

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF PUBLIC

Executive Summary

The following questions have been received from Members of Public. The individuals who raised the questions have been invited to attend the meeting. The relevant Portfolio Holder will be asked to provide a formal response.

Question 1 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

“A huge amount of my work at CAW goes towards preventing and dealing with homelessness. We help clients with housing benefit applications, negotiate repayments for rent arrears to avoid evictions and navigate those facing or experiencing homelessness through the process of securing new accommodation. This includes a large number of vulnerable clients who struggle to engage with their landlord and relevant authorities. How will the council deal with increased demand for housing and homelessness support with the likely reduction in the services CAW will be able to offer?”

Supporting Statement

“From November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking helped 146 clients either threatened with homelessness or experiencing actual homelessness and 46 clients going through the Local Authority Homelessness process. Furthermore, we advised 65 clients on dealing with rent arrears. We also assisted 54 clients with Housing Benefit issues and applications, with 35 of those cases specifically related to Local Authority housing.”

Question 2 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

“Much of my volunteer work involves housing issues directly related to Local Authority properties which Council employees manage. I help a range of vulnerable clients, who find it difficult to engage with relevant parties, to address a range of problems with their Local Authority housing – arrears, mould, repairs, emergency heating and more. What is the council’s plan to address some residents’ additional needs for support with Local Authority housing given Citizens Advice Woking’s future diminished service provision?”

Supporting Statement

“In the period November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking helped 94 clients to solve issues specifically related to Local Authority housing.”

Question 3 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

“Many of my clients, coming to Citizens Advice Woking, require additional support with ensuring they pay their Council Tax, reducing the number of lengthy Court processes that the Council is required to initiate. I negotiate payment plans for my clients to pay back their Council Tax arrears, and many of them need help applying for Council Tax Reductions, Discounts and Exemptions.

Questions from Members of the Public

How does the Council plan to mitigate an increase in Council Tax queries and arrears that will inevitably come as a result of Citizens Advice Woking's expected limited service provision?"

Supporting Statement

"In the period November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking advised 73 clients on their Council Tax arrears and 80 clients regarding a Council Tax Deduction."

Question 4 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

"A major concern of mine is the additional support required by a considerable proportion of CAW clients. Our clients often have language issues, literacy issues, limited digital skills, mental health conditions or learning disabilities. They need help understanding their situation, engaging with relevant authorities, and taking action to improve their circumstances. The most vulnerable clients require home visits as, due to severe disability and lack of support, they are unable to leave their homes. What plan does the Council have in place to accommodate the complex additional needs of so many of CAW's clients if CAW must limit its services?"

Supporting Statement

"Between April and September 2023, 63% of people CAW saw had a disability or long-term health condition. 20% of these clients also have a long-term mental health condition. CAW's specialist caseworkers and trained volunteers undertake a range of actions for vulnerable clients, including negotiating and advocating for clients with relevant authorities, filling in forms and working closely with support and social workers. Critically, many of our advisers have developed the long-term, trusting relationships with vulnerable clients that are needed for these clients to engage openly. Additionally, approximately 25% of our clients do not have English as a first language and cannot read or write in English. Citizens Advice Woking are able to provide face to face support in 15 different languages, often at the first visit from the client."

Question 5 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

"Anticipating a reduction of services at Citizens Advice Woking after 1st April, what plans do the council have to provide extra staffing for the increased footfall to the council offices? Council Staff often direct residents over to Citizens Advice Woking for help. What plans have the Council put in place if this option is not open to them?"

Supporting Statement

"Citizens Advice Woking currently opens to the public from 10am to 4pm for drop in clients. For many this is the first point of contact as many clients are unable to go on-line to use the on-line enquiry form and prefer face to face engagement. Many bring in forms for completion, letters from the council that they are unable to read or understand. Receptionists are on duty throughout that period, often able to support clients for whom English is not their first language. There is often a queue even with two receptionists and if CAW have to adopt a no drop in service clients will see the council offices as the place to go too for help in the first instance."

Question 6 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

“At the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Monday 29th January, the Council set out a New Council Vision in the accompanying slides. The Council has stated unambiguously that it is unable to spend money on services that residents value and want to keep, (e.g. Citizens Advice, Bustler, St Mary’s day care centre) and is unable to spend on anything other than essential services. Will the Council be amending the new Vision and Mission to clarify that it cannot in fact deliver any new services that make a difference to people?”

Supporting Statement

“Vision Statement: A financially and environmentally sustainable Council, delivering services that residents value in every part of the borough.

Mission Statement: A trusted and transparent Council that:

Lives within its means

Is focused on services that make a difference to people in the Borough

Works in partnership with the community to deliver positive outcomes

Continually engages with residents to design more efficient and effective services

Invests in talent to deliver for Woking’s future”

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