

[NOTE: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, Peter Bryant (Head of Democratic and Legal Services) has declared an interest in Questions 6, 7, 19 and 22 arising from him (i) being a member of the Cards Trust, the supporters' club for Woking Football Club and (ii) providing occasional unpaid assistance to Woking Football Club, e.g. acting as Returning Officer for the election of directors. The interest does not prevent Mr Bryant from advising the Council on this matter.

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, Leigh Clarke, (Finance Director) has declared an interest in Questions 6, 7, 19 and 22 arising from her husband having a small shareholding in the Club. The interest does not prevent Mrs Clarke from advising the Council on this matter.]

QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 25 JULY 2019

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 M Ali

“What is the cost of running the selective landlord licensing scheme? Is the license fee paying for it or the council is having to rely upon fines as a source of income too?”

Reply from Councillor D Harlow

“The introduction of the Selective Licensing Scheme has improved the overall standard of privately rented accommodation in the designated area and has been successful in increasing the Council’s engagement with landlords and agents. The cost of the scheme is mostly Officer time, which is absorbed in the cost of running the Housing Standards service. Ongoing problems with the implementation of the Scheme has meant the forecast level of income has not been achieved. In the current financial year, we are now forecasting an income of £18,000 with £15,000 anticipated in licence fees and £3,000 in financial penalties. As stated in the Green Book, this is below the income that was budgeted for and the shortfall will be mostly offset by a saving on staff costs, due to vacancies being held across Housing Standards.”

2. Question from Councillor M Ali

“Is there any plan to extend the scheme (in question 1) to the whole borough in order to be fair and not discriminating against one particular ward.”

Reply from Councillor D Harlow

“The Canalside ward was chosen for the Selective Licensing pilot due to the high number of private rented properties located within the ward and the amount of prosecution cases the Council had successfully taken against private landlords in this area. It was felt that this part of the Borough had the most potential to achieve the intended outcomes of the Selective Licensing scheme. This was an evidence-based decision, not to discriminate against a particular ward, but to improve living conditions for those private rented tenants living there.

As the Canalside Selective Licensing pilot progresses over the next 4 years, it will be reviewed to monitor the extent to which it has improved the overall standard of privately rented accommodation and the wider benefits to the designated area. A decision will then be taken on the future of the scheme for Canalside and the rest of the Borough.”

3. Question from Councillor M Ali

“What cost savings has the new joint waste scheme made over the years that it has now operated? Please give a cost figure in comparison with pre joint waste costs. Please consider reduced service and additional charges that the public is being forced to put up with. And the fact that now the council pays capital costs for equipment and vehicles.”

Reply from Councillor K M Davis

“The key saving as a result of the Joint Waste agreement is the guarantee of £100,000 per annum saving on our pre contract cost.

Under the new arrangements there has been no reduced service or additional charges levied by Woking Borough Council. Finally, the financing in relation to equipment and vehicles is consistent on this type of contract with the value being written off over the term of the contract.”

4. Question from Councillor M Ali

“How much green / open space has Woking borough lost in approved, pending and ongoing projects over the last 5 years including but not limited to schemes like Sheerwater, Brookwood, football club etc.”

Reply from Councillor G S Cundy

“There has been no net loss of public green/open space other than land which had been safeguarded historically to meet future development needs. The Sheerwater Regeneration Project will provide a net gain in public open space. Improved public access to open space has been delivered through the creation of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces and at the Sportsbox.”

5. Question from Councillor M Ali

This question will be dealt with under Part II of the agenda.

6. Question from Councillor M Ali

“What criteria was used in determining and choosing GolDev as a partner for WBC? Is this a formally approved and published criteria?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The Council did not choose GolDev. GolDev was selected by Woking Football Club and it approached the Council for a Development Agreement that was approved by Council. Since 1995, the Council’s policy has been to assist Woking Football Club in developing a 10,000 capacity Football Stadium at Kingfield. The main criteria for entering into the Agreement with GolDev Woking Limited were that the proposed development (i) complied with the Council’s policy objective and (ii) was viable.”

7. Question from Councillor M Ali

“In relation to question 6 above, what other firms were offered the opportunity to bid / show interest in the proposed partnership in way of a transparent procurement / partnership process?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The Council did not seek a development partner. It was not a Council procurement.”

8. Question from Councillor M Ali

This question will be dealt with under Part II of the agenda.

9. Question from Councillor M Ali

“With impending children centre closures and some closed can you please clarify what did you exactly mean by "integration of children centres" in your statement at the meeting on 20 May 2019. Does he mean closures and mergers?”

Reply from Councillor C S Kemp

“Children’s Centres are changing under the new Family Centre specification and in Woking the two Family Centres will be based in Sheerwater and Goldsworth Park which are identified as the two areas of greatest need. Family Centres will work in partnership with local services within the Borough of Woking, providing joined up Early Help for families who are vulnerable. Family Centre Outreach Workers will have also the opportunity to work alongside other professionals, for example from Health, Employment and Housing. This is a key benefit of being overseen by the Borough Council as it enables the team to work closely with colleagues who support key issues for families including the wider determinants of health. Family Centre staff will also have access to the Community Centres in Byfleet, Knaphill, Sheerwater and Westfield plus there is the opportunity to explore the use of other sites in order to deliver group interventions such as parenting courses locally for families in their local area. Therefore, regarding integration, the Family Centres will operate as their own team across the whole Borough but will operate closely and integrate with all of the relevant key partners and stakeholders in a way that meets the needs of the Woking demographic.”

10. Question from Councillor M Ali

“The residents have been hammered at their most vulnerable time with the exorbitant price increases that have happened at Brookwood Cemetery since WBC bought and has been lead by your group. What is the price now in comparison with 2012? Does he believe it's fair?”

Reply from Councillor G S Cundy

“As can be seen below, residents have not been hammered. Brookwood Cemetery has various charges for various plots. The examples shown below are adult fees charged for burial in 2012 in comparison to today's costs. Only a small increase has been implemented over the past 7 years.

Burial on the New Muslim High Ground

2012 - New Purchase and interment Fee - Total £3950.00

2019 - New Purchase and interment Fee - Total £4000.00 - 1.2% increase over 7 years

Burial on M1/M3

2012 - New Purchase and interment Fee - Total £3750.00

2019 - New Purchase and interment Fee - Total £3850.00 - 2.6% increase over 7 years

Muslim Community Agreements

2012 - New Purchase and interment Fee - Total £2300.00

2019 - New Purchase and interment Fee - Total £2300.00 - No change over 7 years

Burial on Plot 119

2012 - New Purchase and interment Fee - Total £4100.00

2019 - New Purchase and interment Fee - Total £4000.00 - 2.4% decrease over 8 years

Interment fee only

2012 - £475.00 - £950.00 depending on the size of grave and location

2019 - £1200.00 across all sites.

Burial of Cremated Remains

2012 - Interment fee - Total £550.00

2019 - Interment fee - Total £575.00”

11. Question from Councillor M Ali

“How many properties has Woking Council sold to Thamesway group of companies and its subsidiaries and Rutland? What price were they sold at? What were the market valuations of these? Did we get 3 differences valuations done?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The Council has not sold any properties to the Thamesway group of companies (including Rutland) during the last 2 years. In 2016/17 the Council sold 2 properties, 10 Guildford Road for £618,722 and Five Acres for £925,000, to the Thamesway group at the cost of acquisition by the Council.”

12. Question from Councillor M Ali

“What is the anticipated build cost per parking space for the red car park. How does that compare with the build cost per parking space for the Heathside car park?”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“In accordance with the Executive report submitted to the Executive the budgeted cost for 1,325 parking spaces in the Victoria Square Red car park is a total of £73m (circa £55,000 per space). No detailed costs are available at this time for the demolition and rebuild of Heathside car park.”

13. Question from Councillor M Ali

“Relating to red car park what other costs except the car park itself were mingled in the budget? E.g refurbishments of some retail space?”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“All budget costs are as reported in the Executive Report EXE18-128 of 22 November 2018.”

14. Question from Councillor M Ali

“In recent press releases and even statements from CEO the impression has been given that the expansion of the Victoria arch and the demolition of the shops and the listed building is a done deal. To my understanding council has not yet approved this and no planning consent has been granted. Are we jumping the gun here?”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“The Council approved the making of a Housing Infrastructure Fund Bid. Planning consent for the demolition of the shops has not yet been sought. I personally made the statements about our proposals which have secured for the Council a grant award of £95m.”

15. Question from Councillor M Ali

“In relation to item 14 above the building in question is a listed building considered of townscape merit. Planning consent for even shop modifications has been denied in the past citing ‘appearance and character’. How do you now feel about demolishing the whole building?”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“The building referred to is locally listed. The merits of the case for demolition will need to be considered when the appropriate planning consent is sought.”

16. Question from Councillor M Ali

“Regarding item 14 above can you confirm that your studies prove that expanding the arch will solve traffic problems and not just move them upstream? Reliable sources have told me that you are simply mitigating the issue around the few meters of the arch and move the congestion upstream without a real solution to the problem. Can you confirm there are studies to back up your answer.”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“Expert highways and transportation consultants have prepared proposals which will improve conditions to the south of Victoria Arch.”

17. Question from Councillor M Ali

“Will the Leader please explain why there is such a huge difference in the purchase price and the current valuation of Dukes Court? How did the public purse suffer such a loss, who did the first evaluation? How many evaluations were done originally? and why was such a big mistake made and who is liable for it.”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The valuation of Dukes Court in the financial statements is a valuation prepared for accounting purposes. The method of valuation for accounting purposes is not the same as that used for a purchase report whereby advice is given as to a recommended price that could be paid for an asset by a specific purchaser, not the market value more generally. Valuations for accounting purposes are governed by different rules, regulations and assumptions such as an appropriate yield and the rental income.

The difference to the valuation calculated by Knight Frank on acquisition of the holding company in November 2017 is explained by a difference in both the yield, where a more cautious view is taken, and the rent, where some rents are now no longer under guarantee.

In September 2018 Knight Frank confirmed that the 2017 acquisition price remained appropriate as the value for the property on its sale by the company to WBC.

Whilst the property provides net income to underpin the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, a key reason for the acquisition was to secure quality office space which might otherwise have been lost to residential conversion. This is not reflected in an accounting valuation based on existing leases and ignoring any special assumptions or special purchaser status which a purchase report would include.

The price paid was not a mistake and therefore there is no liability. The asset is currently performing well as reported monthly in the Green Book."

18. Question from Councillor I Johnson

"Will the Leader please update the Council on the progress of the Community, Development and Engagement Strategic Plan which was due to be completed by 30 June 2019 and its objectives implemented by March 2020? Is any action being taken on this or any other of the objectives within the plans shown in the Community Development service plan?"

Reply from Councillor C S Kemp

"At the meeting of Council, when it approved the Service Plans for 2019/20 it agreed that it would not pursue a Community Development and Engagement Strategic Plan."

19. Question from Councillor L M N Morales

"Can the Council confirm if they own any of the lands proposed to be developed by GoldDev Woking Ltd?"

Reply from Councillor A Azad

"The Council owns the majority of the proposed development site, either in its own right or through Kingfield Community Sports Centre Limited (a company wholly-owned by the Council)."

20. Question from Councillor R Mohammed

"Please can the Portfolio Holder update us on any recent work being done at Pool in the Park to ensure it is ready for the residents to enjoy this summer?"

Reply from Councillor C S Kemp

"The works to install the new flumes has been completed and opened to the public on Saturday 20 July 2019. Repairs have been completed to the interactive beach area water feature and wave machine within the Leisure Lagoon. Over the summer period upgrade works to the pool plant and external envelope of the building will continue with no impact on users."

21. Question from Councillor N Martin

"In light of the recent successes of Party in the Park and the summer activities in Jubilee Square, how does the Portfolio Holder intend to build on this going forward?"

Reply from Councillor C S Kemp

"The Party in the Park was another great success with over 21,000 attending the day. I am most grateful for all the staff, stall holders, entertainers and other staff that helped make it such a great day. Our intention is to hold this again next year; effectively ensuring it is, like the Food and Drink Festival, an annual event. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be given an opportunity to review the event and comment upon its future; I hope it will give its full support."

22. Question from Councillor D E Hughes

“We discovered at the members briefing on the Westfield Development that Mr Gold is now in a partnership with two others from Dukelease, who are now part of GolDev Woking Ltd. What due diligence was conducted into this company prior to the Council signing the contract with them?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

The Council’s contractual arrangement is with GolDev Woking Limited, not Dukelease, i.e. the Council has not signed any contract with Dukelease. As such, the Council’s due diligence concentrated on GolDev Woking Limited. However, Dukelease’s involvement with GolDev was established, through due diligence, before the Council signed the agreement with GolDev. Meetings were held with Dukelease and its solicitors, with appropriate enquiries/searches being made.”

23. Question from Councillor D E Hughes

This question will be dealt with under Part II of the agenda.

24. Question from Councillor D E Hughes

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25. Question from Councillor D E Hughes

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26. Question from Councillor D E Hughes

“Following the latest valuation of Council assets it transpires that the Council has paid £13 million pounds more for Duke’s Court than its current valuation. As this purchase was relatively recent, can the Portfolio Holder comment on whether we paid more than we should have for this asset?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“Please see answer provided to Question 17. As noted by Knight Frank the price paid was the lowest at which the property could be secured. The Council approved the acquisition to secure office space and to enable partial redevelopment of the site.”

27. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“Press reports back in February indicated that a company part owned by Gordon Ramsay had signed a lease for the former Tante Marie restaurant on Commercial Way. Do we have any idea when a new restaurant offer will open on the site?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“Busyn Ltd, a Gordon Ramsay Group company, took the lease of 57-61 Commercial Way, Woking on 24 March 2019 and is currently responsible for the rent and service charges whilst it develops its proposals for opening its training centre and new restaurant. No date has been fixed for the opening.”

28. Question from Councillor A-M Barker

“What measures is the Council taking to recoup the loans, totalling £1.8m according to press reports, made to Tante Marie?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The contractual arrangements with Tante Marie were restructured during 2018/19. As a result the lease was terminated and the Council took back the responsibility for the investment in the property which previously would have been recovered from the tenant. Effectively the Council, as Landlord, has paid for the creation of the space which it has now let to Busyn Ltd.”

29. Question from Councillor G G Chrystie

“Will the Council please confirm that the Council (or a Council body) holds the title to the West Byfleet Recreation Ground as Trustee for and on behalf of local residents.”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“Yes. The freehold is held by the Borough Council as trustee of the United Charities, in the Parish of Byfleet.”

30. Question from Councillor G G Chrystie

“Several statements have been made starting in April this year that the Council had purchased or was in the process of purchasing two fields adjacent to the West Byfleet Recreation Ground. It was ascertained that the fields were owned by Surrey County Council and by Byfleet United Charities. Conflicting information has since circulated and local residents want certainty as to the position. First has negotiation with Surrey County Council been concluded? (and if not when is it expected to complete) Second please confirm the position relative to the Byfleet United Charities field.”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“Surrey County Council has confirmed that the land adjoining West Byfleet Recreation Ground on the Parvis Road is considered part of the school (although it is only occasionally used). SCC is prepared to offer a short lease of the land to WBC, but this would be subject to a right for the school to use the land and potentially break options to take back the whole site should it be required for exclusive use by the school in the future. No formal negotiation with the County Council has been undertaken. The Byfleet United Charities field next to the West Byfleet School is leased by Surrey County Council as school playing fields.”

31. Question from Councillor W P Forster

“Please can the Council confirm what action it has taken following receiving the petition from Catriona Lewis which called for wheelchair accessible equipment to be installed in play areas?”

Reply from Councillor C S Kemp

“Officers have been exploring opportunities to introduce additional play equipment that is accessible to wheelchair users into the Council’s existing play areas. The current preferred option is to include such equipment in one of the upcoming play area refurbishment projects, which will enable this to form a focus for that scheme, rather than attempting to retrofit individual items into an existing play area. Officers are currently in the process of developing ideas and testing the feasibility of including suitable equipment that is both inclusive and accessible to wheelchair users as part of the proposed refurbishment of Loop Road play area. If this proves to be a viable approach, we would aim to deliver these improvements spring / summer 2020.”

32. Question from Councillor W P Forster

“Please can the Council how many Assets of Community Value there are there in Woking Borough?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“The Council has two assets of community value. These are Sheerwater Recreation Ground, and West Byfleet Recreation Ground. More details are on the Council’s website, including the rejected applications, <https://www.woking.gov.uk/assetsofcommunityvalue>”

33. Question from Councillor W P Forster

“I was pleased to see Woking Borough Council running several events for Anti-Social Behaviour Week. However, I was disappointed that none of them run in the evening or weekend.

Please can the Council explain its decision not to run an evening or weekend event? Please can the Council confirm how it is going to reach the vast majority of Woking’s population who work during the hours of the current Anti-Social Behaviour Week events?”

Reply from Councillor C S Kemp

“This is the third year that we have supported the Surrey Police led Antisocial Behaviour Awareness Week. As in previous years, we have followed similar arrangements, in fact this year we have added additional day-time drop-in sessions around the Borough targeting areas where we have received reports of antisocial behaviour.

In addition, a press release has been issued to local media, posters have been put up at touch points around the Borough and a social media awareness campaign led by Surrey Police and WBC is underway using Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Posts give an explanation of antisocial behaviour, how to report it and how to receive help and support and include contact details and website information.

Using social media in this way enables officers to engage with residents and provide them with specific information at a time that is convenient for them, whilst enabling us to target our resources at identified areas.”

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REPORT ENDS