

QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 1 DECEMBER 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 Ellen Nicholson

“What is the council doing to ensure that everyone has voter identification prior to the local elections in May 2023, to ensure that no one is disenfranchised?”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“The Electoral Commission will be running a national public communications campaign to raise awareness of the requirement to show identification and remind the public to bring their identification with them when they vote; and support those without eligible identification to understand how and when they can apply for a Voter Authority Certificate. Two separate advertising campaigns will take place between January – May 2023. The Council’s Press and Communications Team will run a local public communications campaign alongside the national one using a combination of social media, press releases, published articles on the Council’s website to raise awareness amongst the residents of Woking.

In addition to this each household within the Borough will receive the Household Notification Letter in early February, a leaflet will be included containing key information of the local election, voter identification requirements and the availability of the Voter Authority Certificate Service.

Preparations for promotional work amongst the most vulnerable groups within the Borough will commence in January. We will be looking to work closely with local community groups such as the York Road Project and disability groups to help vulnerable people not only register to vote but to apply for and obtain a Voter Authority Certificate. Officers will also visit prime locations across the Borough in March and April to raise awareness of the requirement to bring identification and how to apply for the Voter Authority Certificate.”

2. Question from Councillor Gary Elson

“In April this year the management and maintenance of our housing stock was brought back in house and a responsive repairs contract was awarded to Mountjoy a local firm based in Byfleet. Could the Portfolio Holder provide an update on the progress of this contract?”

Reply from Councillor Ian Johnson

“Mountjoy are a south coast-based contractor, who have established a local base in Woking to deliver the Repairs, Voids, and Gas Servicing Contract, which started on 1st April 2022. We are aware that there have been teething issues in launching the new contract, which is being robustly addressed and monitored.

Under the new arrangements, the Council has specified a number of service enhancements to improve customer service through the Mountjoy contract, including introducing 2-hour time slots and Saturday appointments to help working tenants. The void standard has also been increased for sheltered and bungalow residents with flooring and decoration included. Customers are already benefitting from these changes.

In the early months of the contract, Mountjoy has been hindered by lack of staff transferring under TUPE, difficulties in recruiting skilled staff (in trades and customer care), material supply issues and inheriting a backlog of historic jobs from the previous contractors. Demand has also been higher than either the Council or Mountjoy anticipated.

The WBC Housing Asset Team meet Mountjoy weekly to discuss operational matters to ensure the service continues to improve. The Strategic Director also meets Mountjoy senior management to escalate issues where needed.

Whilst the current level of performance is below expectations, there have been improvements compared to the previous service delivered by NVH and the WBC team are committed to working with Mountjoy to further improve performance and customer service. In order to deliver this, the team intend to implement more regular joint estate inspections and meet the contractor days throughout 2023, targeting schemes with high levels of repairs. We are confident this will improve Mountjoy's knowledge of the WBC housing stock and improve the service received by residents."

3. Question from Councillor Melanie Whitehand

"The campaign raising awareness of domestic violence and the recognition of the need for woman to have safe spaces is welcomed.

Can the Portfolio Holder please update the Council on how my motion, agreed by Council in February, for female designated car park spaces (after 6pm) has been implemented and also advertised."

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

"Council Officers have worked with Police colleagues to bring forward actions that will ensure women feel safe, particularly in our car parks. Progress should have been communicated to Councillor Whitehand, my apologies, this has not happened. I can confirm however that the Council is committed to bringing forward policies that ensure women feel safe when out and about in Woking's public places. The Council's car parks have been awarded the Park Mark, a Police Crime Prevention Initiative aimed at reducing crime and fear of crime in parking facilities including signage, lighting and help points in larger car parks linked to the control room and manned 24 hours. Discussions are ongoing with Surrey Police's Designing Out Crime Officer (DOCO) given his original statement which strongly advised against the provision of women only parking places in its car parks, in that they could create an environment that is perpetrator friendly. Discussions with the DOCO will bring forward what can be put in place to increase the confidence of women and vulnerable users in our car parks. Delays in the commissioning of the car parks and the new charging system has meant that this is yet to happen. Officers will provide an update on this to you as soon as there is progress to report."

4. Question from Councillor Melanie Whitehand

"The provision of a range of Health and Wellbeing services provided at the Woking Leisure centre was very much appreciated by residents and many had taken up the opportunity to pay for some of these services in advance.

It is therefore concerning that they are now being closed. Can the Portfolio Holder please update Members on this development and assure residents any advance payments will be fully refunded."

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

“The Council has been working closely with the North West Surrey Alliance to broaden the health and wellbeing offer at our leisure centres. This has included successfully introducing physiotherapy services, surgical pre-habilitation, Covid-19 recovery, diabetes clinics, weight management support and GP referral at Woking Leisure Centre. Most recently, a new weekly nature walk has been launched from the Eastwood Leisure Centre. We have commenced cardiac rehabilitation and in partnership with St Peter’s Hospital launched a 0-19 service for routine childhood checks at both centres.

Regrettably, the “Heatwaves” Health Suite at Woking Leisure Centre has been temporarily closed due to equipment failure and the ever rising cost of utilities. An assessment of usage was done. Since the Sauna at Pool in the Park opened and then the opening of the Eastwood Leisure Centre, usage of “Heatwaves” has significantly reduced. Both the newer facilities are far more efficient to run and getting much greater usage.

Those residents that have been displaced do have the option to use the other facilities, but would be refunded if this did not suit them.”

5. Question from Councillor Ayesha Azad

“Will the Leader of the Council provide a statement on the impact of the Chancellor’s Autumn Statement for the Council?”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“The Chancellor’s Autumn Statement was delivered on 17 November 2022 alongside the Office for Budget Responsibility’s (OBR’s) Economic and Fiscal Outlook forecasts. The Autumn Statement responds to the OBR forecasts and sets out the medium-term path for public finances.

The Autumn Statement confirmed that departmental budgets in 2023/24 and 2024/25 will be maintained at least in line with the budgets set at the Spending Review, after removing costs relating to the Health and Social Care Levy which will no longer be introduced as a separate tax from April 2023.

Specific detail on local government funding at an individual local authority level will not be available until the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement expected in the week commencing 19 December.

However, the following announcements were made which directly impact the Council:

- The referendum limit for increases in council tax will be increased to 3% per year from April 2023. The previous policy was a limit of 2%, with additional discretion for District Council’s up to a £5 increase. It is not clear whether the £5 will also be amended. For the Council an additional 1% increase generates approximately £110k. This would take Woking Council’s share of Council Tax, for a Band D property, from £255.46 in 2022/23 to £263.12 in 2023/24.
- From 1 April 2023 business rates bills will be updated to reflect changes in property values since the last revaluation in 2017. This will include business rates paid by the Council on its own properties. Transitional support will apply and the Council will be fully compensated for any loss of income from business rates as a result of revaluation and will receive new burdens funding for administrative and IT costs.

- The increase in social housing rents, with the exception of supported housing, has been limited to 7% - under the current rules rents could have increased by up to 11.1%.
- Increases were made to the National Living Wage to apply from April 2023.
- The Energy Bill Relief Scheme (EBRS) will be reviewed to determine support for non-domestic energy consumers, excluding public sector organisations beyond 31 March 2023. The government states that the overall scale of government support offered will be significantly lower and targeted at those most affected.“

6. Question from Councillor Ayesha Azad

“In March this year, the Council resolved that “the online platform for viewing meetings be extended up to an ideal time of four years as soon as technically possible.” Could the Portfolio Holder give Members an update on the progress of this important motion eight months on?”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“Following the decision of Council, a new contract was entered into with the service provider, Public-i. Under the arrangements, any recordings of meetings of the Council, Executive and Committees held after 1 March 2022 will be retained for a period of four years.”

7. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“Does the Portfolio Holder agree with me that the Basingstoke Canal is a key environmental site in the borough, supplying habitats that encourage biodiversity?”

Reply from Councillor Rob Leach

“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. This is rightly recognised and protected through numerous Council policies and strategies, including the Local Plan, Natural Woking and the draft Town Centre Masterplan.

As you know Woking Borough Council has long supported the upkeep of the Basingstoke Canal through an annual contribution. We are working with the Basingstoke Canal Authority positively to ensure the ongoing good management of the canal.”

8. Question from Councillor Kevin Davis

“Residents living along the Hoe Stream in Barnsbury in my ward, are still experiencing flooding after heavy rain. What progress is being made in flood alleviation in this area?”

Reply from Councillor Rob Leach

“Officers have recently met with the Environment Agency (EA) to address matters related to the handover of the Hoe Valley flood alleviation scheme prior to its adoption by the Council. In particular, and while no dwelling is at risk of flooding, the EA have been asked to resolve the flooding of some gardens in the Hawthorn Road element of the scheme. While the EA maintains responsibility, WBC officers have recommended that the original design consultants are brought in to recommend a solution to this ongoing problem. A response is awaited.”

9. Question from Councillor Guy Cosnahan

“Please can the Portfolio Holder update me on future plans for the area south of Brookwood Lye Road?”

Reply from Councillor Ian Johnson

“Contractual negotiations on this site were undertaken in 2016/2017 with a lease being completed on 18 April 2016. We are now seeking to clear up the stalemate that has meant there is still no sign of new homes on the site 6 years later. Discussions are ongoing between Thameswey and the private landowner that seek to progress the redevelopment of the site as a whole. The site’s long and complicated history has resulted in this delay in bringing plans forward. Decisions, made prior to May 2022, have impacted what can be delivered on the site.

The site is allocated for residential and travellers pitches in the Site Allocations Development Plan Document and it is the aim that the site comes forward to meet the requirements of this allocation. The Planning Committee resolved to grant planning permission for 19 traveller pitches on part of the land and there is a current residential scheme under consideration on the remainder of the site however agreement has not been reached to allow delivery of these two interdependent schemes. Discussions are ongoing between the relevant landowners that seek to progress the application beyond the current stalemate position. This includes Thameswey considering several options on how to best bring this site forward for housing in the near future which may be through an alternative proposal. No decision on the site has been made and suggestions that this is the case are misleading and I know have caused concern to residents of Brookwood.”

10. Question from Councillor James Sanderson

“Normally this time of the year, the Council’s Executive makes decisions on funding applications for charities and voluntary groups. However, following the decision in July, the Council will work with the Community Foundation for Surrey to give out grants to the third sector.

Please can the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for the Voluntary Sector provide an update on how plans are progressing for this change to grants?”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“Since July, Officers have been working closely with the Community Foundation for Surrey and wider partners to prepare the new operating processes for administering community grants. Following the decision of the Council in the Summer, all regular beneficiaries of community grants were contacted and invited to information briefings where they could find out more and ask questions. The first of these was conducted in early September and the feedback from community groups was positive. They particularly commented in the session on the wider opportunities the process offers them in terms of collective funding streams. The second of these sessions is scheduled for next week (8th December).

Communication about the new process was promoted online through the Council’s media outputs and information posted on the Community Foundation and Volunteer Woking websites, including the criteria for grants, as per the Council’s Corporate Priorities. Expressions of Interest are currently open for applications to the Woking Council Community Fund and the deadline for these is 23rd January 2023. Following this date, the Foundation will prepare the applications ready for the panel meeting which has been scheduled for Tuesday 4th April 2023, for grant awards for the year 2023/24. More information can be found on the Community Foundation for Surrey’s website.

Officers have started conversations with the community groups that will be funded through Service Level Agreements. These agreements will be confirmed in the New Year, including the financial amounts, service delivery and key performance indicators.

Officers from Business Liaison and Volunteer Woking have met with the Foundation to explore ways that external parties can donate to the existing Woking Community Fund, which is an endowment fund. The ambition is to incentivise growth to the Woking Community Fund, to create a larger and more sustainable fund for Woking community groups for years to come, complementing the Council's grants.

In June 2023, there will be a full report to Council that outlines the grant awards, and the wider discretionary support that the Council offers local community groups to support its residents."

11. Question from Councillor Louise Morales

"How will the emerging Masterplan be affected by the Planning Inspector's decision to overturn local determination of the Crown Place application?"

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

"The proposals for the redevelopment of the former HG Wells Centre was refused by this Council and originally dismissed at appeal before a further appeal which has allowed the development. This decision is a huge disappointment and advice has been taken as to whether the decision is challengeable through the Courts.

Officers are now currently considering the significant implications of this decision for the Town Centre Masterplan, in combination with the implications of the responses received to the Masterplan consultation. In addition, the urban design consultants who produced the draft Townscape Strategy are reviewing the implications of this decision on our Masterplan."

12. Question from Councillor Peter Graves

"Last month, the Leisure Centre hosted the Woking Voluntary Sector Fair. I understand this was the second such event, but the first one to be opened to the public.

Please can the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for the Voluntary Sector confirm how many members of the public attended or how many volunteering offers were made as a result?"

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

"Volunteer Woking held its annual Working Together for Woking event on Thursday 3rd November 2022. The event was well attended with 60 organisations taking part from a range of services.

Over 300 people attended and the event provided an opportunity for local groups to network together as well as recruit new volunteers and promote their services.

Charities on the day were pleased to register volunteers. Action for Carers registered 11 volunteers at the event. The Brigitte Trust, which supports adults with life-limiting conditions, recruited eight new volunteers; and the Woking Good Neighbourhood Schemes enlisted seven new volunteer drivers with charities saying that people had taken their information and would contact them directly

Speaking about the Voluntary Sector Fair, stallholder, Sarah Lout from Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing, said: "As somebody who is new to the area it has been really useful to see what's on offer for our residents and to put names to faces." The event also enabled the Council and partners to promote the Cost Of Living local support offer and connect with new partners from the voluntary sector.

Volunteer Woking will be holding the event next November where they can attract more stall-holders and further grow the attendance from residents, carers and partners.”

13. Question from Councillor Louise Morales

“Friday was the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Please can the Portfolio Holder confirm what this Council did to mark that day?”

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

“We have placed 16 chairs in prominent locations around the Borough to remind us that every 11 minutes, somewhere in the world, a woman or girl dies at the hands of an intimate partner or family member. These women and girls should be among us. These seats are reserved to highlight the void left behind by each and every one of them.

This links to an international campaign started in France called ‘A Place for Her’. Each chair has a red cloth and a sign to explain the significance. They have been placed in the following locations:

- Civic Office – reception and staff rest area (2)
- Centres for the community (4)
- Woking Shopping (1)
- The Lightbox (1)
- ATG theatre and cinema complex (2)
- Woking Library (1)
- Women’s Support Centre (1)
- Leisure Centres (4)

We have posted a photo of a different location each day on social media – 16 chairs to link to the 16 days of action following the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women last Friday.

In addition, we are also supporting the county-wide ‘Show domestic abuse the red card’ social media campaign by scheduling timely posts during the England World Cup 2022 matches.

We will also be promoting the county-wide festive Domestic Abuse campaign when launched towards the end of the 16 days of activism period. This will include three short impactful videos on coercive control. This campaign will go into January when we know that there is always a significant increase in domestic abuse reports.”

14. Question from Councillor Colin Kemp

“Could the Portfolio Holder outline the number of taxi/hackney carriage vehicle and driver licenses issued for the past three years?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“Between 30 November 2019 and 30 November 2022, the Council’s Licensing Team has issued:

438 Hackney Carriage Vehicle Licences;

1,204 Private Hire Vehicle Licences;

343 Hackney Carriage Drivers Licences; and

378 Private Hire Driver Licences.”

The above figures do not reflect the number of people who are licenced over any one period of time. Licences are not on a fixed renewal date and drivers can transfer or change their vehicles.”

15. Question from Councillor Colin Kemp

“Could the Portfolio Holder say how many times BSL interpretation has been provided in 2022/3 for no charge?”

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

“The Council is pleased that British Sign Language (BSL) has been recognised as an official language and ensures that reasonable adjustments are made for those accessing our services with hearing difficulties. The Woking Interpreting and Translation Service have completed 9 BSL jobs since January 2022. All of these jobs were chargeable to the organisation that requested the BSL jobs, but there was no charge to the client.”

16. Question from Councillor Colin Kemp

“We have had two large developments in the town centre that were recommended by officers for approval but they were refused by the Planning Committee, both of these have now been passed by the planning inspectorate.

- a. Can the Portfolio Holder confirm how much these appeals cost the Council including officer time
- b. Have any of the developers claimed for their costs and if so how much is this.”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“The two large applications referred to are EcoWorld which was allowed on appeal on 10 January 2022 and Crown Place which was allowed on appeal on 3 November 2022. The cost of defending these appeals was £93k for EcoWorld and £29k for Crown Place. It is not possible to provide the cost of officers’ time as this was spread over a number of departments such as planning and legal however for the EcoWorld appeal it is likely that 10-12 weeks of officers’ time would have been spent defending this appeal and for Crown Place around 2 weeks. In both appeals, the developer did not claim for their costs.”

17. Question from Councillor Josh Brown

“Can the Portfolio Holder say how many instances during 2022/23 have there been of arranged housing standards visits where no access was granted after 24 hours’ notice to agents/landlords?”

Reply from Councillor Ian Johnson

“The Housing Standards Team have issued a total of 27 Section 239 notices to inspect properties since 1st April 2022. Of those, the team were not granted access on 2 occasions. It was the same property on both occasions and the tenant refused access. The team have also done several informal visits, which have not required the issuing of a notice, either to check works are complete, start investigations, or other reasons. Again, the team usually arrange these in advance and do not have problems with entry.”

18. Question from Councillor Josh Brown

“Can the Portfolio Holder provide a list of services available at Woking’s community centres?”

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

“The Centres for the Community provide a wide range of activities and services for the whole community. Previously they mainly served as day centres for the elderly but are now used by all ages from pre-birth maternity services to places to socialise for the elderly, including intergenerational activities.

All of the activities are published on the Council’s website and the Communications Team are improving this, working with the new Centres Administration Team to better promote the full range of services. A report and overview of the offer of the Centres was also provided at the September Overview and Scrutiny Committee, for further reference.

The Centres provide places for activity and services that promote and support the Council’s Health and Wellbeing Priorities. Physical activity includes yoga, well-balance, ballet, karate, walking groups and dance. Health services include maternity clinics, chiropody, assisted bathing, health visitor clinics, eye clinics, vaccinations and stroke support. Wellbeing activities include targeted services such as youth counselling, a men’s mental health group, relationship and wider therapies plus ‘feel good’ social activities such as the U3A, community choir, toddler play groups and day services that seek to tackle isolation and loneliness.

The Centres also host Family Services, the Youth Employment Hub from Surrey Care Trust, Catalyst substance misuse support, a youth club and a range of community and faith groups including various arts and crafts and social activities.

The above activities are delivered around a central café which forms the heart of the Centre, most notably the Art Café in St. Mary’s Byfleet. In the New Year, a new café provider will launch in Moorcroft in Westfield and the Vyne will develop its café and reopen direct access to the adjacent health centre.”

19. Question from Councillor Josh Brown

“Does the Portfolio Holder believe that the CO2 permits are an important incentive towards low-emissions vehicles in step with those that the Council has asked its stakeholders such as the taxi licensees to undertake?”

Reply from Councillor Rob Leach

“Yes, car park season tickets will continue to be based on a vehicles carbon dioxide emission rating, with lower emission vehicles receiving a discount. This strategy will be balanced alongside the accelerating shift towards zero emission vehicles and national policies, such as the 2030 ban on new petrol and diesel cars.”

20. Question from Councillor Josh Brown

“Could the Portfolio Holder give an update on the status of the Garden Waste Service?”

Reply from Councillor Rob Leach

“The garden waste service resumed fortnightly collections in April and the service was opened to new subscribers in September. The service has been operating consistently, helped by a reduction in driver vacancies following the new driver pay rates and the addition of an extra collection round to support both recycling and garden waste collections.

To compensate for the service disruption, all subscribers have had their renewal date extended by 6 months. Billing has resumed, Joint Waste Solutions (JWS) are working with Amey to notify subscribers of their new renewal date and process subscription renewals for the current year. This work commenced in August, with all remaining subscribers (804) due to receive their notifications by the end of December.

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We are aware that the process has not been as smooth as it should have been for a small number of subscribers, where containers were removed without sufficient notification to residents. These have been resolved and Amey have adjusted their notification process to minimise further issue.”

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REPORT ENDS