

## RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF PUBLIC

**Meeting:** Council

**Date Of Meeting:** 12 December 2024

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Will the decision be open for call in?  Yes  No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?  Yes  No

### 1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The following questions have been received from Members of Public. The individuals who raised the questions have been invited to attend the meeting. Formal responses have been provided by the relevant Portfolio Holder.

#### Question 1 – Bhushan Sharma

“What are your plans going forward regarding the plot of land by the Morrisons roundabout on Goldsworth Rd (where a pub use to be, since knocked down)?”

#### Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons

“The site on Goldsworth Road to which you refer is not owned by Woking Borough Council, and as such we do not know what the owner's plans for the site are. The site is designated as being suitable for residential development under Policy UA8.”

#### Question 2 – Bhushan Sharma

“What is the latest plan going forward concerning the development of the triangle section of Guildford Rd (next to railway bridge) which has been mostly bulldozed and fenced off?”

**Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts**

“This legacy project was fundamentally flawed not least because it required Woking Borough Council to carry the risk for works to both the replacement bridge and highways. A number of scaled-down, and lower-risk alternatives were considered with our partners but were ultimately considered unviable at that time. Instead the site has recently been subject to an initial marketing exercise undertaken on behalf of the authority by two local agents. Whilst the Triangle site is predominately owned by Woking Borough Council and is over 80% cleared there are remaining ownerships which are still subject to negotiation in order to secure the whole site for redevelopment. In addition, the Council is also in discussion with Surrey County Council and Highways regarding the future approaches to both the Bridge widening and Highway re-routing schemes. An initial marketing report is now being prepared by the joint agents and we anticipate that, as a result, a short list of parties will be agreed. Those parties will be invited to submit proposals for the future redevelopment of this site in the New Year.”

**Question 3 – Wade Pollard**

“On what date will the Council make available to its residents the response it made to the recent NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) Consultation?”

**Reply from Councillor Liam Lyons**

“The Council’s response to the recent NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) consultation is available on request as are all Council consultation responses. We have passed your details to Planning Policy and they will provide a copy to you. For future reference, please email [planning.policy@woking.gov.uk](mailto:planning.policy@woking.gov.uk) in respect of any planning consultations.”

**Question 4 – Bhushan Sharma**

“What is the plan going forward regarding the future of the derelict shopping zone previously occupied by Debenhams in Town centre?”

**Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts**

“The Debenhams Department store is part of the Peacocks Shopping Centre which is Owned by a third party, The Arora Group, and is not in the control of the Council. The Council therefore is not able to determine the plans for this site.

The Council does however have a role in the sustainability of the Town Centre and therefore has every interest in promoting the continuing vitality of the retail provision, irrespective of ownership. There have been a number of discussions between Woking Borough Council and Arora in relation to how we can work in partnership to achieve this.”

**Question 5 – Andy Caulfield**

“Could the Council please provide an update on matters with Woking Gymnastics Club, specifically the new lease being negotiated to allow it to submit planning permission for it’s much needed expansion on the current site?”

Supporting Statement

“This matter has been ongoing for some years, which I dealt with during my time as local Cllr. I had understood earlier this year progress was being made, but understand nothing has progressed and given asset sales etc (affecting current temporary facilities), the new facilities are much needed and all legalities and formal processes need to progress urgently now.”

**Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts**

“The Council’s solicitors are instructed to process a lease renewal, as Woking Gymnastics Club’s current lease has expired. In addition the team are also working on the legal documents necessary to permit Woking Gymnastics Club to extend their building.

The basic parameters of the extension have already been agreed in principle with Woking Gymnastics Club (i.e. the maximum height and area, and the principles of the parking layout) and matters are progressing.”

**Question 6 – Andy Caulfield**

“Thanks for reply to my question last month “Commissioners will consider the position of those named in the report and whether further action is necessary. This is reflected in the report to Council.””

“Given GT's confirmation that their report was NOT a forensic accounting/ audit exercise, therefore many matters may well require further investigation to satisfy residents, will the Council/Commissioners confirm a wider scope in their further enquiries. This should obviously include (i) key individuals at all material times in WBC, especially in leadership and statutory roles; (ii) but also failures by appointed auditors; (iii) beneficiaries of over-payments by WBC (without proper valuations); (iv) loans to private schools & (v) the whole array of issues that has led to WBC massive debt.”

Supporting Statement

“The types of issues to be investigated were set out in a non-exhaustive list in last month's question (given the limitations on words permitted) relating to WBC officers and political leadership.”

“In addition, BDO must answer for numerous years incomplete accounts (still); and the former auditors\* of WBC subsidiary companies for their failures, including audits having to be restated by new auditors. [\*Hamlyns LLP (company number OC339112) renamed Cooper Shrubbs Associates LLP (November 2021) - Council will recall my unresolved frustrations at both BDO and Hamlyns LLP failures through my role on WBC Audit committee repeatedly raising these issues for 2 years (2022-2024)]”

“Finally, there are many examples of people benefiting financially from over-priced acquisitions by WBC in numerous cases, which clearly need further investigation as to the circumstances (in some cases, further exacerbated with questions of either direct or family connections to WBC, at the time or historically).”

“All transactions clearly require fuller investigation to confirm or allay concerns as to why gross over-payments were made (including any potential collusion or under-hand dealings) at huge public expense leading to the current stark situation for WBC and particularly its residents.”

**Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker**

“Following the extraordinary Council meeting, the Commissioners have alerted relevant professional bodies to the findings of the Public Interest Report. It is now for those bodies to determine the appropriate course of action in relation to their members. At the same time, the Council continues to systematically work through complex legacy issues, in order to resolve them in a way that best protects the public interest.

In regards to audit, the Government has recently announced plans to address the backlog in auditing local authority accounts. Government has also committed to announcing longer-term plans to address systemic issues and strengthen the local external audit system.”

**Question 7 – Wade Pollard**

“I understand there is a delay to the signing of leases for the new library in Botanical Place in West Byfleet. Will Woking Council consider allowing Surrey County Council to sign a direct lease with the landlord and remove its involvement in the process?”

**Reply from Councillor Dale Roberts**

“This option was discussed between the County Council and Woking Borough Council and it was mutually agreed that it would not be progressed. Negotiations with Surrey County Council are now progressing to establish terms for a lease. The Council is unaware of any delay caused by the process of considering and signing of these leases.”

REPORT ENDS