

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 29 JULY 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.23 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, Graham Howe, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray, Wayne Smith and Bill Soane

Other Councillors Present

Rachel Bishop-Firth
Prue Bray
Gary Cowan
Sarah Kerr
Jackie Rance

15. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence received.

16. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 24 June 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Leader of Council.

17. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader of Council made the following statement:

Good evening and welcome to the last Executive Meeting before the Summer holidays, which will be far from typical. We are in the seventeenth month of Covid, but things are now inexorably returning to normal, we hope.

Please also join me in a moment's silence for those who have died during this dreadful pandemic in Wokingham, the UK and around the world, and those who have suffered not just the effect of the virus itself, but the problems which have accompanied it.

Covid cases remain high in our Borough and they are now similar levels to what they were in mid-January. While the data shows infections have dropped in recent days, this is not a true reflection of the current picture, as the positivity rate remains stubbornly high. Unfortunately, the pandemic is far from over and the lifting of restrictions does not mean the risks from Covid have disappeared.

As a Council, we and particularly I as the Leader of the Council and the Executive, have a duty of care to our residents, and we are urging everyone to remain cautious; using their personal judgement to make the right choices and protect the people around them. We are also maintaining all social distancing measures in public Council buildings; asking people to wear face coverings whilst inside, to follow one-way systems and keep a distance from others, and to practise good hand hygiene.

Many local businesses will be adopting a similar approach and we are continuing to support them, alongside local schools, care homes and other venues, as we navigate through the changing guidance. We encourage residents to be respectful of others during this time, particularly the more vulnerable members of our community and those who are

feeling anxious and nervous about getting out and about again. Importantly, One Front Door is still here to help those who may be struggling and we will ensure that we share important updates through our usual communication channels during this difficult time.

We want to see people back out and about more. It is good for the community and good for our local businesses. But it is not supportive to risk spreading the virus. Already far too many shops and other businesses across the country are having to close because of staff needing to self-isolate. During the school term that recently ended we saw many children sent home for the same reasons. We must try to avoid that when they return in September.

Although hospital admissions remain low, this stage of the pandemic is critical because it is about learning to take personal responsibility and coming together as a community to cope with Covid, while understanding that others will cope differently.

In the months ahead, the test, isolate, vaccinate message will be extremely important to help slow the spread and keep everyone safe. This includes taking regular lateral flow tests to check you aren't infected if you don't have any symptoms, booking a PCR test through Gov.uk if you have symptoms, and staying home for the self-isolation period if you test positive. Close contacts of positive cases should also self-isolate until the rules around this change mid-August.

Getting both doses of the vaccine is crucial for protecting yourself and others and we are working with the NHS to drive uptake and arrange additional pop-up clinics to make access as easy as possible. These steps will help to protect yourself and the people around you, and we must not forget that mild illness to one person could be severe illness or death to another. Beyond the initial infection, there is also the threat of getting long Covid, which can cause long-lasting health implications.

The message is very clear above all else please please, please, please, encourage everyone to be vaccinated with two jabs. Please urge our minority groups to do so where there seems to be some vaccine hesitancy leading to health inequalities.

As we learn to live with the virus, we will continue to manage the risks in front of us and put our residents at the heart of everything we do. So please be cautious, be careful and be kind.

18. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

19. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

19.1 Pamela Jenkinson had asked the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Communities the following question but as she was unable to attend the meeting the following written response was provided:

Question

Would you please confirm that Cranstoun, who are to replace Berkshire Women's Aid's refuges for abused women, actually have refuges available in Wokingham, ready for the

changeover of funding and services, in order to ensure the safeguarding of the vulnerable women, concerned?

Answer

Domestic abuse is a very important and serious issue, which is a key priority for the Government, the Council and the Community Safety Partnership. It is the sad truth that anybody can be a victim, regardless of background and circumstance, that in the worst case can end in the most tragic way as a fatality.

It is in recognition of this fact I will spend some time covering the question and outlining the work being undertaken to ensure that the Council is working towards striving for excellence in providing support and help for local residents and victims in the Borough.

The provision and availability of refuge service for victims remains securely in place locally. Access to three local refuge spaces remains unchanged for victims who need safe emergency accommodation. In addition to this provision, the new service provider Cranstoun are working to secure more enhanced refuge spaces, which will add to the existing local provision already in place. This will result in more than doubling of local refuge provision for victims at a vital point for providing support. However, this will not stop us actively continuing to improve support and proactively look for opportunities to increase spaces above and beyond this.

Furthermore, in line with the Council's ambition to strive for best practice and to comply with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which came in on 1st April 2021, the Council has:

- Increased funding into its local domestic abuse services by 55% in recognition of increasing demands for assistance and requests for help. The increase in financial funding has also in turn allowed the Council to offer an enhanced local 24-7 offer for victims to access support;
- On Monday, the Community Safety Partnership launched our Housing Needs Assessment consultation in line with the Government's push on domestic abuse. In-depth consultations with local victims have helped shaped this work and our work around this has been recognised as good practice by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government;
- Work is also underway to put together a wider Violence Against Women and Girls' strategy (VAWG); which will amongst other aspects ensure that our public spaces are safe places;
- Domestic abuse and safeguarding victims and children is a top priority for the Community Safety Partnership and the Council. The work being undertaken feeds importantly into wider and other strategic thinking on work around the poverty, inclusion and equalities strategies.

The valued contribution from both Berkshire Women's Aid (BWA) and several other local organisations working to make an impact and improve outcomes for victims is highly commended. Our aim is to continue to work closely with all local charities, voluntary sector organisations together hand-in-hand with Cranstoun to tackle domestic abuse for all residents and victims.

19.2 Liz Mayers asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

This time last year I was party to a group complaint, submitted by 76 Wokingham residents, about your conduct with regards your statement, comments and posts about Black Lives Matter and the tragic murders in Reading. The complaint was first mislaid, then mixed up with other similar individual complaints and generally mis-handled. Finally, part of the resolution was you would under-go training about the key messages of your equality policy. When did that happen, and what did you learn?

Answer

I would disagree that your complaint was not dealt with effectively. I would refer you to numerous public statements I made last summer where I apologised publicly for any upset I had caused and sought to clarify my position. Personal letters were also sent to residents who had complained through the Member Code of Conduct process.

Since then, I have carefully studied the LGA Equalities Framework and spoken with many residents, Officers and fellow Members to help educate myself on how the Council can improve and embed its approach to equalities.

As I have shared before, my focus is to help create the architecture and culture within the Council and the Borough to make more meaningful progress in tackling inequality.

In March 2021, I presented the Equalities Plan to Council which I said at the time was a comprehensive guide to tackling all these inequalities. This is not a hollow commitment to tick a box; rather it's backed up by a comprehensive Action Plan supported by Officers from across the Council to deliver real improvements for our residents and staff through 2021/22 and beyond.

The Council is currently undertaking its Member development programme in which equalities training will feature prominently for all our Members. This will build on the comprehensive training already undertaken by all staff. We are all on the same side. Diversity, equality and addressing need must be part of everything we do and the example we set. No rational person would take any other point of view and no responsible person would play politics with this issue. Every one of our residents must be free to live the life they wish and flourish in our Borough and I want to help ensure Wokingham Borough Council champions this.

Supplementary Question

Another part of the resolution was an invitation for me to join the BME Forum, which was immediately suspended, and to engage with Wokingham Borough Council to assist with your review of your Equalities Policy. Numerous meetings were held with you, Susan Parsonage, Keeley Clements and Matt Pope where you claimed to care about equality and have this comprehensive plan which you wanted mine and the help of other residents in the Borough to improve. At the last meeting, which took place during purdah, Wokingham Borough Council committed to respond to a memorandum of intent after the election by 22nd May. Why have we been ignored since the last meeting when we were given a commitment by Wokingham Borough Council to reconvene with us before 22nd May?

Supplementary Answer

If the Officers have sent you a commitment to get engaged with you then I am sure they will.

19.3 Kiran Nar had asked the Leader of the Council the following question which was asked in his absence by Pol Exeter:

Question

The Sewell report claims that there is no racism in the UK and last week we saw this was a lie following the appalling response from racists towards black footballers. We know racism exists and continues to exist in all walks of life including in Wokingham Borough. It has been over a year since I made a formal complaint relating to WBC's response to BLM and your response was that equality is hardwired in WBC's DNA and you were committed to equality. I note today that there is a no team leading equality initiatives anymore, the BME Forum has been disbanded and there has been no real commitment to understand the lives and experience of 155,000 (*Note: this figure was corrected to 17,000 at the meeting*) of the non-white population in WBC. What are you really doing to foster good community relationships and eliminate racism in the Borough?

Answer

Pol, it's great to see you and you have corrected the question because the 155,000 non-white population was a little erroneous. With the current Office of National Statistics data estimates the population of about 13% identifies as something which is other than white which would be approximately 22,000 people. The census data will be refreshed next year and this will give us a more accurate position.

I refute the suggestion in the question that we have scrapped the BME Forum. Indeed, we have not, and we are very keen to have taken the enabling role to support the BME Forum to deliver on its objectives, purposes and activities. We respect the desire of the Forum to be autonomous and we will work in collaboration to understand the best way we can move forward.

But why the overt concentration on the non-white community the Borough is interested in any of its residents who suffer prejudice or harm, with a view to mitigating, eliminating and repairing the prejudice or harm.

I have spent much of my life engaged in sport, both doing it and coaching. I feel genuinely sorry for sportsmen and women who do not do as well as they might, but hey ho we did get to the final of the Euros which is quite an achievement. We need to celebrate the positives and not dwell on the negatives. Well done the England football team, all of them!

The Council launched its Equality Strategy, "Tackling Inequality Together" in March 2021, which includes a detailed action plan with seven specific workstreams. The management of our Equalities programme continues to be led by the Insight, Strategy and Inclusion Team, as part of the Communities, Insight and Change Directorate.

This Team has recently bolstered its support to the equalities agenda by appointing an interim Equality Lead who has a raft of expertise and is now working with us three days per week, a Senior Specialist Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Officer who will start with us in August, along with a Service Manager of the Insight, Strategy and Inclusion Team who is joining us in September.

The equalities programme is continuing to deliver against the actions as outlined in the plan. The seven specific workstreams are led by Senior Managers across the Council to ensure ownership and accountability. The programme team has recently published an

easy read version of the action plan so that more of our residents can access our plans, as well as publishing a community profile to help residents, businesses in the Borough and Officers better understand the makeup of the community.

As part of the Equality Programme, the Council is continuing to support the external review of the BME Forum, which has included over 30 one to one interviews and group discussions and expects to soon be able to work with the Forum to understand how it wants to incorporate the findings from this review in its future activities. As stated within the Council's Equalities Action Plan, this review is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2021. A key piece of early feedback from the consultants has been the broad ambition for the BME Forum being more independent and self-sustaining in the future, which will be factored into our planning.

Due to the global pandemic, for the past year our engagement activities with ethnic minority groups have been primarily focused on the most urgent need to promote Covid safety advice, supporting groups to deliver safe activities and to encourage participation in the vaccination and testing programmes that have been quickly implemented to stop the spread of the virus and get us back to normality as quickly as possible.

These activities have been largely successful and well received. We have provided weekly Covid and Community updates to all faith and community groups directly via email and with targeted one to one support, working with local ethnic minority groups to agree communications messages on accessing Covid services, vaccination pop-up sessions at a Mosque, PCR testing at a Gurdwara during surge testing, and direct engagement with local employers to vaccinate migrant workers.

The Council is also supporting the police community engagement programme through their Independent Advisory Group which has a particular focus on understanding residents' experiences of hate crime.

This Council is also working on a comprehensive plan to foster stronger engagement with local communities. But people shouldn't wait for us to reach out if they have something to share with us that can improve equality for the residents in our Borough. I would ask that they can get in touch with us so we can listen to them.

19.4 Keith Kerr asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

The Black residents of Wokingham are suffering from the weight of discrimination they endure in their daily lives, going about their business of living and working in Wokingham. What contact have you had with representatives from the Black community of WBC and what tangible or practical action have you taken to assuage these discriminations?

Answer

As I have stated in the previous question, due to the global pandemic, for the past year our engagement activities with the ethnic community groups and ethnic minority groups have been primarily focused on the most urgent need to promote Covid safety advice, supporting groups to deliver Covid safe activities and to encourage participation in the vaccination and testing programmes that have been quickly implemented to stop the spread of the virus and get us back to normality as quickly as possible.

These activities have been largely successful with positive vaccination rates for ethnic minority residents and the avoidance of significant Covid outbreaks. What you can do to help is to ensure that all members of the communities that you are engaged with have a hundred per cent vaccination rate. That is a task which eludes us all at the moment.

Internally we have several staff support groups including the Ethnically Diverse Staff Network which meets monthly and a Members' Equality Group who worked together to provide oversight of the launch of our Equality Strategy earlier this year.

Our support for the external review of the BME Forum has continued, including contacting representatives from the Black community to participate in the one to one interviews and focus groups. This review is expected to be completed soon and its findings shared with the BME Forum to assist it in deciding what the next steps it wants to take for its future activities.

This is in line with the Council's target within its Equalities Strategy Action Plan of supporting the BME Forum to deliver on its objectives, purpose and activities.

The Council is also engaging with our ethnic minority residents in partnership with the police through their Independent Advisory Group which has a particular focus on understanding residents' experiences of hate crime.

As mentioned in my previous response, this Council is also working on a comprehensive plan to foster stronger engagement with local communities. But if there is anyone who has an insight into how we can promote equality further, please don't wait. I would ask that they can get in touch with us so we can listen to them immediately.

Supplementary Question

That is a long list of words and promises. But as the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive, Susan Parsonage, of Wokingham Borough Council what do you suggest to the residents of Wokingham Borough Council what more can we do to get the Council to take its knees off our collective necks?

Supplementary Answer

I think as I have said the real issue we are facing at the moment is to attack vaccine hesitancy in our Borough and the health inequalities with minority ethnic groups are very substantial. So, what you can do to help is, particularly with the Caribbean community, is to ensure that everybody is vaccinated, two jabs that is the really practical part.

The other thing you can help us with is on the BME Forum which we are reaching out now to get the BME Forum up and running. The BME Forum is not the property of the Borough it is the property of the BME Forum and we would like to have it up and running; hopefully as soon as we can physically start meeting in the later half of the year.

19.5 Lesley Doyle asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question:

Question

Regarding agenda item 28 - Climate Emergency Community Deliberative Processes; Why has this document been put to Executive for approval when the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee raised a number of concerns about it that demonstrate it lacks any credibility?

Answer

The Climate Emergency Community Deliberative Processes report was discussed at the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 7th July this year.

This was an opportunity for your Councillors to make their recommendations to me as the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions to consider before this report goes to Executive for approval this evening. The only resolution that was recorded in the meeting minutes was that the review of the potential Climate Emergency Community Deliberative Processes should be noted. Which I have done.

There were a number of questions asked during the discussion at Overview and Scrutiny which were addressed directly by the Officers at the meeting. In coming up with recommendations for deliberative processes, fifteen diverse and wide-ranging community deliberative processes were analysed. This report incorporated information from industry experts such as Involve, as well as benchmarking against several other local authorities' experiences where they were available. The comments made by members at the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee have also been noted.

The paper setting out which deliberative processes, and the particular topics and the costs, will come to the Executive in October. Local deliberative processes on a range of topics and consulting a wide cross-section of our population is an essential element in finding the solutions to our climate emergency and I hope everyone will support them.

Supplementary Question

Why has this report got more raw opinion gathering tools than meaningful deliberative processes assessed in it and made recommendations on a flawed scoring methodology?

Supplementary Answer

The processes that were looked at are the ones that are published on a website of an organisation called Involve. They are experts in running local deliberative processes around the world. They have done it in this country, they have done it in other countries, they have done it for councils, and they have done it for entire nations. It is the list of processes that they have put forward as best in practice on their website and those are the ones that we have gone away and analysed and benchmarked.

I will accept that the scoring system that has been used is a subjective one. It is subjective to us as a community. It is subjective to us as our climate emergency to the conditions that our Borough exists in. In comparison to some other communities, it may seem like it is strange or different compared to Reading or to Oxford or to Leeds but we are not a primary metropolitan area we are a combination of a rural borough and some large towns. We have a very unique climate emergency. We have a very unique make-up and we have scored it on what we believe is right for our community, right for our climate emergency and will give us the most diverse collection of opinions back from our residents.

We cannot force our residents to do anything, that is not within our power. We have to work hand in hand with our residents. This is a vital part of that process. This is a vital part of coming to the solutions that we need to put in place in order to get to carbon neutral by 2030. I am hugely supportive of it and I hope that going forward we will have a multitude of deliberative processes on a variety of different topics and some of them are going to be open to a large number of residents and some of them will be very focussed

and conducted in a certain place at a certain time with a specific cross-section of our community.

But I can assure you that the work that has gone in behind this whilst it may seem subjective, and it is. It is subjective to us as a Council, us as a community and us as our climate emergency.

19.6 Peter Major asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question:

Question

Barkham Solar Farm (Agenda Item 29) Barkham Parish Council has published in their recent residents' newsletter (Barkham and Arborfield Green Village Info June/July 2021) that WBC has increased the size of the proposed Solar Farm by extending east into Rooks Nest Farm, an additional 48 hectares and from 72,000 panels to 83,000. What are the financial implications of the increased size, i.e. what are the additional "Estimated Costs / Income over 25 Years", over and above the figures given in the Executive Committee briefing for Agenda Item 29?

Answer

The planning application submitted for the solar farm identifies a site area of 52ha in total. Taking into account the constraints and anticipated planning requirements of the site, at the time of submission, which was March 2021, it was estimated that the site could accommodate a solar farm to generate a peak of up to 33MW (MWp) of energy through the inclusion of up to 72,000 individual solar photovoltaic panels. This detail is included in the planning submissions.

As set out in the Executive report, discussions with adjacent property owners and occupiers are ongoing with a view to mitigating the impact of the development where practical to do so. In addition, further amendments to the scheme will be required following comments received from the Local Planning Authority as part of the planning process. These amendments however will only act to reduce the area of the solar PVs from what is currently shown in the planning application; albeit only marginally. As a consequence, delivery costs will inevitably be marginally reduced, because there will be less panels to install, but so too will the revenue, because there will be less panels generating power. The final array of PV panels cannot be fixed with certainty until planning permission has been secured at which time the financial appraisals can be rerun based on the actual being delivered.

In order to take these discussions into account and accommodate any changes required, it has therefore been recommended that decisions around the final extent and configuration of the Solar Farm be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive in conjunction with the Lead Member for Business, Economic Development and Regeneration; albeit on the caveat that the scheme amendments will not result in the average annual net income after capital financing costs falling below £200k. Any projected lesser return would need to be reported back to Council.

I would also add that I haven't personally seen the Barkham Parish Council newsletter that you refer to but if it does make reference to 83,000 panels or additional land being utilised then I can assure you that it is incorrect.

Supplementary Question

I am slightly confused. Is Barkham Parish Council incorrect about extending into Rooks Nest Farm or just on the number of panels?

Supplementary Answer

My understanding having asked the question myself today of the Officers is that they are incorrect on both fronts. It will be 72,000 panels in the area that has been identified in the planning application. As I said I haven't seen the Parish Council Newsletter myself but if you send me a copy of it I will gladly ask the Officers to speak with the members of the Barkham Parish Council and ideally correct the mistake publicly.

19.7 Andy Croy asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question:

Question

The weighting method in the Council's review of local deliberative processes places more emphasis on cost and speed than it does on the potential for discussion or the variety of participants.

It also excludes any weighting given to the ability of residents to influence the scope and content of the plan. With the weighting choice employed, the report was bound to reach the conclusion that a cheap and quick way of consulting is best.

With the Climate Emergency Plan supposedly having a budget of £71m, it is astonishing that the weighting for a few thousand pounds of cost were given such importance. With no consultation at all on the measures residents were prepared to see implemented, it is even more astonishing that these proposals only relate to the Plan as it stands and do not allow meaningful additions to the Plan to make the Plan as good as it can be.

Leeds, Oxford and Camden Councils have all had successful Citizens' Assemblies. Why is this Council going to such lengths to rig the appraisal on consultations rather than simply opt for the most democratically legitimate and effective form of local engagement - a Citizens' Assembly on the Climate Emergency?

Answer

Wokingham Borough Council recognises the vital importance of community engagement and participation in tackling our climate emergency. The Community Deliberative Process Options Appraisal was a robust investigation and analysis of fifteen varied options scored against factors locally important to the particular challenges faced in Wokingham Borough in tackling our climate emergency. The report incorporates information gathered from industry experts and case studies from other local authorities' experiences in this field. Therefore, the report is a balanced score card aiming to guide decision making on the most effective options.

The processes explored would not exclude gathering information from a cross-section of the community and would ensure voices are heard from key stakeholders including young people, the voluntary sector and the business community. The selection process sought fairly to select the most appropriate processes for Wokingham Borough. The examples mentioned in your question above are cities which face different challenges and issues in tackling their climate emergency.

The climate emergency is an urgent problem that needs to be tackled in a time sensitive manner. Engaging and empowering residents and stakeholders to be part of the solution

is a key stage of the way forward. Although initial implementation of the process may be scored on time efficiency, engagement with residents and stakeholders will continue to be an ongoing process and priority in the climate emergency agenda as set out in the Action Plan which is a living document and constantly evolving. This has not been about saving costs but about finding the approach that represents the best value for money. As has been pointed out there is a gap currently in our Climate Emergency Action Plan. Local deliberative processes are a vital way of ensuring that gap is closed in a way that is palatable to our residents and to the needs of our climate emergency.

Supplementary Question

I guess my point is that there is nothing in the current range of deliberative processes that are likely to come out of this that are going to empower residents to think that they can change the Plan. You keep mentioning that we cannot make residents do things. The only way that we can get people to change their minds is by having a citizen's assembly. None of the other processes will allow that. So, my question is why do you not trust the residents of Wokingham Borough to have a proper say in this most important issue?

Supplementary Answer

I fundamentally disagree with you on that. I absolutely trust the residents of Wokingham Borough so much that I am prepared to put very specific questions to them and ask them for their opinion via a multitude of different engagement mediums rather than just by one, consulting on climate emergency as a whole.

I want to look at, for example, how we go about reducing the amount of waste that we generate as a community. If we did that as part of one massive climate citizen's assembly, it would only be a minor factor in the time and effort that that group of citizens would be able to consider. They would have to look at a multitude of other things as well. What I want to do is break up climate emergency into a multitude of elements and do the most appropriate deliberative process for each element of it.

19.8 Helen Palmer asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

School meals are chosen by pupils from a menu produced by Caterlink on behalf of Wokingham Borough Council who manages the contract.

Could the relevant Councillors and Officers, please, insist on two small but important changes to the menu?

Firstly:

- to implement a meat-free Monday every week (currently this is 2 Mondays in 3) in all schools, whilst continuing to offer fish but no meat on Fridays.

Secondly:

- to offer a vegan choice every day. Currently vegan choices appear just 2 or 3 times a week.

For many children, school lunch is the only solid meal of the day. It needs to be nutritious and balanced.

In the past it was believed that children needed regular meat to provide protein and iron, but research shows that lentils, beans and quorn provide these and other nutrients in

abundance and without saturated fat. Therefore, I am asking for a healthier menu, not an impoverished one.

It is also vital that, every day of the week, every child can select a meal which respects their ethics, religion, culture and food allergies.

Meat has a big carbon footprint. This change will make a small but significant contribution to the Borough's carbon reduction target.

Answer

I absolutely agree that school dinners are an important meal to keep pupils sustained.

The catering company and WBC agree a menu which is submitted to the schools to consider at the beginning of each year. Each school understands the demographics of its children. Therefore, it is they who can make changes, taking into account their children's ethics, religion, culture and food allergies. We will pass on your suggestions to the schools to extend meat free Mondays and daily vegan choice. Schools do promote healthy dieting and now have much about climate control in their curriculums. Children today, like many other things, have a better awareness of these subjects than their parents and it is the children who will choose what they consume, hopefully healthily.

I would also just add that earlier this month there was the first Schools' Council and I would say for anyone that witnessed it, including the ex-Prime Minister Teresa May, they were a very erudite and eloquent bunch of people and they were very forthright in their ideas going forward.

Supplementary Question

At present under the National Food Standards for school children schools are obliged to offer meat three times a week, fish once a week and dairy every day. In view of what you were just saying about pupils, schools and the Council making the choices will the Council please lobby the Government to remove these rules and give councils and individual schools autonomy as academies have?

Supplementary Answer

I think it is within your power, within your national vote, to lobby your MPs to get national Government to change its policies. We have certain powers over schools. Schools are academies which are independent of the local authority in this respect, and we don't quite have that command and control that we used to have in the past. Certainly, we can mention it to Government in the future.

20. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

20.1 Jackie Rance asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Could the Executive Member for Planning, please tell me how many houses have been granted planning permission in the past 10 years for the Wards of Hurst, Shinfield, Arborfield and Winnersh?

Answer

The strategy established by the Core Strategy local plan was to meet the majority of our development needs in four major development areas: North Wokingham, South Wokingham, Arborfield Garrison and South of the M4. A remainder of development needs would be met on the edge of our towns and villages.

This approach has enabled significant infrastructure to be provided alongside new homes, helping to mitigate the impacts by providing an opportunity to access local services, facilities, and the need to reduce travel. This approach has enabled us to have the opportunity to retain the character of our towns and villages through actions such as the retention of gardens.

The Core Strategy was prepared in consultation with residents and stakeholders. Views expressed through residents to more recent planning consultations continue to suggest that the preference of residents is to meet the majority of development needs through major development areas.

In accordance with the strategy established by the Core Strategy, planning permissions have been granted.

Monitoring is routinely undertaken by parish area, other than wards. The majority of dwellings have been permitted in Wokingham Parish, totalling 3,699 dwellings between 2010/11 and 2019/20.

Turning to the specific parishes you request the number of dwellings permitted are as follows:

- Shinfield, 3,397
- Hurst, 37
- Arborfield, 2,047 - but I must say that the majority of that sits within Arborfield Green which is part of Barkham parish
- Winnersh, 131.

20.2 Rachel Bishop-Firth asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question

How many public health funerals has Wokingham Borough arranged during the last two years, ensuring that all residents are treated with dignity in death even if they or their relatives cannot afford a funeral?

Answer

We have carried out one public health funeral within the Wokingham Borough in the last two years.

Supplementary Question

I am really surprised that there has only been one public health funeral, but I did try to find information on the Council's website about our responsibility to arrange these public health funerals. I was very concerned that I could not find any clear statements about the Council's responsibilities and how the bereaved can get support. This is likely to lead to our residents with the lowest incomes being unaware of help that they are entitled to, and it falls well short of the Government's guidance to councils.

What steps will the Council take to ensure that Wokingham Borough Council complies with the Government's guidance on public funerals, including the recommendation that councils have a written policy on public health funerals shared publicly on the website and made accessible for all residents including, for example, those who use braille or who have English as a second language.

Supplementary Answer

Yes of course Rachel I totally agree with you because the Environmental Health deals with assisted funerals on behalf of the Council. We establish contact with the informer to see if the deceased has any relatives and if no relatives are found the Council's Environmental Health will ensure that the deceased gets a dignified exit from this world. We are totally clear about that, and I am surprised that you have even asked this question.

Environmental Health are responsible for carrying out that responsibility on behalf of the Council.

20.3 Prue Bray asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

Given Cllr Murray's answer to a question on climate change at last week's full Council meeting in which he stated that changing people's behaviour was vital, will the Council work with the appointed school catering company to provide more meat-free menu options, and perhaps meat-free days, replacing meat with vegetarian protein to reduce carbon and greenhouse gas emissions?

Answer

It was noted that a response to Councillor Bray's question had already been given as part of an earlier answer.

Supplementary Question

I understand where we are with menus. I do want to make the point that in this report it mentions things, for example, like the local supply chain but includes that because it will help the local economy. It doesn't mention the benefits of fewer food miles for the climate emergency.

So, my question is how can the Council get to grips with the need to really drive change through in the way that is needed? So, what will you do to ensure that the climate emergency is at the top of people's minds whenever services are commissioned or tendered?

Supplementary Answer

I am sure your question applies to a lot of procurements, and I am sure that is included as part of the policy on procurement. I really cannot go much beyond that except to say specifically for schools, as we have 9 out of 10 secondary schools currently that carry a lot of our pupils of course are academies and over half of our 54 primaries are academies, a number of them are procuring their meals separately through their trusts. So we are in a position only to suggest and influence not to implement in most cases.

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

Question

Page 299 Executive Summary states and I quote "On 23rd January 2020 the Council set a target to plant 250,000 new trees in the Borough as part of the Climate Emergency Action Plan. The aim of this target was to increase the amount of carbon captured by trees in the Borough".

Why was there no condition placed in the planning consent for the replacement of about 500 very mature trees given planning permission to be removed without any consultation at Bearwood Lakes as to have done so would have helped considerably to increase the amount of carbon capture as part of the Council's Climate Emergency evolving policy?

Answer

There was no planning consent to impose a condition on as the process to which you refer is one which is regulated by the Environment Agency, and I will read the section now but I am quite happy to e-mail it to you later, Section 10 (3)(c) of the Reservoirs Act 1975.

Following a statutory inspection of the Bearwood Lake dam by an independent reservoirs engineer, the engineer identified a need for critical tree clearance works required in order to conduct essential safety works to the dam. Accordingly, an agent acting for the landowner submitted an emergency notification of tree removal under again, and I will send it to you but it is, Section 14(1)(c) of the Town and Country Planning (Tree Preservation) (England) Regulations 2012.

For clarity, the emergency notification was not a 'planning application' and there was no grant of 'planning permission' for these works. There is no provision under either of the above Acts to enable replacement planting to be provided in these circumstances. However, the Council is working closely with the landowner, and as part of our plan of planting the 250,000 trees, to identify potential for some replacement planting in the nearby and suitable locations.

Supplementary Question

There is a planning application number actually assigned to those works and you can pick it up very easily. Bearwood Park and Lakes is a very big Grade 2 historic park considered to be at risk by English Heritage and as part of the original planning application by Reading Football Club Wokingham Borough Council, to satisfy English Heritage, had to develop a CLENP, which is a Conservation, Landscape and Environmental Plan to get English Heritage to withdraw their objections to what was happening on that site.

My supplementary question is why was English Heritage not consulted when this process took place?

Supplementary Answer

I honestly do not know Gary, but I will find out and I will come back to you.

20.5 Sarah Kerr asked the Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions the following question:

Question

Generating renewable energy is a good thing. We must ensure though that in our quest to tackle climate change, there aren't adverse effects in other areas. This solar farm site is classed as a BMV site - Best and Most Versatile - as it falls within grades 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification. It was being used for both cattle and crops. The NPPF

specifically states that if agricultural land has to be used, it should be poorer quality, which this isn't. Why is prime agricultural land being used against Government advice?

Answer

To quote what the NPPF says it sets out that “where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality”. It does not however preclude delivery of solar farms on Best and Most Versatile Land (BVM). In such cases developers will need to demonstrate special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.

The Council cannot hope to reach carbon neutral within ten years without making some difficult decisions and implementing some significant interventions; including the delivery of four solar farms with the potential to generate in excess of 20MWP under target 12 of the Climate Emergency Action Plan. A 20MWP solar farm is a large scale facility and will require access to in excess of 20ha of land. In respect to the ‘Target 12 solar farms’ therefore the Council has looked across its larger landholdings; having regard also to the emerging development plan for the Borough and the current planning and BRE guidance in respect to commercial scale ground mounted solar PV. The potential for this project to contribute towards the CEAP is clear, as outlined within the Executive report. WBC do not have control of four alternatively preferable sites of significant scale to facilitate delivery against this fundamental CEAP target.

The planning application has now been submitted and is awaiting determination by the Local Planning Authority (LPA). It will be for the LPA to balance the wider environmental benefits against the temporary change of use of the agricultural land for a 25-year period, having regard to all the local and national guidance.

I would also add that we are also looking at generation on smaller land sites and also looking at solar farms on our other assets, such as our schools which has already begun, our property estates and our car parks as well as other assets. There is a great deal of additional complexity in doing so though, not least of which is getting a national grid connection to ensure that energy is not lost, wasted or discharged dangerously.

Supplementary Question

I am pleased to hear about the car dual use actually. There is a risk that at the end of use as a solar farm after 25 years this site may not be restored to the prime agricultural land it currently is and I am concerned about the risk of a change of use that could classify it potentially as brownfield. So, there is a possibility that it could be classified as a brownfield site which means houses. What is this local authority doing to mitigate against this risk of a change of use after the solar farm is gone?

Supplementary Answer

It is a really interesting point that you raise Sarah. Yes, there is the potential risk that it might be classified as a brownfield site at the end of its use but my understanding of planning guidance, and the regulations in relation to this, is that we will not be the authority that determines whether or not it will become a brownfield site. It will come down to national planning guidance that would determine that, not us as a Borough.

My personal intention would be that it returns to being farming or it continues as being a solar farm long into the future. But we cannot guarantee that right now. All we can

guarantee is that by turning it into a solar farm right now it is not going to be turned into housing right now, which definitely would never be returned to farming use in 25 years' time.

So, my personal view is that I would much rather take the potential that it might become a brownfield site over the actual of it becoming housing.

21. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT FY2021/22 - QUARTER ONE

The Executive considered a report setting out the budget monitoring position for the revenue budget for quarter one.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing introduced the report and advised that it was the first report for the 2021/22 financial year and reminded Members that the previous year's budget had resulted in a shortfall of £400k. Councillor Kaiser advised that it was currently being predicted that the shortfall this year would be in the region of £600k; although it should be recognised that it was still early in the financial year.

Councillor Kaiser also drew Members' attention to the request for a supplementary estimate for the Tone of Voice project which would improve the Council interactions with its customers.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the financial impact of the Covid-19 crisis. as illustrated in the Executive Summary, be noted;
- 2) 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, be noted;
- 3) a supplementary estimate of £31,500 for Tone of Voice project be approved.

22. CAPITAL MONITORING 2021/22 - QUARTER 1

The Executive considered a report setting out the Capital budget monitoring position for Quarter 1.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Finance and Housing drew Members' attention to the fact that the Council was currently on target to achieve the objectives of its Capital Programme, including capital spend and investments relating to forward funding of infrastructure, schools etc.

Councillor Halsall highlighted the potential capital underspend, which would have a significant impact on borrowing, and was likely to be £152m this year.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the proposed rephrasing to the Capital Programme following the annual budget profiling review from the Medium Term Financial Plan, to get more realistic profiling for financial management and cashflow purposes, as set out in paragraph 3 and Appendix B of the report be approved and noted;

- 2) the position of the capital programme at the end of Quarter 1 (to 30 June 2021) as summarised in the report below and set out in detail in Appendix A to the report be noted;
- 3) additional budget added to the capital programme for a parcel of land at Winnersh Triangle Station, for the Park and Ride project, to the value of £175k be noted and approved. Funded by a transfer of a nearby parcel of land to the same third party, also for £175k.

23. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEME 2021

The Executive considered a report relating to the updated Local Development Scheme (LDS) which sets out the timetable for the preparation of local plans, including minerals and waste, for the following three-year period.

The Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement advised Members that it was intended to take the Plan to Executive in October with a view to going out to consultation thereafter.

RESOLVED: That the Local Development Scheme 2021, attached as enclosure 1 to the report, be adopted.

24. COMMERCIALISATION STRATEGY

The Executive considered a report setting out a Commercial Strategy which was intended to support and enable Members and Officers to make positive choices about where they wanted to invest, rather than having to make decisions about where to reduce expenditure.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Finance and Housing advised the meeting that as the Council had become more commercial it was important to have a Strategy in place to further improve service delivery and organisational efficiency. Councillor Kaiser pointed out that any surpluses or profits that ensued from being a commercial entity would be used for the benefits of residents.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the Commercial Strategy attached at Appendix A to the report be adopted;
- 2) the Chief Finance Officer be delegated authority to revise and update the Strategy as required to ensure legislative compliance and delivery of best practice in the Council's commercial ventures and activities.

25. PROCUREMENT STRATEGY

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposed Procurement Strategy which was in accordance with the use of best practice and followed recommendations from the recent CIPFA review.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing went through the report and advised that at the end of last year CIPFA had carried out a review of the Council's procurement, contract management and commissioning processes and one of the objectives in the resulting action plan was to develop, adopt and maintain a Procurement Strategy.

Councillor Murray was pleased to note that the eighth mandatory assessment of the Procurement Strategy related to whether the business case considered relevant climate emergency actions.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the adoption of the Procurement Strategy, attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be agreed;
- 2) the Chief Finance Officer be delegated authority to revise and update the Strategy as required to ensure legislative compliance and delivery of best practice in procurement and commissioning.

26. INVESTING IN OUR COMMUNITY

The Executive considered a report setting out proposals for implementing a Community Investment Strategy to improve resources available to the Council by acquiring property assets that would enhance WBC policy delivery in the Borough.

The Executive Member for Business and Economic Development introduced the report and drew Members' attention to the fact that the report was refocussing the Property Investment Strategy that was approved by the Executive in September 2017.

Councillor Kaiser explained that part of the reason for refocussing the Strategy was because the Public Works Loans Board had changed its criteria and as a result the Council would only be investing within the Borough or in partnership with another body outside the Borough, provided it would benefit the Borough. Councillor Kaiser also pointed out the criteria for investment as set out in Appendix A.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the refocusing of the existing Investment Strategy and criteria, as set out in Appendix A, be noted;
- 2) it be noted that the delegated authority already given to the Deputy Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader, Executive Member for Finance and Housing and the Executive Member for Business and Economic Development, applies to this refocused policy;
- 3) the changes to the delegated authority with regard to investment criteria, as set out in Appendix A, be agreed.

27. NEW CONTRACT FOR HEATING SERVICES

The Executive considered a report setting out a procurement business case for a new contract to provide the range of heating services required for the Council's housing stock in compliance with the Council's statutory duties.

The Executive Member for Finance and Housing introduced the report and reminded Members that the Council was responsible for around 2,800 social homes in the Borough and although safety of these homes was paramount there was also a need to consider climate change. It was important to ensure that these homes were not only fit to live in but that they met all the latest standards. Therefore, as part of the tendering process the

Council would be looking for a partner who specialised in new initiatives relating to climate change eg heat pumps etc to enable Council homes to be as clean as possible.

RESOLVED: That the business case to enable the Housing Service to procure a suitably qualified, experienced, and competent contractor for the delivery of heating services required for the Council's housing stock be approved.

28. HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY (INC. SEND)

The Executive considered a report setting out proposed new travel assistance policies for statutory school age children and young people post-16.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Children's Services advised that the policies, which cover the Council's statutory responsibilities, had been updated after a full and thorough consultation had been carried out. The reason why the policies were coming forward to the Executive now was so that the relevant information would be available for parents to take account of when considering which school to choose for their child for admission in September 2022.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the two Travel Assistance policies (statutory school age, and Post-16) as appended to the report be approved;
- 2) implementation of the new Travel Assistance Policies be from the academic year commencing September 2022.

29. SCHOOL MEALS MANAGED CATERING SERVICE

The Executive considered a report setting out the procurement business case for a school meals and kitchen maintenance traded services contract which included the provision of meals, directly supplied to schools by the appointed supplier and maintenance of school kitchen equipment managed by the Council.

RESOLVED: That the proposed business case for procurement of a new contract for school meals and kitchens maintenance be approved to commence in August 2022, noting that the updated traded services offer will no longer deliver the same level of income but still represents a viable option.

30. CLIMATE EMERGENCY COMMUNITY DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES

The Executive considered a report relating to the outcome of the work undertaken to identify effective deliberative engagement processes with the community on climate emergency.

The Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions went through the report and outlined the process that had been followed which had led to an analysis of 15 options, including opinion polls, user panels, citizens' assemblies etc, for community engagement as set out by Involve, who were experts in this field. Case studies from other councils who had gone through this process already had also considered. Each one of the local deliberative processes had been assessed against a multitude of factors.

Councillor Murray advised that the intention was to take a further report, setting out the plan for local deliberative processes going forward, including the likely topics and what

methods of deliberative processes have been chosen, to October Executive. It was noted that likely topics were, vision for the future of carbon emergency, waste reduction, how the gap in the Climate Emergency Action Plan could be closed, etc.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the extensive review that has been undertaken regarding community deliberative processes in climate emergency (as set out in Appendix A to the report) be noted;
- 2) progressing the development of focus groups and e-panels to engage the community with climate emergency be supported;
- 3) it be noted that a fully worked-up proposal with financial implications will be presented to Executive in October 2021.

31. PROPOSED SOLAR FARM - BARKHAM

The Executive considered a report requesting authority to proceed with the development of a solar farm at Barkham.

The Executive Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions drew Members' attention to the fact that report was requesting £30,283,000 funded from borrowing to build a solar farm of up to a 36 Mega Watt Peak capacity on land owned by the Council in Barkham. This would lead to a reduction in the Council's carbon footprint as a Borough by approximately 1%, or the equivalent of the Council's usage on an annual basis.

Councillor Murray advised that the project would also provide an opportunity to plant approximately 18,000 trees and protect and improve hedgerows and public rights of way around the site. After running costs and servicing the debt the projected annual revenue, based on current energy prices, would be around £0.5m per annum, which could then be reinvested in other climate emergency initiatives.

Councillor Margetts welcomed the fact that trees would be planted which would ensure that the site was screened from visitors to California Country Park, nearby roads etc. One issue that had been a concern to his residents was about construction on the site and particularly lorries accessing the site. In order to limit disruption to residents Councillor Murray confirmed that the intention was that large construction material would be taken to a site nearby where they would be held and then moved to the site using smaller vehicles. In relation to the solar panels the intention was that they would be kept at the docks until required and then brought in on a demand basis.

RESOLVED that, subject to securing the necessary planning consents, Council be asked to:

- 1) recommend the capital expenditure of the £20,283,000 funded from borrowing as previously set out in the Medium Term Financial Plan;
- 2) approve delegation of decisions around the final extent and configuration of the Solar Farm to the Deputy Chief Executive (S151 Finance Officer) in conjunction with the Lead Member for Resident Services, Communications and Emissions where scheme amendments will not result in the average annual net income after capital financing costs falling below £200k;

- 3) note the estimated net income (after running costs and capital financing costs) of £12.0m over 25 years (equal to £480k per year on average) will be introduced into the Councils annual budget using an equalisation reserve.
- 4) approve commencement of the Solar Farm at Barkham.

32. CARBON CAPTURE VIA THE PLANTING OF 250,000 NEW TREES

The Executive considered a report relating to the funding required to begin phase 1 of the project to plant 250,000 new trees in the Borough as part of the Climate Emergency Action Plan.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement highlighted the successful bid for grant funding, amounting to £300k, from Woodland Trust to contribute towards the cost of purchasing and planting the trees. Councillor Smith advised that phase 1 of the project would include setting up the project team, development of a tree strategy and working with landowners to identify possible sites. It was noted that around 250ha of land would be required and therefore the Council would need to work very closely with town and parish councils and other landowners.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) Officers be given approval to begin phase 1 of the project, including the recruitment of a project manager, completion of a feasibility study and tree strategy, and start-up of the small woodland planting and community garden planting initiative;
- 2) £350,000 of capital borrowing be approved to fund the first phase of the project. The £350,000 requested will ultimately be funded as part of the invest to save scheme for the overall capital project (preliminary calculations show these costs can be comfortably accommodated);
- 3) It be noted that the estimated pay back of the full cost of the scheme is likely to be within 4 years of project completion, with an annual surplus thereafter to be confirmed with updated business case;
- 4) It be noted that a further report, including a full Business Case and additional funding requirements, will be presented to the Executive for approval early next year.