

**NOTICE OF MOTION – CLLR T AZIZ – PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON HOUSING
INFRASTRUCTURE FUND (HIF) SCHEME**

Executive Summary

At its meeting on 8 April 2021, the Council referred the following Notice of Motion to the Executive.

Councillor T Aziz

“While we fully believe in development, improvement and raising Woking’s profile it seems odd and contrary to democratic principles that we do not consult public on major plans.

It strikes most odd that the council consulted on building 2180 homes, as in the DPD, but did not consult on 5000+ homes in the town center and simply wishes to adopt the HIF scheme.

This motion calls for:

- 1) The HIF scheme housing to be put to public consultation with full honest disclosures.
- 2) The council cease to make any further promises on HIF to any bodies until such consultation is complete.
- 3) The council re assess the scheme’s housing targets under new market conditions, (especially post COVID) public opinion and if needed is open to renegotiations with central government.

Officer Comment

“Woking Borough Council has secured a grant of £95 million from central Government agency, Homes England, which will finance the Victoria Arch scheme, the total cost of which is £115 million. Network Rail are a key partner in the project and are committing £10m through match funding/cost project savings to the works with the balance of the costs being funded from developer contributions. The A320 Guildford Road is the main arterial road through Woking, and because of the restrictions imposed by Victoria Arch railway bridge and the historic road layout, the area creates a pinch-point for traffic causing significant congestion. It has been our long held aspiration to address these issues by upgrading the highways configuration and widening the Victoria Arch bridge to benefit all users and unlock development sites for much needed town centre housing.

To address the three points set out in the proposed motion:

- 1) The Council has agreed to undertake a masterplan process for the town centre and by doing so has committed to consult with residents, businesses and partners about future housing development. The development of a masterplan is underway and will form a key element of the Council’s Big Conversation with all sectors of the community so that we can have an informed debate about the future of the town and provide clear planning guidance for individual planning applications as they come forward. A report on the masterplan process will be presented to the Executive in July ahead of the commencement of engagement with residents.
- 2) There is no requirement for further promises in relation to HIF. The Council has updated Homes England with its intention to secure a masterplan to guide future housing

Notice of Motion – Cllr T Aziz – Public Consultation on Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) Scheme

development and in order to use its best endeavors to secure investment in the town including investment in new homes. The Leader has made it clear in her Leader's speech on the 24 May 2021 that the masterplan is an opportunity to listen and learn and challenge assumptions and ask whether we could do things differently. The masterplan will be an opportunity to set out the background including the strategic need to focus development in the town centre and that she hopes to find a consensus going forward which may include alternative courses of action.

- 3) The Local Plan sets out the Borough's housing requirement and establishes a strategy to develop higher densities within the town centre instead of allocating further undeveloped land and land within the Green Belt to meet housing needs. The housing allocation in the Local Plan is not a maximum and further and additional development can take place subject to a development's compliance with the policies of the Local Plan and suite of adopted and relevant planning guidance. Securing the HIF grant unlocks the development of the town centre given the constraint of the current infrastructure but it is not setting a new Local Plan target.

Woking, with the near completion of the Victoria Place development, is transforming itself and by doing so revitalising and investing in the town centre so that it can compete with other centres. In order to be a thriving place and not a dormitory town, residential, commercial, retail, leisure and other services, including medical and community space needs to be provided in a safe, attractive and welcoming centre. The Council has had a number of debates on what is an appropriate development height and townscape for the town. There are differences of opinion on this and it is recognised that residents, businesses, investors and many other sectors of the community need to be able to see a vision for the town centre and how individual development proposals fit within that vision.

The decision to enter into an agreement to secure the £95 million was formally approved by Council in February 2020 and the project has commenced in line with its project plan. The focus of the project has been to gain ownership of the triangle site to the south of the bridge and significant progress has been made as has progress to develop detailed plans for the replacement bridge including reviewing the designs to ensure that utilities are adequately accommodated. The HIF Oversight Panel will continue to receive regular reports on the progress of the project. The project has drawn down circa £29m of grant and has committed to a further £6m of spend. Withdrawing from the project and the agreed contract with Homes England is likely to require the Council to repay the grant used to date. The project and scale of funding is a once in a generation opportunity which resolves a long standing bottleneck and delivers improved vehicular, cycle and pedestrian improvements."

Background Papers: None.

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