

COUNCIL – 8 FEBRUARY 2024

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF PUBLIC

Executive Summary

The following questions have been received from a Member of Public. The individual who raised the questions has been invited to attend the meeting. Formal responses have been provided by the Leader of the Council.

Question 1 – Nikki Roberts on behalf of Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

“Many of the proposed service cuts or reductions will have an impact on Disabled People. These proposals will disproportionately affect this population.

Please confirm if Woking Borough Council have asked central government to make up the financial shortfall that disabled people will face by the proposed Woking Borough Council service cuts?

If not, how can we be assured that Disabled People living in Woking won't have to pay the additional costs they potentially face? Surrey Coalition of Disabled People are happy to collaborate with Woking Borough Council to discuss solutions to ensure that Disabled People aren't disproportionately affected.”

Supporting Statement

“Disabled People in Woking will be disproportionately affected by the potential threat of closure or changes to the following services:

- community transport scheme
- community centres and pavilions
- swimming pool
- citizen's advice

Without the community transport scheme which offers a reduced rate of travel, the independence of Disabled People will be significantly reduced as the cost of taxis, in particular wheelchair accessible taxis, are unaffordable for some.

The community centres, pavilions and swimming pool are a lifeline to some, providing social contact and keeping people mobile.

Without citizen's advice, Disabled People will not be able to access support with completing forms such as PIP. Being unable to access benefits, will have a detrimental impact on finances and wellbeing.

It's well known that life costs more for disabled people. Disabled households with at least 1 disabled adult or child, face extra costs of £975 - £1122 a month on average. (Source Extra Costs | Disability charity Scope UK) The disability pay gap is 13.8% and has been fairly consistent for a long time Disability pay gaps in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) with only 7% of disabled workers earning over £30,000 in 2022 compared to 54% of non-disabled workers.

Our Cost-of-Living report published last year showed the disproportionate effect that it is having on Disabled People. 76% of Disabled People surveyed didn't turn on their heating last year as they couldn't afford to and 45% went without food. <https://surreycoalition.org.uk/cost-of-living-crisis/>"

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

"I'd like to start by thanking Surrey Coalition of Disabled People for the question and recognising their important work across Woking and beyond.

The Council faces a critical financial shortfall owing to its historic investment strategy. On Wednesday 7 June 2023, our Section 151 Officer issued Woking Borough Council (WBC) with a Section 114 Notice in response to the unprecedented financial challenges facing the authority. The 114 notice sets out how the Council faces a budget deficit of £1.2bn.

The Council is in discussions with Government around the handling of its historic debt, with further detail around these arrangements due for consideration at the next Council meeting. However, a key principle of seeking support from Government is that the Council must take all possible steps to manage budget pressures and restore long term financial stability, and that the Council should, wherever possible, mitigate the impacts on those least able to pay.

Restoring long-term financial stability means that the Council needs to learn to live within its means and that it can no longer fund non-statutory services. However, the Council has been working hard to find alternative solutions for such services which avoids closure wherever possible. For example:

- Pool in the Park – the Council is proposing to increase fees, bringing them in line with neighbouring pools, so that the facility can better cover its costs and remain open.
- Community Centres/Sports Pavilions – the Council is introducing a Community Asset Transfer scheme to enable these facilities to be transferred to local groups, enabling important services to be maintained. The Council has also allocated UK Shared Prosperity Funding to support these transitions.
- Citizens Advice Woking (CAW)– Whilst the Council can no longer grant fund voluntary organisations, funding will still be available for specific projects such as the Court Desk Service and Refugee Hub. The Council has also allocated £30k UK Shared Prosperity Funding to support CAW to change its operating model, supporting its transition away from local authority funding so that it can continue to provide advice services. The Council is also looking at how it can utilise the Government's Hardship Fund to support signposting to the range of advice services throughout Woking, including those provided by local faith groups.
- Woking Community Transport (WCT) – the Council is working with WCT and Surrey County Council to find a solution where WCT can continue to provide some level of Dial-a-Ride service. The Council will also signpost users to alternative providers, including but not limited to:
 - Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service run by the NHS.
 - A new White bus service that provides services to St Peters and Ashford hospitals.
 - The Good Neighbourhood scheme that provides free transport to St Peters.
 - Local taxi providers that provide wheelchair access.

I hope this response, and the corresponding Equalities Impact Assessments, provides assurance that the Council has looked to mitigate the potential negative impacts of its budget proposals wherever possible. However, the Council does recognise that, in light of the severity of its financial position, it cannot mitigate against all negative impacts.”

Question 2 – Nikki Roberts on behalf of Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

“Following the publication of the Equality Impact Assessments (EIA), will Woking Borough Council be fulfilling its duty under the Care Act 2014 if the proposals are approved?

The Care Act 2014 states people are entitled to:

1. receive services that prevent their care needs from becoming more serious, or delay the impact of their needs
2. can get the information and advice they need to make good decisions about care and support
3. have a range of provision of high quality, appropriate services to choose from.”

Supporting Statement

“Community Transport

The mitigation in the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) only cites hospital visits and negates to include GP appointments, mental health support, or community/social activities.

The additional cost and difficulty in sourcing wheelchair accessible transport has not been considered. Of those (over 2,000) people who needed extra support to use the transport, there will not be a service to help them. Additionally, will the current community transport users meet the criteria for hospital transport?

Removing the transport (approx. £42 per person per year) will cost more in the longer term. For example, missed medical appointments, reduced footfall in the town centre.

By removing community transport with no direct replacement the council are in jeopardy of not fulfilling their duties under the Care Act 2014.

Citizen’s Advice

The EIA states that 63% of Citizen Advice clients are disabled or have a long-term health condition. Disabled people can not access the information and advice they need to make good decisions about their care as outlined in the Care Act.

The mitigation covers a provision for debt advice but there are other reasons people contact Citizen Advice. For example, housing.

Pool in the Park

Pool in the Park is increasing costs as well as reducing the length of the Disabled Swimming Session will be reduced by 33%.

Many of the mitigations suggest the voluntary sector will provide additional support with less money. This will not be possible particularly as it's proposed the community grants programme is withdrawn in Woking."

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

"Again, I would like to thank Surrey Coalition for the Disabled for this question.

Woking Borough Council continues to meet its statutory obligations. Whilst the Council recognises that leisure services and community centres are highly valued by residents, these are discretionary services. There is also no statutory requirement for District Councils to provide funding to voluntary groups.

The provisions of the Care Act will continue to be met in Woking by Surrey County Council, who have responsibility for the delivery of Adult Social Care in Surrey. Woking Borough Council will also continue to do all it can to support the Act and ensure wellbeing, advice, and preventive services are retained in Woking.

The response to question one details the actions that the Council has taken to ensure that, wherever possible, such services can continue to operate without Council funding. This includes working with local interested parties to enable important assets, such as community centres and sports pavilions, to be transferred to community ownership. The Council is also allocating part of the Government's Hardship Fund to ensuring that advice services are retained for vulnerable people, whether that be through Citizens Advice Woking or other local providers. The Council is also committed to working with Woking Community Transport, so that some provision for Dial-A-Ride services can be maintained across Woking, whilst at the same time signposting residents to alternative provision."

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