

QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 9 FEBRUARY 2023

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 Gary Elson

“Please can the Leader / Portfolio Holder update members on the latest status of applications for Financial Assistance received from the various Community Groups and Organisations within our Borough.

How many have applied, how many have been successful in being granted the full amount requested, how many have been granted reduced funding and how many will not receive anything?”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“This year applicants wanting to be considered by the Woking Council Community Fund were asked to apply to the Community Foundation for Surrey (CFS). The deadline for full applications was 23rd January 2023.

All previous beneficiaries of the Council’s community grants were contacted at the end of the Summer 2022 to inform them of the new process. Two Q&A sessions were facilitated online with community groups to discuss the process in more detail, held in September and December 2022. Both sessions were informative and attendees were grateful for the information.

At the deadline for full applications CFS had received 33 full applications and are now in the process of reviewing these. All eligible full applications will be presented and discussed at the Woking Council Community Fund Panel on the 4th of April 2023. Awards will then be made in May.

Service Level Agreements for five charities are now being drafted ready for the next financial year. These are for groups who provide specific services for the Council, and this process will ensure they are funded for the work they do. The value of these services is just under £500k.

A full report will be provided to the Executive in June 2023 detailing the outcomes of the grant awards. This will include an overview of the applications plus all of the wider discretionary benefits the Council provides to support the voluntary sector in Woking.”

2. Question from Councillor Gary Elson

“Can the Portfolio Holder explain why consideration was not given to change the status of the emerging Town Centre Masterplan from a SPD to a DPD having insisted that pre prescribed tall building height limits would be set within a range?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“The National Planning Policy Framework (last updated July 2021) defines SPDs as ‘documents which add further detail to the policies in the development plan. They can be used to provide further guidance for development on specific sites, or on particular issues, such as design. Supplementary planning documents are capable of being a material consideration in planning decisions’. Similarly, in National Planning Practice Guidance (published 2019) it is further specified that ‘supplementary planning documents (SPDs) should build upon and provide more detailed advice or guidance on

policies in an adopted local plan. They are however a material consideration in decision-making’.

Although SPDs clearly have legal weight in determining planning applications, the report to the meeting of the Executive on 2 February 2023 sets out the reasons why we should not move to adopt the Masterplan as an SPD at this time. Both myself and the Leader clearly stated that, contrary to a rogue newspaper headline last week, the Masterplan is very much alive. It is very clear from the outcome of the extensive consultation process that there is a large amount of support for the Masterplan, and for providing a clear position on what development might be considered appropriate in the town centre. As part of the next stage in the town centre Masterplan’s timetable for delivery, Officers will bring a report back to the Executive, outlining the options available to the Council in taking the Masterplan forward to its next stage.”

3. Question from Councillor Gary Elson

“Can the Portfolio Holder please confirm that he is still of the opinion that he expressed at the meeting of the Executive on Thursday 2nd February, that the Town Centre Masterplan as it stands as a SPD does not conflict with the adopted SADPD and that in doing so he disagrees with opinion and advice given by our Officers?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“Whilst on some sites the draft town centre Masterplan proposed fewer homes than the SADPD, given that the overall number of homes provided for by the draft Masterplan exceeded the minimum numbers set out in the SADPD, taken as a whole there is no material conflict. I therefore agree with the legal and Officer advice given in relation to those individual sites, as I stated at last week’s meeting of the Executive. How we address those individual sites will be considered as part of Officers’ report back to the Executive.”

4. Question from Councillor Steve Dorsett

“How much money has been spent putting together the Masterplan; including all consultations, roadshows, pop up shops etc., to date?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“The overall amount spent to date is £168,528.29. £100k was agreed by the Executive and this budget has been supplemented with funds secured from Homes England. This allowed the completion of significant public consultation, undertaking of a town centre housing market appraisal and the drafting of a detailed townscape strategy and site analysis. These documents and the feedback received through the consultation responses provides robust and comprehensive evidence to support the delivery of the town centre Masterplan.”

5. Question from Councillor Steve Dorsett

“If, as local media suggest, the Masterplan is to be scrapped, how can we ensure the Town Centre is protected and does not become a free-for-all for developers?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“The town centre Masterplan is very much alive. There will be a further report to the Executive that will outline the next steps in taking the Masterplan forward.”

6. Question from Councillor Steve Dorsett

“Can the portfolio holder outline a time frame for the remaining Sheerwater regeneration, given the announcement at the Executive that the administration intend to pause certain phases.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“A mid-point review was always intended for the Sheerwater Regeneration project. In light of the Council’s financial position, it is proposed that this is brought forward sooner. Construction of Red, Yellow and Copper will continue in parallel with the review, as will the tender process for future phases. Further details will be included in the Thamesway Business Plans being reported to Council on 23 February 2023.”

7. Question from Councillor Ayesha Azad

“The Councils accounts remain unaudited since 2019/20. Can the Leader provide an update.”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“The audit of the 2019/20 Council accounts has been substantially completed but there is outstanding work on a number of areas, including the Council’s group accounts. The external auditors, BDO, do not currently have the resources available to complete this work. The Chief Executive has escalated this issue, meeting with the Financial Reporting Council (FRC), and Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) in recent weeks to seek a way forward and to urge relevant parties to respond to the national issue with local government audit delays and take action to halt the worsening position. The detail of the work currently completed and outstanding has been reported to the Standards and Audit Committee at each meeting.”

8. Question from Councillor Ayesha Azad

“The Woking food festival is a great way to show case our town as well as local produce which helps small and micro businesses. Can the portfolio holder confirm if there will be a 2023 Food Festival.”

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

“I agree that the Woking Food and Drink Festival was a great event for the Town Centre.

This large scale event required significant financial and Officer resource to organise and deliver which will not be available in 2023. However, we are currently working on a cost neutral program of events in Woking Town Centre in collaboration with local market traders and community groups – showcasing smaller artisan food markets and community events.”

9. Question from Councillor Ayesha Azad

“Residents in Sheerwater are concerned that the community facilities promised to them as part of regeneration scheme may be at risk of not being provided. Can the Leader assure residents the regeneration scheme will be completed as originally promised to the residents of Sheerwater.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“The Council remains fully committed to delivering the Sheerwater regeneration project. Given the Council’s financial challenges, we need to review how we can achieve this in an affordable, responsible and sustainable way. It was always in the plan to undertake a mid-point review and now is the right time to conduct this.”

10. Question from Councillor Ian Johnson

“Please can the Council confirm when the outstanding accounts for this Council and its wholly owned or partially owned companies will be complete and published?”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“As I explained in my answer to Cllr Azad’s question, there continues to be delays in the audit of the Council’s 2019/20 accounts. The external auditors will not commence the audit of subsequent years accounts until these are complete. Alternative solutions are being considered at a sector level to address this unacceptable position. Officers are working with Victoria Square Woking Ltd (VSWL) to understand the timescales to complete the outstanding accounts and audit of the 2021 accounts. All the other Council companies’ accounts are up to date.”

11. Question from Councillor Will Forster

“Please can the Council confirm if people in properties including Brockhill and Hale End Court, where they pay their energy bills alongside their rent are eligible for the energy rebate, energy price gap and/or warm homes discount?”

Reply from Councillor Ian Johnson

“At the moment, there is no national energy rebate scheme in place for residents who receive all their energy supplies through communal energy distribution networks. The Government has stated that an update will be given on this by the end of the month.

Any scheme is likely to be administered centrally with the onus put on residents to apply for any rebates available and local authorities being responsible for verifying claims. The Council will support residents with this process once the Government has released the details of the scheme.”

12. Question from Councillor Will Forster

“I was delighted to see that the Bonsey Lane to Westfield Road path through Westfield Common has been surfaced by Surrey Wildlife Trust and Woking Borough Council.

Please will the Council consider putting the same treatment on the route in Westfield Common between Highlands Lane and Westfield Primary School, and between Balfour Avenue the Coop, both of which are also well used by children and parents of Westfield Primary School?”

Reply from Councillor Peter Graves

“I am pleased to hear that the works to enhance the footpath through Westfield Common have been positively received. While further potential footpath improvements were identified in the Westfield Common management plan, at present there are no plans to undertake further footpath works of this nature. Any such works would be subject to identifying suitable funding. Officers would be happy to discuss possible options with Councillors, which could include utilising local neighbourhood allocation of Community Infrastructure Levy funding.”

13. Question from Councillor Andy Caulfield

“Please can the Council provide an update on the rebuild of the Old Woking Community Centre?”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“The Old Woking Community Centre (OWCC) refurbishment and alteration works commenced on 24th October 2022 and were scheduled to complete on the 12th May 2023. The OWCC project has subsequently received additional funding of £980,000 from Your Fund Surrey (YFS) and there is a significant amount of work ongoing to agree the detailed scope of works that will be funded by the YFS grant, including air source heat pumps, photovoltaic panels and insulating and recovering the existing roof. A planning application has been submitted for the YFS funded works and a decision is due on the 24th March 2023. The additional YFS funded works once added into the

contract works will extend the current contract period to complete for the new academic year.”

14. Question from Councillor Louise Morales

“The fence in Woking Park near the gardens of properties on Claremont Avenue has been damaged for sometime and the car park nearby this fence has been closed as well. Please can the Council confirm when the fence will be repaired or replaced and the car park reopened?”

Reply from Councillor Peter Graves

“The fencing in question was originally installed as part of the temporary Hoe Valley School site in Woking Park as both a boundary for the School but also to mitigate noise from the School site to adjacent properties. As this fence was installed as a temporary measure alongside the School, the fencing will not be replaced. The Council intends to encourage this small corner of the park to develop into a more natural boundary treatment, providing both a buffer between residential property boundaries and the car park. I understand that the plan is to reinstate the car park and we will review this given the update on Council spending controls. Details and timing on the car park will need to be confirmed at a later date.”

15. Question from Councillor Rob Leach

“What steps are being taken to clear the graffiti on the statue opposite the station and can a solution be found that can be used promptly for any future incidents.”

Reply from Councillor Peter Graves

“It is always disappointing when graffiti appears around the Borough and even more disappointing when pieces of art are the target. In the case of the Wanderer statue outside the station the removal of the graffiti needed special treatment and after liaising with the artist, an agreed method was adopted. This method can be applied promptly to any similar future incidents.”

16. Question from Councillor Melanie Whitehand

“Increasing the number of Greenwaste recycling users is of paramount importance for a sustainable borough, however residents who want to sign up for the service are still having to wait a long time to have their applications approved. Can the portfolio holder please update the council on what the waiting time frames are and when the back log will be cleared.”

Reply from Councillor Peter Graves

“Our waste contractor, Amey, have reported around 100 applications outstanding where new subscribers are waiting for the delivery of a garden waste bin. The oldest order is dated 25/01/2023. Joint Waste Solutions will continue to monitor Amey’s performance in respect to bin delivery timeframes.”

17. Question from Councillor Melanie Whitehand

“It is no secret that residents are having their green waste bins removed or not emptied without any prior notification of such.

When residents contacted Amey to enquire regarding the non-collections, they were advised that their subscriptions had expired and records show that they had not been renewed. This is despite residents stating that they had not received any renewal notices in order to continue with the collection service.

Given there has been a cost increase from 1st April, it is questionable that a price increase is justified when such poor customer service is being meted out to residents.

Can the Waste Portfolio Holder please update us on the current Green Waste Collection renewal system.”

Reply from Councillor Peter Graves

“It is acknowledged that there have been challenges with managing this volume of subscription renewals in a condensed time period. While some complaints have been received about letters or emails not arriving, these have all been investigated and responded to on a case-by-case basis.

Officers continue to work with Amey to improve our services and will of course be happy to pick up on any outstanding issues should residents make contact with you directly.”

18. Question from Councillor Melanie Whitehand

“Can the portfolio holder update the council on the development status of the Robin Hood pub site and the Anchor pub which were purchased by the Council for community redevelopment purposes. Residents have raised concerns the sites will potentially be sold off in a fire sale by the Council with no long-term benefits to Knaphill or its residents.”

Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts

“The plans for the Robin Hood Site (owned by Rutland Woking) and The Anchor pub are currently under review. Given the complexities of the sites, in particular the Robin Hood site, we will need to carefully consider our options. The Council now has a strategic approach to the management of its assets and future proposals for all Council assets will be considered in the context of the Council’s strategic priorities and our wider financial challenges.”

19. Question from Councillor Peter Graves

“How much CIL has been collected across Woking to date and how do these funds break down into a) Neighbourhood CIL b) SANG payments c) funds available for local infrastructure d) administration fees.”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“The amount of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) collected across the Borough to date (to 25 Jan 2023) is £10,538,167.75. CIL is allocated as follows:

- 5% Administration fee
- 15% Neighbourhood CIL for Wards where no Neighbourhood Plan is in place; or
- 25% Neighbourhood CIL, where a Neighbourhood Plan is in place.

Of the balance:

- 40% SANG
- 60% Strategic Infrastructure

Based on the above breakdown, responses to the questions are that:

- a. Neighbourhood CIL of £1,976,523.26. This has been used to support around 25 local projects around the Borough
- b. SANG payments of £3,238,163 (to 31 Mar 2022, SANG payments are monitored by Financial Year)
- c. CIL funds for strategic infrastructure of £4,473,096.10
- d. Admin fees of £526,908.39.”

20. Question from Councillor Josh Brown

“The Portfolio Holder previously promised to stop what he called the “culture of piling them high”. With the latest update on the masterplan, can the Portfolio Holder reconfirm that there will be a 15-storey height limit to developments within the town centre, as previously promised?”

Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“I have never given a commitment that the town centre Masterplan would limit the height of future developments to 15 storeys.

The emerging Masterplan has always sought a consensus on a vision for Woking town centre, including guidance on what height might be considered acceptable to residents for future development, whilst taking the existing townscape into account. The previous administration favoured extremely high rise development and the lack of clear planning guidance over several years has allowed a number of very high developments, initially refused by the Planning Committee, to gain planning permission on appeal. Unfortunately, those appeal decisions have had a permanent impact on the future townscape, not least on the heights of future developments in the town centre. The draft town centre Masterplan seeks to address this by proposing specific height limits on each site, taking the height of existing buildings (including those for which planning permission has already been granted, but not yet built) into consideration.”

Date Published:

9 February 2023

REPORT ENDS