

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council

Meeting of Council 24 September 2020

Questions by Members

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1	Councillor Walsh	Councillor Knight, Executive Member for Housing and Benefits Councillor Humphreys, Executive Member for Place and Economic Prosperity	Developments at Marketfield Way, Cromwell Road and Pitwood Park
2	Councillor Sachdeva	Councillor Knight, Executive Member for Housing and Benefits	Homelessness
3	Councillor Feeney	Councillor Humphreys, Executive Member for Place and Economic Prosperity	Reopening High Streets Safely Fund
4	Councillor Ritter	Councillor Bramhall, Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services	National Government Support to Deliver on Carbon Emissions Reduction Targets
5	Councillor Brown	Councillor Knight, Executive Member for Housing and Benefits	Welfare Arrangements
6	Councillor McKenna	Councillor Biggs, Executive Member for Planning Policy	Response to Government Consultation on Planning System
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Councillor Walsh asked the **Executive Member for Housing and Benefits, Councillor Knight and the Executive Member for Place and Economic Prosperity, Councillor Humphreys** the following question:

Question 1: Developments at Marketfield Way, Cromwell Road and Pitwood Park

Whilst recognising the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions that have been imposed upon the nation it would be appreciated if the Council could be advised of what actions the executive members have taken to maintain the borough's investment in the key developments at Marketfield Way, Cromwell Road, and Pitwood Park and what the current status is and progress is being made on each of the schemes.

Response for Cromwell Road and Pitwood Park (Cllr Knight):

Our two Housing schemes, Pitwood Park and Cromwell Road are both on-site and progressing.

Both schemes had some level of delay getting into contract, in part because of the impact of Covid-19 which impacted on both sites, but also because of the need to ensure safe working practices on-site. Whilst other sectors were required to shut down, the construction industry were encouraged by central Government to press ahead with work, however, the need to adapt and change to a Covid-world has presented challenges. For example statutory utility providers furloughed staff who were related to the construction industry, leading to a backlog in site-connections, which are an essential element in a new development's programme.

On the 14th April we entered into contract with Thakeham Client Limited to deliver the 25 new homes on Pitwood Park. Then on the 12th June, the Council entered into contract with Neilcott Construction to deliver the commercial units and 32 new flats above them at Cromwell Road.

Thakeham are making good headway on our Pitwood Park site on both of the two phases to the project. Stage one groundworks have been completed across the site, including installation of new sewerage pipes, and installation of the required concrete bases underneath the ground floor of each home. Phase one of the project is more advanced, with roof trusses having been delivered and installed on some of the new homes. Both phases are anticipated to be completed Summer 2021.

On Cromwell Road the site is fully set up. The tower crane has been installed and vertical concreting completed. Neilcott has commenced the installation of the ground floor, and the first floor slab. We anticipate the development being completed in the Autumn of 2021.

We are reevaluating the tenure mix on both sites, with the intention to increase the affordable housing numbers across both sites. Cromwell currently has agreement for 32 flats, 50% market sale & 50% shared equity. Pitwood has agreement for 25 homes, mix of flats and houses, 11 shared ownership units and 14 market sale.

Response for Marketfield Way (Cllr Humphreys):

Thank you for your question Councillor Walsh.

As the Executive member, both myself and officers, have been working hard this year to ensure that Marketfield Way will not only be a successful investment for the Council but will also help to bring about real change in Redhill town centre.

I would like to highlight just a few of the things we have put in place to do this.

Firstly, we have appointed a new professional team headed up by industry experts Gardiner & Theobald who are providing project management and cost consultancy services.

We have entered into a Building Contract with Vinci Construction, who have expertise in bringing forward similar major schemes such as ours.

Importantly this Building contract has fixed well over 90% of the costs and has a range of terms within it to protect us from any uncertainty caused by Brexit or from cost increases as a result of COVID-19.

We have appointed a dedicated Client Monitoring Team whose role is to independently monitor our contractor's design proposals, and their work on site, to maintain the highest quality and compliance.

We have also commissioned a range of additional work to ensure that our commercial floorspace is highly flexible to ensure that we can successfully let all the units.

Finally, we have secured an £820,000 from Coast to Capital Local Enterprise Partnership towards the costs of the scheme and we have provisionally been awarded a further £1,200,000 through the Government's Getting Building Fund.

I am pleased to report therefore that the Council continues to make significant progress in delivering Marketfield Way.

Since we completed our land assembly and we secured vacant possession at the beginning of this year, we have completed the demolition and relocated statutory services, providing us with a cleared site.

In recent months we have commenced the piling for the buildings and undertaken works to form the basement of the residential block and to install the concrete base of the cinema.

I am pleased to say that this flagship scheme is currently on track for a practical completion by Summer 2022.

Councillor Sachdeva asked the **Executive Member for Housing and Benefits, Councillor Knight** the following question:

Question 2: Homelessness amid COVID-19

Could you please let the members of the Council and members of the public know how the Council has approached the problem of homelessness over the last 6 months amid COVID-19 and the plan going forward considering housing eviction has been resumed on 20 September and the relaxation on furlough scheme will be over by end of October 2020?

Response:

Officers have been working hard in these unprecedented times over the last 6 months. With the courts closing and evictions on hold, we have experienced very few family households approaching as homeless but have been very busy with single applicants.

At the start of the Pandemic the Government expected all Local Authorities to accommodate rough sleepers and those threatened with homeless. During the period March to September we accommodated 130 applicant households in emergency accommodation of which 86 were singles. This was a far higher number than usual because under normal circumstances the Council only has a duty to give advice and assistance to single people without a 'priority need' rather than provide emergency accommodation.

So far we have successfully assisted 87 of these applicants into more secure accommodation such as private rented rooms, supported housing, private & social rented flats. The remaining 43 households are either still receiving support, refused a suitable offer, made their own arrangements or lost contact. We have also organised some cabins at the back of Donyngs Lesiure Centre which are used for isolating those with symptoms and shielding when appropriate. Throughout the Pandemic the Housing Department has worked closely with Public Health England and Surrey County Council managing Covid within the homeless population.

Last week we were awarded £180,000 from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government to part repay some of the costs we have already concurred assisting rough sleepers and those close to rough sleeping. The balance will be put towards a variety of schemes to keep single people off the streets during the winter and assist those we have recently accommodated to keep their new tenancies through tenancy support. This is even more important this year as the local charity Renewed Hope are unable to run their Winter Night Shelter that the Council support each year. It has not been possible to run the shelter due to current Covid regulations.

The Government have introduced new regulations around the eviction of tenants for when courts reopen for possession cases, this should have the effect of spacing out the families that require our assistance to either keep them in their current accommodation or assist them into alternative accommodation.

Notices have continued to be served over the last six months and we have continued to work with these households successfully preventing homelessness in many cases. Currently out of the 134 active open homeless cases, 37 are due to the ending of a private tenancy of which 22 are due to the landlord selling the property.

Finally, those tenants struggling with affordability due to Covid and the ending of the Furlough scheme have some protection through the courts in cases where a tenant is under notice solely due to rent arrears accrued during the Pandemic. The Council can also assist households with Discretionary Housing Payments and housing staff continually negotiate with landlords and all partners to prevent homelessness wherever possible. Many clients also receive assistance from the successful in house money support team and partner debt agencies who help manage their household debts and maximise income. We will continue to relieve those made homeless by securing alternative private and social rentals wherever possible.

Councillor Feeney asked the **Executive Member for Place and Economic Prosperity, Councillor Humphreys** the following question:

Question 3: Reopening High Streets Safely Fund

Earlier this year the government announced the creation of the 'Reopening High Streets Safely Fund'. Councils across England shared £50m of additional funding to support the safe reopening of high streets and other commercial areas. The money was to allow local authorities in England to put in place additional measures to establish a safe trading environment for businesses and customers, particularly in high streets, through measures that extend to the end of March 2021. Reigate & Banstead Borough Council was allocated £132,263.00 from this fund.

Can we please have an update on how much of this funding has been spent, how much has been spent in the north of the Borough and what the funds have been spent on. If there is a sum from this allocation still remaining, please can we have an indication of how it is likely to be spent, and can members have an input into funding options for their wards?

Can we also have an update on what plans the economic development team has for supporting our business community in the coming months and what plans the communications team have for encouraging residents to shop local?

Response:

The Reopening High Streets Safely Fund (RHSS) is a pot of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funding, administered by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on behalf Her Majesty's Government (HMG). It was identified by MHCLG as a fund for helping Local Authorities implement the guidance set out in the "COVID-19 Secure: Safer Public Places – Urban Centres and Green Spaces document.

The RHSS fund can be spent on four different areas:

- Support to develop an action plan for how the local authority may begin to safely reopen their local economies.
- Communications and public information activity to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely.
- Business-facing awareness raising activities to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely.
- Temporary public realm changes to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely.

There are very strict guidelines on what the funds can be spent on but to date £106,838.40 of the RHSS has been allocated on signage across the borough in our town and local centres to reinforce social distancing and safety messaging.

As contracts for the works were awarded for the projects as a whole it is not possible to breakdown the actual spend for the north of the borough. However, signage has been installed in Banstead, Burgh Heath, Lower Kingswood, Nork Way, Waterhouse Lane, Chipstead, Tadworth, Tattenham Corner, Walton on the Hill, Drift Bridge, Rectory lane, Tattenham Way, Tadworth High Street, Woodmansterne Street and Shelveys Way ensuring all our centres receive the same safety messaging. In total 32 areas in the borough have some signage, 15 of these are in the north.

We currently have a balance of £25,424.60. Decisions on how to deploy this will be made when we have a better understanding of the changing impact of Covid-19 and have had the opportunity to engage with our MHCLG relationship manager.

We have worked closely with the Comms team to ensure we promote not only the shop safe message, but also shop local. During the height of the pandemic we had a Reigate & Banstead Business Champions campaign highlighting local businesses who had adapted their business model to continue to serve the community.

We also published our business e-bulletin daily, rather than monthly as new guidance and support was announced.

We have relaunched our Learning Lunches which now are held over Zoom with a speaker and breakout rooms so local businesses still receive some specialist knowledge and get a chance to network.

Once of the first learning lunches we did was with Google who highlighted how Google Business can help and we ai to develop a digital training package for our business to give them ideas on how they can adapt their business model. We are also hoping to book Amazon via Enterprise Nation to hold a Learning Lunch for us.

We are using the Town Improvement Fund to make the town more attractive and cleaner so the public feel more reassured visiting. We are using half the fund to do low level maintenance and repair, so the towns are nicer places to visit and the other half has been put aside as grants for the business guilds to apply for to help with the run up to Christmas. They can apply for up to £5k to go towards Christmas lights and up to £5k to go towards a Christmas event (within the guidelines), to encourage people into the town to shop locally. We have had initial meetings with the Comms team to discuss the Christmas campaign which they are currently working on.

Councillor Ritter asked the **Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Bramhall** the following question:

Question 4: National Government Support to Deliver on Carbon Emissions Reduction Targets

When the Environmental Sustainability Action Plan was brought to Executive on 28th July the Executive member for Neighbourhood Services stated that we needed to call on the national government to support local councils with funding and legislation to deliver on our carbon emissions reduction targets.

With this in mind please can you share what responses you have had from government to date and also share the council's submission to the Comprehensive Spending Review which was due in by 24th September (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/comprehensive-spending-review-2020-representations-guidance> for more details)

Response:

Thank you for your question, Cllr Ritter. The Council's Environmental Sustainability Strategy sets the Council on an ambitious path, for our organisation and the borough to become more sustainable and to play our part in responding to the climate change challenge.

At the moment, our Strategy is focused on actions that fall within the remit of this Council to achieve. In the past I have been very clear that to achieve our longer term goals we will need further policy and financial support from Government.

We have - and will continue to - respond to relevant Government consultations making this point. For example, we responded to the Future Homes Standards consultation and will be responding to the Planning for the Future consultation.

I have also made representations to the Comprehensive Spending Review that you refer to. In these representations I highlight the need for clear and consistent Government policy to enable us to reach our targets, supported by the necessary funding. Also, for a continued commitment from Government to support a green recovery from Covid – for example by prioritising jobs and skills in the green sector. These representations were made via the Treasury's online portal but I can share their content with you.

We also continue to seek opportunities to secure external funding to assist in the delivery of our environmental strategy. We have recently been part of a joint bid to Government for the Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery Scheme and are currently awaiting feedback on this.

As you know, the Executive has also supported the Surrey Climate Change Strategy which sets out a number of 'asks' of central Government. The Borough Council, working with the County Council, will continue to pursue these.

Councillor Brown asked the **Executive Member for Housing and Benefits, Councillor Knight** the following question:

Question 5: Welfare Arrangements

During the first lockdown there was a sharp rise in benefit claimants, with places like Redhill particularly badly hit. From March to June, an increase in 128% was reported for Redhill, that is more than doubling its rate of universal credit claimants, the fifth highest impacted location in the country (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53697256>). This is before any impact of the end of the furlough scheme (for which there are still 20,300 people, that is 28% of those eligible to be furloughed in Reigate and Banstead, as of 31st July 2020).

Please can you provide details of what additional welfare arrangements the council is putting in place to prepare for the end of furlough in October to help the increasing number of households who find themselves increasingly reliant on Universal Credit going forward.

Response:

You have already heard in my previous responses this evening, many of the workstreams staff use to prevent homelessness. For those households that continue to be affected by the ending of the Furlough scheme and in many cases the loss of employment, we have an increased level of Discretionary Housing Payments funding to assist households that due to circumstances beyond their control are unable to afford the whole of their rent. We have also received a Council Tax Reduction grant of £754,000 which is providing extra help for people experiencing payment difficulties. We have allowed households to defer their Council Tax payments and will continue to be as reasonable as possible where household incomes are hit by the ending of the furlough scheme.

Our Housing team can provide interest free loans or rent deposit bonds for households where the only blockage of moving to an affordable private rental is the funding of rent in advance or deposit, some of the many tools in our toolbox to prevent homelessness.

Households can also access Money Support from our dedicated officers whose primary role is to help people to minimise their outgoings and maximise their income through assisting with access to all working and non-working benefits.

We will also bolster the capacity of the food banks to provide food parcels both for current food bank users and those with a Covid specific need, as well as working with local community groups to set up food clubs. For those of you that are not aware, food clubs are a growing national phenomenon whereby people on low incomes join the club for 12 months for a small weekly fee, giving them access to a weekly supply of food of a much greater value. The aim with the food clubs is to take the pressure off the food banks who are currently supporting the same people for many more than the "normal" permitted number of times. We have received nearly £90k from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to alleviate the food impacts of the pandemic, which we have allocated between the food banks and kept a small amount back to initiate the food clubs.

Councillor McKenna asked the **Executive Member for Planning Policy, Councillor Biggs** the following question:

Question 6: Response to Government Consultation on Planning System

Over recent years the planning system has become more complex and in some respects more difficult to operate, such as highlighted in the current failure to provide adequate affordable housing, even more necessary as a result of COVID-19. A simplification of the system as set out in the Government's new White Paper Planning for the Future, could introduce some benefits. However it also includes significant factors that could adversely impact our area if implemented such as the end of the five year housing supply, the imposition of binding housing targets by Government without any scope for our Council to challenge or negotiate revised figures (previously decried as Stalinist by Eric Pickles former Environment Secretary) and, most importantly, the automatic grant of outline planning permission for growth zones once the new simplified Local Plans have been adopted. The Government are proposing to directly allocate a national target of say 300,000 units of housing a year – that's like a new Birmingham every 5 years.

We appreciate there is a meeting scheduled for Members on 24th September to examine and discuss this proposed enormous redesign of the planning system. If Councils like Tandridge (largely designated as Green Belt on over 97% of their area) are going to be forced to find land for substantial growth this means no areas will be sacrosanct and it surely behoves our Council to ensure that these potentially authoritarian changes in favour of major housebuilders and developers are resisted. Can the Council therefore agree that "Build Build Build" should not mean a free for all in favour of the market and a loss local council autonomy on planning decisions and ability to set our own housing numbers, and confirm here tonight that a robust response will be made to the consultation to ensure that any major relaxation of the planning system will not undermine protection of our key assets and communities and neither will undermine local decision making and transparency.

Response:

I would hope that, having now read the draft responses to the Government's Planning Consultations and, having had the presentation and Q and A session on it, you will agree that I, together with the Planning Policy Officers, are intent on responding robustly to it. However, if any Member wishes to feed into that response they are welcome to do so.

You will appreciate that we live in one of the most unaffordable areas of the country and we face the challenge of trying to ensure that we can provide sufficient housing, which is affordable, for future generations whilst also protecting the character of the borough which we all cherish.

However, I agree that this balance is best struck by a planning system which requires the developers to fund the infrastructure and affordable housing we require whilst

giving local Councils autonomy to set the policies appropriate for their area and retaining the flexibility over the planning decisions they make.

I hope you will agree that the responses that we have drafted do seek to ensure we retain the planning controls to protect the areas of the Borough that make it a great place to live, work in, do business and visit. In our view this is best achieved by a planning system which is focussed at the local level, led by the Members, Officers and Residents who know the Borough best. However, should you wish to make any further comments or suggestions to the response we would be happy to consider them.

Councillor Sinden asked the **Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance, Councillor Schofield** the following question:

Question 7: COVID-19 Second Wave

As we head towards the winter, and new shielding and a local or national lockdown is possible I am concerned that we must improve things here compared to the last lockdown where there was a lack of PPE and testing, especially for those working in care and the NHS. The first wave of the COVID-19 had a big impact, especially for older residents in care homes and those receiving home care. Surrey's new Local Outbreak Control Plan says that we have the fourth oldest population in the country, and Reigate and Banstead had more people shielding than the other parts of Surrey.

Can you say what we are going to improve locally this time? And also, can we please call on the county and government for us to have much more local testing places - you still have to go to Gatwick rather than local testing like in other countries where you can walk up and get tested in the street, in Germany and Italy - and also can we make sure that those working in care and living in care homes are tested regularly and have all the PPE they need this time.

Response:

When the Covid lockdown was declared by Central Government in March Surrey County Council took on the lead emergency role within the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) as the first-tier authority.

The supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to NHS and other care settings was, and still is, the responsibility of the LRF which is in turn supported by co-ordinated delivery of PPE made by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The role of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council was to ensure that our staff, including those rapidly redeployed into a welfare response as well as operational teams, had appropriate PPE that was compliant with current PHE guidance This was achieved by drawing on our own secured stocks of PPE and maintained through procurement from our existing and newly identified suppliers. We have a secure and broad supply chain of PPE suppliers with sufficient stocks held by the council.

As a result all our essential and Covid welfare response services were able to function with appropriate levels of PPE.

In response to the pandemic situation Reigate & Banstead Borough Council made the early, proactive decision to set up robust welfare support arrangements for our residents, including both our food and pharmacy support which we ran from the community support centre we established at the Harlequin and our welfare phone calls by specifically trained staff and volunteers. Between the period of March and August 2020, we:

- Delivered 2089 emergency food boxes

- Prepared and delivered 7,379 hot meals
- Delivered 48,366 grocery items to 7 local food banks
- Made 12,902 welfare calls to vulnerable residents
- Made 93 welfare visits to vulnerable residents
- Collected and delivered 397 prescriptions
- Supported 5 local pharmacies with volunteer delivery drivers
- Had 24,072 visits to our 'I need help' coronavirus webpages
- Were directly supported by 70 volunteers – either making befriending phone calls or delivering food or medication.

Our response has involved close partnership working with a host of community partners through regular Covid 19 locality meetings. These have seen in excess of 30 meetings held since they were initiated early in lockdown.

We are now concurrently working on recovery and second wave planning. As you will be aware we have five joint officer/member workstreams actively addressing both recovery actions and future plans. The work of these teams is overseen by the Recovery steering group and scrutinised by a separate scrutiny panel of members. We have established systems and experienced staff that will support us in responding to any local second wave quickly, and are working closely with our partners across the voluntary and community sectors both to support recovery and to be ready to be able to deliver support to our most vulnerable residents quickly and effectively again if we need to.

In the case of a second wave of Covid-19 the stocks of PPE we hold will ensure that our staff can continue to deliver services in response to the virus.

Mobile testing Units (MTU's) are deployed by Surrey County Council's Public Health Team. When requested Reigate and Banstead Borough Council identify local sites for MTU's to operate and assist by providing facilities, such as access to hand wash basins and lavatories, for MTU staff. We will continue to support testing units for as long as necessary in the fight against the virus.