

Agenda Item 34.

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE HELD ON 24 SEPTEMBER 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.09 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batt, UllaKarin Clark, Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Gregor Murray and Wayne Smith

Other Councillors Present

Prue Bray
Gary Cowan
Andy Croy
Richard Dolinski
Lindsay Ferris
Sarah Kerr
Andrew Mickleburgh
Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey

19. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Stuart Munro.

20. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 30 July 2020 and the Extraordinary Executive held on 11 September 2020 were confirmed as correct records and will be signed by the Leader of Council at a later date.

21. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

22. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

22.1 Jennifer Lissaman asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

I am asking this question on behalf of the Wokingham Waterside Centre (WWC) Board of which I am a member.

Since April this year there has been tremendous use of the beautiful open space between WWC and Thames Valley Park Nature Reserve, the majority of people spending the whole day there and sometimes overnight as well. Soon, the Park and Ride, to the rear of WWC will be open.

As agreed with this Council earlier this year WWC has one toilet on the outside of the building for use only with a RADAR key. The outcome of this is, unfortunately, that people are using land adjacent to the campsite at WWC, and possibly the Nature Reserve, to relieve themselves. WWC trustees/board members find this unacceptable and ask that

you find a way to provide properly working public toilets in a location appropriate to this sensitive location by the River Thames National Path.

Answer

I must admit I have used that location myself during very sunny days and it is very pleasant out there.

Going back to 2009, in line with many other authorities throughout the country, the Council took the decision to stop providing standalone public toilet facilities and instead established a Local Loo Scheme where local businesses and other facilities (such as Council offices) make their toilets available for public use. This decision was taken because these toilets were costly to maintain due to regular incidents of vandalism and graffiti. The toilets also attracted anti-social behaviour and were often closed to the public for repairs.

This approach has worked well for many years and has proved a more efficient way of ensuring access to toilets across the Borough.

Due to the size and semi-rural nature of our Borough, it is not practical for the Council to provide public toilet facilities in every location where residents may want to use them. We urge everyone who lives in and visits our Borough to adhere to the laws around public decency and to report any instances where this isn't happening to the police.

Supplementary Question

We were part of the Local Loo Scheme but that is the reason that there was a discussion with the Council earlier this year, and one of the toilets was closed because it could not cope with the usage and was broken. That is why there is only one toilet for use with a RADAR key. There were local loos available there. The Waterside Centre was paid to run them, but now there is only one for those with disabilities. You are not quite up-to-date with the latest usage of these things and I wondered if we could perhaps have some progress on this with a meeting with either yourself or the relevant Officer to discuss a way forwards, otherwise the situation can only get worse? It is not acceptable to have people using the Waterside Centre grounds as a public toilet.

Supplementary Answer

I totally agree Jenny. There is a need for everybody to be responsible for their own behaviour, especially at this time when resources are spread so thin, for us as an authority, and the Police. Essentially the point is why should the Council spend more money responding to the behaviour of a few people who spoil the experience for the vast majority visiting the area near the Thames. I am very happy to meet you offline with the appropriate Officer to discuss this further.

22.2 Arya Babollah had asked the Leader of the Council the following question and in his absence the following answer was provided:

Question

Knowing what you have said about Black Lives Matter, what were you thinking when you tried to commandeer a Black Lives Matter banner for your photo ops at the BLM protest against for what you said and stand for in Elms Field in August?

Answer

Thank you very much for your question. I am really pleased as it allows me to articulate the Council's and therefore my approach to these issues.

As the Leader of the Council, I have a duty to all residents, to understand their views, and do everything in my power to ensure the Council upholds its equalities duties.

My previous comments about Black Lives Matter have been misconstrued, although I accept, they may have been open to an interpretation that I did not intend. I also wish to acknowledge that there is always space for all of us, including myself, to educate ourselves and grow in our understanding of each other.

Firstly, and most importantly, we are an organisation committed to antiracism, promoting equality and celebrating diversity. The staff and all the Members of the Council wish to be at the forefront of best practise. If there is an area, in which we are deficient in these aims, we wish to know it, to address it if we can and create a better quality of life for all our residents. I believe I speak for all Councillors.

I came to England as a boy speaking little English and suffered prejudice and abuse because of my origins and speech. In the fifties, those prejudices were very real.

Black Lives Matter is an idea, a philosophy, a moral code and a movement. The idea, philosophy and moral code are central to what we believe we are and I am.

The Black Lives Matter rally in Elms Field was a public meeting held on Borough Council land managed by the Town Council. It was advertised as a peaceful and welcoming meeting. The organisers knew that the Deputy Chief Executive and I had accepted their invitation and would be there. Indeed, they had welcomed us and came to greet us. The first speaker acknowledged my presence by mischaracterising me as having associated the murders in Forbury Gardens with the BLM march that day in Reading. At the time, I explicitly, publicly and frequently said that there was no association between those two events and have repeated this regularly. Indeed, the Police have also expressed that assertion. I have apologised freely and openly to anyone who misconstrued what I have said and have thereby taken offence.

I did not commandeer the flag as you suggest, in fact, I was invited to join my Council colleagues who were holding the flag, when an individual in a mask snatched their flag from them and ran away. I was saddened to witness that as it lowered the tone of what was otherwise a peaceful and powerful event. And so, I fear that you have been misinformed about the incident.

Please join me in striving to make the quality of life in all our community better.

Our mission as a Borough Council and mine as an individual is committed to antiracism, promoting equality and celebrating diversity and improving where we can the quality of life of all our residents and helping residents in their pursuit of happiness.

Please Arya join us as part of the solution and many thanks again for raising this question.

22.3 Tracey Stone had asked the Leader of the Council the following question and in her absence the following answer was provided:

Question

You have made statements on national television and made postings on your Facebook page which could appear racist and has spread fear, alarm and distress to many people of all ethnicities, but particularly black residents, living in Wokingham and Districts. As the leader of a public body, why did you do this?

Answer

Again, I welcome the question.

It is really great to have the opportunity to restate the Council's and my position.

In my answer to the previous question, and at the Council meeting on 23 July, I have sought to clarify my position, but I am happy to re-iterate this as this is a very important issue for our community.

I completely support the message, principles and the aims of Black Lives Matter in the UK.

I have always been opposed to discrimination in all its forms. I understand the need to have a clear focus on tackling racism where it is found.

If any comments that I have made have been offensive to anybody then, once again, I apologise unreservedly. That was never my intention; rather by reaching out we had hoped to bring residents together.

Firstly, and most importantly, we are an organisation committed to antiracism, promoting equality and celebrating diversity. The staff and all the Members of the Council wish to be at the forefront of best practice. If there is an area in which we are deficient in these aims we wish to know it, to address it if we can and create a better quality of life for all our residents.

I have never made statements on national television. There was a piece which was selectively extracted from an Executive meeting mixed in a feature on South Today. My postings on Facebook were not racist and indeed I have gone to great lengths to clarify any possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpretation. I have also apologised if I have inadvertently caused offence amongst any community; I would never knowingly do so.

Unfortunately, your question is phrased in a way which is incorrect and mischaracterises my words and actions.

The diverse nature of the British population is a beautiful thing and something we can and should be proud of. We can experience incredible cultures from the far reaches of the world with greater clarity and depth than any generation before us. We live together with people who have stories drastically different to ours. These are all aspects of diversity worth encouraging, enjoying and celebrating, because we are lucky to be able to do so.

Our mission as a Borough Council and mine as an individual is committed to antiracism, promoting equality and celebrating diversity and improving where we can the quality of life of all our residents and helping residents in their pursuit of happiness.

Please Tracey join us as part of the solution and many thanks for raising this question.

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

Question

The paper you are presenting tonight seeks to help alleviate the effects of fuel poverty on some of the most vulnerable, at risk and lowest income households across our Borough. Please can you confirm how recipient households will be identified and what criteria will be used when deciding how to prioritise households?

Answer

As you mentioned, this scheme has been developed to help those in most need, and seeks to help alleviate fuel poverty and improve energy efficiency of households locally. Wokingham Council has 949 properties (HRA properties) in the E, F and G bands. These are the three least energy efficient bands. In addition, from the database we can identify those older private properties that could benefit from this scheme; together there is a combined figure of 1,809 properties. These homes form the target group, which we will review against the eligibility criteria for this scheme.

Our local knowledge and experience is essential in identifying those with the greatest need from across the Borough, and we will focus on these households first. These properties will receive a letter to invite those who meet the eligibility criteria to contact us. We will liaise with our housing departments to target those on benefits or council tax benefits who could also benefit from this. To be eligible, households must receive one or more of the benefits listed in the Home Heating Cost Reduction Obligation; also known as the "the Affordable Warmth Obligation".

The Council will use directly targeted letters to invite residents to respond and are currently using this system, which is tried and tested. Upon the response we will confirm eligibility criteria and arrange a visit and survey to establish costings and customers approval.

We want to achieve as widespread an uptake as possible to ensure that energy efficiency measures are installed in as many eligible households as possible. The Energy Company Obligations Grants are paid directly to the eco installers rather than the household or HRA company. This guarantees that residents will benefit from the efficiency upgrades without either themselves or the Council having to contribute financially. As a Council we have set aside £30,000 of pre-budgeted money to meet funding gaps should for any reason an identified household not be eligible for 100% grant of works.

Supplementary Question

Could you please confirm if this is the same or if it is a different scheme to the Government's Green Homes Grant Scheme?

Supplementary Answer

I am really pleased to say that this is actually very separate to the Government's Green Homes Grant Scheme, although many of the same houses would be eligible for both. I actively advise any resident in the Borough who is a homeowner to check out the www.simpleenergyadvice.org.uk website to see whether they would or would not be eligible for a Green Homes grant, which is money paid by the Government in order to make environmental upgrades to your home. I have applied myself for grant money to put solar panels on the roof of my house, which will help fund my heating bill, and should help

bring it down by about 25% hopefully. I actively encourage any householder across the Borough to apply for this, completely separate scheme.

22.5 Judith Clark had submitted a question which was withdrawn prior to the meeting.

23. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

23.1 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

The Government has introduced new Regulations some of which came into force on 22 July. One in particular gives CIL charging authorities a discretion for a limited time to defer CIL payments, to dis-apply late payment interest and surcharge payments; and to credit interest already charged to developers.

What impact will this have on existing planning applications along with the Council's ability to deliver on infrastructure and climate emergency programmes?

Answer

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the Community Infrastructure Levy (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020 are now in force. These temporary regulations will remain in force until 31 July 2021. They are aimed at helping small and medium sized developers with an annual turnover of less than £45 million who are experiencing financial difficulties because of the effects of Covid-19. The regulations enable charging authorities to defer payments for up to 6 months, to temporarily dis-apply late payment interest and to provide discretion to return interest already charged where they consider it appropriate to do so.

The regulations can apply to any payment that fell due after 21 March 2020. The request should be made in writing no earlier than 14 days before the CIL payment is due. The Council can request further information which should be provided within 14 days of the request. The Council can grant or refuse the request. A deferral is for up to 6 months from the date the request was received. If the request is refused, the developer has 7 days from date of refusal to make the CIL payment. There is no right of appeal against a refusal.

We have published an FAQ and application form for those seeking deferred CIL payment on our website. I will send the link to you Gary. Any applications for deferrals will be required to demonstrate that their need for a deferral is as a direct result of Covid-19, including by submission of 2 years audited accounts and a written financial impact assessment.

To date we have not had received any applications for deferral of payment through this route. For the most part developers operating in Wokingham Borough are national house builders who do not qualify for deferral under this scheme so it is not anticipated it will have any impact on our major development proposals.

There is likely to be some deferred payments in relation to smaller developments, but it is important to note it is a deferral, not non-payment. Surcharges are discretionary in any case and we would be unlikely to apply them where a small business' financial difficulties were clearly related to Covid-19. The scheme waives late payment interest, which would be mandatory under normal circumstances, for a deferred period. On the whole it is not anticipated that this particular scheme will impede delivery of the Council's capital programme or climate emergency programme and is in line with the Council's other measures to help support small businesses to survive the pandemic.

Supplementary Question

Thanks very much for that. It really is helpful. It really should have said what impact has on ability, not what impact will. From your answer, it is fairly clear that to date it has no impact. I would be interested in being kept up-to-date should you end up in the situation where we do get into problems with the developers but thank you for the answer.

Supplementary Answer

I will send it over to you Gary.

23.2 Andrew Mickleburgh asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Individuals and families living in poverty are not identified as one of the nine protected characteristics under the Equalities Act of 2010. However, Council decisions and actions often impact on individuals and families – frequently offering vital practical support, but sometimes in ways that could potentially cause harms and unintended consequences. Is there a process, perhaps something similar to the our Borough Equalities Impact Assessments, that WBC can apply to ensure that impacts of WBC policy proposals and actions on the poorest in our community will be explicitly considered, documented and given a significant weighting in the policy making process?

Answer

Poverty is a terrible blight and it is vital that it remains in the forefront of our thinking, in particular as the impact of Covid-19 continues to be felt on all our economy, and so I am grateful to you for this question.

There is a fundamental difference between the protected characteristics you mention and poverty, which is that we will always aim to eradicate poverty. To prevent it and help people out of it. Whereas the nine characteristics are to be protected at the least and, in many ways, to be cherished and celebrated. This means the two things are in different categories and must be considered differently.

But, in other ways, your point is valid. In particular, we recognise the need to understand poverty better so as to guide our policies appropriately. We need to know of its causes so that we can: prevent it; its impacts so that we can mitigate them; and its escape routes so that we can support people through them.

That is why we are developing our bank of local insight and knowledge to understand the complexity of poverty in the Borough so that this understanding can drive more informed decision and policy making and reinforce our approach to this complex issue.

We are not starting from scratch with this; the Council's Community Engagement Team (previously the Community Development Workers) have for many years operated in our

more deprived areas, building up invaluable local contacts and understanding as well as supporting people and neighbourhoods to become stronger and more self-sufficient. And we have also always sought to prevent, mitigate and tackle poverty in practical ways. For example through the work of the Early Help Team with targeted families, by providing food bank vouchers and by back-to-work and employment advice and support.

So our work on poverty will be guided by this combination of on-the-ground knowledge, data analysis and existing good practice in order to better respond to what we know will be a growing issue due to the impact of Covid-19 already mentioned.

Supplementary Question

Unfortunately, as you stated the pandemic means that it is likely that poverty is going to rise further in our Borough. You have mentioned the Community Engagement Team and the Early Help Team but where within the WBC organisational chart does monitoring of poverty levels and the impacts of WBC's policies and action on poverty, currently sit? If possible, can you please provide the name of a specific Officer and/or role with primary responsibility for this activity?

Supplementary Answer

I think within the arrangements that we are now just about to put in place again for the second wave, I think that the Officer who would be responsible for poverty would be the Chief Executive and the Councillor would be myself.

We are very alive to the issue that as we go into the second wave, there will be parts of the community which will suffer more than others, and we have to be on that case all the time. So Andrew it is a very pertinent question and which we are considering all the time now that we are in the second wave.

23.3 Prue Bray asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question:

Question

The ban on private landlords evicting tenants facing financial hardship because of the pandemic is likely to come to an end soon. Has WBC done any modelling of what the impact would be in terms of numbers of people the Borough would need to re-home in order to fulfil our statutory requirements to the homeless?

Answer

The ban on evictions was extended to 20 September from when the courts were able to start considering claims made by landlords and the process towards eviction could start.

Although the ban has come to an end landlords now have to give their tenants a minimum 6 month notice period to leave their properties after an eviction notice is issued. However if there are serious mitigating factors, such as anti-social behaviour, fraud or domestic abuse then the notice period would be only 4 weeks (or in the case of domestic abuse 2 weeks). I am sure you would agree that if a woman is living with a man, or the other way round, you would not want them living together for more than 2 weeks.

During the Covid pandemic the team, our team, you have obviously been in the meeting today with TLIP, have continued to work with landlords and tenants to try and support both parties to resolve any issues threatening those tenancies and will continue to assist those who are at threat of homelessness as our statutory duty asks.

From our work with landlords and tenants over the past few months we are not aware of any significant number of pending eviction cases however the Homeless Reduction Act specialist will continue to monitor the situation and carry out some more detailed modelling in October.

That intelligence and modelling will be reported through to our multi-agency and cross-directorate, and will no doubt turn up and be spoken about at our Tenants' meeting, the Local Homelessness Co-ordination Cell for consideration. That Group has overseen our successful approach to tackling rough sleepers and homelessness during the pandemic. Again, it was at the meeting today, I think when they did the last count. We had four people in the Borough who are homeless; which is probably what most Boroughs can only dream of.

Supplementary Question

It was pleasing to hear today that since we have been able to get Government funding in April we have managed to make some progress, particularly on rough sleepers. But, given where we are and the modelling that is being done to see how we can take this forward both short term and long term, I wondered what analysis is being done as part of that modelling, of the people who may be presenting as homeless as to whether there may be any groups that are particularly at risk of losing their homes or becoming rough sleepers? I am particularly, but not solely, thinking about this in the context of Black Lives Matter and whether we are actually looking at the ethnicity of people as well as disability, sexual orientation and so on, to check that there is not a problem anywhere in the system, or there is not something we could do better to help particular groups?

Supplementary Answer

My response to that Prue, is as you would expect, housing allocation is colour blind, and anyone who applies for a home is treated in the same way. If we were to find that there were an ethnic aspect to seeing disproportionate people from cultural backgrounds or ethnicity, we would actually have to start to record that. I think that is a very good idea and when I see Simon I will be asking if he can just make a point of making sure we are understanding this going forward.

23.4 Lindsay Ferris asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question:

Question

Can you advise what the reserves of the Council are at this time (i.e. week commencing 21st September 2020)?

Answer

Although we monitor the general balance at least monthly and adjust for supplementary estimates and known pressures, the Council does not keep a running balance of all reserves throughout the year, but as part of our monitoring we produce forecasts of the position at year end to assist with future budget setting. That I bring to the Council and the Executive when we talk about monitoring.

Balances on reserves as at 31st March 2020 I can tell you are on page 18 of our draft accounts, which are available on the Council's website. These show a General Fund reserve of £12.43 million, which is in the General reserve, and Earmarked Reserves of £91.52 million.

The forecast General Fund reserve balance at the end of this financial year (31 March 2021) as reported in Quarter 1 to Executive was £5.01 million. The main reasons for the drop was the approved carry forwards of £2.7 million and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. A revised estimate at Quarter 2 will be reported to Executive in October which should see an improved position due to additional funding from Government for Covid-19 costs and a better understanding of the financial pressures. The 2020/21 annual budget includes a net contribution to the Earmarked Reserves of £1.5 million, so they are actually going up.

Supplementary Question

John said he said another answer; could I have the other answer please?

Supplementary Answer

The other answer is basically Lindsay that, it was only one paragraph where we were different, but basically where we are at the moment is that we feel that we are well placed compared with other councils. But I think that you have heard it many times before that when we were looked at, a report was issued by Maidenhead Borough which showed us having the tenth best reserves of any unitary in the country

23.5 Sarah Kerr asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question:

Question

There still appears to be a lack of clarity and commitment from the Government to long-term funding for Council Covid-related expenditures. Some of these vital activities that the Council has funded from its own resources are particularly important for less economically well-off members of our Borough. Does the Council share this concern and if so, what practical actions can be taken to address this issue and particularly to avoid cuts that could disproportionately harm the poorest, forced upon the Council by insufficient Government support?

Answer

In March of this year, the Government pledged to support local authorities through the Covid-19 pandemic. They have made available £4.3 billion to local authorities and Wokingham Borough Council has received support in the form of a direct grant of £8.3 million. In addition to this the Government have announced a variety of other measures, some offering financial support, such as the '75p in the £' compensation for loss of income, to passported grants to local businesses and care providers, and also deferring payments to assist with cashflow issues.

That said, the Council has had to front fund a significant amount of support to residents, suppliers, partners (such as Places for Leisure) and care providers, and this will impact on the Council's General Fund Balance, hence why we are forecasting £5.1million for the end of the year. The money it holds to cover such crises, which is the reserves obviously, where every effort is being made by the Council's Officers to secure funding to cover these pressures and manage down costs, it is still anticipated that the Council's general balances will be depleted at year end. Furthermore, the impact of Covid-19 does not fall neatly into one year and as such its impact will be felt strongly as we formulate our budgets for 2021/22 and beyond.

I can assure the Councillors and the residents of the Borough that we will continue to make representations to Government for the funding we need in both this year and future years. In addition, we will need to continue with our diligent measures of financial management: to target expenditure where it is most needed (which are those that are suffering most financially); seek value for money in all we do; be efficient; be innovative; and work with our partners to create the most effective service delivery options.

Work is already underway on setting the Medium Term Financial Plan, which will be coming to Overview and Scrutiny in the not too distant future, for the next three years and Officers are working to maintain a financially sustainable Council with a balanced budget whilst minimising the impact on residents. Inevitably this, as with all Councils at this time, will mean having to make some difficult decisions, which will make the targeting of resources to those most in need an even greater imperative. As stated, a second wave of the virus will only make matters worse, and of course, what we have seen in the last couple of days, we are nowhere near out of the woods. I think it is very important that people understand that if we as a Council do not control our costs and maintain our costs, we will be broke, and if we are broke then we are no good to anybody.

Supplementary Question

By way of trying to replenish our reserves in due course, is it likely that Council related services are to see an increase in cost to people using those services, and if so are there any measures in place, or could be put in place, that would help those that are from poorer backgrounds?

Supplementary Answer

There are a number of ways that the Council raises money. One of them is via investments and another one is via fees and from council tax. Council tax is capped and so there is only so much we can raise with that. A number of the services we provide, we are only allowed to cover the cost of those services, especially if they are statutory, so we can only raise those in line probably with inflation or what we are experiencing. There are opportunities to raise some of our other fees where we offer pretty good value for money, but we understand during this time everybody is going to be in the same situation.

Wherever we possibly can we will make concessions as we are looking to do at this current moment. There is a consultation going out with the Council Tax Discount Scheme and that will be coming forward shortly to show you what we are doing with that.

23.6 Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Why are there 100 unrelated houses added into a plan for the badly needed special needs school in Winnersh?

Answer

The Council has been working very closely with the Department for Education and our colleagues at Reading Borough Council to identify a suitable location for a much-needed new SEND school.

Having reviewed the Council's land holdings it is proposed to site the school on land at Winnersh Farm adjacent to Wheatfield Primary School. It is anticipated that a detailed planning application for the SEND school will be submitted in the next year. The

application will be for the SEND school only and will not include any housing proposals, and I am sure you will be on the Planning Committee when that one comes through.

However, as you are very aware, the consultation draft of the Local Plan Update, which was earlier in the year in February, proposes the allocation of land at Winnersh Farm for around 250 new homes across both Council and privately owned land in that area.

The proposed number of new homes was adjusted downwards to account for the potential new SEND school, as I have just mentioned.

A separate application, outline application for housing on the remaining Council-owned land is likely to be submitted in the early part of next year, for consideration, which will obviously mean both of them going to the Planning Committee.

Supplementary Question

When is the Local Plan Update Committee going to be meeting next to consider all these problems that we have, including all the extra 100 houses?

Supplementary Answer

That is an absolute brilliant question because I was with Nigel and Ian last week and I have asked them to put a timetable out over the next week to get a plan, and get some dates in the diary to start that, so that we can go back to where we were, look at what has happened and look at the options. So, diary dates should be coming out, where are we now, potentially tomorrow or Monday. You will obviously be included in that, along with Lindsay and the rest of the working group.

23.7 Richard Dolinski asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

My question is to the Lead Member for Children's Services regarding the proposals for a new Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) school in Winnersh.

There is much clinical evidence published that shows that major highways have an adverse effect on the health and wellbeing of children who live near or attend schools adjacent to major highways, both from the failing air quality and from the noise pollution. I have no doubt that any new building design will mitigate against noise, but children are not just confined to just four walls. As a SEND teacher I became acutely aware of how sensitive some children can be and how debilitating this can be for them. Worryingly the Council is proposing to build a school next to one of the busiest and expanding motorways in the UK, which again research has shown has the greatest impact on the health of our residents because of the poor air quality. Anything about 100 on the boundaries between index points for each pollutant is harmful. Therefore, will the Council conduct extensive air monitoring exercises and publish its results before any planning approval is considered? I'm sure you will agree, safeguarding our children is paramount.

Answer

First of all, it is great news that we are able to work with the Department for Education and Reading Borough in bringing forward a much-needed and welcomed facility in Wokingham Borough.

We are very conscious of the potential air quality and noise issues surrounding the site and our technical teams have already carried out initial impact assessments on these matters and it demonstrated that the noise and air quality levels were acceptable.

These assessments have helped us identify the best location for the school to the western end of the site which is furthest from the motorway and adjacent to the existing Wheatfield Primary School.

All of these studies have been carried out in association with the Department for Education and they are also satisfied that the levels are acceptable.

Further, more detailed studies will be carried out by the Department for Education as part of the Planning Application process and will then be considered by the Local Planning Authority, which of course is us.

Supplementary Question

Obviously, I am pleased that some monitoring is already taking place. However, this is not the first time that a similar concern has been raised. The Executive Member for Environment on 23 February 2017 replied to a resident's questions regarding pollutants associated with the M4 motorway at Winnersh. The Executive Member quoted the Government's warning of the uncertainties, including increased traffic, and in order to monitor concentrations of pollution from the M4. In light of those uncertainties and the possibility of pollution levels exceeding the Air Quality Index of 100, that is the safe level, anything above that and children with special educational needs will suffer, and noise levels rising about 50Db, again children with special educational needs will suffer with anything above that. Can we really be confident that Warren Farm and the area that you have identified next to the other primary school is a safe location now and into the future as a site for children with learning disabilities and co-morbid conditions? Once built there is no turning back.

Supplementary Answer

As I have already explained, we have done assessments already. The Department for Education is involved and I am certain that they will ensure that this school will be put in a place where no child will be put in any danger in any shape or form.

23.8 Andy Croy asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

What sort of Local Authority builds a SEND school next to one of the busiest motorways in the country?

Answer

The development of the SEND school in Winnersh is a welcome one, and will provide a valuable contribution to both the education for children with SEND within the Borough, but also in terms of the reduction of out of Borough placements that can be both disruptive to the family and cost the Council money.

We are very conscious of the potential air quality and noise issues surrounding the site and I can advise that our technical teams have already carried out initial impact assessments as UllaKarin has already mentioned. During the master-planning process, which demonstrate the noise and air levels are acceptable, these assessments have

helped us identify the best location for the school at the western end of the site which is furthest from the motorway and adjacent to the existing Wheatfield Primary school.

All of these studies have been carried out in association with the Department of Education who are similarly satisfied that the levels are acceptable.

Furthermore, detailed studies will be carried out by the Department for Education as part of the Planning Application process and considered by the local authority early next year.

Supplementary Question

This school is going to be there for a hundred years and whatever the studies say people are not going to understand why a school has been built there. You have spoken about the best location for the school, but that is the best location on the site. We should be looking at the best location in the Borough because I cannot think of any worse location than next to a motorway, can you?

Supplementary Answer

This was not the only site that was considered and it was obviously considered with the Department of Education and with our colleagues at Reading Borough Council. It was not just that we said this is the only site available so this is where it is going to go. In answer to your question it was not the only site considered.

24. SUBSTANCE MISUSE SERVICE

The Executive considered a report relating to the re-commissioning of the Council's substance misuse service in order to have a new contract in place by June 2021.

When introducing the report the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services advised that the current provider of the Council's drug and alcohol substance misuse service, which was a statutory requirement, had served notice and advised that they had been subsidising the service from their charitable reserves for some time but could no longer sustain this position. An agreement was reached to support the provider temporarily whilst a benchmarking exercise was undertaken prior to going out to tender for a new provider. The Council wants to ensure that any new provider would provide the service at an appropriate level with the funding in place to provide the service needed. Therefore having undertaken the benchmarking exercise an increase in funding was being requested.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the current substance misuse annual contract value of £492k be increased for the incumbent to allow for a sustained delivery of a mandatory* (*required by law or mandate; compulsory) service until 30th June 2021 whilst a new procurement exercise is completed (as allowable within PCR2015);
- 2) re-commissioning of the Wokingham substance misuse service be agreed. This will start with publishing a Prior Information Notice for early market engagement and awareness of the upcoming re-procurement of the substance misuse service relevant to a contract of estimated £4.5 million. (£642k per annum);
- 3) the contract value in the tender be increased to meet the anticipated demand and cost of the service.

25. WOKINGHAM SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS SCHOOL

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposal for the provision of a new Special Education Needs School within the Borough and setting out proposed terms of the lease of the site for 125 years to the Department for Education.

The Executive Member for Children's Services introduced the report and advised that the school, which would be a free school, would have 150 pupils; 75 pupils from Wokingham Borough Council area and 75 from Reading Borough Council area. The Department for Education would fund the building of the school which would be run by the Maiden Erlegh Trust.

In response to a query by Councillor Kaiser, Councillor Clark confirmed that the proposed site in Winnersh was the site favoured by the Department for Education.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) support for the development and provision of a new Special Education Needs school at Winnersh Farm be supported;
- 2) the lease of the site at Winnersh Farm to the Department for Education for use as a Special Education Needs school on their model Heads of Terms be approved and the Director of Resources and Assets be delegated powers, in conjunction with the Lead Member for Business and Economic Development, to complete the lease.

26. PROCUREMENT OF COMMERCIAL PROPERTY OWNER'S INSURANCE COVER

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposal to retender the Council Commercial Property Owner's Insurance.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing advised that currently the Council's insurance cover was placed with a number of insurers and the intention was to seek to utilise the size and variety of the whole portfolio of assets that the Council owns in order to secure high quality cover at a competitive price with a single insurer.

In relation to the properties bought utilising the Councillor Murray queried that as the insurance applied to many buildings that the Council had bought as part of its investment fund asked how much borrowing the Council has and how much income it generates? Councillor Kaiser confirmed that the Council's net general fund external debt was at March 21st was £121m. The Council also had £84m which was money borrowed to buy social housing which actually generates £15m worth of rental income per year. In addition we have £134m of internal debt, which was money that the Council lent to itself, and there was also £180m on deposit, some of which was with other councils and invested in secure bonds. All this equates to net borrowing of £121m. The cost of financing debt falling on the taxpayer for 2020/2021 would actually be around about £7.50 per band D property which was 0.4 of a percent. The total assets of the Council was about £1,000m which more than covers the borrowing.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the procurement (by way of open competitive tender) of the insurance cover be approved;

- 2) the design of the contract specification be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive;
- 3) the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Executive Member for Finance and Housing, be delegated authority to award the contract(s) to the successful bidder(s) following completion of the evaluation process.

27. HELP TO HEAT AND ECO SCHEME

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposal for a Help to Heat and ECO Scheme; the aim of which was to facilitate a widespread uptake of Energy Company Obligation (ECO) funding to ensure that energy efficiency measures were installed in as many eligible households within the Borough as possible.

The Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions advised the meeting that improving the energy efficiency of some of the Council's least efficient homes would help reduce carbon and waste energy usage. Councillor Murray also drew the meeting's attention to the fact that one in ten households in the UK were affected by fuel poverty and this programme aimed to help alleviate the effect of this. Funding home upgrades would improve the energy efficiency of homes and consequently dramatically cut home energy costs.

Members were informed that across the Borough there were approximately 18,000 houses with an energy rating of E, F and G; the three lowest EPC energy efficiency ratings. The difference between heating identically sized three bedroomed houses rated G versus D was £516 per year i.e. £43 per month and a 27% saving. Unfortunately many of these E, F and G houses were currently part of the HRA stock and were occupied by some of the lowest income, most vulnerable, eldest or most at risk in the community.

Councillor Murray confirmed that the intention was to access the Energy Companies Obligation Fund and use that money to pay for energy saving upgrades to properties. There would be no cost to the resident and they would keep all of the savings generated by the upgrades. As part of the scheme areas where it was known that fuel poverty existed would be specifically targeted with hand delivered letters advertising the scheme and inviting them to apply. There would also be an extensive media and PR campaign. Using the Energy Companies Obligation Fund could potentially help up to 400 houses across the Borough this year with potential to help more homes in the future.

Members thanked the Officers who had investigated this proposal and who had worked diligently in order to bring the proposal forward.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the Help to Heat Scheme be approved in order that the Chief Executive can sign-off Wokingham Borough Council's 'ECO FLEX Statement of Intent'. This will enable the Statement of Intent to be published on the Council's website;
- 2) the use of the wider national ECO scheme, including the advertisement to residents of their ability to access ECO grant funds, be approved.