

QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 13 OCTOBER 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 Kevin Davis

“Being a blue corridor, the Basingstoke Canal is vital to the borough’s environmental credentials and is a key component to delivering the Natural Woking biodiversity and green infrastructure strategy. Most of the canal is a SSSI and is a significant resource for recreation to many residents as it runs directly through the borough. It also provides economic benefits to the town with the Basingstoke Canal Society trip boat ‘Kitty’ operating from Woking Wharf.

The fees that Woking Borough Council pays to the Basingstoke Canal Authority for its upkeep are very small considering that 11 kilometres or roughly a fifth of the canal passes through our borough.

Surrey Heath Borough Council have never paid their full contribution to the upkeep of the canal, and now Rushmoor Borough Council has decided to unilaterally put the canal at risk by deciding to stop making its fair contribution. Will the portfolio holder confirm that there are no plans for Woking Borough Council to stop or lower the contributions made to the Basingstoke Canal Authority?”

Reply from Councillor Rob Leach

“The Basingstoke Canal Authority was formed in 1996, bringing together the counties, boroughs and parishes through which the canal runs. Each borough pays an annual fee to support the authority, based on the length of canal within the borough. Disappointingly other councils pay less than their fair share. As Councillor Davis has highlighted, the Basingstoke Canal is an important natural and recreation resource for local residents and for wildlife, running through the heart of Woking town and the wider borough.

Woking Borough Council has long supported the upkeep of Basingstoke Canal through making its full annual contribution. We will of course through our membership of the Basingstoke Canal Joint Management Committee take forward discussions to find ways in which efficiencies can be made given the financial challenges we face as an authority.”

2. Question from Councillor Gary Elson

“The Borough’s Housing delivery is not keeping pace with the annual minimum target of 292 new homes per annum as set out in the Core Strategy. This has been confirmed by the publication of the government’s 2021 Housing Delivery Test which showed that Woking scored only 78% in meeting its planned housing requirement.

Please can the Portfolio Holder update members on any response received so far from the government following submission of the ‘Action Plan’ in July this year.”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“The Government’s Housing Delivery Test (HDT) is an annual measurement of how the Council is performing against its planned housing requirement of 292 dwellings per year, and this is measured and published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Local authorities not meeting 95% of their requirement

are required to prepare an action plan which may also include identifying additional land to improve the prospect of achieving planned housing requirement. As Cllr Elson knows, the delivery of housing has slowed considerably over recent years, and it is one of the challenges of this administration to reverse that. While Officers consider the calculation published by the Government to be lower than the level of housing actually delivered at 88%, the requirement to prepare an action plan remains the same, as it is indisputable that it is below 95%. We believe the proposed Town Centre Masterplan will end the deadlock of many oversized applications being refused by the Planning Committee, resulting in more reasonable applications coming forward and being approved, ultimately resulting in more homes being delivered. Overall housing delivery for 2022-23 is on track to be above our annual target.”

3. Question from Councillor Steve Dorsett

“Council premises or any Council owned premises should never be used by any protest or political campaigning groups.

Therefore, can the Deputy Leader explain why on 3rd September Extinction Rebellion were able to use premises owned by the council to hold a 'workshop'.

Then, on 30th September as part of The Great Big Green Week, a meeting was held on the premises by Make Votes Matter, making the argument for PR voting, to replace First Past the Post.

The Deputy Leader spoke at this meeting, presumably as a way to bolster his motion that we will debate tonight. He even announced on Twitter that he had spoken at said meeting.

This is clearly a misuse of Council premises, and has potentially brought the work of the Council into disrepute. Both Extinction Rebellion and Make Votes Matter are political entities, and I also question what a Proportional Representation campaign has to do with being part of a Great Big Green Week.

Can the Deputy Leader please explain this situation?”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“Both meetings which Councillor Dorset refers to took place at the WeAct shop in Mercia Walk. The shop unit is owned by the Council and there is a licence to occupy between the Council and WeAct. The licence does not prohibit the occupier from holding meetings and events and there is no sanction that the Council needs to take against the licence holder.”

4. Question from Councillor Adam Kirby

“In May the former leader of the Council received a letter from central government, confirming that the affordability of debt built up under her administration should be seen as a potential area of concern. What is the latest and when do we expect to hear from DLUHC?”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“Council officers have had 3 (three) sessions with DLUHC officers where we have provided them with an extensive amount of information and responded to all of their information requests.

We have proposed and offered to DLUHC to host a workshop with them on site in Woking at their earliest availability. The purpose of the meeting is to show the regeneration activity on the Victoria Square (retail, residential, leisure and creative sector) scheme and Sheerwater (social housing estate) scheme and make available the most senior officers that have the lead responsibility for these schemes. This

would enable us to share the operational and financing data in more detail and with greater context.

DLUHC officers have accepted our proposal and we are awaiting details of their availability.

We are now waiting for feedback from DLUHC following the discussions we have held to date. We anticipate this feedback in the coming weeks.

I am not able at this stage to inform you of the details that will be contained within the feedback, we will have to wait until we receive it to brief you on these details.

I believe, through our discussions with DLUHC, that they recognise the Council is aware of its financial position and through our Medium-Term Financial Strategy and the arrangements we are putting in place around company governance, we are already taking prudent and responsible actions to get the Council's finances on to a sustainable footing. To strengthen these actions I am already in discussions with the County Council to work with us and assist us to move with greater pace and certainty, as well as recruiting to permanent posts in our finance team."

5. Question from Councillor Adam Kirby

"I was pleased to see that last week, the Council started consulting the public on refurbishing a play area in my ward in Horsell Moor.

Please can the Portfolio Holder for Leisure confirm when this play area will be built, if approved by the consultation?"

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

"Subject to the consultation feedback being supportive of the proposal and the scheme not requiring any significant changes, we would anticipate installation during March 2023."

6. Question from Councillor James Sanderson

"Please can the Leader of the Council update councillors following the recent Woking Cost of Living Summit? Please can the Leader of the Council confirm which councillors and organisations attended the summit?"

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

"The Cost of Living Summit had a positive turnout of nearly 70 attendees. Those that attended from the Council included the Leader and Deputy Leader, Cllr Nicholson the Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing, Cllr Akberali, Cllr Aziz and Cllr Raja. Officers included representation from Communities, representing Health and Wellbeing, Community Development, Communications, Revenue and Benefits, Volunteer Woking and Business Liaison.

Wider representation included the Lighthouse, Surrey Coalition of Disabled People, Woking Environment Action, Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum, Welcome Church, Thamesway, Christians Against Poverty (CAP), Police, Surrey County Council, Freedom Leisure, DWP, Citizen's Advice, Ashford and St. Peter's Hospital, Sheerwater Together, Foodwise, Woking Foodbank and Knaphill Community Fridge.

I was pleased to provide a verbal update to last week's Executive meeting, highlighting the new or revived relationships that have emerged from the summit and the collaboration that has already started between local groups offering access to free or low cost food. A full report including attendees, an overview of the discussions and the action plan will be presented to the Executive in November."

7. Question from Councillor Louise Morales

“I’ve spoken to many of my local residents who are delighted with the Council’s reduced parking charges offer in Victoria Place.

Please can the Council confirm if it has had any positive feedback from local businesses or residents?”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“The parking trial for Saturdays based on £3 for 3 hours commenced at the start of September alongside further town centre activities and events to encourage visitor numbers and support local traders.

Anecdotally, Woking businesses have provided a positive response to the car parking pilot. Retailers, restaurants and leisure operators in or near Victoria Place have seen a rise in footfall and turnover on Saturdays and have attributed this to the lower parking charge.

The full results from the trial will be reported to the November Executive meeting where a decision will need to be taken on whether to continue with the tariff from the New Year.”

8. Question from Councillor Liam Lyons

“I saw that the Borough Council has submitted a bid to the Government’s Levelling Up Fund for £3.8 million to support the development of a health and community campus in Sheerwater.

Please can the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder say if the Council has heard about this bid following submitting it? When will the Council hear the results of the bid?”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“The Council has contacted the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities to enquire about this. At the time of writing we are awaiting feedback on our application.”

9. Question from Councillor James Sanderson

“In March the government announced an extension to the Household Support Fund whereby local councils would receive additional funding to be distributed by the end of September.

Would the Leader please advise the amount received by the Council, what arrangements were made to distribute the funds and how many recipients benefited?”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“The Council received £201,187 for the second tranche of the Housing Support Fund. In this round the stipulation was to focus on pensioners requiring financial assistance in the Borough. The funds were allocated prior to the end of September.

The Borough has 1,368 pensioners who are in receipt of Council Tax support. These residents received payments in cash or directly paying bills, £85 per eligible household. The process was organised in partnership with the Post Office who provided a robust administration process that made the distribution accessible for residents. A total of £119,332 was used in this process including administration costs.

The rest of the fund was distributed to vulnerable individuals and families through Citizen's Advice Woking and the Council's Housing, Independent Living and Family Services teams, as follows:

- Citizen's Advice Woking: £49,000 distributed to 163 residents; £3,000 administration fee (Total £52,000)
- Independent Living team: £12,200 to 122 residents
- Housing/Family Services team: £17,655 distributed to 145 families

Allocations were cross-referenced on a central spreadsheet to avoid duplication.

Total: £201,187 distributed to 1,798 residents.

One elderly resident wrote to the Council specifically to state, "*Just a quick feedback point that this is very much appreciated and will ease a little of my worries*".

10. Question from Councillor Ayesha Azad

"Many residents, especially children, look forward to switching on of the Christmas lights in the town centre, can the portfolio holder confirm this hugely popular custom will be continuing under the new administration."

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

"The Council is holding a Community Centric Christmas Event on 24th November 2022, which will be a family and community event utilising community groups and school choirs. The Christmas Tree lights will be turned on at the event. Given the cost of living crisis facing us we are putting an emphasis on no or low cost activities for Christmas, including free visits to Father Christmas for our youngest residents. We are hoping to have local choirs in the Town Centre too."

11. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

"With local businesses in Woking Town Centre facing many challenges in the run up to Christmas, what actions will the council be taking to support businesses and increase footfall?"

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

"It will be the first Christmas that Victoria Place will be open together with the Woking Superbowl and the increase in students in the Town Centre is also a welcome addition, we expect these additions to increase footfall considerably over the festive period.

The Council parking trial for Saturdays based on £3 for 3 hours commenced at the start of September - alongside further town centre activities and events to encourage visitor number and support local traders. The full results from the trial will be reported to the November Executive meeting where a decision will be taken on whether to continue with the tariff.

The Council continue to offer the reduced rate of £1.50 after 6pm to support our hospitality trade and evening footfall.

The Council promotes seasonal events, such as the winter ice rink, and also manages the Celebrate Woking website diary, on which community Christmas events can be listed free of charge. A Christmas market is also planned for December with dates to be announced shortly.

We are holding a Community Centric Christmas Event on 24th November 2022 to drive footfall into the town centre, utilising local Community Groups and schools to ensure this is a family event.

The Council continues to work alongside our business partners to ensure that we are responsive to local business needs.”

12. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“In the previous three years, how many developers have claimed a self-build exemption making the development exempt from CIL contributions?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“Thank you Cllr Davis for your three questions seeking detailed information on Community Infrastructure Levy exemptions and disqualifying events. Systems are in place to ensure that Community Infrastructure Levy payments, when required, are collected from developers and to ensure that action is taken where payments are overdue. Your question requires some analysis from the planning team which is currently being investigated and I will be pleased to provide a full and comprehensive response which is deserving of the question as soon as this work is complete.”

13. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“Is there a process in place to ensure that disqualifying events are captured and CIL contributions are subsequently collected?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“Please see my answer to Question 12 above.”

14. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“How many CIL disqualifying events have occurred in the previous three years and have the CIL contributions been collected?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“Please see my answer to Question 12 above.”

15. Question from Councillor Josh Brown

“Flood Alleviation is an important issue affecting residents of Byfleet and across Woking.

Can the Portfolio Holder reaffirm the Council’s commitment to ensure that Flood Alleviation remains a top priority on the Council’s agenda?”

Reply from Councillor Rob Leach

“The Council’s support for the Byfleet Flood Alleviation Scheme was reconfirmed in June 2022 in the Woking for All supplementary strategy 2022 to 2023. This stated: ‘Commit the Council to fund its agreed share of the flood relief works in Byfleet and work with the Environment Agency and Surrey County Council to support the delivery of a viable scheme’.

The project is led by the Environment Agency with input from partner organisations, including Woking Borough Council. As Members will be aware, the Council has a current vacancy in the role of Flood Risk and Drainage Engineer. Recruitment for this post will commence in the coming weeks. In the meantime, priority projects such as this are being supported by other colleagues within the property, engineering and green infrastructure teams.”

16. Question from Councillor Gary Elson

“Surrey County Council has advised of its intention to give notice to withdraw from its four Jointly constituted Committees to expire on or before 30th April 2023 one of which is Woking Borough Council.

One of the functions of the WBC / SCC Joint Committee was to determine and approve applications for the use of local CIL allocated monies to fund local projects over £10000 with a Task Group set up to consider and approve those applications that are below this amount.

Please can the Leader advise what arrangements are in place to ensure that these community applications can continue to be received and determined in a timely and appropriate manner?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“On 26 September 2022 the Leader of Surrey County Council wrote to the Leader of Woking Borough Council in relation to the Joint Committee arrangements. The letter confirmed that, as part of Surrey County Council’s review of local arrangements, it has removed the executive highway functions; the remaining decisions – for libraries opening hours, community safety, youth, and Public Rights of Way – and all advisory functions are proposed to be removed this autumn. This will in effect mean that Surrey County Council Joint Committees would be disestablished. We believe this is a retrograde step, as it removes the ability for local communities to have a direct say in the way those decisions are made.

The CIL Regulations prescribe what CIL income earmarked for local community projects should broadly be used on. The funds must be used to support the provision, improvement, replacement, operation or maintenance of infrastructure or anything else that is concerned with addressing the demands that development places on the local area. An Executive paper in November on our partnership arrangements will, among other matters, set out the future arrangements for decisions on the Neighbourhood CIL allocations.”

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REPORT ENDS