

COUNCIL – 19 OCTOBER 2017

### QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 19 OCTOBER 2017

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 A E Murray

“#WEAREWOKING appears on several hoardings around the town and the Victoria Square Construction Site.

What is #WEAREWOKING and what is it being used for?”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“#WEAREWOKING is a media campaign supporting the Victoria Square development but more importantly recognising and sharing the very positive position of Woking as a place to live, work and visit. Members will be aware of the national review which established Woking as the eighth happiest place to live in the UK and the happiest in Surrey. Sometimes we forget to tell everyone how great Woking is, indeed often we concentrate on the negative issues that exist in a place and do not spend enough time telling everyone how great it is to be in and part of Woking.

On Wednesday #WEAREWOKING was launched to the business community at a well attended Woking Means Business event; it was very well received. The #WEAREWOKING platforms will enable our businesses, our community organisations, our residents and our visitors to share with everyone how great it is to be part of Woking.

I encourage all Members to participate positively in this campaign; use the core strapline of the campaign #WEAREWOKING and positively promote the activities of Woking. Please be positive as the future of our economic success and the ability to provide our wide range of social and environmental policies depends on us succeeding economically.”

2. Question from Councillor G G Chrystie

“Neighbourhood Forums: Following upon the successful Referendum in West Byfleet held on 5th October 2017 and the number of Forums passed now being 3, does the Borough intend to actively assist other suitable areas to set up local forums and prepare Neighbourhood Plans?”

Reply from Councillor A C L Bowes

“The Council is always willing to assist local communities to set up a Neighbourhood Forum to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan.

Officers are presently working with Brookwood and Bridley Neighbourhood Forum to prepare their Neighbourhood Plan. The Forum is at an advanced stage of preparing the Neighbourhood Plan, and Officers have recently reviewed a draft of the plan and have submitted some comments for the Forum to consider.

Byfleet has a designated Neighbourhood Forum and a Neighbourhood Area. A draft of their Neighbourhood Plan is yet to be submitted. There is further scope for Officers to proactively engage with the Neighbourhood Forum to assess any assistance they can provide to speed up the process.

Officers have proactively engaged with residents of Sheerwater to encourage them to establish a Forum and prepare a Neighbourhood Plan because of the potential future regeneration of the area. These attempts have been unsuccessful to persuade the local residents to establish a Forum. Officers have not given up trying, and will continue to proactively engage with the hope they will establish a Neighbourhood Forum.

Members should note that the setting up of a Neighbourhood Forum to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan is not something that the Council could impose. First and foremost local residents must be willing and committed to do so. Officers will always be willing to assist any community that wishes to set up a Neighbourhood Forum to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan.”

3. Question from Councillor I Johnson

“South Western Railways are undertaking consultations about their rail service. Would the Leader please advise whether or not the Council has responded to, or been involved in, the consultations, particularly in light of the proposed reduction of the number of fast trains from Woking to Waterloo in the morning rush hour?”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“South Western Railways (SWR) is currently consulting on its timetable for December **2018**. The consultation runs until 22 December 2017 and Officers are in the process of preparing a response. SWR is planning to undertake some face to face meetings at key stations and I would be delighted to invite the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to join me at the Woking meeting. I will let him know when the meeting details are announced.

On a positive note Officers have engaged with both Network Rail and South Western Railways on future investment in rail infrastructure in Woking. This includes the grade separated junction with the Portsmouth line crossing the Basingstoke line, a new and widened Victoria Arch bridge, a new platform at the station, a new station building on the south side of the railway and a new gateline on the north side of the station. All this will improve the station and support growth of 40% in rail capacity of passenger movements from Woking to Waterloo, linking with Crossrail 2 at Wimbledon or Clapham and hopefully providing direct rail access from Woking to Heathrow.”

4. Question from Councillor I Johnson

“Given the proposed roll-out of Universal Credit in Woking in July 2018 will the Leader please

- a) provide a statement as to how the Council will deal with rent and Council tax arrears arising and
- b) advise whether there has been any assessment of the extent of assistance which will be needed by Universal Credit claimants, the application process being online?”

Reply from Councillor A Azad

“In respect of a) I can assure the Council that Officers will work positively with residents who may be adversely affected by changes in benefit arrangements. Our experience in dealing with the benefit has been positive in helping people cope with the change and either help them in finding more affordable homes and/or increased income through accessing work. Obviously this has taken time and some additional housing payments have been made to assist those in greatest difficulty. Officers will do all they can to help those of our residents in need and I will monitor the impact. What we shouldn't do is speculate and cause local residents unnecessary worry.

As to question b) we have not done an assessment as to what help is needed, save to the fact that we know that some will. Members will be aware that seeking housing

accommodation from the Council is already an online activity and those that need help get it from Officers and from partners; this will continue and to the extent to which we need to increase resources in the short term to assist any peak work load we will do so.

As this is such a complex issue I have attached as an Appendix to this answer a brief explanation of where we are in the process of Universal Credit roll out.”

5. Question from Councillor D E Hughes

“The lead article in the local paper this week paints a literally sunny picture of the Victoria Square development, and cites the £460 million pounds price tag. However, at the Council meeting on the 28th Sept there was an inference that this price tag may change.

Can the Leader confirm the rosy picture as in the article and reassure the Council that the project is on track and also within the agreed costs?”

Reply from Councillor D J Bittleston

“I am delighted to confirm that the rosy picture is a true reflection of the development of Victoria Square as approved by the Council.

I intimated at Council on 28 September, that we were considering other matters upon which I briefed the Victoria Square Project Board meeting on 27 September. I now know with greater certainty that we will be asked to consider at the Executive on 23 November 2017, and to recommend to Council on the 7 December, to provide additional capital resources for three issues. The first issue is to revise the fire strategy of the development in light of the Grenfell Tower incident, the second is the opportunity to provide additional residential units which will generate additional income and additional town centre car parking which again will generate additional income. I have also arranged for a private briefing of all Members to be held on 22 November prior to the Executive on 23 November.”

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REPORT ENDS

Note for Explanation about Universal Credit

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is slowly rolling out Universal Credit across the country. This is already 4 years behind schedule and Woking Job Centre will be one of the last in the country to move to “full service”. Hopefully some of the issues regarding payments will have been ironed out by the time it is rolled out in this area. As we speak there are on-going debates in Parliament about delaying the roll out.

Full Service means that universal credit will be open to **all new claims** at the Woking Job Centre from July 2018. Previously it was limited to a small selection of single claimants.

Universal Credit will amalgamate 6 current social security benefits, including Housing Benefit which relates to payment of housing costs.

It will not include Council Tax Support which will continue to be claimed and awarded through local authorities. Therefore, the impact on Council Tax arrears should be minimal as the local authority can make a determination on a Council Tax Support claim without a decision regarding Universal Credit.

Existing claimants of Housing Benefit (working age only affected) will NOT move onto Universal Credit from July 2018; this will not start nationally until July 2019, at the earliest and not be completed until March 2022.

Claimants for Universal Credit will need to apply on-line and the claim process is administered by the DWP, not the local authority. It is understood that a Universal Credit advisor will be assigned, by the DWP, to help and support the claimant through the claim process. As is the case now, applications can be made at the Council Offices using the customer terminals and staff will be able to provide assistance. Existing Housing Benefit staff already provide further support on budgeting and managing finances for the most vulnerable, but this tends to be via referrals from the job centre as detailed records have to be submitted to the DWP for these cases.

In preparation for Universal Credit, New Vision Homes (NVH) has been running digital inclusion courses for residents using “We are Digital”, a specialist provider. The courses were advertised to all residents.

To understand and review the extent of residents' digital skills, NVH surveyed residents as part of its annual survey asking:

1. Does your household have access to the internet?

*63% are in households with internet access, whilst 5% said they don't have internet access now but did have in the past. 32% do not have internet access.*

2. Overall, when you go online, do you mostly use your mobile phone or mostly use some other device like a desktop, laptop or tablet computer?

*Of those with internet access, 26% mostly use a mobile phone and 25% use some other device when online. 17% said they use both equally.*

3. Overall, how confident are you as an internet user?

*Excluding those who responded 'don't know', 39% of respondents describe themselves as 'very confident' internet users with 76% either 'very/fairly confident'. 24% said they were either 'not very or not at all confident' when going online.*

These recent survey results will inform how NVH approach and target its current digital inclusion initiatives.