

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 27 OCTOBER 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.00 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Clive Jones (Chair), Stephen Conway (Vice-Chair), Prue Bray, Lindsay Ferris, Paul Fishwick, David Hare, Sarah Kerr, Ian Shenton and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

48. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Bishop-Firth.

49. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive meeting held on 29 September 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

50. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

51. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER

‘These are very difficult economic times. The Council has been left with a shortfall for the current financial year of just over £2.2m.

This was covered by the previous Administration by raiding the general reserve to balance the budget. We can't use general reserves to do this again. To do this would mean the general reserve would drop below £7m which would then see the government taking over the running of the council as they have in Labour controlled Slough and Conservative controlled Thurrock.

We all know that Wokingham is the lowest funded unitary local authority. I have written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ask him to find more money for Wokingham.

The Conservatives have put us in this position of being the lowest funded authority, probably for the last eight years.

In recent days, the government have once again shuffled the ministers around the Cabinet table. Some have suggested that there could be cuts in services and it has been suggested this could mean less money for local councils. If there is less funding from the government, Wokingham borough council will be in serious trouble and it will be the Conservative government's fault.

Many residents have told me about their concerns about increases in their mortgages following Liz Truss's disastrous budget. Many will have to find an extra £500+ a month in interest charges. That's £6,000 a year that could have been spent in the local economy, especially our shops.

Increases in energy costs are also hurting our residents and local businesses, energy costs have doubled since last year.

Increases in mortgage costs, increases in energy costs and inflation is doing far more to hurt local retailers than increases in car park charges.

I am really concerned about the local economy so I hope the government will keep energy costs low, will keep interest rates low and I hope they will continue to support local councils and find more money for local authorities like Wokingham that has been underfunded for far too long.'

52. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

52.1 Sarah Evershed has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

In the absence of Sarah Evershed, Jeremy Evershed asked the following question on her behalf:

Question:

The proposed football pitch at Maiden Erlegh School will increase pressure on the restricted access to the site. The entrance is through an already congested shopping parade, which includes the only chemist on the estate; and in close proximity to 2 bus stops and a pedestrian crossing. During big school events/parents evenings the queuing traffic already extends out along Silverdale road. Adding into this the traffic from the 3G pitch will create this scenario every evening of the week as parents/people overlap during the change over of sessions on the new pitch. The school have already accepted that congestion occurs in the vicinity. Bearing these facts in mind, and that visiting teams are likely to be coming from outside the Borough, are the Council accepting that this pitch will increase pollution, congestion and increase risk to the community's safety?

Answer:

It is recognised that there is restricted access to the site and due to the buildings by the access, there is little opportunity to improve this. It is also recognised that there is congestion in the area during drop-off and pick-up times from the schools. To avoid conflict the uses of the football pitch during the week would be restricted to after school time to ensure that there will not be any overlap between the school and the pitch. This is the current situation with football activity during the winter months.

There is ample parking on site for the use of the pitch during out of school hours operation as the parking standard for pitches is 20 spaces per pitch. However, there would need to be an agreement between the school and the Borough Council to ensure that there are no conflicts with large events such as parent-teacher evenings.

The key partner clubs will encourage players and parents to walk or cycle to the site to reduce the impact on residents. Promotion to encourage parents to share lifts, particularly on midweek training nights, will also be a key feature. These actions are expected to more than offset any increase in pollution from visiting teams on match days.

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

Question:

An online petition against the plan for a large manmade 3G pitch to replace most of Maiden Erlegh school's grass field has attracted at least 164 signatures. Almost everyone

I have spoken to in Earley is totally opposed to the plan, given the massive negative impact on their quality of life the non-stop renting out will bring. The council claims it wants to enhance the lives and well-being of local people, but this will cause untold misery as residents never get a break from the noise, traffic and parking problems. People also have many other serious concerns about the pitch. Does Wokingham borough council care about the impact on residents at all, and how many signatures do we need for the council take us seriously?

Answer:

The purpose of the consultation was to establish the views of residents, demonstrating that the council does care. It has elicited almost 1,000 responses and numerous other inputs, highlighting several issues that need careful consideration and will be taken very seriously. Prior to the consultation, the council had already identified the need for noise and parking management plans and will now assess what other mitigation would be required were it to proceed further. In that event, it would still be required to go through the same process and be subject to the same tests as all other Planning Applications.

Supplementary Question:

When would the consultation period start and when would the Planning application be submitted if this was to go ahead?

Supplementary Answer:

I don't have a date for the consultation as yet, the Planning application will be some way off.

52.3 Elizabeth Newman has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

Question:

Environmental and flooding concern.

The proposed 3G pitch will cover yet more ground with plastic, which, over time as the plastic degrades, will shed its load of microplastics into the local environment and in due course water courses, that feed into our rivers.

Rain water that would previously have sunk into the ground, will flow down towards Avalon Road, and we're told be captured. Has there been a risk assessment of precisely how, and where the water will then be directed, and how the micro plastics, large enough to be physically captured, will be dealt with? Given the severe flooding of Radnor Road after heavy rain, natural drainage would appear already to be a problem in the locality.

Answer:

Following a review of the drainage systems on the site, drainage has been included to utilise a Thames Water service outlet in the Northeast corner of the potential pitch. If the proposal were to progress beyond the current feasibility stage, a full drainage survey would be carried out as part of design works, prior to a planning application being made.

In line with "Guidance on How to Minimise Infill Dispersion into The Environment" the Football Foundation AGP Framework currently includes within all new projects tendered infill retention measures to include but not limited to:

- Perimeter infill containment barriers within the fence line
- Smooth bar industrial grate and recess pits to prevent it being washed into the drainage system

- Perimeter margins on all boundaries
- Boot cleaning stations

The design of the pitch drainage will reflect the findings of the Flood Risk Assessment and the standard practice for modern 3G pitches is for a holding tank to be placed underneath the pitch to hold rainwater to then be slowly dispersed into the ground. The system also has filters to capture any potential rubber crumb penetrating the sub levels of the base.

Supplementary Question:

Will the maintenance of the drainage system fall to the Council or the school?

Supplementary Answer:

This will be part of the Council's operation, as far as I am aware.

52.4 Michaela Thomas has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

In the absence of Michaela Thomas, Karen Brown asked the following question on her behalf:

Question:

I am concerned about the proposal for a 3G pitch at Maiden Erleigh school and the increase of these pitches in the borough. The known environmental and health issues caused by the tyre rubber crumb infill in 3G pitches is a huge concern across the world, and yet the local authority continue to install these at a rapid rate, without seeking other possible alternatives. Have you considered the financially viable long term future of plastic pitches if within the next few years, central government's view changes and they lean towards an alternative non rubber infill or even a complete ban (as is the case in Europe and other parts of the world)?

Answer:

I would like to refer you to the research conducted by the European Chemical Agency (ECHA) which was released in 2019 concluding that "*ECHA has found no reason to advise people against playing sports on synthetic turf containing recycled rubber granules as infill material*". In 2020, the results of a major pan-European scientific study undertaken by internationally respected independent researchers and published in the scientific journal *Science of the Total Environment*, concluded that no health concerns were found for AGPs with End-of-Life Tyre-derived infill material.

The council has no desire to build and promote 3G pitches for usage by residents if the scientific findings conclude that they are unsafe, but that is not the case. Furthermore, Sport England has stated that the ECHA report "found no reason to advise people against playing sport on 3G pitches with rubber crumb". Any such government action as you suggest would therefore be unsupported by research and thus unlikely.

52.5 Judith Clark has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

In the absence of Judith Clark, Sandra Spencer asked the following question on her behalf:

Question:

An artificial 3G pitch at Maiden Erleigh School has been put forward as an environmentally friendly solution for Earley football teams because it will allow young people to play locally

and cut down on car journeys outside the borough. However, Maiden Erlegh school is not in central Earley but on the western side both of Earley and of Wokingham borough, so is also further from London, but your own consultation material admits that players will be making car journeys of up to 45 minutes duration, and Laurel Park football club admits it wants players from as far away as Teddington to travel here. Given this, how can a pitch at this school be the right location to meet the environmental argument of cutting down on motor traffic?

Answer:

I would refer you to the third part of my answer to question EP1

The key partner clubs will encourage players and parents to walk or cycle to the site to reduce the impact on residents. Promotion to encourage parents to share lifts, particularly on midweek training nights, will also be a key feature. These actions are expected to more than offset any increase in pollution from visiting teams on match days.

Those actions would also be expected to result in a reduction in vehicle movements.

52.6 Chris Thomas has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

In the absence of Chris Thomas, Elizabeth Newman asked the following question on her behalf:

Question:

How does the installation of 3G pitches fit in with your commitment to delivering a greener future and your climate emergency action plan? Instead of opting for plastic pitches have you fully investigated other options like simply investing in improving existing Grass Pitches? The Football Foundation run a Grass Pitch Revolution scheme which offers funding to improve existing pitches as an alternative to 3G pitches. Could this be a solution for Laurel Park pitches instead of shoehorning a new plastic pitch into a residential area when nearby residents are opposed to it.

Answer:

The Football Foundation does work closely with local football clubs and local authorities to support the enhancement of grass football pitches. However, a host of local clubs still train on substandard surfaces and in cramped school halls and on expensive, commercially run sites. The 3G pitch provision aims to reduce the impact on local clubs of having to use out of date or unsuitable training facilities.

The Football Foundation looks to improve the opportunities for teams to enjoy 3G facilities and have the ability to host teams on safe and modern floodlit pitches. Training is a key part in supporting the wellbeing of participants and 3G provides coaches with a medium to improve technical and physical elements of the game. 3G pitches allow for year-round use and do not get waterlogged or muddy. 3G pitches also offer a safe surface and players will reduce the risk of injury, unlike the old-style concrete base pitches.

52.7 Emily Thomas has asked the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure the following question:

In the absence of Emily Thomas, Jim Baddoo asked the following question on her behalf:

Question:

Regarding the proposal for a 3G pitch at Maiden Erleigh school. The 'grass' blades are made from plastic that is the equivalent of about 1½ million plastic bags, and the rubber crumb comes from about 20 thousand end of life tyres, can I please ask what will happen to the plastic pitches when they reach the end of their very short lifespan of around 10 years? Will the pitches be recycled or do they end up in landfill? In a time of climate emergency, it seems ludicrous that these pitches are seen as a sensible solution just so football matches can play on in wet weather.

Answer:

The 3G pitches allow for evening usage particularly in the winter months when the light fades and outdoor pitches are not suitable, as indicated in my answer to question EP6.

Furthermore, the Football Foundation AGP Framework supports and endorses the handling of end-of-life synthetic turf pitches in accordance with the Waste Regulations which seek to ensure waste is handled in the most sustainable way.

To ensure that end-of-life synthetic turf pitches are processed in a way considered acceptable by the Football Foundation and its partners, only the recycling companies and their listed processes will be authorised for use on AGP Framework funded projects. Under no circumstances shall end-of-life synthetic turf surfacing be disposed of by repurposing or land fill. All end-of-life synthetic turf components shall be disposed safely.

Also worth noting, a recent change to 3G projects going forward is that the perimeter infill barriers within the fence line are to comprise 100% recycled material with the majority of content from recycled synthetic turf pitches.

52.8 Paul Stevens has asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan the following question:

Question:

We were repeatedly told by the previous administration that large Strategic Development Locations are the best mechanism for delivery of essential infrastructure. Can the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan confirm or deny that this is still considered to be the case?

Answer:

Our new planning strategy will require a range of development types, including both large and small sites. I expect larger scale development designed holistically with infrastructure, similar to our existing Strategic Development Locations (SDL), to continue to play a role in any future proposals.

I personally believe that our existing planned SDL have been successful, however there are always learnings that we can take forward.

The SDL approach has to date led to the provision of five new primary schools, one new secondary school, new affordable homes, hundreds of hectares of new open green spaces, and new road links including the Eastern Relief Road, Shinfield; Observer Way, Arborfield; and the Northern Distributer Road, Wokingham.

As I mentioned, there are always things we can do better, and we have a team that recognises this. Notwithstanding, having visited some larger developments outside of the borough, what we have achieved is often of visibly higher quality than elsewhere.

Supplementary Question:

If SDL is the best way to deliver infrastructure, why are residents running a petition? Residents were sold properties based on facilities being available. Following consultation in 2022 and a Planning application in September 2022, this never happened. Bankfield Green residents had been let down badly.

Supplementary Answer:

I share your concerns about the range of issues you raise. Consultation will be taking place this autumn, there will be consultation on the shopping area and neighbourhood centre this week. I will be pushing hard on this.

53. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

53.1 Gary Cowan has asked the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan the following question:**Question:**

Unlike the previous Conservative administration has the current administration a public view on building housing beyond the Governments Plan period of 15 years.

I refer in particular to the 2200+ houses written into the Local Plan housing Update at Hall Farm or are they content to keep the building of 2200 houses beyond the government's plan period within its evolving plans or will they simply just publicly say now they will not be planning and future building beyond the Governments 15 year plan in the LPU.

Answer

National planning policy requires local plans to look ahead over a minimum of 15 years from adoption. Recent amendments also introduced the expectation for larger scale developments to be set within a vision that looks further ahead, referring to 30 years.

As you are aware, I have some concerns about planning beyond the 15 year period and as such I have asked for counsel advice on this matter to be sought to help inform our future decisions.

Supplementary Question:

The Council is required to carry out another public consultation, when might this be?

Supplementary Answer:

Public consultation would be carried before a plan was published, the Executive Member was engaging closely with officers. At this stage, he was unable to say when the public consultation would be.

54. RENT SETTING POLICY

The Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Housing reported that this Policy was no different to that of previous years and related to the process of rent setting as opposed to the setting the rent itself. The Council recognised that a significant number of tenants were struggling and were ensuring that targeted help was in place for those already in arrears or at risk of going into arrears.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- i) approved the Rent Setting Policy as set out in Appendix 1 of the report attached to the agenda papers. The 'Rent Setting Policy' primarily relates to the Housing Revenue Account (2567 properties) plus a small number (18 properties) of General Fund properties.
- ii) noted the economic challenges that many of our tenants' face and that the Executive Member for Housing in consultation with the Director of Place & Growth, would explore all opportunities to minimise any increase between now and the budget setting process in February/March 2023.

55. CAPITAL MONITORING 2022/23 - Q2

The Executive Member for Finance reported that this year the budget that had been inherited from the previous Administration was significantly inadequate to fund service provision. Significant inflationary pressures had exacerbated this, with costs rising much higher than expected.

This had necessitated the Administration to carefully consider how services were run. The Council had looked across all services to consider where savings could be made. The capital programme had been significantly reduced.

The Deputy Leader queried how much borrowing had been reduced. The Executive Member for Finance agreed to provide a written response.

The Leader, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance thanked officers for all their tremendous hard work to meet budgetary challenges.

RESOLVED that the Executive:

- i) noted the position of the capital programme at the end of Quarter 2 (to 30 September 2022) as summarised in the report and set out in detail in Appendix A of the report.
- ii) approved and noted the proposed carry forwards in the capital programme as set out in Appendix B of the report.
- iii) noted that due to the current uncertainty surrounding higher interest rates, as part of our enhanced financial management process, a review is to be undertaken to determine what capital projects can be postponed this year, to minimise exposure to borrowing at high rates. Approval from the Executive will be sought for any proposed postponement.

56. REVENUE MONITORING 2022-23 Q2

The Executive Member for Finance reported that savings within the Council had made of £2.2 million. There was an emerging picture of increased numbers of children in care and increasing numbers of children moving into the area, including unaccompanied asylum seeking children, this had led to increasing pressures on Council budgets. This was coupled with a reduction in income from car parks and leisure activities.

She reported that the Council would need to continue to make difficult and unpopular decisions to ensure that the Council did not go into special measures. Every part of the Council had been asked to consider where savings could be made. The report showed that the Council was moving in the right direction.

The Deputy Leader thanked officers and the Executive Member for Finance for all their hard work.

RESOLVED that the Executive noted:

- i) the overall forecast of the current position of the General Fund revenue budget, Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) illustrated in the Executive summary and appendices attached to the report.
- ii) delegated authority to the Deputy Chief Executive in consultation with the Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure to discount or uplift Leisure charges.

57. LEASE FOR LEARNING DISABILITY RESPITE CENTRE

The Executive Member for Health & Wellbeing and Adult Services reported that this facility was very well utilised. If this facility was not available, there was increased potential for incidence of family breakdowns leading to increased demand for high cost supported living accommodation. 60 families used this service and the lease was in need of review. No increase in costs were anticipated, bar the need for a refurbishment of the premises.

This was to be considered as an urgent decision as the premises lease had now expired.

RESOLVED that the Executive approved a 15-year lease for the ground floor of the address below. The lease to be signed with Ability Housing Association.

289 Lodden Court,
Wokingham Road,
Earley,
RG6 7ER.

58. MATTERS REFERRED TO THE EXECUTIVE

No referrals were made to the Executive on this occasion.

59. TO CONSIDER ANY REPORTS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

59.1 Officers' response to the recommendations from the Tree Protection and Biodiversity Task & Finish Group

The Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure reported that in summer 2021, Council had considered a Motion which proposed that the Council declare an ecological emergency. Due to the fullness of agendas, this Motion had not been heard until November 2021.

It was reported that a report would be brought back to the Executive on the matter if an ecological emergency.

The Executive Member for Climate Change and Resident Services stated that it would be prudent to consider the work of other councils who had achieved a biodiversity net gain, such as Cambridge and the Cotswolds.

The Executive Member for Planning and the Local plan stated that it would be important to future proof the Local Plan and embed the introduction of significant numbers of trees in the borough.

The Executive Member for Climate Change and Resident Services asked that any volunteers or residents who wished to assist with taking care of veteran trees in the borough should contact the Council, this work was critically needed.

RESOLVED that the Executive approved the Officers' responses contained within the report.