

QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 31 MARCH 2022

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 E Nicholson

“Regarding underpasses, there has been noticeable flooding reported after heavy rain around the cycle storage on the town side of West Byfleet. Will the council be looking into this flooding.”

Reply from Councillor K Davis

“The responsibility for the underpass is with South West Railway. Officers have made enquiries with SWR with an offer to work with them to determine any potential solutions. Should there be any progress to report we will contact the Councillor directly.”

2. Question from Councillor W Forster

“As part of the opening of Victoria Square, the Council did not charge for parking in its car parks. This decision clearly helped encourage people to Woking town centre.

Please will the Council agree to review its parking charges to maximise the numbers of people visiting the town? For example, please will the Council consider offering the first one or two hours of parking free?”

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

“The opening of Victoria Place is a major and significant milestone in the regeneration of the town centre following the Council’s investment in the town. Town centre parking charges were agreed as part of the Budget for 22/23 in the Autumn 2022 and are an important component of the Council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy as they secure funds for the Council to support both its investment into regeneration and ongoing vital services for the benefit of the residents of Woking Borough. The Council will continue to review its parking tariff to ensure that the offer remains competitive.”

3. Question from Councillor W Forster

“The last few years have been very tough for retail, including here in Woking. Please can the Council provide an update on filling the empty shopping units in the new Victoria Square development, the Peacocks Centre, Wolsey Place and in Commercial Way?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The new Victoria Place development provides a further 186,000 sq ft of retail space boasting a new M&S 50,000 sq ft store. The centre has been successful with 93% of the retail space already being let including Skechers, Moss Bros, The Gym Group, Gail’s Bakery. The presence of these big names will inevitably drive further interest with a number of retailers expressing interest in the remaining shops.

Currently within Wolsey Place and along Commercial Way there are three vacant shops: 1 & 24 Wolsey Walk and 51 Commercial Way. The Council are close to agreeing terms on two of those units with an expected completion within the next month.

There are a number of vacant units within the Peacocks Centre, but the opening of Victoria Place will serve to increase footfall through the centre and increase demand for shops leases.”

4. Question from Councillor E Nicholson

“With the creation and opening of the fantastic indoor and outdoor spaces around Victoria Place, Woking now has the opportunity to utilise these spaces for the community.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted in their report “The social value of public space” that these spaces can play a vital role in the social and economic life of communities.

The success of a particular public space relies on how people adopt and use the space, i.e., people make places.

With this in mind.

1. Will Woking Borough Council consider conducting people flow monitoring pilot to understand the demographics of the people using (or misusing) the space and how they are using it?
2. Consider a programme of both indoor and outdoor activities and events over the coming months, such concepts as pop-up open-air markets, jubilee activities, various buskers, circus skills etc to offer entertainment and to attract residents and shoppers to the area
3. Finally does Woking have a busking code of conduct similar to other councils or town spaces conduct policy?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“In answer to your three questions;

1. Victoria Place monitors footfall on a daily basis, and will be including Henry Plaza soon. Over the coming months as the centre settles into its operation and new stores and facilities open, including the entertainment complex, Woking Superbowl, and performing arts academy, Italia Conte, it will be important to understand how the space is being used and by whom and what actions, if necessary, could be taken to ensure the whole community feels engaged.
2. Now that the centre is open it’s important that we develop a clear strategy for the animation of the town centre which maximises on the investment the Council has made resulting in the opening of Victoria Place. Currently the Council has plans in place for celebrating the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee in the town centre between 2 and 5 June 2022. It is also the Council’s intention to attract street entertainment to the open and closed spaces in the town centre including, artisan and farmer’s markets, and street performers. We will consider any appropriate activity that will draw visitors to the area.
3. The Council has a Public Realm Usage Policy which is due to be updated following the completion of the public realm space of Victoria Place and is managed by colleagues from Victoria Place. A supplementary document is also available, The Street Entertainment Guide which advises on busking. Both documents are available on Woking Borough Council’s website - [Public Realm Usage Policy | Woking Borough Council.](#)”

5. Question from Councillor E Nicholson

“Woking has a customer code which is listed on the public facing website, outlining customer service standards that the council expect from officers when dealing with public enquiries.

On behalf of Mount Hermon residents who have raised concerns around the length of time it can take for Woking Borough Council to respond to queries and with reference to mention of erratic council responses to queries highlighted in the recent council roadshows;

Can the Council consider introducing performance monitoring for any breaches of customer service standards within a given timeframe by monitoring these through the overview and scrutiny committee green book monitoring?"

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

"Thank you Councillor Nicholson for your question and suggestion for establishing performance monitoring against customer service standards which was mentioned by residents during the Resident Engagement Roadshows and is already planned to be implemented as part of the Council's Digital Transformation Programme.

In respect of the concerns from Mount Hermon residents, if you forward me some details I will look into the specifics and provide a response."

6. Question from Councillor A Kirby

"Legality of borrowing to fund Revenue Account

Woking Borough Council has a legal responsibility to balance its Revenue Account each financial year. To do this it is currently dependent on 'loan repayments' – almost entirely from its own companies, effectively another arm of the Council.

These owned assets of the Council themselves generate a negative combined cashflow, and have done so for a number of years as made clear in their statutory accounts. This ongoing situation has now even been accepted to some extent by the Executive where it is described in recent documents as: "*drawing down further loan facility to cover these losses and refinance existing loan arrangements through approved loan facility*". Such repayments are in fact recycled further borrowing.

As a result of this circular borrowing route, a total of £36.7 million in so-called 'investment income' to WBC, just in this financial year, appears in fact to be indirectly funded from borrowing claimed to be for capital projects. This borrowing is taken out by WBC from the Public Works Loan Board, sent to another arm of the Council in the form of WBC-owned companies, and returned to WBC – but despite taking a complex route, the Council's Revenue Account is part funded by borrowing.

What external advice has been taken to ensure this is legal? Assuming this is the case, on what basis is this deemed consistent with the terms of the Local Government Act 1988? I sincerely hope that Council can be reassured on this vital point."

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

"This approach has been audited through the Council's statutory accounts over many years. The EY work on the comprehensive statement recognised that projects of this type may take many years to break even.

Government Statutory Investment and Minimum Revenue Provision Guidance allows for local authorities to make loans to group companies and this is a well-established route being used by many local authorities. This Council has consistently agreed it on a cross-party basis over many years.

No independent legal advice has been taken on this approach. It is not clear to which element of the Local Government Act 1988 – much of which has been superseded by later acts – the question refers. I am happy to explore any specific legal points with relevant senior officers subsequent to the meeting."

7. Question from Councillor N Martin

"Will the portfolio holder confirm that the Council will be applying to the £450m Local EV Infrastructure Fund to boost our EV charging provision?"

Reply from Councillor K Davis

“On Friday 25 March 2022, the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) launched the [Local EV Infrastructure Fund](#) (LEVI), alongside its [EV Infrastructure Strategy](#). LEVI is designed to encourage large-scale, ambitious and commercially sustainable projects that use significant private sector investment. To test the design of the new scheme, OZEV has launched a £10 million pilot competition, which is expected to fund between three and eight projects. More information is available on the Energy Saving Trust website and a complete overview can be found on the [OZEV website](#). Officers are attending a session about LEVI in early April to find out more, after which a view can be taken as to the relevance and opportunity of this funding for Woking borough.

In parallel, the Energy Saving Trust will also be continuing to administer the On Street Residential Charging Scheme (ORCS) for a further year. £20m will be available - the eligibility criteria and grant funding cap for 2022/23 will be confirmed soon.

WBC recently received £166,090 through the ORCS scheme towards the installation of 70 charging points in the new Victoria Place development. Officers are continuing to look at further bid opportunities under this scheme.

Additionally countywide opportunities for enhanced EV infrastructure are being discussed with Surrey County Council through the countywide Surrey EV Forum.”

8. Question from Councillor J Brown

“Does the Leader of the Council join me in welcoming the opening of Victoria Place on March 23?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“Thank you for your question Cllr Brown. I am delighted that Victoria Place Woking has opened to residents and visitors alike. I hope that all Elected Members have now had the opportunity to visit and agreed that it was worth the wait.

To begin with I would like to take this opportunity to thank the project team, who I know have been working tirelessly to achieve our opening date. I know there is a lot more hard work to come.

We set out to breathe new life into the town centre with our ambitious transformation and I believe we have achieved this. I'm proud to welcome the likes of M&S, Gail's Bakery, Moss Bros and Skechers who share our vision for a thriving retail and visitor destination.

The public's reaction has been overwhelming. Total number of visitors to Victoria Place in the week commencing 21 March 2022 was 173,127, with the busiest day Saturday which saw an uplift of 48.5% on the previous Saturday. It was a pleasure to see our Woking Town Centre thriving and our car parks full again. No doubt our offer of free parking encouraged many to visit, some for the first time in a while.

During the opening weekend, all four of the new retailers reported strong sales, particularly on Saturday. So much so that M&S reported concern of diminishing stock levels in their food hall, whilst Skechers surpassed their sales target. This positivity must be infectious, as many other retailers in Woking benefited from this uplift in footfall and the boost to our local economy. Body Shop reported topping their sales league on Saturday for the first time in three years.

All of this, and we still have more to offer. Apartment rentals at The Marches will shortly commence, which once let, will see hundreds of residents enjoy modern town centre living. Whilst entertainment complex, Woking Superbowl, and performing arts academy, Italia Conte, are both set to open their doors this summer. And finally, the four star Hilton Hotel will welcome guests to Woking from autumn.

This really is the start of an exciting era for the Borough and is a significant milestone on our journey to making Woking one of, if not the most, exciting and vibrant boroughs in

the south east.”

9. Question from Councillor S Dorsett

“Does the portfolio holder agree with the claim made by the opposition that the independent auditor EY did not endorse the council’s finances?”

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

“The work commissioned from EY was for a Comprehensive Statement of the Council’s financial position and support for the Medium Term Financial Strategy providing insights to inform financial planning and resilience. EY were not acting as an auditor neither were they asked to endorse the Council’s finances.

EY acknowledged the focus we have placed on regeneration and the alignment of our financial strategies to achieve this. Most importantly the comprehensive statement did not reveal anything unknown to us and it provided assurances around the Council’s asset valuations approach and short term cash and investment positions.

I maintain that whilst our borrowing is considerable, the Council remains financially strong. The Council has assets valued greater than liabilities and its reserves are sufficient to manage short-term financial shocks.

The review did raise points around our exposure to risk in certain markets and emphasised a number of issues that the Council have immediately given increased focus and attention to.”

10. Question from Councillor S Dorsett

“Could the portfolio holder update the Council on what work has been done to support refugees from Ukraine in the Borough?”

Reply from Councillor D Harlow

“The towns and villages of Woking are proud of the diverse communities that chose to make our Borough their home. Our thoughts and feelings of compassion are with the people of Ukraine, and their families and friends that live in our Borough. In an act of unity and support, Woking Borough Council has joined government organisations in the UK and around the world to display the blue and yellow flag of Ukraine, above the Civic Offices in Woking.

The Council has a strong reputation working with partners to provide support to refugees, which you will be aware of through our actions of providing homes for five Afghan families and 50 Syrian families. A meeting with Ukrainians and community groups has been held this week to plan our localised welfare support offer. Our website is being continually updated with the latest information.

The Council will also play a vital role in supporting the Government’s “Homes for Ukraine” scheme, particularly conducting property and safeguarding checks to sponsor households and facilitating payments to sponsors and Ukrainian arrivals. There are currently 47 Woking households who have found matches and we are arranging visits as soon as possible.

This week, Housing and Communities Officers hosted an engagement event with local community support representatives, volunteers and Ukrainians. The Ukrainians shared their stories and experiences, and advised about their priorities and important cultural information. Working together with the Council and existing support groups including CAW, The Lighthouse, Woking Mind, the DWP and Surrey Care Trust Youth Hub, plus many local faith groups, sponsoring households and Ukrainian residents will be able to access advice and guidance for a range of needs at the hub in The Lighthouse. Volunteer Woking are processing applications from Russian and Ukrainian speaking volunteers and Housing Officers have already started visiting households for the security and suitability checks.

Members have all been sent weekly email updates from the Director of Housing on progress and will continue to be updated regularly.”

11. Question from Councillor R Mohammed

“Does the portfolio holder join me in welcoming the news that the housing support fund has now been doubled to £1bn?”

Reply from Councillor D Harlow

“The Council welcomes the news that there will be further financial support to residents to help with the rising costs of fuel and food. As yet, we do not know how much money has been allocated to Surrey and in turn, to Woking residents. We await further news.

You will see in the Woking for all Strategy our priority to be a Borough with a strong voice and influence with government and business to achieve the best outcomes for the Borough. We therefore welcome this increase in funding and will seek to represent the interests of the Borough in both attracting a share of this funding and evidencing that we can be trusted to deliver the best outcomes from its use.”

12. Question from Councillor C Rana

“Would the portfolio holder provide an update to the Council on when the town centre Masterplan will be agreed?”

Reply from Councillor G Elson

“The outline timetable is for a Draft of the Masterplan to be considered by the Local Development Framework Working Group by end of May/early June and the Executive at its meeting on 16 June 2022. A further series of community and stakeholder engagements and consultations will begin following agreement by the Executive.

The Neighbourhood Forums, local residents, Residents Associations, neighbouring authorities, local businesses and statutory consultees will all be positively and actively engaged. The Council is keen to make sure that the Masterplan is ‘our plan’, one that all key stakeholders have a stake in its preparation and delivery of its outcomes. The outcome of the consultation will inform a final version of the Masterplan. It is anticipated that the Masterplan will be completed in September 2022.”

13. Question from Councillor D Roberts

“In September 2021, a resident raised a written objection with the Council auditors to the unaudited statement of accounts for the year ended 31 March 2021. The council were copied in on the letter which expressed concern that the Council is continuing to under-provide for Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP). The objection, suggests, that MRP is not being calculated in a prudent manner and that, if it has to be corrected retrospectively, could severely impact the Council’s overall finances and potentially its ability to set a balanced budget in future years. The same resident raised similar concerns for the prior year, 2020.

When will the Council be responding and what will be the key points of that response?”

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

“We maintain that the Council takes a prudent approach to the calculation of its MRP.

The guidance from government has clearly been drafted to enable local circumstances and discretion to play a part in determining a prudent provision. It is ultimately the statutory duty of the Authority to determine what presents a prudent provision and this is agreed by Full Council each year.

Furthermore, the MTFs report that has been recommended to this evenings meeting of Council outlines the Council’s response to the recent government “consultation on changes to the capital framework; minimum revenue provision” and the anticipated next

steps from government.

In respect of the audit of council accounts:

The audit of the 2019/20 accounts is in progress. In order for the external auditors to respond to the 2020 objection to the accounts, they have requested a legal opinion from the Council in respect of its Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy. The Council is currently seeking this opinion to provide to the external auditors so they can take account of this in their response to the objection.

On completion of the 2019/20 audit the external auditors commence the audit of the 2020/21 accounts and will address the September 2021 objection as part of their audit work.”

14. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“How much revenue has Woking market generated for the Council in each of the last 5 years?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The market opened in the autumn of 2014 and was originally operated through a management agreement with the income generated offset by the operational, management and promotional costs. The Council took over direct management during 2018/19 and have been working to improve the financial performance. In 2019/20, the first full year of the new arrangements, the market generated £258k income. In 2020/21 trading was significantly impacted by the Covid pandemic and income reduced to £176k. Total income for 2021/22 is forecast to have returned to pre pandemic levels, generating £262k. It is envisaged that, with the opening of Victoria Place and the market now an integral part of the integrated shopping offer, performance will continue to improve.”

15. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“Does the Council have the necessary resources and skills in place to follow through on recommendations from EY in the MTFs?”

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

“The Chief Executive reported to the last meeting of the Executive her proposal for changes to strengthen corporate leadership in the Council. This proposal recognised the need for the Council to strengthen its commercial and financial capability to manage the significant investment made in the Borough and the Council’s investment and commercial portfolio.

It equally recognised that some of the Council’s working practices and the structure of the organisation will need to change to take forward the opportunities and address the challenges that have been identified in the new Corporate Strategy (Woking for all Strategy) and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).”

16. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“EY’s ‘Assessment of Medium Term Financial Resilience’ included in the MTFs indicates 10 areas of high or medium significance risk. Most notably future requirements for MRP, the Council’s use of 80% of reserves and the viability of Thamesway Central Milton Keynes. Are this number of risks usual for local authorities assessed by EY?”

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

“It is not for me to comment on the work EY have done with other local authorities. I am grateful to EY for the work they have done with the Council’s finance team and the experience and insights they have brought from their work across local government.”

17. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“The MTFs proposes that Woking Council borrows money to buy the new Red car park at a cost of £58 million. This is the car park that Woking Council borrowed money to construct as part of the £700 million Victoria Square project. Councillors have been told the car park has to be bought so the Council can receive parking revenue from it. How many years of parking revenue will it take to pay back the £58m?”

Reply from Councillor S Ashall

“The financial model for Victoria Place has always included the sale of the car park asset to the Council. This provides a capital receipt which is used by the company to cover operating losses. The Council’s Investment Programme has included both the loan facility and the acquisition of the car park which will be managed alongside the Council’s other town centre car parks. The amount of time it takes for the parking revenues to pay back a total of £58m depends on how much those revenues are worth.”

18. Question from Councillor C Rana

“Would the portfolio holder provide an update to the Council on when the Lakers building works in Goldsworth Park would be completed and what exact facilities will be provided inside the building?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The Lakers Building is not a WBC owned building. This is a matter for Surrey County Council and Officers have asked the County for an update on the current position which will be shared with Councillor Rana once received.”

19. Question from Councillor W Forster

“Following the reduction in funds for the project to renovate and extend the Old Woking Community Centre, please can the Council confirm what changes in the plans have been made to the original extension plans to make savings and how will this impact the proposed division of the site?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“To respond to the reduced availability of funds for the project at Old Woking Community Centre and following ongoing discussion with all stakeholders, the two-storey extension proposed for the north of the building that contained a community hall on the ground floor and two classrooms on the first floor has been removed. As such the impact upon the division of the site is neutral as the balance of space lost is the same for both users.”

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REPORT ENDS