

COUNCIL – 2 DECEMBER 2021

QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 2 DECEMBER 2021

The following questions have been received under Standing Order 8.1. The draft replies, which are subject to amendment, are set out below.

“Councillors are thanked for their questions.”

1. Question from Councillor W Forster

“Please can the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Environmental Services update members of the Council and members of the public about plans to refurbish the subway under Woking Station following a Lib Dem motion earlier this year?”

Reply from Councillor K Davis

“I am pleased to report that we have now been granted approval by Network Rail and South Western Railways. This was completed on 23 November and works can now proceed.

We are proposing to start works early next year to complete by March and are now getting the contractors ready. The main work will be to the steps where we will replace the existing loose and damaged stairs with new anti-slip nosings. Missing mural tiles will be replaced and damaged tiles will be replaced or repaired. Stair areas will be decorated and a full clean completed.

Communications are now being finalised complete with a diversion route and signage plan.”

2. Question from Councillor D Hughes

“Can the Portfolio Holder please confirm whether WBC owns the freehold to the land on which the Red Car Park is sited? If not, who does?”

Reply from Councillor C Kemp

“The Red car park sits across the ownerships of both Woking Borough Council and Victoria Square Woking Limited. What were previously the entrance and exit ramps are within the freehold ownership of WBC; and the main car park building itself is within the freehold ownership of VSWL.”

3. Question from Councillor D Hughes

“We understood that the properties in the triangle had been expected to be demolished by August 2020. As it is now Dec 2021 can the Portfolio Holder please give the Council and Woking residents an update on this, including the now anticipated date for full demolition.”

Reply from Councillor C Kemp

“The planned demolition of the properties within the triangle site has not been possible for a number of reasons:

- the Council is still dealing with the purchase of all property interests, and this process has to be carefully managed to ensure public funds are spent appropriately and wisely. Some property negotiations involved with the transfer of some interests have proven to be more complex than anticipated.
- It is essential that the demolition works fully accord with environmental obligations. This involves carrying out the relevant surveys for endangered species and nesting birds. This can have a substantial effect on the programming of construction works.

With all of this taken into consideration, the demolition contractor working on behalf of the

Council has readjusted their original demolition programme. Once some of the key issues identified above have been resolved, expected to be early in the new year (2022), demolition works can continue on the properties currently owned by the Council. The remaining properties outside of Council ownership will continue through the compulsory purchase order process for the acquisition of the remaining property interests. The Council's HIF Oversight Panel receive a regular update on the progress of this element of the proposal."

4. Question from Councillor D Hughes

"The recent draft internal audit report into the HIF project provided an assurance flag of limited, i.e.' that 'significant weaknesses in the framework of governance, risk management and control such as that it could become inadequate or ineffective'.

This is an appalling indictment of the basic governance omissions that the auditors identified, including; omission of key risks in the risk register; no TOR; Formal contracts not finalised and no decisions log. This is to say the least disappointing as this is now 18 months after the Westfield report and the Gifty Edila report which flagged similar failings. We were assured that these governance omissions would not happen again, so the question is why is this the case?"

Reply from Councillor C Kemp

"The aim of the scrutiny review of the HIF project was to add value to ensure that the project is focused on the delivery of outcomes that reflect the needs of and improve the outcomes for Woking communities. The review was to provide additional assurance for the project. It should be noted that although the report states that weaknesses and areas for improvement have been identified in the project governance it should also be noted that the same report highlights examples of areas where controls are operating reliably and lists elements of the control framework operating effectively, including regular governance meetings, and meetings with external stakeholders to manage external dependencies as well as risk registers being in place.

Council will note that the audit report which was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and presented to the Council's HIF Oversight Panel confirms that actions will be taken to improve on the current arrangements. The project team have prioritised this work. The project team has over the last 8 months worked to ensure that the project has a strong governance framework in place and welcomes the additional recommendations made via the audit report."

5. Question from Councillor D Hughes

"Following a question regarding the reasons for losses on Thameswey shown in 2019 and 2020 accounts, the Executive was informed that the Thameswey Business Plans were all long term in nature, making losses to start with and moving to a profitable position over time as energy customers were connected and rents increased'.

Can the Portfolio Holder give us a date when this Group of companies is anticipated to come to at least a break even, and then a profitable position?"

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

"The Thameswey Group was established to assist in the delivery of the Council's strategic environmental, infrastructure and housing priorities. The individual Thameswey companies have long term business plans which are approved by the Council and include projects which address objectives which would not be delivered by private investment. The operating models for each project and company break even over different timescales. Thameswey Energy is currently forecast to break even on an annual basis from 2038 reflecting the recent investment in the new Poole Road energy centre. Thameswey Central Milton Keynes breaks even from 2043. The Thameswey Housing model, which includes the investment in the Sheerwater Regeneration approved by the Council in February 2020, moves to a break even position from

2042.”

6. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“What process should residents be following if their green waste is not collected during the current 2 week collection period?”

Reply from Councillor K Davis

“The crew should come on your usual collection day, so please put your bin out by 6am. If your garden waste bin isn’t emptied that day, non-collected roads are being prioritised the next day so please leave your bin out for the crew to collect it. If the bin isn’t collected on the second day, please report it as a missed collection <https://www.jointwastesolutions.org/report/report-a-missed-collection/> and leave your bin out for the crew to return.

Officers are keeping track of non-collected roads and resources have been allocated to work Saturday as a contingency in order to complete all collections including non-collected roads and missed bins.

Please continue to check [jointwastesolutions.org](https://www.jointwastesolutions.org) where daily updates are provided.”

7. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“What is the realistic timeline for work to be completed to make the Hilton Hotel safe and enable Victoria Way to be re-opened?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“Sir Robert McAlpine (SRM) are programming the works to continue to the end of January 2022, however this is dependent upon weather conditions onsite.”

8. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“How many residents have attended the CEO and Leader run consultation sessions to date, by event?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The conversation at each of the engagement events has provided invaluable input into the Corporate Strategy that will be agreed by Council in February 2022. Face-to-face events such as these form part of our comprehensive engagement programme, including new online Civic space, Woking Community Forum, where over 800 residents have shared views through an online survey. We have also created a Residents’ Panel which over 750 residents have joined to take part in engagement on matters such as the Town Centre master plan. This is not a one off exercise, it is the start of an ongoing commitment. We will continue to get feedback from residents through our online Community Forum and further face-to-face engagement sessions next year.

I am pleased to confirm that over 100 locally engaged residents have attended in person our community roadshows so far. Residents that attended these events had the opportunity to raise with me and senior officers from the Council the key local issues that concern them and would like to see addressed over the next five years. Overall, feedback from residents about the sessions has been positive, with 89% of attendees stating they were pleased they came and had the chance to have their say, whilst 94% stated they would attend future roadshows.

	Attendees
Holy Trinity Church, Knaphill (Tuesday 21 October)	16
Scout Hall, Hoe Valley (Tuesday 26 October)	12
Parkview, Canalside (Wednesday 3 November)	19
Council Chamber, Woking Town Centre (Monday 15 November)	27
St Mary's, Byfleet (Monday 29 November)	30
The Lightbox, Woking Town Centre (Thursday 2 December)	20
St Andrew's Church, Goldsworth Park (Monday 6 December)	

9. Question from Councillor A Kirby

“Can the Leader reassure Members and residents that the main contractor for the construction of Victoria Square, Sir Robert McAlpine will be responsible for bearing (or passing on to subcontractors) the additional costs of the cladding dangers that have recently emerged?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“Yes.”

10. Question from Councillor A Kirby

“How does Council intend to further its opposition to cuts to our local train services, beyond the recent Network Rail consultation stage? Even in the mid-range ‘Medium’ post-Covid-19 scenario there is an expected increase of eight additional trains per hour. However current plans by South Western Railway amount to proposed 13% cuts to peak services into London and 14% cuts to off peak services. In addition, Woking is set to lose direct trains to Bristol and Bath entirely just next month. How does Council policy currently aim to further these objections or make constructive suggestions for change – given the potential economic, social and sustainability implications for Woking Borough?”

Reply from Councillor C Kemp

“South Western Railways recently published its December 2022 timetable for consultation, which the Council responded to express its concern about any reduction in the frequency of service provision to the Suburban routes to London Waterloo and the Mainline routes to destinations such as Southampton, Exeter St Davis and Portsmouth. The relationship between the economic and transport strategies of the Council with rail service to and from Woking was robustly highlighted in the Council’s response. South Western Railways is yet to publish its response to the representations that it received. Officers will study the response when it is published and advise Members accordingly on the outcome.

Whilst the Council is waiting for South Western Railways’ response to the consultation, the Director of Planning shall write to South Western Railways to reiterate the Council’s objection to the reduction of the frequency of services to and from Woking, taking into account any new information that might have emerged since the Council submitted its response to the original consultation.”

11. Question from Councillor A Kirby

“Given the importance of competitive procurement, has the Council recently decided any dispensations to standard procurement policy as set out in the principles of the Public Contract Regulations 2015? Put another way, has the Council always followed competitive tenders where these regulations would require that practice?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The Council has a procurement officer that advises the Council and provides the professional input into procurement activity. In addition we have a clear set of procurement policies and practice that is compliant with the legal framework, best practice and the Council’s Contract

Standing Orders. In recognition of its importance, procurement has been highlighted as a key strategic area for consideration within the Council's Fit for the Future programme.

The Council recognises the importance of procurement. It ensures the effective use of public funds while safeguarding the public's interest in an open, inclusive and transparent environment which ultimately helps the Council attain overall best value for money."

12. Question from Councillor A Kirby

"Given new requests for additional lending to safeguard the Council's existing borrowing to Greenfield School, would the Leader and Executive have done anything differently in agreeing the original lending to the school?"

Reply from Councillor A Azad

"The loan to Greenfield School was provided to facilitate the move to a bigger site enabling the school to grow, providing additional school places for the Borough. This has been a success with the school now accommodating 334 children, compared to 216 when they left the Brooklyn Road site, with an application submitted to the Department for Education to increase maximum numbers from 350 to 406.

267 of these children live in the Borough, 80% of the total. Whilst there have been issues with the construction project as reported to the Executive earlier this month, the objectives of the original lending have been met and the School has been able to substantially extend the service it delivers to local families. Going forward the Council's Strategic Asset Manager will monitor progress on the project until completion of the building extension."

13. Question from Councillor J Sanderson

"Please can the Portfolio Holder provide a breakdown by month of the financial support given by the Council to Freedom Leisure (whether in direct grants or loans) since the start of the pandemic."

Reply from Councillor C Kemp

"In a similar approach taken by many Local Authorities, the Council has supported Freedom Leisure through the pandemic, recognising the severe impact of the lockdowns on the leisure sector and the importance of the business survival to the future provision of leisure facilities in Woking addressing the Council's Health and Wellbeing priorities. The support has been through direct financial contributions towards operating costs and in addition the Council has received no management fee during this period. The Council has also administered Business Grants on behalf of the government which have provided further support towards the net cost of operating the leisure facilities. The table below sets out the payments which have been made since the start of the pandemic by month. The Council has received £183,214 through the National Leisure Recovery Fund towards these costs. The management fee was forecast to be £690k for 2020/21, however the government Sales, Fees and Charges Scheme provided compensation for approximately 70% of this loss. It is expected that the facilities will break even in the new year requiring no further support towards operating costs and moving towards a position where the management fee income can resume. No payments have yet been made for July 2021 onwards.

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FREEDOM LEISURE SUPPORT					
2020/21	STAFFING	OPERATIONAL	MOBILISATION	GRANTS	TOTAL
April	306,807	93,797	-	20,000	420,604
May	102,275	72,693	-		174,968
June	72,511	72,693	37,256		182,460
July	64,751	72,693	-		137,444
August	-	23,735	-		23,735
September	-	30,820	-		30,820
October	-	47,979	-		47,979
November	-	99,003	-		99,003
December	) -		-	8,668	8,668
January	) -		-	28,943	28,943
February	) -		-	15,321	15,321
March	) -	330,000	-	13,620	343,620
	546,344	843,413	37,256	86,553	1,513,566
2021/22					
April	) -	112,868	-	-	112,868
May)				-
June)				-
July					-
August					-
September					-
October					-
November					-
December					-
January					-
February					-
March					-
					1,626,434

14. Question from Councillor J Brown

“As the British Sign Language Bill makes its way through Parliament, will the Leader of the Council confirm what measures the Council currently has to make BSL available to residents who wish to access its services?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The Council wishes to ensure that its services are accessible to all residents within the Borough and that residents who use BSL are fully engaged in daily and public life. The Council will arrange a BSL interpreter, upon request, for those residents who could not otherwise access our services.”

15. Question from Councillor S Dorsett

“Will the Portfolio Holder confirm that the first social units in the Sheerwater development have now been advertised on the Council’s Choice Based Lettings system?”

Reply from Councillor D Harlow

“I am delighted to confirm that all of the new social rented townhouses and apartments at Murray Place have been advertised on Choice-Based Lettings and have understandably been very popular with housing applicants. Having visited Murray Place myself, the high quality of the apartments and the amazing podium garden is truly something for the Council and Thamesway to be proud of. Priority has gone to residents living in the Sheerwater regeneration area in line with the Community Charter and I’m pleased to say that 11 households have already moved into these fabulous new affordable homes.”

16. Question from Councillor R Mohammed

“Could the Portfolio Holder provide an update on Hale End Court following its official opening?”

Reply from Councillor D Harlow

“I am really pleased that we were able to take handover of Hale End Court last month and that the Mayor officially opened this fantastic scheme last weekend. Lettings have been phased, but 23 flats are now occupied with the majority of the remaining apartments now under offer. The feedback from residents has been extremely positive and there is already a buzz about the place. I would like to extend my thanks to Willmott Dixon, their professional advisers and all the officers involved in delivering such a high-end development, along with Homes England who helped to fund the scheme. I am proud of the exceptional facilities that we are able to offer our older and more vulnerable residents at Hale End Court and Brockhill.”

17. Question from Councillor D Roberts

“The Sunday Times, in an article ‘How councils blew £200m of local taxpayers’ money on property speculation (31 Oct 2021), reported that Woking holds the second most outsized commercial portfolio nationally (at £330m) and was identified, in a chart labelled ‘Council’s Property Woes’, as having the largest decline in investment property value (between 2019 and 2021) nationally.

Given the size of the Council’s property portfolio what approach has the Council been taking to ensure that the portfolio is resilient and is it reviewing this approach considering accelerated change in behaviours to working from home and online shopping?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“WBC has strength in a range of property types: the portfolio is well distributed across retail, industrial and offices categories. The success of a portfolio is shown by its ability to weather recessions over the longer term rather than the short term. The level of vacant property is relatively low; with no vacant industrial space, very few empty retail units, and some 19% of office space, mostly accounted for by two properties.

Additionally, the increase in “work-from-home” activity may help Woking as larger central London companies seek satellite offices to provide hubs for their staff to visit rather than travel into the city. WBC’s stock of offices generally benefits from small to medium sized floor plates and is well placed to capture future changes in demand. The only qualification here is that premises need to be made attractive and up-to-date, providing the high specification sought by prospective tenants. It is essential that in a competitive market that we ensure that our offering is of a good standard. Using dilapidations monies (paid to the landlord on vacating a building to restore it to its original let condition) from leaving tenants is one way in which this might be achieved.

Throughout the Covid pandemic we have striven to ensure that property portfolio remains resilient. The Council agreed two Covid Rental Strategies (in 2020 and 2021) which have enabled us to support tenants in line with the provisions set out. This has proved very successful in keeping tenants trading.

Traders have also been able to access discretionary grants from WBC and business rate holidays from central Government.

We have found that the retail position is more positive than was anticipated with numerous new openings in the town, including Island Restaurant, Dukes bar and deli, and shortly Tesco, ITSU and Luciano’s as examples.

In respect of offices we have looked at re-purposing one or two of the more difficult to let spaces for residential, or disposal, however in at least one of those buildings the business case remains strongly in support of leaving as offices. We are hopeful that Export House will

be much easier to let once the Victoria Square works are completed with a new entrance off Henry Plaza.

We have a strong focus on debtors and our managing agents are very focussed on both collecting rent and driving down debts. In some instances it is necessary to pursue these where there is a reluctance to enter into dialogue although there is currently a Government moratorium on taking action for recovery.

Lastly, Woking has a relatively thriving business environment compared to many Surrey town centres and with the new supply of residential developments and the ongoing and planned infrastructure improvements, the future of the town is very positive and this will in time manifest itself in the greater demand for commercial premises and subsequently result in rental growth and higher capital values.”

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REPORT ENDS