



Winchester
City Council

COUNCIL MEETING – 7 November 2012

Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 1

From: Councillor Weir

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment

“What plans does the administration have for implementing the recommendations in the report from Ecoup Ltd, delivered in March 2012, on opportunities for developing renewable and low carbon energy in Winchester district?”

Reply

“The report by Ecoup Ltd was prepared for our Climate Change Partner, WinACC using grant funding provided by the Department for Energy and Climate Change. The report was shared with the City Council as it contained an excellent assessment of the potential for increasing the extent of renewables within the City Council’s District.

In order to build on the report’s findings the City Council has already held a member and Parish Council training event on 2 October when the opportunities from renewable energy projects were discussed in detail. The event also gave Members the chance to consider the planning policy framework and its impact upon decisions on specific developments.

The links between renewable projects, climate change and economy is recognised and therefore a follow up project to look at the development of a costed ‘Low Carbon Route Map’ has already been commissioned. The route map will provide a blueprint for the future development of a vibrant low carbon economy within the District, with the aim of creating additional employment and inward investment, whilst also contributing towards the Council’s target of a 30% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions between 2004 and the end of financial year 2015/2016.”



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QUESTION 2

From: Councillor Henry

To: The Portfolio Holder for Communities, Culture and Sport

“Further to her statement made at the last full council meeting can the Portfolio Holder please state whether she is still intending to purchase a portable event stage for the Winchester District as an Olympic legacy? If so, can she please let the Council know how much this will cost and from which budget this planned spend will come?”

Reply

“It was clearly demonstrated during the Jubilee and Olympic events throughout 2012 that there is a lack of covered, small-scale event spaces in Winchester Town and across the District. To this end, I am still keen to commission a structure which would be sympathetic to the historic street scenes of our towns and villages, and suitable for use by a wide cross-section of arts and community groups.

My officers have met recently with representatives of Winchester Cathedral, who have assured us that the Dean welcomes the idea and is happy to provide a regular home for the structure on the Cathedral’s Outer Close.

I have also reviewed possible funding sources, and can assure Members that there will be no requirement for a budget growth bid. The main sources of funding which I am proposing to use would be:

- a) the remaining funds from an allocation designated for public art enhancement of the refurbished High Street and The Square, given that this space will be artist-designed and will enhance provision in the centre of Town¹;

¹ NB This budget was from LABGI funds, and just over half of it has been used to pay for the refurbishment and expansion of the painted bollards in The Square.

b) the Active Communities commissioning budget, in view of the fact that such a space will support both large scale and very local celebrations in years to come, and

c) the Winchester Business Improvement District, who would obviously be keen to use space for some of the events they run – such as the switching on of the Christmas lights.

The Portfolio Holder Decision Notice later this month will set out more details, I will be keen to keep all Members informed about the process as it moves forward.

I believe this to be a fitting legacy to a splendid year of celebrations in the Winchester District.”



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QUESTION 3

From: Councillor Mather

To: The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning and Economic Development

“How many vacant retail properties are there in Winchester High Street?”

Reply

“The Winchester Business Improvement District (BID) monitors vacancy rates closely, and liaises regularly with agents to assess interest in vacant premises.

The current figure for the whole BID area (which covers the whole commercial centre of the City) is 22 vacancies. There are 370 businesses in the defined area and the vacancy rate is therefore 5.95%.

Nationally, recorded figures vary. For example, The Local Data Company average shop vacancy rate for July 2012 was 14.5%, while the British Retail Consortium’s Springboard Monitor recorded an 11.4% vacancy rate for July. In either case, Winchester is holding its own well in a very difficult retail climate.

The City continues to present an extremely attractive location for retailers, with many companies seeking premises but being unable to find a location which meet their specific requirements. A certain level of turnover in retailers is expected and helps enable the City retail offer to keep refreshing itself and meeting the demands of shoppers.

The presence of a dynamic BID and the Council’s growing reputation as one which is very much ‘open for business’ are key to the continued vibrancy of the Winchester High Street.”



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QUESTION 4

From: Councillor Janet Berry

To: The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Administration

“In view of the fact that this week, from 4 – 10 November 2012, is Living Wage Week, and further to the reply to a question about the living wage at Council on 18 July 2012, has Winchester City Council now reviewed its position with regard to becoming accredited as a Living Wage employer?”

Reply

“Winchester City Council is committed to regularly reviewing its position regarding the Living Wage accredited employer status. The Council is not in a position to comply with the Living Wage at present.

A review of Council hourly pay rates currently being paid shows that there are less than 10 employees whose hourly rate is below the Living Wage level. They are employed in roles in areas which do need to reflect competitive market rates for commercial purposes or in areas which are currently subject to review as we have previously stated.

As far as contractors are concerned, it is suggested that they should be encouraged, but not required, to consider adopting a Living Wage policy.”



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QUESTION 5

From: Councillor McLean

To: The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning and Economic Development

“Please provide an update on the success of the apprentice grants and the micro business development grants schemes.”

Reply

“This Administration has committed itself to promoting the local economy. During this challenging economic climate, we have particularly looked for ways to assist individuals and small businesses who are striving to put their skills and talents to good use.

We launched our new Apprenticeship Grants in August this year, with a budget of £10,000. We have received around 20 enquiries and six full applications so far. The grants provide for the costs of clothing, travel, specialist equipment and other essentials required in taking up an Apprenticeship, where these are not picked up by other sources. Transport was a key barrier identified in a recent study on youth unemployment commissioned by the City Council, and the first two grants – each for £400 - have been for bus fares and moped fuel. Further publicity for the scheme is now planned, focusing on the first two grant recipients.

Following a series of requests prompted by a previous grants programme for business start-ups, a pilot scheme to help a wider range of small (or ‘micro’) businesses across the District was launched in late September 2012. This provides grants of up to £1,000 to help with one-off costs that will take the business forward. So far, twelve enquiries have been received, with nine full applications. Grant recipients have included three who are developing their web-based sales operations. A fund of £5,000 was initially created from existing economic development budgets, and this sum has now been fully allocated. Further funding for this programme would clearly be put to good use in helping local businesses to grow.

These two schemes demonstrate the responsive approach we are seeking to take, in terms of supporting the needs of our employees and employers alike. I encourage you to share information about these schemes in your Wards. And I will keep you all informed about future developments in these and other areas of our increasing wide range of business support services.”



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QUESTION 6

From: Councillor Tod

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing

“Can the Portfolio Holder for Housing outline:

- how many empty homes have been reported to the council in the last year
- how many have been brought back into use and
- how much new homes bonus this is predicted to provide?”

Reply

“We have had only four formal reports of potential empty homes this year. Last year, a very large number of reports were received following a Channel 4 programme on the issue. All were investigated, although it was not possible to bring any of those reported back into use as a result of direct Council action.

More reliable information is available from Council Tax records, which indicate just under 400 properties that have been empty for more than 6 months, representing 0.8% of the District’s Housing. Approximately 70 of these have been empty for more than 3 years.

Previous experience in dealing with empty properties has lead to us prioritising for action those properties that are a detriment to the neighbourhood, we have powers to enforce repairs and gain entry through the Magistrates Court to carry out this work, if necessary within 24 hours. Empty properties that cause no nuisance require the use of a Compulsory Purchase Order or Empty Dwelling Management Order approach, essentially the process for both is the same hence why there has been very few EDMO’s ever granted. This is very time consuming and frustrating process that often doesn’t result in the property actually being occupied. In fact, regulations have been strengthened even further in favour of property owners in the last year.

Currently, resources available to support this work are very limited and no empty properties have been brought back into use in the last year as a direct result of the Council's actions, with the exception of two Council owned shops that have been converted to residential dwellings in Compton and Stanmore.

With regard to the New Homes Bonus, the bonus that we receive relates to the increase in the number of new homes that we bring in compared to the previous year, less the net effect of long term empty properties. Therefore, reducing the number of empty properties has a clear impact on the potential bonus.

For every empty property brought back into use, the Council can generate in excess of £1000 (£1,155 for a band D property) in New Homes Bonus per annum for 7 years. The two shops referred to above have been converted to 3 flats and could therefore generate in excess of £3,000 in New Homes Bonus in 2013/14."



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QUESTION 7

From: Councillor Scott

To: The Portfolio Holder for Finance & Administration

“In light of the Council Tax and Council Tax Benefit Consultation taking place at the moment (until 12 November 2012), could the Portfolio Holder advise me of the number of residential properties in St Lukes Ward which currently claim exemption from the payment of Council Tax due to their occupation by students. Could he also tell me what this amounts in excused Council Tax payments?”

Reply

“As at Monday (5 November) the number of properties in the St Luke’s Ward in receipt of a student exemption was 114 (i.e. 100 band D equivalents). However, at this time of year the Local Taxes section is still dealing with a large number of student applications and obtaining proof of status from students is often slow. Therefore, we estimate that this number will ultimately be greater than 100.

If all of the 100 band D equivalent properties were entitled to a student exemption for the whole of the financial year the cost would be £143,310 for 2012/13. This Council’s element of that would be £18,759.

As your question refers to the Council Tax and Benefit Consultation I would like to clarify that this exemption is not affected by the proposals referred to in that consultation. Also, there is no amendment at this time to the regulations laid down by Central Government for this exemption and so the award of this exemption can not be altered.

Please note that this information is not easy to assimilate because property exemption data is not held on the Council Tax database in relation to wards, only parishes. However, it is easier to collate the information in respect of the whole Town, particularly in respect of number of properties affected.”



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QUESTION 8

From: Councillor Cook

To: The Leader

“Would the Leader state if there is any procedure or convention which restricts Councillors from dealing with issues in Wards other than the one for which they have been elected?”

Reply

“I would expect any Ward Councillor to deal with local matters raised with them by their constituents. I would also expect Councillors to pass on any casework on local matters which do not relate to their Ward to the relevant colleague.

Councillors are elected to the Council, and I would not expect them to confine their remarks or activities to Ward issues. The responsibilities of Portfolio Holders require their involvement in a wide range of policy matters, whether district wide or local to one Ward.

I have every confidence that Members will continue to use their judgement on such matters, and do not see the need for any procedure.”



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QUESTION 9

From: Councillor Southgate

To: The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning and Economic Development

“Could the Portfolio Holder please update us on what events and activities are taking place to support and encourage businesses through the Christmas period?”

Reply

“Christmas is the most important trading season for many businesses, although the rapid growth in internet retailing has presented a challenge for the traditional high street offer.

There is a host of festive events organised each year, but Winchester Cathedral's successful ice rink and Christmas market have become the foundation stones for an annual marketing campaign which encompasses the whole Winchester District. 2012 will be the third year of the *England's Christmas Capital* campaign which is managed by the District-wide tourism consortium, Discover Winchester. Last year, the estimated total 'readership' exposed to Christmas advertising and editorial was almost 41million.

Winchester Cathedral and the Winchester Business Improvement District have this year funded 27 advertising sites on the London Underground as part of the above campaign – something which was trialled last year with significant impact. Meanwhile, the Council's tourism team operates the dedicated campaign site www.christmasinwinchester.co.uk which netted nearly 12,000 unique visits in 2011. The team produced a *Christmas is here* dvd which has now been viewed on YouTube by over 15,000 people, and is supported by dynamic social media activity on both Facebook and Twitter. The team also advises the Cathedral on production of its Christmas in Winchester booklet (100,000 copies) to ensure that it reflects the Christmas 'offer' right across the District.

The ice rink and market have seen steady growth in visitor numbers, with around 40,000 skaters and up to 350,000 Christmas market shoppers anticipated in 2012, thanks to an extended run of the market. This growth has a direct impact on footfall in the City Centre, and translates into custom for not only shops but also eateries, visitor attractions, hotels, the theatre and local B&Bs.

Thanks to strong partnership working with visitor attractions such as Marwell Wildlife and the Watercress Line, this additional interest in Winchester is spread well beyond the City, making not just for jingle bells but also jingling tills right across the Winchester District.”



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QUESTION 10

From: Councillor Pines

To: The Leader

“Could the Portfolio Holder please inform Council when the seats are to be replaced in front of Kings Walk? Could he also provide an update of the present state of development at Silver Hill?”

Reply

“The Silver Hill Compulsory Purchase Order inquiry has now been formally closed and we anticipate that the Inspector will submit her report to the Secretary of State very shortly if she has not done so already. The Secretary of State normally takes a few weeks to reach a decision based his Inspector’s advice so a decision before Christmas is entirely possible. If the Order is confirmed we can expect 2013 to be a very busy year as the detailed preparations for the commencement of development begin.

The Access and Infrastructure team is arranging for the replacement of the seats that Cllr Pines refers to and these should be in place before the end of the month.”



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QUESTION 11

From: Councillor Hutchison

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

“What pressure will the administration bring to bear on Cala Homes to ensure that the Barton Farm development is one fully fit for the twenty-first century and of which the whole district can be proud?”

Reply

“The Secretary of State has issued an outline consent for development at Barton Farm which requires that it conforms with the masterplan considered in considerable detail by the planning inquiry in 2010. The masterplan sets out the general layout, and includes a requirement for a new primary school, community centre, recreational space and park and ride facilities. The consent also includes a range of conditions to ensure that this is the case. Two section 106 agreements were also completed and signed during the course of the inquiry, one with the City Council covering mainly affordable housing issues, the other with the County Council covering transport issues. As a result many of the parameters of the development are now fixed.

The preparation of the masterplan involved dialogue with Council officers, representatives of statutory agencies and with local organizations, including intensive workshop sessions. Even organisations which were in principle opposed to the development took part in some of these sessions recognising that if development were eventually to be consented then it should be as good as possible.

Cala Homes must now submit a design code for approval and then a series of reserved matters applications for the details of the development. I am committed to ensuring that these are of high quality and that Cala work hard to meet the standards we set. To that end, officers have been meeting with Cala Homes to set out our expectations and to ensure that these are properly understood. Cala have been asked to consider holding a public exhibition in the new year to provide a full update on their proposals.

In addition to this we intend to establish a Barton Farm Forum to provide a public interface between the Council, Cala Homes and the community to monitor and advice on the implementation of development. This will be a long term body which has an important role in helping to ensure that the development is well integrated and successful. Details of this will be published very shortly.”