

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 23 MARCH 2023 FROM 7.30 PM TO 10.30 PM**

Members Present

Councillors: Caroline Smith (Mayor), Beth Rowland (Deputy Mayor), Sam Akhtar, Keith Baker, Parry Batth, Rachel Bishop-Firth, Laura Blumenthal, Chris Bowring, 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, Pauline Helliard-Symons, Graham Howe, Chris Johnson, 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, Jackie Rance, Ian Shenton, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Mike Smith, Wayne Smith, Bill Soane, Alison Swaddle and Shahid Younis

Council stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect for Ruth Perry, the headteacher of Caversham Primary School, who took her own life in January while waiting for the publication of an Ofsted report which downgraded the school.

116. Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Shirley Boyt and Clive Jones.

117. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Council meeting held on 16 February 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

118. Declarations of Interest

A declaration of interest was submitted from:

Prue Bray submitted a Personal Interest in Item 129 – 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 129 – 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 129 – Statement from Council Owned Companies - as a Non-Executive Director of Optalis Ltd. Councillor Hare also submitted a Personal Interest in Item 126.2 (Member Question Time) as he was answering a question about GPs and his wife was a GP.

119. Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor made the following announcements:

Volunteer awards – a successful event had been held on 14 March 2023 to

recognise the contribution made by volunteers across the Borough. Eight volunteers had received the Mayor's Award which recognised their outstanding work in supporting residents and local communities.

The Mayor had attended an event at Buckingham Palace, at the invitation of the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire, which witnessed a number of representatives, including the Lord Lieutenant, giving the loyal address to King Charles.

The Mayor thanked all the Members who were not standing for re-election in May for their service and wished them well for the future.

120. Public Question Time

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

120.1 On behalf of Ann Dally, Richard Tredgett asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

As Councillors may be aware the *Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health* (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/prevention-concordat-for-better-mental-health>) is underpinned by a prevention-focused holistic approach to improving our resident's mental health, which in turn contributes to a fairer and more equitable society.

The Concordat emphasises collaborative cross-sector working to deliver the best evidenced-based practise to support wellbeing and good mental health within the whole population, for those at greater risk and for those currently receiving treatment.

Could you tell us what plans have been made for Wokingham Borough Council to sign up to the updated *Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health*, with its commitment to promote good mental health for all by strengthening protective influences while reducing risk factors.

Answer

We agree that the Concordat is a very good document and encourages all of our health and social care partners to work together to get what is best for our residents.

The Concordat has been discussed during our Wokingham Integrated Partnership Leadership Board (which has representation for all of our health and social care partners) and it was seen as a favourable document.

Wokingham Borough Council commit to signing up to the Concordat and we will work with our partners to add signatories within our 2023/24 Integration Plan. We will do what we can.

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

With the Council's finances squeezed like never before it is disappointing that the

Highway's Department continues to waste money. I've already highlighted the use of single use signs littering the Borough, and the problem has got worse since then.

Back in the day when a Highways Officer painted white lines around a pothole it was a sure indicator that it would soon be fixed. But now it seems due to a lack of communication the paint is allowed to fade, and the holes allowed to get bigger necessitating another officer to come out and re-mark the crater. And, of course the bigger the hole gets the more expensive it will be to repair.

As an example, I've provided a photo for Members of a growing crater in Crutchley Road but there are many others like it. Does the Council have a plan to break this vicious cycle?

Answer

Wokingham Borough Council has a statutory duty to maintain the public highway. To ensure this duty is fulfilled, WBC carry out routine safety inspections as set out within the Wokingham Highway Inspection Policy (WHIP) and, also investigate issues raised by the public, such as yourself, to ensure the adopted highway is safe for public use. Any safety defects found, will be made safe/repared as required.

With the example you provided, there was a delay to the repair, for which I apologise.

Following the recent cold and wet periods earlier in the year, the officer team, alongside the contractor, are reviewing processes to improve the punctuality of repairs and are looking at alternative treatment solutions. We hope this will give us an improved speed of repair and a greater noticeable benefit for our residents.

Defects that have been identified are generally marked in white paint. This is to ensure the contractor is aware of the location and extent of the repair.

Defect D2233589 Crutchley Road, Wokingham, as referenced, was made safe on 14 March 2023. Due to the location being on a junction a permanent repair will be programmed to ensure the correct traffic management is in place to protect both the workforce and the public whilst the permanent works are carried out.

Supplementary Question

I would be interested to know when that will be programmed in. I recall, not so long ago, you said that there was going to be a review of the Highways Department – working practices, etc. Is that available to view yet?

Supplementary Answer

There is a review, currently ongoing. We are also working with Volker Highways to improve efficiency in pothole repairs.

121. Petitions

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

Councillor Parry Batth	Parry Batth presented a petition, signed by 290
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	<p>people, requesting a pedestrian crossing outside the main entrance to the Crosfields School on Shinfield Road.</p> <p>To be forwarded to officers in the Place and Growth department.</p>
Councillor Peter Harper	<p>Peter Harper presented a petition, signed by 827 people, calling on the Council to pause and review the planned works to California crossroads and carry out further consultation in order to understand the views of local residents, people with disabilities, schools and businesses.</p> <p>To be forwarded to officers in the Place and Growth department.</p>

122. Petition Debate

The Council considered a petition which had been submitted to the previous meeting on 16 February 2023. The petition, which contained over 1,500 signatures stated:

“For 20 years, Wokingham Borough Council maintained a policy of having bins collected every week. Careful management of the Council’s money made this possible, even when other local authorities, strapped for cash, went to fortnightly, or even three-weekly collections.

Collecting bins every week is important. It means that families, especially with small children, aren’t stuck with nappies and other non-recyclable waste. A lot of homes in the Borough have nowhere to store waste and no external access to back gardens, leading to rubbish piling up in the streets and creating a public health issue.

The new Liberal Democrat led coalition administration running Wokingham Borough Council won’t commit to keeping weekly bin collection.

We challenged them to give a guarantee, and instead, they hide behind having a consultation. When asked if they would keep weekly bin collection, if local people said that’s what they wanted, Wokingham’s Coalition Administration refused to make that promise.

Please complete the Council’s consultation and explain why changing to two to three weekly collections is not acceptable.

If you want Wokingham Borough Council to carry on collecting your bins every week, please support our campaign.

Sign this petition and send a message that the Lib Dem-led coalition cannot ignore.

Keep WBC Weekly Bin Collections.”

Councillor Norman Jorgensen presented the petition and addressed the Council as follows:

“It is clear that the majority of residents wish to retain weekly waste collections. Over 2,000 people have now signed our petition and only 24% of respondents to the Council’s consultation liked the idea of moving to fortnightly collections.

The Council’s Lib Dem/Labour administration is planning to do away with weekly general and dry recycling waste collections and replace them with fortnightly collections despite the forecast cost of £2m to implement and the policy not being in the Lib Dem or Labour manifestos. Indeed, some of the ruling Coalition Members, in this room tonight, have previously pledged in their election literature, to maintain weekly waste collections.

The £2m implementation cost is largely due to the purchase of wheeled bins and taking on extra people to administer the change. Because of this upfront expenditure, there would be no savings arising from this scheme for several years. Any savings claimed for the fortnightly waste scheme arise from constraining the size of wheeled bins provided and, hence, how much general waste residents can put out, forcing them to recycle more, recycling being cheaper for the Council than disposing of general waste.

The forecast savings are not guaranteed to be achieved. Conservative Councillors believe instead that savings can be achieved by making it easier to recycle by extending the range of materials that can be recycled and by encouraging residents to adopt recycling to a greater extent. A move to fortnightly collections would see a collection lorry turn up every week at residents’ homes, but it would take away less of people’s waste than previously.

Despite other nearby authorities moving to fortnightly or less frequent collections, previous Conservative administrations in Wokingham Borough have kept weekly waste collections over that 20 year period through careful management of the Council’s finances. Collection of waste and recycling are important universal services used by almost all residents in the Borough. Wokingham Conservative Councillors would retain weekly waste collection and make savings by enabling residents to recycle more of their household waste. Please support this Motion.”

In the ensuing debate, Councillor Stephen Conway stated that he understood the concerns of residents who signed the petition, but Members needed to recognise that many of their concerns could and would be addressed before the changes were made. Members should recognise the general level of acceptance for the changes, expressed in the Council’s consultation on this subject. The Opposition’s attempt to construe acceptance as objection seems a rather desperate tactic to undermine the clear message from the consultation. A significant majority of those who responded either supported or accepted the need for the changes.

Councillor Conway reminded Members of the context within which the Executive had made its decision. The Council was currently not able to secure the recycling rates that Members would like to see. The councils which were best-performing in terms of

recycling all had alternate weekly collections. The evidence suggested that alternate weekly collection of residual waste encouraged more recycling. More recycling saved the Council and, therefore, the Council Taxpayer, money. It was worth reflecting that the Council had faced and continued to face considerable financial challenges. Double-digit inflation, rising demand for services, shortfalls in anticipated income and higher interest rates had put enormous pressure on the Council. As a result, difficult decisions had to be made. Changing the waste collection regime was one of those difficult decisions. The savings to be achieved when containerisation came in were considerable, about £1m each year. If the Opposition wanted to retain weekly residual waste collections they would have to come clean about where they were going to make savings of £1m per year, not just for one year but year after year.

As the petition organiser, Councillor Jorgensen submitted the following Motion which was seconded by

“This Motion is a result of 1,800 residents signing a petition calling on the Council to maintain weekly waste collections.

Wokingham Borough Council shall:

1. Accept the views of those who signed the petition and the 76% of residents who responded to the Council’s consultation on future waste collection who did not like the idea of moving to fortnightly general and dry recycling waste collections.
2. Maintain weekly kerbside collections of general, dry recycling and food waste.
3. Increase the proportion of materials recycled and reduce costs by offering residents more options.
4. Communicate better with residents to ensure they understand what they can recycle.’

Council also considered a statement from the Chief Finance Officer which commented on the financial implications relating to the proposed Motion, as follows:

“The Chief Finance Officer comments are purely an assessment of the financial implications associated with the Motion as written and are not an opinion on the policy direction or intention contained within them.

There is an estimated loss in savings of £150k in 2023/24, £500k in 2024/25, rising to £1m from 2025/26 onwards, directly associated with the Motion not to proceed with Alternative Waste Collection. Enhanced communications and diversion of waste aligned to a reduction in Blue Bags can be delivered within existing resources and this is estimated to generate up to £100k per annum in savings.

It is not possible to assess the financial implications associated with the proposal of ‘offering residents more options’ until those options have been identified. Therefore, the net lost income directly associated with the Motion is estimated to be £150k in 2023/24, £450k in 2024/25, rising to £900k from 2025/26 onwards and will need to

be found from further cost reductions and/or additional sources of income in setting future years' service budgets."

In line with the Council Constitution, six Members requested that a recorded vote be held on the Motion.

Upon being put to the vote, the voting was as follows:

For	Against	Abstain
Sam Akhtar	Rachel Bishop-Firth	
Keith Baker	Prue Bray	
Parry Batth	Rachel Burgess	
Laura Blumenthal	Stephen Conway	
Chris Bowring	David Cornish	
Anne Chadwick	Andy Croy	
Gary Cowan	Peter Dennis	
Phil Cunnington	Lindsay Ferris	
David Davies	Paul Fishwick	
Michael Firmager	Jim Frewin	
John Halsall	Maria Gee	
Peter Harper	David Hare	
Pauline Helliard-Symons	Chris Johnson	
Graham Howe	Sarah Kerr	
Norman Jorgensen	Tahir Maher	
Pauline Jorgensen	Morag Malvern	
John Kaiser	Adrian Mather	
Abdul Loyes	Andrew Mickleburgh	
Charles Margetts	Alistair Neal	
Rebecca Margetts	Beth Rowland	
Stuart Munro	Ian Shenton	
Gregor Murray	Imogen Shepherd-Dubey	
Jackie Rance	Rachelle Shepherd-Dubey	
Wayne Smith	Caroline Smith	
Bill Soane	Mike Smith	
Alison Swaddle		
Shahid Younis		

Following the vote, the Mayor announced that the Motion was CARRIED, in the following terms:

That Wokingham Borough Council shall:

- 1) accept the views of those who signed the petition and the 76% of residents who responded to the Council's consultation on future waste collection who did not like the idea of moving to fortnightly general and dry recycling waste collections;
- 2) maintain weekly kerbside collections of general, dry recycling and food waste;

- 3) increase the proportion of materials recycled and reduce costs by offering residents more options;
- 4) communicate better with residents to ensure they understand what they can recycle.

123. Council's response to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England Consultation

Members considered the Council's response to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) Consultation, as set out at Agenda pages 37 to 44.

The report stated that, on 31 January 2023, the LGBCE had published its proposal for a new warding pattern in the Wokingham Borough. The Commission was now running a consultation on the proposal until 10 April 2023. The Electoral Review Working Group (ERWG) had reviewed the Commission's proposal and drafted a submission on behalf of the Council – appended to the report. The draft submission largely supported the Commission's proposal. However, the ERWG could not find consensus on the issue of three Member wards for Twyford and Hurst and the Southern ward arrangements. Consequently, these issues had been highlighted in the draft submission.

It was proposed by Councillor Prue Bray and seconded by Councillor Stephen Conway that the recommendation within the report be agreed.

RESOLVED: That the Council's submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission, as recommended by the Electoral Review Working Group and as set out at Appendix 1, be approved.

124. Changes to the Constitution

Council considered a report setting out proposed changes to the Constitution, as set out at Agenda pages 45 to 64.

The report contained revisions to several parts of the Constitution, as agreed by the Constitution Review Working Group for recommendation to the Monitoring Officer and the Audit Committee. The proposed changes related to:

- displaying public questions on screen at meetings (1a);
- the Executive – amendments to the Executive's terms of reference (1b);
- responsibilities of the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure (1c);
- Planning Committee – amendments to the terms of reference (1d);
- Employee Assistance Provider Scheme – available to Members (2);
- size of the Constitution Review Working Group (3);
- Audit Committee – amendments to the terms of reference (4).

It was proposed by Councillor Imogen Shepherd-Dubey and seconded by Councillor Prue Bray that the recommendations within the report be agreed.

Upon being put to vote, each recommendation was voted on separately.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the following changes to the Constitution, as recommended by the Monitoring Officer, via the Constitution Review Working Group, be agreed:
 - a. that Rule 5.2.4.2 [Scheme of Delegation to the Executive] be amended as set out in paragraph 2.1 of the report;
 - b. that it be noted that Rule 5.2.10.24 [Responsibilities of Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure] will be amended as set out in paragraph 2.2 of the report;
- 2) it be agreed that the Employee Assistance Provider Scheme be made available to all Members (as detailed in paragraph 4 of the report);
- 3) it be noted that the size of the Constitution Review Working Group will increase to five Members, two of whom shall be members of the Opposition;
- 4) the amendments to the Audit Committee terms of reference as set out in Appendix 1 of the report, be agreed, noting that the changes will come into effect from the new municipal year with the exception of the responsibility for approving the Council's statement of accounts which will remain with the Audit Committee until clarification of the appropriate Council body to sign future statement of accounts has been provided to Council;
- 5) the following proposed changes to the Constitution were **NOT** approved:
 - 1a. amendment to Rule 4.2.9.7 – Asking the Question at the Meeting;
 - 1d. amendment to the Planning Committee terms of reference.

125. Member Parental Leave Policy

Council considered a report on a proposed Member Parental Leave Policy, as set out at Agenda pages 65 to 77.

The report stated that the Council had agreed a Motion, at its meeting in October 2022, supporting the introduction of a parental Leave Policy for Members. At present, there was no legal right for Members to take parental leave. It was intended that adoption of the Policy (Appendix A) would help to remove some of the barriers which currently deterred people from standing for election.

The proposal was to effectively “stop the clock” at the point leave was taken so that a Member taking parental leave did not find him/herself in breach of the Local Government Act 1972, which required Members to attend at least one meeting during a consecutive period of six months.

It was proposed by Councillor Rachel Bishop-Firth and seconded by Councillor Laura Blumenthal that the recommendation within the report be agreed.

RESOLVED: That the Member Parental Leave Policy at Appendix A to the report,

be agreed.

126. Annual Report from the Audit Committee 2022/23

Council considered the annual report from the Chair of the Audit Committee for 2022/23.

It was proposed by Councillor Rachel Burgess and seconded by Councillor Maria Gee, that the report of the Chair of the Audit Committee be noted.

RESOLVED: That the report of the Chair of the Audit Committee for 2022/23 be noted.

127. Annual Report from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees 2022/23

Council considered the annual report from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees for 2022/23.

It was proposed by Councillor Jim Frewin and seconded by Councillor Andrew Mickelburgh that the Annual Report from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and the reports from the four Overview and Scrutiny Committees be noted.

RESOLVED: That the Annual Reports of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and the four Overview and Scrutiny Committees, be noted.

128. Reports from Members appointed to Outside Bodies

Council considered reports from Members appointed to Outside Bodies, as set out at Agenda pages 115 to 156.

It was proposed by Councillor Stephen Conway and seconded by Councillor Prue Bray that the reports from Members appointed to Outside Bodies for 2022/23, be noted.

RESOLVED: That the reports from Members appointed to Outside Bodies for 2022/23, be noted.

129. Member Question Time

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

129.1 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services the following question:

Question:

In the Council Chamber you said I am afraid that I need to finish my statement by raising an issue, and that is the issue of poor behaviour. We have been told about some instances of behaviour on the part of councillors, and I mean councillors plural, towards officers that has fallen short of the standard we would expect. I want to take this opportunity to remind you that all councillors should treat officers with respect in this Chamber and in their correspondence with them. Robust discussions are perfectly possible without descending into bullying and harassment. Please make

sure that you do not cross this line. There have been relatively few complaints about councillor behaviour in this Council compared to many. We would like that to continue.

You say we have been told of instances. Who are the “we”? The word plural is also used which implies that there is more than one Councillor.

Accusing elected Councillors of bullying and harassing Officers without any evidence in a formal public arena is insulting to all 54 members of the Council and brings the Council into disrepute.

My question simply is should you not apologise in public for this statement.

Answer:

The purpose of my statement was to remind all Councillors of our obligations under the Member Code of Conduct which requires all of us to treat the public, officers, and other Members with respect, not to bully or harass, and generally to maintain the highest standards of conduct and behaviour as elected representatives of our community.

Formal complaints of alleged breaches of the Member Code of Conduct are a matter for the Standards Committee which receives regular updates on complaints at its meetings. As I said in my statement, it is encouraging to note that Wokingham Borough Council has relatively few formal complaints, certainly compared to other councils. However, there are also instances which I have witnessed, whilst not leading to formal complaints, do fall short of the standards we aspire to.

I make no apology for reiterating these standards to which we all sign up.

Supplementary Question:

One has to understand that to make a statement in this Chamber with any strength of feeling must mean that somebody had given you that information. The Constitution, badly aligned as it is, does set out very, very clearly that if an Officer has a problem with a Member on bullying, he reports that matter to the Monitoring Officer, and he deals with it in the normal procedures. There is no constitutional procedure for a member of the ruling Executive of this Council to stand up and criticise Members, more than one, of bullying and harassing officers, and I think that if she thinks that she should not resign then, I think she has got it wrong, and it is all the more reason that she should resign. It is a dreadful thing to have done.

129.2 Abdul Loyes asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question:

After all the concerns raised by residents over the past 18 months about access to GP appointments, what is the coalition doing to keep the pressure on GPs and their PCNs to make more face-to-face appointments and more surgery space available to our ever-increasing local population?

Answer

When my wife saw this question she shared it with some of her GP colleagues and I

will not tell you the answer they got. They work very hard, the GPs in the Borough

We do not directly commission GPs in the Borough, that is the ICB. However, we work closely with our partners to make sure that we get the best from GPs that we can, for the residents in Wokingham.

The GPs in the Borough are offering more appointments on average than prior to the pandemic. The data from the BOB, that it is the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West NHS situation that we are in, shows that approximately two thirds of primary care appointments provided in Wokingham over the past 6 months took place face-to-face (average 65.3% over 6 months).

GPs now I will be honest, work far harder than in the past, but that means very few GPs who in fact work a full week due to the pressure of the job, and getting GPs and staff in Wokingham is very hard due to the funding being so bad for Wokingham. We are healthy and wealthy, so we do not get funded. It is also a fact that secondary care is now delegating much patient care to surgeries, as people who I know who are GPs see this as a very positive move, but it does give them an increased workload.

In order to try and improve access to primary care there have been several initiatives:

1. Health colleagues have been working to expand the primary care network through recruitment of pharmacists, paramedics, nurses physicians' associates and mental health practitioners so creating additional capacity and reducing the pressure on core staff.
2. Primary care staff are referring patients to community pharmacy for minor illness.

Supplementary Question:

I understand that Healthwatch were so concerned about feedback received about Wokingham Medical Centre. They have conducted their own consultation. Will the Executive inform us of their findings, and what assistance they can offer Wokingham Medical Centre, and other local practices which are under performing?

Supplementary Answer:

I encouraged Healthwatch to look at Wokingham Medical Centre and they have done. The results will be made known to everyone. Healthwatch, I think, would like to come and do a presentation. Certainly we will make sure that underperforming practices are encouraged to do better.

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

Question:

Nightingale Road roundabout continues to flood badly every time it rains. The Council has been investigating this issue with Thames Water for a long time. Please can you share when residents can expect the drainage issue to be fixed?

Answer

I do appreciate that residents are frustrated about the persistent flooding in this location and the time it is taking to resolve the matter.

The Council's regular clearance of its gullies in the area and our initial investigations have indicated that the cause of the repeated flooding on the roundabout is most likely the result of a blockage in the Thames Water surface water sewer network.

Unfortunately, the Council is unable to investigate or work on the surface water sewer which is solely the responsibility of Thames Water.

We have been raising this matter regularly with Thames Water for a number of months and on the 8th March we escalated the matter within Thames Water in an attempt to get some action. Whilst we are not able provide a date for when they will investigate and address the issue, we can reassure you that we will continue to chase them for prompt resolution.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you so much for that response. I have been raising this issue since 2016 so it would seem that Thames Water has not been the most forthcoming. Do you think that it might be wise for us to have a meeting with Officers and Thames Water, and would you support that and help to organise that with me?

Supplementary Answer:

What I will be doing tomorrow if we have not received anything from Thames Water, I myself will be writing as Executive Member for Active Travel, Highways and Transport, directly to Thames Water's directors.

129.4 Jackie Rance asked the Leader of the Council the following question which was answered by the Executive Member for Housing:**Question:**

A petition signed by 1,800 residents to stop development at Hall Farm was handed to the Council in December last year. The Leader of the Council accepted it and took the trouble to have himself photographed taking receipt.

Now the petitioners have been told that they can't have a debate at Full Council on the grounds it would force members of the Planning Committee to take a stance on a planning decision. However, there have been examples where Council has debated petitions on planning decisions before – in January 2019, a debate was held on a petition relating to South of Cutbush Lane, with Planning Committee members leaving the room. Can the Leader explain why it was possible to have a debate then, but not now?

Answer:

Firstly, I wanted to acknowledge and thank residents who put significant effort into organising the petition. I can also confirm that Executive members have seen the petition and they are aware of the local strength of feeling.

I must however correct an important point that you make. The Council is unable to debate the petition, not because it would force members of the Planning Committee to be put in a position where they might be accused of pre determination, but because a debate on the petition would put all councillors in a position where they

might disqualify themselves from voting on the final version of the Local Plan, on the grounds that they had already made their mind up before seeing all the evidence. It is important to note that the whole Council decides on the final version of the Local Plan. The Planning Committee only decides on planning applications. I should add that developers and land owners of sites within the draft Local Plan will be looking out for any signs that decisions made on the Local Plan are political rather than based on sound assessment of relevant planning considerations. If they are given any reason to doubt that the process has been based on sound planning assessments, they will have the opportunity to raise their objections with the Inspector at the Inquiry Stage of the Local Plan process. If the Inspector accepts their argument that the Plan is tainted by political considerations and not based on sound planning assessments, the Inspector can order us to redo the Plan, with all the consequences that this further delay will bring.

Supplementary Question:

Is it the truth of the matter that the Liberal Democrats have acted to ensure that they would not have the embarrassment of debating this petition right before voters have their say at the local elections?

Supplementary Answer:

No, that is not the truth. I have told you the truth. I am not in the habit of not telling the truth, and I do resent that accusation greatly. That is an appalling slur and I would give you the opportunity to withdraw it now.

129.5 Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

Residents in my ward are concerned about pollution in the Thames. Sonning is synonymous with the beautiful winding river and the wildlife that live along it. Can you tell me what powers the Council has to stop sewage from Thames Water entering our stretch of river?

Answer

We fully share your residents' concern about pollution in the River Thames. Sadly, the Borough Council does not itself have powers to regulate the discharge of foul water into the river, as the regulatory body on a national basis, the Environment Agency.

In theory, the Environment Agency advises water companies to take actions to investigate, monitor and reduce the impacts on the environment of discharges from sewage treatment works. Unfortunately, this seems to have little effect on Thames Water, which discharges sewage so frequently that they have introduced a near real time map on their website, showing when overflows occurred and for how long.

This Council is totally opposed to Thames Water being able to put raw sewage into rivers, but sadly I can only recommend that you contact your constituency MP, Theresa May. I would caution you that on 20th October 2021, she voted in Parliament to allow water companies to continue to dump sewage into rivers, just three days after attending a community clean-up event on the Thames in Sonning. She was accompanied through the lobby by the members for Wokingham and

Bracknell Forest.

If residents do spot a pollution incident, they can report it by using the Environment Agency 24-hour incident line.

Supplementary Question:

That is very interesting thank you for that response. I am actually in the process of writing to the Environment Agency and indeed Thames Water as well, as part of a three pronged attack on them to do something about it, because I do not want them to have all the muck in there. It is obviously a health hazard as well. But I did read in the paper that the Leader of the Council was meeting with Thames Water and asking residents to contact him with their concerns. However, the Leader did not contact councillors with the Thames in their area which I thought was a bit strange. I was just really wondering if he had done that then we could have perhaps lobbied, together with the Leader, Thames Water, and it is something that we can do together. I appreciate that we might not have the power, but why can we not lobby, and be a bit of a pain?

Supplementary Answer:

I cannot comment on what the Leader of the Council said but I would be happy to put my signature to your letter, and join you in a cross party attack on Thames Water.

129.6 Norman Jorgensen asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

At Budget Council, Councillor Ian Shenton described a petition signed by 1,779 residents on waste collection as “spurious”? Will he apologise to residents for his disregard of their views?

Answer

I described your petition as spurious, Councillor, not the views of residents, and I most certainly have not disregarded their views. Quite the opposite.

Let me define spurious for you: “not being what it purports to be” says the OED. And your petition met that definition because the signatures were not gathered to inform the Council of residents' views, which we already knew from our consultation, which were obtained in much larger numbers. They were garnered instead to further your political aims and that is glaringly obvious because you garnered those signatures through a welter of misrepresentations and falsehoods. One week it was going to cost £7 million, then £4 million, then “it would save no money for many years, if ever”. Total fiction.

The plain fact is that in our consultation, the option we are pursuing was liked by 24% of residents and accepted by 43%, while 7% were neutral and 26% did not support it. Yet even tonight, you deliberately and maliciously misrepresent that as “76% of residents who responded to the Council’s consultation on future waste collection did not like the idea”.

So, Councillor, it is you that is disregarding the views of residents, and it is you that should apologise.

Supplementary Question:

Residents will note that there was a total absence of an apology there. It speaks volumes about his attitude. We know that this Administration is not interested in the views of local people. We have heard it on parking, on elections, and now on waste. For your interest we started our petition long before you started your consultation so it was not that way round, it was the other way round. So, why should residents bother to take part in a Lib Dem consultation ever again?

Supplementary Answer:

I answered that question on Tuesday night at Executive.

129.7 Rebecca Margetts asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:**Question:**

I'm delighted that the Conservative Government has announced funding for new SEND schools in Wokingham Borough. However, I'm surprised that the Liberal Democrat-led coalition administration has identified Rooks Nest Farm in Finchampstead as a potential site for a new school. Why build on green fields when there are other more sustainable sites available?

Answer

This location is within walking distance of bus routes serving Lower Earley, Shinfield, Arborfield, Finchampstead, Crowthorne and Wokingham, and is accessible by sustainable modes of transport, such as cycling and walking, from surrounding communities. Most importantly though, it will enable a higher proportion of Wokingham's students with special educational needs to be educated in the Borough, so reducing the length of their journey to school.

This new SEND school is urgently needed. This site belongs to the Council, which will enable us to deliver the school more quickly than if we had to wait to negotiate with another land owner. Even so, it will still take several years to deliver it.

Other options have been considered. It has been suggested that a developer in the south of the Borough may be prepared to provide land for a SEND school in place of the primary school they are expected to provide. But quite apart from taking longer to implement, using that land for a SEND school would mean we lose a primary school site, with significant knock-on effects for future primary provision. The old Farley Hill school site has also been suggested, but, as has now been announced, that is going to be used for Addington expansion.

Finally, I am slightly surprised that you suggest the choice is between green fields and a SEND school. Can I remind you that the Conservatives identified the whole of Rooks Nest as a site suitable for development, in the draft Local Plan Update and were intending to build 270 houses on it? The actual choice is therefore between 270 houses on the whole of Rooks Nest with the Conservatives, or using just part of it for a SEND school to help some of the most vulnerable children in the Borough, with the Lib Dems, and as Lindsay reminds me, using another part of it for the Covid memorial wood.

Supplementary Question:

The Covid wood is actually a very small proportion of Rook's Nest. It is 7.7 hectares out of 40 plus hectares. The Liberal Democrat candidates actually promised residents that they would fight to stop any development at the last election, in Rook's Nest Farm, in exchange for their votes. We now know that this is yet another broken promise from this Administration. Will you listen to residents and reconsider these plans?

Supplementary Answer:

I find that quite a remarkable statement from somebody whose party was proposing to build all over the entire site. We need a SEND school, and I think residents would prefer us to cater for some of our most vulnerable children in the Borough, than to build 270 houses.

130. Minutes of Committee Meetings and Ward Matters**130.1 Graham Howe asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:****Question:**

The Executive Member mailed me on 17 November 2022 and said that due to a change in current resource within the Traffic Management Team we are having to review and reprioritise the workload which related to the Traffic Management speeding and parking in Wargrave. There is a great deal of growing discontent in my ward on this lack of action, and it was an initiative which was instigated by the Conservative Administration 18 months ago. Furthermore, the Executive Member was unable to accept any responsibility in his radio interview with my residents Chris Cordrey and Meg Rowsen on Radio Berkshire. There have been consultations, at least two, with Wargrave Parish Council. The objections not to increase the hours in the School Lane car park which will decimate the High Street have been ignored. The Motion passed by the Executive last evening to take on moving traffic offences includes eleven areas but no mention of any progress on the measures for Remenham, Ruscombe or Wargrave. Could the Executive Member please advise what communication I should make to my residents that is proactive, given that he has got 'Active' in his title?

Answer:

The review was because there was a large number of schemes which needed to go through the full assessment, which were currently on the list for delivery coming forward, and they needed to be designed. That is why I changed the emphasis on those. We need to start getting things designed up and delivered on site, and going through the consultation process. Those with the highest priority schemes such as Rose Street in Wokingham, which has been around for some time, Molly Millars Lane, also in Wokingham, so those focuses have been on that. We are now starting to deliver Rose Street and we are going to deliver at Molly Millar's Lane in June. That is a crossing across that particular location.

The radio interview on Radio Berkshire was about speeding traffic going through Wargrave. Speeding traffic is something that we work on with the Police, but they carry out the enforcement of that. The particular scheme which you have alluded to in Wargrave is something within the assessments list, and it will be looked at when it

comes up, but the first emphasis is to get delivery on site.

130.2 David Cornish asked the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways the following question:

Question:

The verge on Longwater Road in Finchampstead has long degenerated into an eye sore, principally due to some inconsiderate use by some of the residents. Not only has the verge deteriorated into a large patch of mud in places, the parked vehicles are now providing an obstruction to people entering on to the highway from neighbouring sub roads. After a considerable number of months, I received news yesterday, hopefully coincidentally that the Highways Group have now taken ownership of that verge from the Estates Team. That being the case, can I ask the Executive Member that some urgency is now applied to solving this problem?

Answer:

Yes, Longwater Road, Finchampstead, there were two parcels of land, one part mainly the carriageway was highway, and parts of the verges were owned by WBC commercial properties. I had to sign an approval notice together with Clive Jones for the process to make that into a dotted highway. That process has now been completed so all the legal complexities have been completed, and the Traffic Management Team are now going to assess the location to see what yellow lines are required to go in that particular location, and that will be included in Amendment 6.

130.3 John Halsall asked the Deputy Leader of the Council the following question:

Question:

May I refer to you to the Borough's Coat of Arms. Out of the coronet there rises a grassy mound on which stands a royal lion holding an orb, representing Henley Regatta, the jewel in the Borough's crown, an international event which matches Ascot and Wimbledon in its importance. It is televised throughout the world.

Henley Royal Regatta is over ten days. Some 5,000 people flock to Remenham to watch it. Henley is not a single event, but many events happening at the same time. Whilst there is private enclosures, most of the course is public. The Council has assured provision of public toilets and litter picking of the towpath. I understand that this will no longer be the case, but I can find no reference to it in the MTFP or a business case. The last time there were no public toilets, all accessible land was used, the church, village hall. There is no litter picking planned. Is the coalition determined to literally trash the Council's reputation, not only locally but now internationally as well?

Answer:

I am not sure I entirely got the question. I heard a lot of discussion or rather a lot of comment on the importance of the Henley Royal Regatta. I cannot give you an answer as full as you would like and I will undertake to get you a written response John, but I would remind you that the Henley Royal Regatta, although clearly has an impact on Remenham, also clearly has an impact on Henley, which is a different local authority.

130.4 Andy Croy asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan the following question:

Question:

My question has been sent to me by Councillor Boyt who is unable to make it this evening. She says that one of the characteristics in our Ward is that we have many verges and we have many people who wish to have extensions to their houses, often the verges end up totally ruined by the builders, and very rarely are they brought back to their original condition. It ruins the look of the area so my question is to the Executive Member for Planning will you seek to meet with Officers and perhaps with Shirley as well to find out if we build in some sort of consistent condition in householder planning applications, whereby people are required to bring verges back to their original condition?

Answer:

Yes certainly if you want to send me the details I will see what we can do, and if you want a meeting we will discuss.

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

Question:

My question relates to a request for parking solutions on Haddon Drive and Rowan Drive during the football season. In August 2021 following extensive lobbying from local residents, the Town Council and myself, an agreement was reached that it would be included in a future amendment TRO. The Town Council who actually submitted the request even had a confirmation email from the system saying the request was in. It did not appear in that Amendment. We were informed that it had got lost. So, the opportunity to get it in to Amendment 5 was lost. We are now in March 2023 and we will have to wait for Amendment 6 to have it included, which realistically using the time it took to process Amendment 5, means that it is unlikely to get anywhere near implementation until the end of this year 2023. That is a two year gap between agreement with the Highways Officer to proceed with the request and possible implementation. The process is clearly broken.

Due to time constraints the Mayor requested that Councillor Baker email his question to the Executive Member.

130.6 Maria Gee asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

My question is about the meeting on 23 February 2023, which was an Individual Member decision. I was pleased to see that there was an A Board policy put forwards at this meeting and approved. It is great to have one. I have been banging on about this for three years so it is quite good that this Administration had actually got themselves together and actually done it. Tired for two years before that. I just want to know, because some compromises have been made, whether is an appropriate compromise between the needs of business and the needs of those who are visually and sight impaired to proceed along the pavement?

Answer:

I believe we have found a compromise. We will monitor it and we will make sure,

because obviously the needs of business to advertise legitimately their business, and also the needs of pedestrians to be able to have a fairly free passage along the pavement. We will monitor it and we will see what happens with time.

130.7 Charles Margetts asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

My question is specifically about Range Road in my ward which is a byway. My resident contacted me about the surface and state of it and we had a productive meeting with the Rights of Way Officers last week where they committed to actually do repairs on it, and on Tintagel Road in Finchampstead. However, during the discussion it turned out that their funding expires next year. At the end of this financial year, they have no further funding. They gave me the commitment that they would do Roman Ride and Heath Ride in my ward next year. I realise that all this happened before Councillor Shenton has been in his post, but could I ask him if he would work with Officers to arrange funding so that they can carry out their list of commitments to the residents of Finchampstead North and wider?

Answer:

I will take a very close look at that. I am familiar with Roman Ride, but I am not familiar with Range Road,

Charles Margetts agreed to send a list of locations to the Executive Member.

130.8 David Hare asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local plan the following question:

Question:

In Earley there are quite a few Houses in Multiple Occupation and we went to find out whether all of these are licensed, and found that some of them are not. I want to know whether we can make sure that all Houses in Multiple Occupation are licensed so that we can work with them in the area?

Answer:

Yes, we have been looking at HMO's over the last few months and if you want to contact me about the specific ones, I will take them up, but is an area of significant concern.

130.9 Abdul Loyes asked the Deputy Leader of the Council the following question:

Question:

In the Sandford Farm estate in the Airfield part of my ward there has been a spate of keyless car thefts, and the number of burglaries has been steadily rising. Whilst this is ultimately a Police matter, I believe the Borough Council has a part to play in this. This is especially so when it comes to communication of how to prevent these things happening and how to get support to those victims when it happens. I have noted a large increase in communication activities around a whole host of special days dedicated to a particular topic, but have not seen much if any similar campaigns around this issue. Can you tell me what joined up thinking and communication are happening with the Police?

Answer:

The problem you are describing is of course much wider than your ward. It is a problem that many people are afflicted with across the Borough and across the country. I would like, if this is appropriate, for you to meet to discuss this in a bit more detail. I would like to get a bit more sense about your ideas about how we might be able to improve things, so if you would like to send me an email we will set up a meeting time to discuss this.

130.10 Peter Dennis asked the Executive Member for Finance the following question:**Question:**

I am asking a question about the minutes of the Audit Committee that occurred in February and the associated risk register that came with it. I note that the risk register, that the Conservatives' voting solution looking for a problem voting suppression Bill, unsurprisingly has a bunch of risks associated with it, including disenfranchisement and additional administrative burdens. I note that there is a mitigation plan of communications to deal with this poor and unnecessary legislation, which of course will cost the Council money. What plans do the Council have to record the impact of this legislation, especially associated costs, turnout and the changes of the demographic of the said turnout?

Answer:

Basically our Returning Officer has a duty to produce a report for the Electoral Commission after the elections, and he always produces a report that comes here to this Council. Hopefully that will include the data from the voter ID. We have also been given a grant but it is a woefully inadequate grant, to fund the changes for this election, but I am hoping that this report will contain the information that you are asking for and the details of the grants that we have received, when it appears after the election.

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

I wanted to ask about the Earley train station footbridge which begins in my ward and which a lot of my residents rely on to commute. I know we have been part of meetings to discuss maintenance of the bridge, and I just wanted to get the latest. Is there planned maintenance to the bridge upcoming, what is it and when is it going to happen? I understand you will not have specifics to hand but an approximation would be useful in itself.

Answer:

Assessments have been done on the bridge, including the ramps. The ramps have a significantly less life expectancy remaining compare to the span across the A3290 and the railway, so the focus now is to replace the ramps. They are also checking the footings to make sure that the footings will also take the loadings for a lifespan of twenty plus years. When we get that information, probably later on in the summer we will be able to update Ward Members as well as Town Council Members either side.

131. Statements by the Leader of the Council and Executive Members

Councillor Ian Shenton, Executive Member for Environment, Sport, and Leisure

I am pleased to confirm that Rook's Nest Farm has been approved as the site of the Borough's Covid memorial woodland. The idea from Councillor Clive Jones, and with cross party support, is to create a peaceful woodland area for quiet contemplation for those who lost loved ones to Covid. It will consist of substantial tree planting interspersed with wild flower areas, pathways and benches. Effectively an extension of California Country Park it will be able to take advantage of the park's existing infrastructure and parking, toilets and café, thereby mitigating the cost to the Council in these financially challenging times. It also means that the site will no longer be considered for the 270 houses previously planned there. It is expected to be feasible to plan the site in the planting season that will start this Autumn.

Under 4.2.13.16 Response from an Officer, Councillor Pauline Jorgensen commented that Gregor Murray had suggested a Covid memorial wood. She sought written confirmation from Officers.

Councillor Stephen Conway, Deputy Leader of the Council and Housing

I am speaking in my capacity as Deputy Leader, standing in for the Leader. As the municipal year draws to a close and the election campaign starts, I think it is pretty clear, that it has started this evening, this is a good moment to thank all those who have helped to improve life for members of our community since May 2022. Included in my thanks are my Executive colleagues and the senior officers who have supported them so well, but I also wanted to express my gratitude to non Executive councillors of all parties for their contribution on Council committees, Board and Working Parties, and to all of our hardworking Council officers whose dedication to public service should be recognised and properly appreciated. Outside the Council I want to thank all our partner organisations, the Town and Parish Councils, the Voluntary and Charitable sector, local businesses, educators at all levels, health providers, the Police and Fire Service. I want with my affordable and social housing Executive Member hat on to register my particular appreciation of the work of Steve Bowers and the other tenant volunteers who make TLIP so effective and enjoyable. Thank you all for playing your part in helping to make the Borough an even better place to live and work.

Councillor Prue Bray, Executive Member for Children's Services:

I am very pleased to be able to announce that the Council's bid to be included in the Safety Valve programme has been accepted. As Safety Valve is a programme of support for those councils with the most challenging deficits on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. The agreement that we have made with the Department of Education commits us to a very demanding SEND improvement programme over a number of years, which will require substantial investment from the Council, but in return we will receive a total of £20million over the lifetime of the agreement to help us reduce the deficit. The first payment of £8million is due before the end of the current financial year, and it will allow us to almost half the accumulated deficit, which has built up since 2017. Our Safety Valve plans include new SEND provision in the Borough, which is very badly needed. I am very pleased to announce that we have been successful in our bids for new special schools. We have been awarded not just one, but two schools. Other thirty three schools were awarded in total and

only three authorities were granted two schools, the other two being much bigger than us. These schools will take several years to build and open, but in time will make a real difference for our children as well as for our spending, with fewer children having to travel long distances to expensive out of Borough schools. This is excellent news for Wokingham residents, and especially for those parents whose children have Special Educational Needs, and I would like to thank Officers for all their hard work on both Safety Valve and the school bids, and congratulate them on their success on getting such critically important projects over the line.

Finally, I would ask Council to note that despite all the pressure on school places this year, the percentage of children who are offered a place at one of their preferred secondary schools for September has actually increased to 95.63%, a higher percentage than in any of the three preceding years. I do not underestimate the frustration or upset that not getting a place at one of your preferred schools can cause, but I would like to place on record that the percentage of parents and children adversely effected this year, is in fact lower than it has been for some time.

Councillor Sarah Kerr, Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services

It has been quite a year and one of the key highlights for me has been the establishment and development of strategic partnerships. These partnerships allow for mutual benefit, not just for the Council and our partner organisations but our communities as well. I would like to thank my colleague Stephen Conway who has been the driving force behind this for our Administration, and the team of Officers who have worked so incredibly hard in progressing this. The work that is underway in terms of developing the community vision in complete partnership with businesses, community groups, forums and the voluntary sector, is a new and exciting way of working for us, and of the utmost importance.

The first of these partnerships that I want to mention is the Polehampton Trust. I am thrilled that the contract has been appointed to start work on the old Polehampton Boys School to convert this heritage asset into Twyford's permanent library and community hub. After many years of campaigning by the local community it is fitting that we are able to provide the local community with this asset at the Polehampton Trust reaches its 300 year anniversary. I would like to thank my colleagues, the Polehampton Trust, and in particular the late David Turner for making this happen.

The second of those partnerships is in the form of a new Arts and Culture Forum. Following an event held in the Autumn of last year that brought businesses and cultural organisations together, we have facilitated the set up, and are a member of a new Arts and Culture Forum. There is a high opportunity to put Wokingham Borough on the map in terms of arts and culture, and the benefits are multiple including intrinsic social and economic value. We are at the start of an exciting and collaborative journey.

In terms of our environment, the third partnership I wanted to highlight was with Freely Fruity, who are now on site on land that sits alongside what will be Barkham Solar Farm. Freely Fruity are a community orchard charity who require new land to propagate saplings for future orchards. The fruit will help feed our communities, and the trees will help with both our biodiversity and climate commitments.

Then we have the partnership established with the other Berkshire local authorities that has meant that we can launch a Solar Together programme this Spring. The scheme which is run by a company called Ichoosr will allow our residents to group buy solar PV for their homes. We will work with the company to help promote the scheme and our residents will benefit from economies of scale and the fact that installers will be fully vetted, giving residents peace of mind. Whilst this is a group buy scheme each property will be individually assessed, and quotes tailored accordingly.

Finally, I wanted to highlight the fantastic internal partnerships that we have, and in particular between our Climate Emergency and Housing teams. I am absolutely thrilled tonight to announce that we have been successful in securing just shy of £300,000 from the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund which will allow us to make home improvements to our social housing stock. We will be match funding, and together this investment will benefit our tenants immensely with reduced energy costs and increased energy security. I would like to thank Officers who worked so hard to secure this.

Councillor Rachel Bishop-Firth, Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty

I am very pleased to announce that following the queries which Councillor Rachel Burgess raised last year about the spending of the Council's Local Welfare Provision Fund, having considered how we can better ensure residents who desperately need this money for essential furnishings for their homes, can access funds. We have transferred the delivery of the scheme and the associated funding for this year to Wokingham United Charities. Residents who live on low incomes and who are either moving into a new property will have essential items such as an oven break. Often they do not have the money to pay for household basics and no way to transport large items. This means that they risk getting into debt to pay for essential household items, or have to go with absolute basics. A local charity has had to appeal for beds for children this month after reporting that children are sleeping on cardboard boxes here in Wokingham. The Local Welfare Provision Fund was meant to pay for this kind of one off help, but as we have discovered in previous years a lot of this funding has not been claimed despite being greatly needed by residents. This year therefore we are transferring the management to our partner Wokingham United Charities, who have close links with local people in need, and will be able to distribute this funding to those who need it. This shows again how working with our Hardship Alliance partners is crucial to getting assistance to those who need it most, and how effective cross party working and putting residents first can help us make better decisions. I would also like to say thank you to the Officers from the Finance team and to the team working on tackling poverty for doing the work to get us there. Finally, I wanted to say that if you are a resident that needs help in these difficult times, please do get in touch through One Front Door or directly through one of our local charities. Wokingham United Charities are giving one off grants. Share are working hard to get furniture and other household basics to residents, and First Days, as I mentioned earlier, are providing children with beds. Many people are having to ask for a helping hand this year who have not needed help before, so please do come forward if you need assistance.

Councillor Imogen Shepherd-Dubey, Executive Member for Finance

It has been quite a year for this Council financially with unprecedented pressures coming from accommodation of the war in Europe, Brexit, and recovering from Covid. We were still able to find nearly £12million in revenue savings and adjusted our Capital Programme, to produce a balanced budget. Unlike the previous Administration we did not end up raiding the General Fund reserves without a plan for making repayments. However, it could have been worse. Slough Borough Council residents are facing a council tax increase of 9.99% due to their historical mismanagement of their finances.

We continue to distribute grants that we have provided for hardship for our residents, as Rachel alluded to, and those most in need. On top of this we have been able to find extra funding to help more people in Wokingham Borough than ever before. I would certainly say that this has been a successful financially responsible and compassionate approach to our Council finances, which has been achieved. One of our more recent benefits was the £400 Energy Support grants that residents in homes in Bands A-D successfully received late last year. There are also some residents who are eligible in the higher council tax bands. One recent example was the extension of this Energy Support Grant, which is where households that were previously not eligible for the Energy Support Grant, are now eligible to claim. This was usually because they were not directly connected to the gas or electricity grid, such as living in a boat or in a managed residential park home. All of our residents who were in this category and who were not able to claim before, please come forwards and claim what they are due.

As this is the last meeting of the year I wish to thank all of those who contributed to our scrutiny committees to help in the budget setting process, and I particularly want to thank Rachel Burgess, the leader of the Labour Party Group, for being the Chair of our Audit Committee, and doing so responsibly and with good grace. I can see that there has been a lot of good work done in that area, and I hope that it will continue.

Councillor Paul Fishwick, Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways

Extra money, it was welcome news that the Government has finally listened to the Local Government Association and the highway industry, and provided some funding for pothole repairs to the local highway network, in which Wokingham has been awarded £589,200. However, this is a drop in the ocean when the ALARM survey published on Tuesday this week now shows a backlog of 14 billion road repairs across England and Wales, up from 12.6 billion last year. The new money can be spent on preventative maintenance, and this is what is intended rather than simply filling potholes, which is short term. This is a Government that has, and continues to, underinvest in local highway maintenance. The extra funding received will all be investment in our local highway network during this year, on preventative maintenance, unlike the previous Conservative Administration that did not and squirreled it away. Talking of potholes, the average number of potholes reported between 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 was 2,179. During this financial year they have decreased, yes decreased, to a forecasted 1,500. So potholes are not getting worse since the Lib Dem took over. They are getting less, significantly less. We have also set up a system to charge insurance companies for damage to highways property.

The previous Conservative Administration had nothing in place and the council tax payer picked up the bill for the repairs.

132. Statement from Council Owned Companies
Councillor David Hare – Optalis

I would just like to give you some information about Optalis which is going from strength to strength. It has worked with WBC to open a range of new services in Wokingham this year. The intention was to phase this service launch. This has not worked out entirely as had been intended, but even with a lot happening all at once, the team has been managing very well, and the relationship between Optalis and the Wokingham committees and social workers is good and is certainly being productive in all that it does. All these additional services and functions which Optalis have taken on in 2022 seems to be operating very well. Optalis now has more than 50 different services and 800 members of staff, equating to an overall growth in the operations of 33% in nine months. This has been achieved without any increase in central management resources, and is a tribute to the hard work, commitment and dedication of the existing team. It should also be noted that all CQC regulated services remain at 100% Good. Optalis is looking to continue to remodel certain services such as the Day Services, and are developing the next phase in their modernisation plan for community lives, focusing overall on how Optalis might be able to offer availability of service seven day a week, as well to a younger cohort of people who are currently not provided for very well, and also going out in the evenings and times like that, living a normal life. Optalis is working well. It is growing and it is developing. There have been problems, everyone knows the staffing problems, and things like that, but it is going forwards and we in Adult Services are very pleased on how it is going forwards and all that is doing.

133. Motions

133.1 Motion 499 submitted by Shirley Boyt

Council considered the following Motion, proposed in Councillor Shirley Boyt's absence by Councillor Rachel Burgess, and seconded by Councillor Andy Croy.

"This Council values the contribution of all key workers. The pandemic highlighted those who provide an invaluable service to our community and who should be regarded as key workers.

Key workers in our community are suffering hardship caused by a combination of low pay and the high cost of living in this Borough. Many are in receipt of means tested benefits and qualify for Council Tax Relief. Many are using foodbanks and/or other help provided by the Hardship Alliance.

The cost of living in the Borough means that there are shortages of key workers. A google search in the first week of January revealed 73 local NHS vacancies, 72 care worker vacancies and more than 100 vacancies for teachers and/or classroom assistants.

This Council seeks to address this issue by:

Undertaking a full review of Key Worker Housing Provision including but not limited

to:

- 1.Setting a more realistic income threshold;
- 2.Reviewing the list of eligible occupations;
- 3.Working with Preferred Registered Partners and developers to provide range of Key Worker Homes suitable for families as well as single occupants;
- 4.Using S106 agreements to ensure that all new developments include Key Worker Homes for 'social' rather than 'affordable' rent."

Upon being put to the vote, the Mayor announced that the Motion had been approved.

RESOLVED: That this Council values the contribution of all key workers. The pandemic highlighted those who provide an invaluable service to our community and who should be regarded as key workers.

Key workers in our community are suffering hardship caused by a combination of low pay and the high cost of living in this Borough. Many are in receipt of means tested benefits and qualify for Council Tax Relief. Many are using foodbanks and/or other help provided by the Hardship Alliance.

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- 1) setting a more realistic income threshold;
- 2) reviewing the list of eligible occupations;
- 3) working with Preferred Registered Partners and developers to provide a range of Key Worker Homes suitable for families as well as single occupants;
- 4) using S106 agreements to ensure that all new developments include Key Worker Homes for 'social' rather than 'affordable' rent.

133.2 Motion 500 submitted by Andy Croy

Council considered the following Motion, proposed by Councillor Andy Croy and seconded Councillor Paul Fishwick.

"Over many years, residents and Members have made submissions to Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) asking for road crossings, traffic calming, and other requests related to Highways and pedestrian safety in their area.

And for many years there has been a distinct lack of transparency in dealing with

requests from residents and Members. Requests have been described as 'in the pool'. This has become a synonym for 'sunk without a trace'.

The petitioning process is particularly problematic as once a formal response from WBC has been received by the petitioner, there is no obligation on WBC to provide any future update.

Council calls on the Executive Member for Highways to usher in a new era of transparency and cause to be published on the WBC website a Schedule which allows residents and Members to see at a glance the status of road crossings, traffic calming and other resident and Member requests related to dangers on WBC highways.

The Schedule should rank and grade requests and schemes by their stage in the assessment and delivery process in such a way as to give residents and members and understanding of the likelihood and timing of a request progressing, an outline of future milestone and any constraints.

The Schedule should include requests made by petitions in the last four years. Where any request had been rejected, the request and reason for rejection should also be shown on the Schedule.

The Schedule should not rely on administrative versions of the 'pool', such as deferral to the finalising of the Local Cycling and Infrastructure Plan or Local Transport Plan, as a way of delaying an assessment as resident and Member requests deserve to be considered on their own merits.

The Schedule would be updated at least twice a year and the first version would be published by 1st October 2023."

Upon being out to the vote, the Mayor announced that the Motion had been approved.

RESOLVED That:

Over many years, residents and Members have made submissions to Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) asking for road crossings, traffic calming, and other requests related to Highways and pedestrian safety in their area.

And for many years there has been a distinct lack of transparency in dealing with requests from residents and Members. Requests have been described as 'in the pool'. This has become a synonym for 'sunk without a trace'.

The petitioning process is particularly problematic as once a formal response from WBC has been received by the petitioner, there is no obligation on WBC to provide any future update.

Council calls on the Executive Member for Highways to usher in a new era of transparency and cause to be published on the WBC website a Schedule which allows residents and Members to see at a glance the status of road crossings, traffic

calming and other resident and Member requests related to dangers on WBC highways.

The Schedule should rank and grade requests and schemes by their stage in the assessment and delivery process in such a way as to give residents and members and understanding of the likelihood and timing of a request progressing, an outline of future milestone and any constraints.

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