

COUNCIL

Monday 21 October 2019

Agenda Item 7

Questions from Members

Unanswered Questions – Responses sent subsequent to Meeting

11. Question from Councillor M Hanif to the Cabinet Member for Housing

Tackling rough sleeping needs both health and care solutions to help those most in need and reverse the long term trend of rising number of people living on the streets.

In a new publication for councils, the LGA says this is the best way to support the government Rough Sleeping Strategy and achieve its target of halving rough sleeping over the course of this Parliament.

Prevention, Intervention and Recovery are the focus of the strategy.

What is WDC strategy and are we likely to meet this target?

Thank you for your question. Our Conservative Government has recognised the vital importance of addressing the issue and have allocated funding.

I would like to meet the Target of at least halving the number of people rough sleeping and one of the actions planned is the emergency bed provision, tenancy sustainment for former rough sleepers and proposals for an enhanced severe weather provision this winter.

Not all of those on the street are homeless. Begging is an easy way of making money.

We work very closely with our colleagues at Wycombe Homeless Connection, Wycombe Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme, Connections, Outreach and many others to prevent and relieve all forms of homelessness, not least rough sleeping.

A key factor for me and my officers is ensuring the excellent work done here continues with the new unitary.

I would also like to take this opportunity to encourage you and other Members to attend the seminar next week Tuesday 29/10 which will give a more informed idea of the work being done.

Question No. 12 from Cllr Ms J Wassell to the Cabinet Member for Planning was withdrawn before the Meeting.

13. Question from Councillor S Graham to the Cabinet Member for Community.

The main entrance to the Hilltop community centre and the Wycombe Badminton Club is badly in need of repair, whilst the main car park mainly serving the Hilltop community Centre is in need of resurfacing .On top of this the emergency parking bays need to be repainted and a couple of disabled bays need to be provided.

All the above had been submitted to the appropriate Department back in September 2018, yet nothing appears to have been done.

Would the Cabinet Member responsible please say whether community organisations and their facilities need to be kept up to standard like other public facilities, and if so, can I expect some action in this area please?

Thank you Cllr Graham for raising the issue of the car park that is used by both the Badminton Centre and Hilltop Community Centre.

This year Council officers have undertaken a number of repairs, all agreed with you, to some of the doors and windows of the community centre and also the external footlights. I am aware that the repair of the surface of the car park has been raised before but this has not been something that has been prioritised for funding.

There is a programme of works that the Council carries out each year as part of both its planned and reactive maintenance across a large portfolio of facilities. Condition surveys inform this work, enabling urgent and essential work to be undertaken. Whilst there is not funding allocated to the car park at this time, Council Officers are continuing to review the ongoing programme of work for the remainder of the year and the car park at Hilltop Community Centre will of course be part of that process .

14. Question from Councillor M Knight to the Cabinet Member for Economic Development & Regeneration.

At the end of August it was announced that High Wycombe had been chosen to receive money from the government's Future High Streets Fund to bring improvements to our town centre.

Could we have an update on how this is progressing?

We were delighted to receive the news on August Bank Holiday that High Wycombe had been chosen as one of the additional 50 towns to go through to the second stage of the Future High Street Fund process.

From a strategic point of view, the future of our town centres, especially enhancing the vibrancy and vitality of High Wycombe is a key strand of the Regeneration Strategy tabled this evening. In the Buckinghamshire context the importance of the town centres of High Wycombe and Aylesbury is also a strand of the Local Industrial Strategy developed by the Buckinghamshire Local Enterprise Partnership that was adopted in the summer.

This strategy framework developed with input from Members and partners sets a clear direction and foundation to build our Future High Street business case on.

Since the announcement on an operational front, we have received preliminary guidance on the process that will need to follow to develop our business case and been allocated a Delivery Manager at the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government who will be our guide through the process.

Officers had an initial telephone call with our Delivery Manager on the 16 October and an Inception Meeting in London will be arranged in early November. This will help us focus in on the schemes most suitable to take forward.

We were also told this month that the submission timeline has been changed and we will be working to submit a draft business case by the 15 March (previously 15 January) and a final business case by the 20 June 2020 (previously 28 April).

This is a competitive process and our application will be considered alongside 99

other towns. If we are successful we will be told in summer / autumn 2020.

We have a strong track record of making positive change to the town – especially through our Recycling Retail Units Fund (RRUF) that has enabled us to buy and refurb vacant units and this is one of the programmes, as identified in our Regeneration Strategy work, that we will look to repeat with this funding opportunity.

15. Question from Councillor R Raja to the Leader of the Council

Would the Leader of the Council like to give us an update as to where exactly in the 'pipeline' is the recommendation of the Remaking of the River Wye Task and Finish Group, for the River Wye to be brought to the surface in the Town?

As you attended Cabinet you will be aware that the Cabinet response to the task and finish group were fully discussed and voted on and subsequently went through Full Council so I hope that your question was in fact answered. I am providing the response here for your information. That:

- (i) *the response to the recommendations of the Improvement and Review Commission 28 November 2018 concerning the River Wye is noted; and that in any future plans, strategies, schemes or bids which Buckinghamshire Council may pursue for the town, that they take the report and response into account;*
- (ii) *the work to develop a strategy and action plan for the Future High Streets Fund takes the IRC report and the Cabinet responses into account; and*
- (iii) *the new Buckinghamshire Council is encouraged to adopt a clear strategy and action plan in its first year for the improvement and regeneration of the town centre which includes making a feature of the hidden asset of the River Wye.*

16. Question from Councillor K Ahmed to the Cabinet Member for Housing

Since the introduction of the Homeless Reduction Act in April 2018, does the cabinet member feel that it has served its purpose so far in reducing homelessness?

It is very difficult to assess the successes of the new Act as homelessness can be considered to be subjective with outcomes subject to individual circumstances and the expectations of applicants. I would be wary of calling the new Act a success as yet, however the statistics can support this view in Wycombe in one respect.

Since the introduction of the Act, the number of households in temporary accommodation has reduced significantly down by approximately 33% between April 2018 and October 2019 as it would appear, more households have been prevented from becoming homeless. However, rough sleeper numbers have increased both nationally and locally since the introduction of the Act for a number of reasons which we do not believe are attributable to the new Act.

In terms of rough sleepers, officers have been working hard to assist those rough sleeping in the district including successfully applying for, and using over £250,000 worth of Government funding for emergency beds, tenancy sustainment for former rough sleepers as well as the provision of enhanced severe weather provision which we aim to again provide and improve this winter.

To answer the question posed, has the Act served its purpose I would reply that the evidence suggests that the Act **is** meeting its purpose however more work is required to continue to meet the need of those who need our help.

17. Question from Councillor Ms J Wassell to the Cabinet Member for Planning.

Please can you advise me about the progress with the Bassetsbury Park home scheme as I get many questions about this from members of the public?

Written Response from Councillor S Broadbent (Cabinet Member for Economic Development & Regeneration).

Bassetsbury Triangle, as the site is now known, has been openly marketed, via specialist agents active in the park homes sector. Prospective residential park home developers have been shortlisted. The site had been marketed on the basis of the Council undertaking both on-site 'enabling works' (capping), and off-site 'embankment works' (improvements to the adjacent footpath).

However, the bidding process resulted in a preference on the part of the prospective developers to undertake the groundworks themselves. So they have been asked to re-bid on this basis, with a bid deadline of 14th November 2019.

In the meantime a decision on the planning permission for the proposed 'embankment works' is awaited (the main site already having the benefit of consent). It is estimated that construction works will start early in 2020, so we are hopeful we will see new park homes arriving by next summer. If people wish to register interest, then please use WDC Estates' email: EstatesServices@wycombe.gov.uk"

18. Question from Councillor Ms J Wassell the Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources

With the arrival of Universal Credit, can you inform us about the impact on our benefits department particularly in regard of housing costs?

Universal credit, as opposed to Housing Benefit, is administered by the Department of Work and Pensions and will ultimately replace the current system of Housing Benefit that is administered by Local Councils. The current impact is a slow reduction in caseload from 7,400 in April 2018 to 6,000 in October 2019. It is estimated that overall Housing Benefit expenditure will reduce by approximately £7m from £43m in 2018/19 to £36m 2019/20. The transfer of claimants to Universal credit has been slowed by the Government for review purposes.

Despite the reduction in caseload, the number of changes dealt with by the Benefit Team has increased as the DWP are sharing more data electronically. In 2017/18 there were 91,000 changes, increasing to 151,000 in 2018/19. This figure is set to increase further in the current year. These changes are managed by a team of only 16 staff.

The Government will set a timeline to transfer residual caseload from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit at some point in the future but Pensioners in particular will remain on Housing Benefit for many years to come. In the meantime Benefit Officers continue to work closely with the Citizens Advice Bureau and Council's Homelessness Prevention team to support claimants who need extra help. The Benefit team includes a dedicated officer to prioritise Homeless claims and this ensures claimants in need are given the highest level of support.