alive although aimed at the age group of the audience can actually be applied to all in the country who drive or travel in a car.

The second point I would like to make is about local bus services and the driver shortage. There is a growing driver shortage locally as well as nationally as current drivers leave to join the HGV industry. This has been exacerbated by previous Government Ministers incentivising recruitment when wages were already up to a third higher. Local bus wages make up around 67% of costs with fuel around 15%. Passenger numbers are down on pre-pandemic levels but are growing – now standing at around 81%. However, rising costs are a significant pressure and make commercial services less attractive, as well as supported services, especially with the lack of further financial support from WBC. WBC has already made available an additional £450k between 1 October 2022 and 31 March 2023. Local bus services

are seeing ad-hoc cancellations. WBC as well as neighbouring authorities are working with bus operators to give passengers certainty as to which journeys will operate. I have therefore, written to the new Secretary of State for Transport, Mark Harper, to highlight the situation and copied in our local MPs and the Chair of the Local Government Association, who has responded with very positive comments. I hope that the new Secretary of State will also respond positively.

86. Statement from Council Owned Companies

Stephen Conway – Loddon Homes

This morning, we held the first, and very successful, Common Purposes meeting for the Council-owned housing companies. The aim is to share perspectives, discuss common concerns and create greater strategic alignment, to ensure that we are all working to the same common objectives. Separate meetings also took place today of the boards of Loddon Homes, Berry Brook Homes and Wokingham Housing Ltd.

87. Motions

87.1 Motion 493 submitted by Rebecca Margetts

Due to time constraints, this item was not considered.

87.2 Motion 494 submitted by Gary Cowan

Due to time constraints, this item was not considered.

87.3 Motion 495 submitted by Charles Margetts

Due to time constraints, this item was not considered.