

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council

Meeting of Council 28 July 2022

Questions by Members

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1.	Councillor Walsh	Councillor Schofield, the Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance & Governance	Council reserves
2.	Councillor Essex	Councillor Schofield, the Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance & Governance	Charities paying business rates
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4.	Councillor Ritter	Councillor Sachdeva, on behalf of Councillor Mrs Bramhall, the Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services	Children's play areas
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12.	Councillor Sinden	Councillor Ashford, the Executive Member for Community Partnerships	Cost of Living Officer
13.	Councillor Baker	Councillor Sachdeva, the Executive Member for Leisure & Culture	Christmas lights working group
14.	Councillor Torra	Councillor Biggs, the Executive Member for Planning Policy & Place Delivery	Demolition of affordable homes

Councillor Walsh will ask the **Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance & Governance, Councillor Schofield**, the following question:

Question 1: Council reserves

Over the course of this year comments have been made, from various quarters, about the healthy level of reserves that this Council has maintained through careful stewardship of its finances. Suggestions have recently been made that substantial, unbudgeted, sums should be given to private landlords and property owners to improve their properties for such purposes as improved recycling facilities or increased insulation. Could the Executive Member for Finance & Governance confirm the current levels of reserves held by the Council and what they are intended to be used for?

Response

As recently reported in the Medium Term Financial Strategy, the Council does indeed have healthy level of earmarked Revenue Reserves, totalling £42.6 million at 31 March 2022.

In addition we also set aside a General Fund Balance (currently £3.0 million) to address any unexpected in-year issues that might arise.

Therefore we have £45.6 million in total in Reserves.

However the fact that the majority of these are earmarked means that we have already considered and approved how they will be used.

I don't propose to list every single Reserve in this response tonight however the key ones are as follows:

- The most significant Reserve is the £19 million that we have set aside for investment in initiatives to support our Housing Delivery Strategy. These funds are not yet committed but business cases will be developed when opportunities arise;
- We also have sums set aside to help manage the immediate impacts of any new Government funding cuts (such as the continued reduction in housing benefit subsidy) and Commercial income risks (such as property rental voids). Also for investment in service development initiatives.

These Reserves help us to address risks and opportunities without delay while we implement measures under the Financial Sustainability Plan to address them over the medium term;

- The Capital Schemes Feasibility Studies Reserve helps ensure that any new proposals for inclusion in the capital programme are supported by robust

business cases and the Insurance Reserve ensures we are covered against uninsured losses;

- Other earmarked Reserves hold the unspent balances on grants that we are carrying forward to later years (including Government funding for the legacy impacts of the pandemic), funds for investment in Environmental Sustainability projects, contributions to Surrey-wide infrastructure projects and funds to cushion the impacts of increases in employer pension contributions.
- Following approval of the IT Strategy earlier this year we also now have a Reserve to fund investment in the priority measures that were agreed to ensure the security and resilience of our systems and networks;

Overall these Reserves help ensure that we have funds available manage the impacts of unplanned, usually one-off, costs or income losses that have to be resourced. Also to help us plan ahead and take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

In addition, and totally separate to our Revenue Reserves, we have access to balances held in reserve in our capital accounts which include capital receipts from sales of assets in the past and this council's share of Section 106 contributions. Again these sums are held for use in the future, primarily to help fund new capital schemes when business cases are approved.

I trust that this brief response has helped demonstrate that we do have a healthy level of Reserves compared to many authorities but also that we have already agreed how we plan to make use of them.

Any proposals for investment of our Reserves in new initiatives would firstly require approval of a full business case.

It would also require a decision to allocate lower priority to our existing plans for use of Reserves, along with acceptance of increased financial risks as a consequence of having less set aside in earmarked Reserves to address them, something that I as Finance Portfolio Holder could not support.

Supplementary question

It is refreshing to have such sound financial management expressed when addressing Council and to hear that, as expected, the Council has sound financial controls and management, holding back reserves to invest when appropriate for the benefit of residents. Please could the Executive Member for Finance & Governance detail how the Council has recently invested in the Borough to provide affordable homes for our residents as well as providing income.

Supplementary response

The most prominent example of how reserves have been invested to benefit residents is the development of 32 units of affordable housing in Cromwell Road. Retail and business premises are provided at the ground level of the units. These will generate income as reflected in the business plan and help to recoup the investment made from reserves.

Councillor Essex will ask the **Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance & Governance, Councillor Schofield**, the following question:

Question 2: Charities paying business rates

In around 2018, the Council changed the way it funds local charities with a small core of charities retaining core funding and the remaining charities instead invited to bid for small or medium sized grants (which have been suspended for this year).

However, those charities that are no longer receiving core funding from the Council are subject to pay up to 20% business rates. This includes Furnistore, for which I am a trustee.

Please can you confirm how many charities are now paying business rates that were not paying them before and what the total cost is this year for those charities as a result.

Response

Charities will receive a mandatory 80% relief on their business rates, and they are then able to apply for up to 20% relief of the remaining liability. All applications are considered and scored using set criteria and following this assessment we apply the Discretionary Rates Relief to their liability.

There are five charities that previously received core funding from the Council, but no longer receive any funding. The net liability for these charities to pay after applying reliefs is £5,012.26.

I would also like to point out that the amount of Discretionary Rates Relief awarded to these five charities is £7,136.42.

The adjusted bill for this year for Furnistore is £534 over the 12-month period. There is also hardship relief that can be claimed where an organisation can demonstrate it is facing financial hardship and is teetering on the brink of ceasing to trade.

There was no supplementary question forthcoming.

Councillor McKenna will ask the **Executive Member for Corporate Policy & Resources, Councillor Lewanski**, the following question:

Question 3: Support for fuel bill costs

With the huge increases in prices of energy and foods, many of our local residents are struggling to pay their bills and this situation is likely to be significantly worse as the colder weather approaches and the energy cap is removed, allowing energy costs to rise even more sharply.

There is an opportunity for our Council to lead the work on helping residents just as was done during the pandemic. Whilst it is known that there will be more availability of grants to enable people to secure improvements that will save money on their bills, residents will need advice on an impartial basis. Unfortunately, there will be ceilings on available funding as with many grant-aided initiatives. Furthermore, there will potentially be an increase in scams, such as dodgy installers or overcharging so our residents will need to be supported there.

It is therefore hoped that our Council will not only liaise with Surrey County Council's Fuel Poverty Team but will undertake its own direct measures. Could the Council advise on the sort of measures being considered, in particular;

- Setting up a Retrofit Unit to aid with advice for residents on what are the best solutions to reduce fuel poverty. For instance, solar panels and double glazing are not always the optimal way ahead because there is heat loss through walls and roofs.
- Adopting procurement best practice, advice notes and guides to protect residents from scams and other bad practices.
- Bulk buying and reducing unit costs so that savings can be passed onto residents.
- Increasing training for local fitters in liaison with East Surrey College or other such institutions.

Response

You raise an extremely important question, and the good news is that the Council is already considering how it can best support residents to respond to the cost of living crisis and particularly the dramatic increases in energy costs that we have already seen, and are forecast in the coming months.

You make a number of suggestions so I will respond by outlining some of the measures that are – or will be – in place to support residents.

The Council – along with other local authorities in the county - already supports Action Surrey. This is an impartial energy advice service set up to provide information to residents about how to reduce their energy bills, including through both physical

measures such as insulation but also behaviour changes that can make a difference. We promote the work of Action Surrey through our communications channels and I would encourage anyone looking for advice to have a look at the Action Surrey website or call them directly.

Our Community Partnerships Team is actively engaged in the Surrey Fuel Poverty Strategy Group, and I think it important to recognise that there is much value to be had in combining forces with partners to deliver joined up and complementary support to residents facing financial hardship.

Separate from this, however, we are using some Household Support Funding – via local voluntary sector partners – for residents who are struggling with the cost of pre-payment top ups. And the team is actively looking at other opportunities to secure more external funding to support our fuel poverty work and link up with work that other organisations are doing.

Both this council and Surrey County Council will be providing more information to residents about what action they can take and how to access support as we approach the winter months. This will include promoting Government funding initiatives for low income households – the so-called ‘Sustainable Warmth’ fund. This follows the Green Homes Grant scheme which saw over 100 low income households have energy saving measures installed.

We are also working with Surrey County Council to look at more schemes for those who are in a position to invest in their homes to make carbon and energy bill savings. In relation to your suggestion about bulk purchase, this is not something that we would look to undertake ourselves but there are similar schemes that we have already supported. For example, the successful Solar Together collective purchase project which - so far - has seen reduced cost panels installed on 117 homes.

In relation to the local skills base the Council has a good working relationship with East Surrey College, which – in collaboration with other providers – is working to extend their current offer to include green construction skills. This will increase local capacity to make improvements to dwellings in the borough

Finally, when it comes to providing information and support for residents about scams, I would suggest that Surrey Trading Standards is best placed to undertake this work. They provide advice on finding the right trader, and on avoiding scams, as well as allowing residents to report scams and providing scam awareness sessions.

Supplementary question

It is my understanding that there is an incredible shortage of skilled building trades. Many small construction firms do not have the skills to undertake the types of works we are talking about such as insulation. This is a national problem but it is probably

even more difficult in this region. There is a focus on new builds within the sector, but we are interested in retrofitting existing housing which requires a different skill set. Therefore, is there any more information you can provide on how many people are being taught the necessary skills to undertake retrofitting works?

Supplementary response

As I do not have the figures to hand at this meeting, you will be provided with a written answer.

Supplementary response (provided subsequent to the meeting)

It is correct that there is – nationally and regionally – a recognised deficit of appropriately skilled people within the construction industry to deliver the level of building retrofit to meet carbon reduction targets. The Council does not currently hold the figures requested. However, we are seeking information from East Surrey College as to numbers who are registered with respect to their relevant construction skills courses, and will pass this information on if they are able to provide it.

Councillor Ritter will ask **Councillor Sachdeva on behalf of the Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Mrs Bramhall**, the following question:

Question 4: Children's play areas

Please can the Executive Member give an outline of the rolling plan for children's play area refurbishments, the expected length of time between planned upgrades within the current budget envelope and how residents and playground users are consulted as part of the process of play area upgrades?

Response

Given our experience of the usable life of play areas, we established that this tends to be around 12-15 years on average, therefore, taking the number we currently own, we need to replace roughly 2-3 per year on the rolling replacement programme to broadly meet this timescale. However, it is important to note that that some sites will not need replacing for much longer periods due to receiving less usage.

We use a data-driven approach to inform the sites to be replaced each year, and these are selected based on a number of factors such as operational inspection reports, equipment condition assessments, material composition, annual inspections and maintenance costs. This approach ensures that resources are used efficiently, and eliminates the risk of prematurely replacing sites which are older than average, but are still in good condition.

Once selected for refurbishment, careful consideration is then given to their specification to ensure they meet the needs of the users. Resident feedback, stakeholder engagement (including user surveys and community-led proposals) and any historic site-related issues are all factors used to inform this process. Some recent examples include a user survey for the Preston Park skate park, consultation with Ward Councillors on the Tattenham Way play area and a community-led proposal incorporated into the specification of the Lady Neville park play area.

Supplementary question

Please could more information be provided on how play area consultations take place. For example, is a proposal developed on which a consultation takes place or does the consultation come first and shape the proposal for any play area refurbishment? Residents have been enquiring about when they will get the opportunity to share their views on play area refurbishments.

Supplementary response

As I am not the Portfolio Holder, I will pass on your question to Councillor Mrs Bramhall who will be able to provide a response.

Supplementary response (provided subsequent to the meeting)

Thank you for your question. I can confirm that the most effective use of Council resources is to select the play areas to be replaced using the aforementioned data-driven approach. Once selected, consultation on specific elements of the replacements will be sought, dependent on the type of replacement to be made. It is not always possible to consult on every element of the replacement, as factors such as budget capacity, equipment selection and the flow of the layout require subject matter expert input. The current approach has been delivering well-designed, robust and low maintenance play areas for many years. Therefore, it is considered that there is not a compelling reason to fundamentally alter the existing process. However, as a means to increase engagement and consultation on play area replacements, we are currently considering the option to survey residents on elements to be included in a play area's specification prior to the tender process taking place. We have previously consulted with residents and ward Councillors prior to large replacements and park redevelopments like Priory Park, Lady Neville, Merstham Recreation Ground etc.

Councillor Sinden will ask **Councillor Humphreys** on behalf of the **Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Mrs Bramhall**, the following question:

Question 5: Allotments

I have just completed the Council's Carbon Literacy training for Councillors. This highlighted the value of allotments in allowing residents to be more self-sufficient, to have more fresh fruit and vegetables, and reduce food and packaging waste for the Council to collect.

Please can you list the waiting time for an allotment for the different sites across the borough and how the cost for an allotment now compares to five years ago.

Response

We do appreciate the value allotments provide to our residents and the positive impacts experienced as a result. However, it is difficult to predict the waiting times for a plot at any of our sites. Vacant plots only become available when people decide to surrender their tenancies, or when an eviction process has finished (mainly due to non-cultivation or non-payment of rent). In 2021/22 we processed 267 new tenancies, which is around 20% of our total number of plots across all of our sites.

Following the onset of the pandemic in 2020, expressions of interest in allotment plots increased significantly, and this was the case across much of the UK and Europe, therefore, waiting times have since increased at some sites.

We currently have waiting lists for each of our sites 23 sites across the borough, with the following number of applicants listed below:

Batts Hill – 116

Brambletye Park Road – 94

Colesmead – 73

Highlands – 105

Holly Lane – 77

Lakers Rise – 38

Lambert Road – 54

Maple Road – 41

Merland Rise – 47

Merstham – 53

New Pond Farm – 83
Park Lane and Park Lane Extension – 76
Park Lane East – 39
Parsonsfield Road – 42
Partridge Mead – 25
Princes Road – 97
Redstone Hill – 60
Riding School – 24
Smithy Lane – 37
Tattenham Way – 86
The Paddock – 45
The Park – 17
Wiggie Lane – 113

It is important to note that a single applicant can apply for multiple sites, therefore, the cumulative total of all waiting lists does not provide an indication of the number of individual applicants awaiting an allotment plot.

I can also confirm that the price for a half plot in 2017 was £38.50 and a full plot £77.00, and in 2022, the price for half a plot is £47.50 (£9 difference), with a full plot being £95.00 (£18 difference).

There was no supplementary question forthcoming.

Councillor Booton will ask **Councillor Schofield** on behalf of the **Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Mrs Bramhall**, the following question:

Question 6: Recycling

Noting the excellent work that our recycling teams do, what is the Council doing to increase the types of items that can be recycled from our kerbsides, including, amongst other things, items that are currently recyclable at supermarkets and through the national Terracycle scheme?

Response

Thank you for your recognition of the excellent work undertaken by our waste collection teams. In fact, this Council collects more at curb side than most other Districts and Boroughs. I believe that we are alone in collecting paper and card separately.

This year the Council, along with other members of Surrey Environment Partnership, will be focusing on increasing the collection of food waste. We know from composition analysis that 35% of waste that is presented in the residual bin is food that could be recycled. Furthermore, only around 45% of residents that have food caddies regularly present them for collection.

A campaign to encourage the use of the food waste service will be undertaken across the county of Surrey. Work is also being carried out to better understand the barriers that dissuade residents from making use of their food recycling service.

If successful, the tonnages of waste diverted from the residual waste stream will be significant and could well see a recycling rate of more than 60% achieved.

Most supermarkets now recycle plastic film (such as carrier bags) as part of the Terracycle scheme. However, the material is of low grade and limited processing options are available in the UK. It is, however, anticipated that Councils will be required to collect film in the future, probably by 2027. This is likely to be an outcome of the Government's Waste and Resources Strategy which is still awaited. Planning for new waste streams is underway and it is possible that 'new burdens funding' will be made available to help implement services.

This year our efforts will be focused on food waste recycling.

Supplementary question

The figures provided in the response are not accurate. According to the information available on the Surrey County Council website there are eight other Boroughs in the county that recycle more than Reigate and Banstead.

The recycling target will raise to 65% in 2035. What will the Council do to achieve this target?

Supplementary response

As I am not the Portfolio Holder, I will pass on your question to Councillor Mrs Bramhall who will be able to provide a response.

Supplementary response (provided subsequent to the meeting)

In 2021/22 Reigate and Banstead Borough Council collected 31,459 tonnes of material for the purpose of recycling. This is more than any other Borough or District in the County of Surrey.

As stated in my original response to your question the campaign to increase food waste recycling, if successful, is likely to see the recycling rate of 60% met and potentially exceeded.

Nevertheless, we remain mindful of the National target of 65% by 2035.

We await the outcome of the Government's Waste and Resources Strategy which may see the introduction of national initiatives such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS). These are likely to radically change the composition of material collected at kerbside and are designed to help achieve the national recycling rate of 65% by 2035.

The Strategy may also introduce further statutory duties for Waste Collection Authorities including the requirement to collect additional waste streams for recycling.

Once we have received to outcome of the Strategy, the Council, along with other members of the Surrey Environment Partnership, will review our waste collection service and implement any changes that may be required, thus helping to achieve the national target of a recycling rate of 65% by 2025.

Councillor Chandler will ask the **Executive Member for Planning Policy & Place Delivery, Councillor Biggs**, the following question:

Question 7: Green Belt protection

The Housing Monitor Report details a change in the calculation for the five-year housing supply in Reigate and Banstead. This indicates that the housing supply figure for 2022/2023 is barely over five years where previously it has been over eight years.

Please can the portfolio holder indicate what is being done to protect the Green Belt where the Sustainable Urban Extensions in the Development Management Plan have been located. This extract from the Housing Monitor Report states: "In accordance with DMP Policy MLS1, the allocated sustainable urban extensions are not required to be released for development at this time. The Council however remains committed to maintaining an on-going dialogue with those involved in promoting and delivering the allocated sustainable urban extension sites and will actively support and encourage planning performance agreements and/or the preparation of joint development briefs (where appropriate) for the sites in order to facilitate their timely delivery upon release."

Response

The Sustainable Urban Extensions (SUEs) are housing allocations that were taken out of the Green Belt in the Development Management Plan (DMP) although the Council fought hard to ensure that they should only be developed if they were required to maintain a five-year housing supply. We managed to secure Policy MLS1 in the DMP which does just that.

In order to secure Policy MLS1 the DMP Inspector required the wording you have extracted from the Housing Monitor about on-going dialogue.

The Housing Monitor forecasts the trajectory of new homes over five years against the local plan housing requirement of 460 per year. We have fought hard to ensure the local plan housing number is protected by ensuring the plan is up to date rather than having it default to the much higher number that would be the case under the Government's standard method.

The only other tools available are the granting of more planning permissions on brownfield sites, to boost delivery and delay the release of the SUEs. Our policies are clear in favouring brownfield development over green belt and as an Executive we have brought forward our own housing schemes in Cromwell Road and Pitwood Park to help with this. Ultimately though the housing trajectory relies on the granting of planning permissions which is the domain of the Planning Committee rather than the Executive.

Supplementary question

Will the Council update the Local Plan in order that we can use the number of 460 rather than the 644 calculated under the standard method? This is needed otherwise the housing supply will decrease and the Sustainable Urban Extensions will be released which I feel will have a significant impact on my Ward and others in the Borough.

Supplementary response

This Council will always be a plan-led authority. We will continue to make sure our plans are up-to-date and that we have a Local Plan in place to make sure we can deliver the best for the Borough.

Councillor Chester will ask the **Executive Member for Planning Policy & Place Delivery, Councillor Biggs**, the following question:

Question 8: Gatwick consultation

Please will the Council make publicly available its response to the latest Gatwick consultation, in light of the greater impact these latest changes to the proposed development would have on Horley residents, with particular reference to the partial destruction of the widely used Riverside Garden Park.

Please can the Council also confirm that its response has ensured that we as a Council are able to meet our sustainability and carbon reduction targets, and is line with progress towards similar targets nationally, with particular reference to elements such as widening roads to allow for greater traffic flow rather than focusing on public transport improvements.

Response

The current Gatwick consultation is a more focused consultation than the PEIR consultation held in Autumn 2021. The Council will share its response with members. Officers and I remained very concerned by the proposed alterations to the A23/M23 spur and their significant long term negative impact on Riverside Garden Park and neighbouring properties. Among the concerns raised in the Council's response, specific matters include:

- the Riverside Garden Park land take and need for greater clarity (GIS Layers have been requested on a number of occasions and promised by Gatwick Airport Limited (GAL) but have still not yet been received),
- the scale of the loss of trees and vegetation clearance including during the construction stage,
- the A23 re-routed pedestrian/ cycle path through Riverside Garden Park, and
- noise mitigation measures including the height of the proposed noise barrier.

With regard to the impact of an enlarged Gatwick Airport and road alterations on Reigate and Banstead's Council's own sustainability and carbon reduction targets, it is important to note that most of the Gatwick planning redline is outside Reigate and Banstead and the aviation industry has its own nationally set carbon budget. The Council's preference is for users of Gatwick airport to access the airport by public transport or where appropriate active travel modes. GAL are seeking an ambitious 60% of airport users to use sustainable travel modes to access the airport (though officers are still seeking measures to ensure that this is achieved). Bus and coach service improvements are the primary area for improvement as they are more flexible and deliverable than rail service upgrades though the Gatwick Station upgrade is on schedule to be completed in March 2023. Pollution from road vehicles is set to reduce over the coming years as consumers move away from petrol and diesel vehicles to

electric and other low carbon technologies. However, the benefits of these improvements in the Gatwick area will be reduced should the Development Consent Order for the Northern Runway Extension be approved by Government. Specialist work is currently being undertaken on the noise and air quality impacts of the Gatwick proposals on behalf of the Gatwick local authorities for completion prior to the DCO submission.

Subject to the agreement of the other authorities involved in the consultation response, I would be happy to share this work with Members when it has been completed.

There was no supplementary question forthcoming.

Councillor Proudfoot will ask the **Executive Member for Investment & Companies, Councillor Archer**, the following question:

Question 9: Commercial venture funding

Please can the Council confirm the amount of money it has spent to date on in its business venture for a Crematorium (previously referred to as Project Baseball) and the amount of money lost so far in its business venture called Pathway to Care.

Response

With regard to the project which proposed the development of a crematorium in the Borough, I can confirm that £351,685 was spent in total, including all associated feasibility and planning stage activities. Throughout its life, the project's finances were tightly controlled, with expenditure closely aligning to the initial estimate, and as a result, only a 1.2% variance was experienced.

Despite the application's refusal at Planning Committee, a decision which I wholeheartedly respect, the fundamental case and evidence base which informed the Council's decision to pursue the project was strong. Since its refusal, this position has been further strengthened by the Planning Inspectorate's decision to overturn Tandridge District Council's refusal of the proposed crematorium in Oxted, on the basis that there is a clear, evidenced need for more crematorium facilities in the locality.

Had it received approval, the Council's proposed scheme would have provided a valuable service to our residents, improved access to the surrounding area, achieved a biodiversity net gain on site, and importantly, it was forecast to have generated an annual surplus in excess of £1.5m per annum when operating at full capacity. This would have made a significant contribution towards supporting the delivery of Council services and reducing the overall budget gap going forward.

Turning to Pathway for Care Limited, the Council owns a 10% minority shareholding in the company and 1.1m Preference Shares. The preference shares are valued at £1.1m in the company's accounts. This investment is due to be repaid by April 2023.

If any loss is expected it will be recognised by making a provision for the estimated credit loss (impairment) in the Council's accounts when published.

There was no supplementary question forthcoming.

Councillor Baker will ask the **Executive Member for Leisure & Culture, Councillor Sachdeva**, the following question:

Question 10: Swimming at Horley Leisure Centre

I have been contacted by several residents regarding swimming at Horley Leisure Centre. Prior to Covid, pool users could simply turn up and use the facilities as required. During Covid a booking system came into force, limiting the number of swimmers and generally reducing accessibility for residents. At the time this was understandable, however, the system is still in force, the pool is regularly understaffed and is being operated well below capacity. What checks and measures are in place to ensure that 'Better', the operators, are fulfilling their contractual obligations to our residents.

Response

Since re-opening during the pandemic, GLL – our Leisure Centre operator – has updated its' booking process, and have moved to a 'digital first' system encouraging residents to book online or via the 'Better' app. Booking in this way allows people to pre-plan, and also see live availability updates.

However, as we recognise that not all residents can book in this way, users can still book in person at the centres – as they could before the pandemic – and this includes people who just want to turn up and swim. This is, of course, on the basis that there is space in the pool for this, and I can confirm that, although the capacity of the pools changed during Covid, they have since returned to their pre-pandemic levels. I am interested to understand more about the 'understaffing' comment, and would be grateful to you, Cllr Baker, if you could provide me with more details about this outside of Full Council so that my officers can look into this.

Senior officers meet with GLL every month to discuss and monitor the performance and usage of our leisure centres, including ensuring contractual obligations are met.

There was no supplementary question forthcoming. Councillor Baker promised to provide the Executive Member with the additional information as requested.

Councillor Stevens will ask the **Executive Member for Housing & Support, Councillor Neame**, the following question:

Question 11: Safeguarding

Recently, we have seen an investigation conclude in Telford that many young children and vulnerable individuals were targeted and abused over a long period. Although local authorities had various opportunities to act against the many perpetrators, the local Police, Social Services and relevant Council Authorities failed to do so. This follows a disturbing trend as concluded in similar reports from Rochdale and Rotherham in recent years.

Whilst these examples are found in towns hundreds of miles away from Reigate and Banstead, as a Councillor it is shocking to see the many failures of these local authorities to act to safeguard youngsters as well as other vulnerable people and ensure perpetrators were brought to justice for their actions. Please could I ask the Executive Member what safeguarding policies we have in place for those children and vulnerable adults who may be at risk. Additionally, if any concerns of a similar nature were brought to this Council, what course of action would we undertake?

Response

I am grateful for this question to Full Council as it gives me the opportunity to make sure all Councillors are aware our Safeguarding responsibilities.

It is true that there have been some appalling examples of abuse which have highlighted occasions where professionals – including local councils – didn't share information effectively or, in some examples, act on information they received.

For clarity, Reigate and Banstead is not the local Safeguarding authority – this responsibility rests with our colleagues at Surrey County Council – but we take our responsibility of working together to prevent people facing the risk - or the actual experience - of abuse or neglect very seriously indeed.

To that end, all officers are required to undertake mandatory safeguarding training when they start working for the council, and front-line officers from a range of teams across the organisation are further trained in understanding and identifying safeguarding issues. There is an internal Safeguarding telephone line and email address, manned by officers from within our Intervention teams, which ensures that all officers can get advice and information in instances that cause them concern. Where issues are raised, these are shared with the Surrey Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub for their consideration, making sure that we continue to remain as involved as it is appropriate for us to be.

I can confirm that our policies cover both children and vulnerable adults and the executive member for Community Partnerships and our Head of Leisure and Intervention Services represent the Council at a quarterly meeting, chaired by the Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Cllr Clare Curran. In addition, we are an active member of the District & Borough Safeguarding forum ensuring that our practice and approach are inline with expectations from both the Surrey Safeguarding Children's Partnership and the Surrey Safeguarding Adults Board.

It is the responsibility of us all to protect children and the most vulnerable in our community. Should any Councillor have a concern or concerns that have been brought to them by residents, they should immediately be brought to the attention of the Intervention Team.

There was no supplementary question forthcoming.

WRITTEN RESPONSES TO BE PROVIDED AFTER THE MEETING

Councillor Sinden will ask the **Executive Member for Community Partnerships, Councillor Ashford**, the following question:

Question 12: Cost of Living Officer

The rising cost of living is already impacting the lives of many residents. Some have said to me that the Council Tax is too high and is causing hardship to many.

Raven Housing Trust is supporting their tenants to monitor electricity use and have provided a cost-of-living payment. In addition, there are an increasing number of food banks and food hubs used across the borough. I have heard that the London Borough of Wandsworth has a cost-of-living support package to help with the cost-of-living crisis. This includes providing an advice hub in partnership with its Citizens Advice Bureau, requiring all Council contracts to pay at least a local living wage and providing a cost-of-living payment to all pensioners on their Council Tax support scheme.

Does the Council have, or have plans to employ, a cost-of-living officer who works with residents, not just to deal with fuel poverty but also rising food costs, which are already being seen on a weekly basis when shopping?

Response

The global cost of living crisis, in particular energy costs, is creating pressures not just on our residents, but also on the Council's own finances, and those of local businesses and the local voluntary and community sectors. We are already working to mitigate the pressures facing our communities as best we can, however, we must be realistic that there are limits to what we can do given the global context, and given the need to ensure the financial sustainability of the Council's budgets and commitments.

I would like to take the opportunity to highlight the excellent work already undertaken by this Council, in my portfolio as well as in the Housing & Support and Finance & Governance portfolios, to reduce the cost of living pressures facing our communities where we can, including:

- Supporting households by making payments of £150 to almost 36,000 households in Council Tax Bands A-D, through the governments Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme. To date payments have been made to over 82% of these households.
- Paying further grants of £150 to households in Bands E-H in the next few weeks under a discretionary scheme, focusing on those receiving benefits and certain discounts or exemptions on their Council Tax.

- The Council's Money Support team working with residents who are struggling to manage their money by helping residents to maximise their income, become more confident at budgeting and help to prevent future debt. (My Community Partnerships team co-ordinate a joint approach with our partners around money management, including local debt management specialist organisations.)
- Supporting the coordination of the work of food banks and the operation of 5 food clubs in the borough; and facilitating access at food bank / food club sessions to advice and support through our Money Support Team, Sutton & East Surrey Water, Raven's Moneywise Team and others.
- Funding Citizen's Advice Reigate & Banstead (CARB) and Community Debt Advice (CDA) who provide money and debt advice to residents.
- Leading an employment and skills group which brings together the DWP, Raven, colleges and others focussing on how to support residents into employment / better paid employment.
- Encouraging applications to the Mayor's Trust Fund and the Surrey Crisis Fund, both of which can provide one off support to residents experiencing particular hardship.
- Collaboration between the Council's Community Development and Sustainability Teams to pursue initiatives to reduce the cost of energy for those facing fuel poverty.
- Ensuring that the government's Household Support Fund is distributed to residents. As part of the current round of Household Support Fund, this month our Council Tax team has started issuing payments of £110 per pensioner household (where they receive Council Tax Support).
- Offering Council Tax Support to households that are struggling to pay their Council Tax, as well as enabling residents to request a reduction in their bills through the local discretionary scheme.

Councillor Baker will ask the **Executive Member for Leisure & Culture, Councillor Sachdeva**, the following question:

Question 13: Christmas lights working group

In cities, towns and villages across the UK, Christmas lights are a common sight, popular with residents and an important part of our national identity. I am part of a group of volunteers in Horley which has been decorating our town centre for many years, including fundraising, repairing lights, organising insurance and everything else that goes along with it.

New regulations and required certifications are making it very difficult for us to continue with this tradition. Costs are prohibitive to the point where this may be the last year we put the lights up.

Though streetlighting is dealt with by Surrey County Council and Skanska, would Reigate and Banstead Council be prepared to set up a working group to look into ways in which we could make the festive lighting process easier and encourage residents to get involved.

This is a pattern being repeated up and down the country. It would be great to see our Council taking a lead on this emotive issue.

Response

Officers from the Council will continue to assist and advise local groups that wish to introduce Christmas lights in their area. This includes town centres and shopping parades and is primarily guidance on the various permissions and assurances required, including appropriate insurance. Each group will need to obtain permission from the relevant property owners, including Surrey County Council Highways, to be able to install any scheme, and to ensure they have sufficient funds for installation and decommissioning. The Council does not have any direct control or discretion over these arrangements.

Establishing a working group would add little value to this process. However, the Council remains supportive of initiatives that create seasonal atmosphere at Christmas and that encourage residents and visitors to our town centres and local shopping parades.

Councillor Torra will ask the **Executive Member for Planning Policy & Place Delivery, Councillor Biggs**, the following question:

Question 14: Demolition of affordable homes

Please can you confirm how many affordable homes have been demolished in Reigate and Banstead since 2012, including homes lost in the redevelopment of sites, such as in Merstham?

Response

Approving the demolition of affordable housing is not something we do lightly and this needs to be considered in the context of wider regeneration benefits. Core Strategy Policy CS15 and DMP Policy DES6 (which superseded CS15 in 2019) plan for a **gross** number of affordable housing units (1,500 between 2012 – 2027). Whilst we don't record the number of affordable housing demolitions specifically, officers have identified that since 2012, approximately 128 such units have been demolished but 1036 new affordable homes have been completed. Where affordable units have been lost, they have been replaced, with more suitable accommodation, often with more affordable housing, more balanced communities, and wider estate regeneration benefits.