

4.8

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
BOROUGH PARISH LIAISON FORUM
HELD ON 12 APRIL 2021 AT 7.00 - 9.02 PM**

Councillors Present

Michael Firmager (Chairman), Stephen Conway and Gregor Murray

Parish/Town Council Representatives

Roland Cundy	Finchampstead Parish Council
Pam Stubbs	Barkham Parish Council
Dawn Peer	Shinfield Parish Council
Tony Farnese	Sonning Parish Council
John Anderson	Swallowfield Parish Council
Roy Mantel	Twyford Parish Council
Shaun Hanna	Winnersh Parish Council
Steve Bromley	Finchampstead Parish Council
Trefor Fisher	Sonning Parish Council
John Bowley	Twyford Parish Council
Andrew Grimes	Shinfield Parish Council
Alistair Neal	Earley Town Council
Liz Halson	Clerks Forum

Officers

Richard Bisset (Lead Specialist, Place Clienting), Neil Carr (Principal Democratic Services Officer), Andy Glencross (Assistant Director, Highways and Transport), Emma Pilgrim (Place Clienting), Simon Price (Assistant Director, Neighbourhoods and Communities), Mark Redfearn (Lead, Localities Service) and Justin Turvey (Operational Manager, Development Management)

53. MINUTE SILENCE

Following the recent death of the Duke of Edinburgh, the Forum held a minute's silence as a mark of respect.

54. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Lesley Foxwell, Ken Newland and Majid Nagra.

55. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 February 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman at a future date.

56. MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

57. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

58. RECENT CHANGES TO THE PLANNING SYSTEM

The Forum considered a presentation on recent changes to the Planning system relating to day-to-day planning issues, including:

- Amendments to the Use Classes Order – impact on the High Street;
- New Permitted Development Rights and Prior Approvals;
- Temporary changes to the Planning system during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Justin Turvey (Operational Manager, Development Management) attended the meeting to give the presentation and answer Member questions.

The presentation reminded Members that the Use Classes Order 1987 put uses of land and buildings into various categories known as “Use Classes”. A change of use requiring planning permission occurred when moving from one class use to another. The presentation set out the use classes in the 1987 Order, such as A1 (retail), A2 (banks), A3 (restaurants and cafes), etc. and described the changes introduced from 1 September 2020.

As stated by the Government, the purported aim of the changes to the Use Classes Order (from September 2020) had been to enable a repurposing of buildings on high streets and in town centres quickly and in response to changing demand. Examples of change of use that no longer required planning permission were shop to gym and bank to restaurant.

The presentation also gave details of changes to Permitted Development Rights and Prior Approvals. Permitted Development was the national grant of planning permission which allowed certain building works and changes of use to be carried out without having to make a planning application.

The presentation highlighted a number of temporary changes to the planning system during the Covid-19 pandemic. These included the extension of planning permissions, virtual Planning Committees, extension of construction hours, temporary buildings and uses. WBC had produced guidance for businesses to erect temporary structures without seeking planning permission.

In the ensuing discussion Members raised the following points:

Could a takeaway be created from an existing business use without requiring planning permission? Justin confirmed that this did not apply to change of use to a takeaway but could include change of use to a restaurant.

What was the impact of the amendments to the Use Classes Order on the work of WBC Planning officers? Justin confirmed that the outcome was a reduction in effective control over development in a town centre and also out of town centres e.g. office parks could now be converted to retail uses without planning permission. The change of use from a shop to a gym no longer required planning permission. Similarly, the change of use from a bank to a restaurant would not now require planning permission. This meant that there was no longer any control over hours of use or noise and disturbance issues. Justin stated that another impact was a reduction in income from the planning application process which would make it more difficult to provide a cost-effective service.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Justin Turvey be thanked for attending the Forum;
- 2) the presentation slides be circulated to members of the Forum.

59. WOKINGHAM BOROUGH ACTIVE TRAVEL

The Forum considered a presentation on the Borough Council's approach to Active Travel in the Borough.

Andy Glencross, Assistant Director (Highways and Transport) attended the meeting to give the presentation and answer Member questions.

The presentation stated that, until recently, there had been limited opportunities for investment in cycling and walking infrastructure. However, the past year had seen the publication of the Government's "Gear Change" document and LTN 1/20 which was the new national cycle design guidance. These documents were supported by the Active Travel Fund which made £2bn available for Council's, subject to competitive bidding and compliance with the new guidelines.

The presentation gave details of the Borough's Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) which determined the focus for future investment in active travel infrastructure. Potential schemes within the LCWIP were the subject of public consultation. In November 2020 the Council was awarded £576k from the Active Travel Fund (Tranche 2) by the Department for Transport. Early stage consultation on proposed schemes commenced in March 2021 and would be followed by Phase 2 Formal Consultation in September 2021.

In addition to the LCWIP, the Borough's Local Transport Plan 4 was due to be developed during 2021/22. This would provide a further opportunity to focus on improved cycling and walking infrastructure. In addition, officers would continue to seek funding opportunities (e.g. LEP and S.106) and would continue work on Greenways and Public Rights of Way.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points.

Stephen Conway referred to a potential cycle route linking Charvil to Twyford Station. Andy suggested that this be submitted as part of the LCWIP consultation process.

John Anderson highlighted issues in Swallowfield relating to vegetation overgrowing pavements. Andy confirmed that the Council's street cleansing contractor was working through a number of similar issues and the issues in Swallowfield could be added to the list.

Al Neal suggested sharing more information on the LCWIP process with the Town and Parish Councils. Andy confirmed that officers would be happy to receive ideas and scheme proposals from the Town and Parish Councils.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Andy Glencross be thanked for attending the meeting to update the Forum on progress relating to Active Travel across the Borough;
- 2) the presentation slides be circulated to members of the Forum;
- 3) a further update on Active Travel be submitted to the Forum during 2021/22.

60. REFUSE, RECYCLING AND GRASS CUTTING

The Forum considered a presentation which provided an update on Refuse, Recycling and Grass Cutting.

Richard Bisset (Lead Specialist, Place Clienting) and Emma Pilgrim (Place Clienting) attended the meeting to give the presentation and answer Member questions.

The presentation stated that, in relation to Refuse and Recycling, the new Green recycling sacks had been delivered to households across the Borough in addition to the blue bags and caddy liners. The aim of the green sacks was to reduce the amount of wet waste. The past year had seen an increase in both refuse and recycling tonnages. WBC was now achieving a recycling rate of around 50%. The priorities for the year ahead were to:

- Divert as much recycling from blue bags as possible;
- Increase the levels of food waste recycling;
- Reduce WBC's carbon footprint further;
- Draft an updated waste Strategy.

In relation to grass cutting, the presentation stated that the 2021 grass cutting programme had commenced in March. Priority was being given to public open spaces and amenity areas as these were likely to be used more as a result of pandemic restrictions. Weekly updates were provided for Borough Members and the Town and Parish Council clerks. WBC officers welcomed feedback on local issues and concerns.

In relation to biodiversity, there was a commitment to make progress in areas such as wildflower sites, rewilding campaigns, community engagement and partnership working with the WBXC Localities and Green Infrastructure teams. Officers welcomed feedback and ideas for local initiatives.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points.

Examples were given of issues relating to sacks getting wet, split bins, contractors being untidy, etc. Richard commented that Veolia would be happy to receive feedback on any specific issues and would take corrective action where necessary.

Gregor Murray confirmed that WBC was focussing communications and engagement in order to increase the number of households that were recycling food waste. Officers were keen to receive any suggestions or ideas that could lead to increased participation. This could include information in Parish Council newsletters, e.g. Finchampstead and Swallowfield.

The Town and Parish Councils welcomed the offer of joint working on biodiversity issues. As an example, Jane Hartley referred to the plans to develop a community orchard in Charvil.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Richard Bisset and Emma Pilgrim be thanked for attending the Forum;
- 2) the presentation slides be circulated to members of the Forum;

- 3) Town and Parish Councils contact the WBC officers in relation to advice and ideas for joint working on local schemes.

61. CLIMATE EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN

Gregor Murray addressed the Forum and gave details of progress relating to the Borough Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan.

Gregor referred to five specific areas, as follows:

Energy Company Obligation (ECO) and Help to Heat Scheme – the scheme aimed to help eligible residents to reduce their carbon emissions and lower their fuel bills by making their homes more fuel efficient. Improvements relating to the Help to Heat Scheme included loft insulation or cavity wall insulation. Eligible households included those in receipt of means tested benefits or with household income below £35k after taxes. Since the end of 2020, 486 homes had benefitted from these schemes which had delivered a carbon reduction of 217 tonnes CO₂e per annum.

Increasing carbon sequestration by planting 250k trees in the Borough. WBC had received a £300k grant from the Woodland Trust to support this project, which was divided into four phases – large sites (over five acres), small sites, private land and a garden forest. The first phase was due to commence in 2021/22. Two new tree officers were to be appointed along with a project officer who would work with the Town and Parish Councils.

Solar Farms – a planning application had been submitted for the first solar farm, located in Barkham. This was a 40 hectare site which would lead to the generation of enough energy to power 6k-8k homes and would save 6k-7k tonnes of CO₂e per annum. The site would also accommodate 15k trees. It was estimated that the solar farm would operate for 40 years, after which the land could revert back to more traditional farming use.

Wokingham Community Energy (WCE) – WCE had been approved by the Council's Executive in January 2021. The aim of the scheme was to create investment opportunities through a community share offering. Income raised through the sale of shares would then be used to deliver green energy projects across the Borough such as solar or green energy installations. The selected projects would then generate income through the sale of electricity to public energy suppliers and/or the export of electricity into the Grid. This in turn would lead to investor returns and profits for WCE. As an example, the Reading Community Energy Society (RCES) had raised over £500k since it was founded in 2016. It was estimated that initial projects linked to WCE would commence in Q3 or Q4 of 2021/22.

Communication and Engagement – Gregor gave details of the ongoing process for sharing information and ideas with the Town and Parish Councils. This included regular drop-in sessions including the Town and Parish Clerks. Gregor stated that WBC was keen for the Towns and Parishes to play a role in driving the Climate Emergency agenda forwards.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points.

Liz Halson commented that the drop-in sessions were useful but was not aware if elected Members were invited to attend. Gregor undertook to provide clarity on this point.

Stephen Conway referred to the emerging Local Plan Update which had the potential to facilitate further large-scale housing development in the Borough which may impact on the

Climate Emergency Action Plan. Stephen also had concerns about air quality in Twyford. Gregor highlighted three key issues: behaviour change, future housebuilding and retrofitting for existing homes across the Borough. Gregor referred to the work being carried out by the Active Building Centre. This involved research into tools and new technologies that would ensure that buildings of all scales contributed to a reduction in carbon emissions and a more sustainable built environment. Stephen noted that the changes to the Planning system, considered earlier, made it more difficult for the Council to ensure that carbon reductions and sustainability were considered in changes of use.

Andrew Grimes referred to the impact of the pandemic in relation to people working from home. Existing housing standards were not helpful in relation to home working. Would this be addressed in the Local Plan Update? Gregor commented that the Low Energy Housing Strategy was dependent upon the Local Plan. Gregor was pushing for higher standards to be included. Improved broadband (5G) would also improve the experience of home working. Andrew commented that the delivery of new infrastructure ahead of housing development was essential if additional carbon emissions were to be prevented. A holistic view was required for the future of the Borough.

RESOLVED: That Gregor Murray be thanked for the update on the Climate Emergency Action Plan.

62. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

63. FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

The Forum considered the list of potential future Agenda items, set out on page 11 of the Agenda.

The Chairman commented that he was keen for the Town and Parish Councils to drive the Forum's work by submitting Agenda items. This would be supported by inviting the Clerks' Forum to submit items for consideration.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the list of future Forum Agenda items be noted;
- 2) suggestions for additional Agenda items be submitted to Neil Carr, Democratic Services at WBC;
- 3) the Clerks' Forum be invited to suggest potential Agenda items for the Forum.

64. DATES AND LOCATIONS OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Forum considered dates for its meetings in 2021/22, viz:

- 21 June 2021;
- 4 October 2021;
- 7 February 2022;
- 11 April 2022.

The Chairman confirmed that the next meeting (21 June 2021) would be held at the WBC Shute End offices. He then hoped that meetings would be held at different locations around the Borough. This would be considered further at the next meeting.

As this was the final meeting of 2020/21, the Chairman thanked the Borough, Town and Parish Members and officers who had supported the work of the Forum during the year.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Forum dates for 2021/22 be confirmed as 21 June 2021, 4 October 2021, 7 February 2022 and 11 April 2022;
- 2) Members discuss potential venues for the meetings at the next meeting.