

**QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 11 FEBRUARY 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 P Forster

“Local residents in apartments in the Kingsmoor Park development are unable to obtain a surveyors report, namely EWS1, into the type of cladding and external walls on the buildings.

As we sadly know from Grenfell, some types of cladding can be dangerous. Mortgage companies can also refuse to lend to those seeking to buy a home with cladding and insurance companies either increase with premiums or refuse to provide cover altogether.

However, local residents do not know what type of cladding is on the exterior of their homes as they cannot get confirmation or an EWS1 certificate.

As the instigator of the Kingsmoor Park development, please can the Council confirm what type of cladding was used by the developer?

If the cladding and material is acceptable, please can the Council help residents get EWS1 certificates?

If this cladding and material is not acceptable, please can the Council agree to work with the developer, the management company and residents to get it replaced?

Finally, will the Council also work with the Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing Association to remove and replace the material on their properties?”

Reply from Councillor D Harlow

“Kingsmoor Park has some areas of cladding. However, all of these areas are clad in a cement board, which is a non-combustible material.

The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) has developed the EWS1 process, whereby housing providers conduct an intrusive survey inspection of buildings over 18 metres in height to examine the make-up of external wall systems and their compliance with building safety guidance. As the apartment blocks at Kingsmoor Park are below 18 metres in height, they are not part of Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing’s (MTVH) initial inspection programme. This is in line with the guidance for the EWS1 process.

Unfortunately, some lenders are requesting EWS1 forms for buildings outside of the scope of the process and guidance. The Government and RICS have made clear that EWS1 forms should not be required on buildings below 18 metres.

In recognition of the challenges the EWS issue may be causing residents looking to sell or re-mortgage their homes, I will contact our local MP calling for government action to ensure EWS1 forms are only requested for buildings where they are required and that other forms of building safety evidence are accepted in order to allow residents to move forward with transactions.

The safety of all our residents remains the highest priority for both the Council and MTVH. MTVH would like to reassure its customers that the absence of an EWS1 certificate does not mean that a building is unsafe. MTVH is continuing to conduct routine Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs) and act on any points that require attention.”

2. Question from Councillor R N Leach

“In an earlier question, I was told that the Neighbourhood Officers would approach the landowner of the plot of waste ground in De Lara Way to get it cleared up and that this would be preferable to any form of enforcement action. I notice there has in fact been a deterioration rather than an improvement in the condition of this land. What progress has been made with the landowner?”

Reply from Councillor K M Davis

“Unfortunately it has not proven possible to obtain cooperation from the landowner on an informal basis. Legal colleagues have provided advice in respect of formal legal action which will be explored further to ensure the condition of the land is improved.”

3. Question from Councillor L S Lyons

“At its meeting on 3 December 2020, this Council unanimously approved a motion that Officers should produce a report that would set out existing guidance, along with the consequential impacts which may arise from any changes that would limit the height of future developments in the town centre at the earliest opportunity.

Noting the Leader’s apparent support for this motion, and the resolve of the Council that it should be produced “at the earliest opportunity”, why is this report not available for the Council to consider at this evening’s meeting of Full Council? Could I please have an update on the progress to date, and an assurance that, in accordance with the recently published Forward Plan, it will appear on the agenda for Full Council on 8 April 2021, so that the Council may determine what (if any) limits should be placed on the height of future developments in the town centre?”

Reply from Councillor G W Elson

“The Council in December resolved to support Councillor Lyons Motion that “The current Design Supplementary Planning Document does not provide clarity on the permissible height and scale of new buildings across Woking, particularly those in the town centre. It is therefore proposed that Officers should produce a report at the earliest opportunity, setting out existing guidance, along with the consequential impacts which may arise from any changes, with a view to updating the Design Supplementary Planning Document, if appropriate.”

The report is already in the Executive Forward Plan to be considered by Executive at its meeting on 25 March 2021. Subject to the recommendation(s) of the Executive it will be reported to Council on 8 April 2021.”

4. Question from Councillor L S Lyons

“How many retail units in Woking are currently vacant? What is the impact to Council finances as a result of business rates not being collected on these retail units?”

How many retail units, in which the Council has an interest, are in default of rent payments due wholly or in part to the Council, or are in an arrangement whereby less rent is being collected by the Council than their occupants’ original contractual obligations? What is the impact to Council finances as a result of rent on these retail units, full or in part, not being collected?”

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

“I am only able to comment on Woking Borough Council retail units. The Council currently has 12 vacant retail units including 2 Market Walk Kiosks where terms are being agreed with new tenants. There are also a further 2 units where tenants are in administration. The vacant units represent 9.3% of the total retail units owned by the Council. The business rates for these vacant units are £203,907 for a full year.

58 retail units have some rent or service charge amounts overdue, or have made an arrangement with the Council. This has been an exceptionally difficult time for these businesses in particular. The impact of forecast lost rent is set out clearly in the 2021/22 General Fund budget paper received by the Executive last week and recommended to Council this evening. The Medium Term Financial Strategy will provide a further update next month.”

5. Question from Councillor L S Lyons

“Approximately how much did Woking Borough Council spend on printing costs in the civic year 2018-19 relating to all internal functions (but not including documents which the local authority is legally required to print copies of, such as ballot papers and postal communications with residents)? I do not require the response to be itemised, but should include paper, ink, printers and photocopiers, along with any other related costs.

Approximately how much did Woking Borough Council spend sending printed copies of documents to Members by courier during the civic year 2018-19.”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The cost of paper from the Council’s supplier in the civic year 2018-19 was £26,314.66. This figure includes paper used for printing correspondence to residents as this is not separately accounted for.

The cost of print cartridges for use by Members in 2018-19 was £2,691.50.

The cost of photocopier expenditure in 2018-19 was £69,381.84. This figure includes printing correspondence to residents as this is not separately accounted for.

The cost of printing in 2018-19 was £165,450.76.

The cost of Courier Charges for Members in 2018-19 was £4,124.00.

In total, this amounts to £267,962.76 in 2018-19.”

6. Question from Councillor M A Whitehand

“Will the Council join me in thanking all the staff of Woking Borough Council and the many volunteers from our communities who participated in Operation Eagle last week for their hard work and commitment engaging with residents under such extremely difficult circumstances?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“I am sure all Members of the Council will wish to thank all those involved in Operation Eagle from Surrey Local Resilience Forum, its volunteers, the local volunteers and our staff, all of whom contributed to the success of the event. I would also like to thank the residents who so positively engaged in the mass testing.”

7. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“Aside from the CIL funding allocated to local communities to spend via Neighbourhood forums or other local representative groups, please provide a breakdown, by project, of CIL spending over the last 5 years.”

Reply from Councillor G W Elson

“As at end of January 2021 a total of £5,166,297 had been received for Borough-wide projects. The breakdown of the CIL spending is as follow:

- £1,248,977 spent on Woking Integrated Transport Package
- £825,508 spent on S106 transport deficit
- £1,382,990 transferred to SANG reserve
- £1,345,471.76 provisionally allocated to SANG
- £363,350.93 unallocated

The Council publishes an Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS) by 31 December of each year setting out the amount of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) received and spent. The IFS is on the website and can be accessed by this link: <https://www.woking2027.info/ldfresearch/infrastructurefundingstatement201920.pdf>.

Note that the current IFS is up to end of the financial year 31 March 2020.”

8. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“Woking Council has a long record on the environment and took its latest step by declaring a climate emergency in 2019. Will the Leader now encourage our local MP to support the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) Bill currently going through Parliament?”

Reply from Councillor K M Davis

“The ethos of the CEE Bill is demonstrated locally through the activities shown in our Woking 2050 strategy and most recently through the Planet Woking initiative supported by the continued political will and strategic frameworks provided by the Council. Jonathan Lord MP needs no encouragement from me to support the Bill.”

9. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“Given recent announcements about further new office purchases by Surrey County Council will any Surrey staff be moving to Midas House in Woking?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“As previously reported Surrey County Council withdrew from the acquisition of Midas House. Accordingly there will be no Surrey County Council staff located in Midas House.”

10. Question from Councillor J R Sanderson

““Further to the confirmation that the Borough Council, County Council and Police Commissioner elections will take place on 6th May and the continuing uncertainties caused by COVID, I understand that a leaflet will be sent out to local residents explaining about these elections will be conducted. How else will the Council address any concerns about the safety of these elections and clarifying the alternative ways people can vote such as postal and proxy voting?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“All properties in the Borough have been sent a leaflet, setting out the details for the May 2021 elections.

In line with the Electoral Commission’s communication strategy, we are publicising that polling stations will be safe places for electors to vote. We will be publicising the additional measures that will be in place on polling day and electors are also being advised to wear a face covering inside the polling station; sanitise their hands using the hand sanitiser provided; maintain social distancing at all times and bring their own pen

or pencil to mark their ballot paper.

We are aware that some electors will prefer to vote by post or nominate a proxy and we included details for applying for these in the household leaflet. Electors are already responding and are setting up postal votes now. Details will also be included on the poll cards which will be sent out at the end of March and we will continue to publicise the different voting options as we get nearer to the election.

Residents that we have identified as being in the 'vulnerable' category are being contacted to consider setting up a postal vote/or nominate a proxy on their behalf. We are targeting these electors prior to the distribution of poll cards, to encourage applications to be made as early as possible.

The government is also introducing secondary legislation to extend the emergency proxy provision to cover electors who are required to isolate due to Covid-19, which we will publicise once this comes into effect."

11. Question from Councillor N Martin

"Does the portfolio holder have any explanation as to why the number of affordable homes delivered by the Council in 2020/1 is so low?"

Reply from Councillor D Harlow

"Thank you for the question. The team has been working hard to identify sites for affordable housing and to secure additional grant funding to allow these developments to proceed. However, new schemes cannot progress until they have been granted a planning consent. Unfortunately, the vast majority of larger developments have been refused by the Planning Committee in the last year. We only have the delivery of Hale End Court, Broadoaks, Sheerwater Purple phase and the temporary accommodation at Waterman House forecast for completion in 2021/22, giving us an extra 170 affordable homes. We need many more. Council Officers are having to resort to acquiring homes on the open market to meet the shortfall in certain types of properties when there is a very urgent need, as we have no other options.

If planning applications continue to be refused, and/or developers stop bringing forward development proposals, due to onerous and unrealistic expectations of the Planning Committee, we will fail to adequately house many of our residents and fall foul of not meeting our agreed housing target in the Development Plan Document (DPD). The worst case scenario would be that planning decisions could be taken out of our hands and/or we will be forced to build on green belt land."

12. Question from Councillor J E Bond

"Have the effects related to the recent news about the sale and closure of Debenhams and other High Street stores been fully incorporated into the modelling behind the latest financial figures?"

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

"The financial forecasts are an assessment of recoverable rents at the point of preparing the budget, based on the latest information at that stage.

The current economic climate is incredibly difficult for businesses in particular in the retail and hospitality sectors many of which have been completely closed for much of the past year. Forecasts are therefore constantly moving as the restrictions change and business decisions are made. They are the Council's best judgement on the current and future position. The Debenhams store in Woking is in the Peacocks centre. The Head Lease rental received by the Council is not affected by Debenhams or any other Peacocks stores closing. However, the success of the town centre requires an attractive offering and the Peacocks centre is part of this. The Council will need to

consider what can be done to manage the future of the town centre vacant space including that in the Peacocks.”

13. Question from Councillor J E Bond

“The Investment Programme details provided in the Executive meeting of February 4th showed that the largest change was a £900,000 reduction in the Flood Prevention schemes. A later list of the suspended projects does not show this figure and does not identify which flood schemes are to be suspended, so where does the £900,000 come from?”

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

“The February 2020 Investment Programme included revenue costs relating to the Byfleet flood scheme (£400k) and the Hoe Valley scheme (£500k). The timing of these works has slipped (due to Covid/project work suspended). These costs are now included within the 2021/22 figures on the schedule of temporarily suspended projects. Otherwise the figures and timing remains the same for the Byfleet scheme, the Hoe Valley estimates have been slipped a full year and include an underspend from 2019/20.”

14. Question from Councillor J E Bond

“In the Executive of February 4th, a study on the infrastructure requirements of the East of Woking was put forward, when will this come to full Council for a discussion on the details and a final decision?”

Reply from Councillor G W Elson

“The Study is due to be completed by end of May 2021. Given the lead time for Executive Reports, the intention is to report to the 15 July 2021 meeting of the Executive and Council on 29 July 2021.”

15. Question from Councillor J E Bond

“In the Executive of January 14th, the recruitment of Independent Directors of Subsidiaries was put forward, when will this come to full Council for a discussion on the details and a final decision?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The Executive approved the arrangements for the recruitment of the Independent Directors which was due to start last week but due to the COVID Mass Testing has been delayed and will start later in the month. The Council will consider recommendations about the appointment of Directors at its meeting on the 8 April 2021.”

**Date Published:**

10 February 2021

REPORT ENDS