

COUNCIL – 14 DECEMBER 2023 – SO 30 QUESTIONS

Question from Councillor O’Driscoll

Question to the Leader of the Council (Councillor Sayer)

This Council was ranked the lowest out of all of the Boroughs and Districts in Surrey for taking action to tackle climate change.

It scored a total of 20% which is 9 points lower than Runnymede and Guildford, the next lowest districts in Surrey, and the only one in Surrey below the average score for all boroughs in the UK.

As the generation who will have to live and deal with the consequences of climate change, it is important to many young people, that their council is fully transparent about how they are addressing climate change and what steps are being taken to reach net zero.

Will this Council agree to include a net zero target and make tackling climate change one of its main priorities in the next Strategic Plan from 2024/25?

Response from the Leader of the Council (Councillor Sayer)

The scorecard was completed before we were able to reflect some of the work that we've been doing on climate change mitigation. I've got a list here of work that we have done since then which includes:

- Increasing the percentage of household waste which is recycled, composted or reused from 53% to 60% in the last six years. The Council has moved from 43rd nationally to 7th and 1st in Surrey for recycling.
- Making sure all Council vehicles are powered by electric or other low carbon alternatives by 2030.
- Switching the Council's electricity supply to a green tariff.
- Plans to install electric vehicle charging points, solar panels, better insulation and triple glazed windows in our housing stock, where possible.
- Building new council properties to be net zero carbon.
- Delivering new housing schemes with biodiversity net gain
- Encouraging contractors to source local materials and appoint local sub-contractors where possible to reduce their carbon footprint.
- Refurbishing Quadrant House in Caterham to make it more environmentally friendly and reducing emissions from the Council Offices, Oxted.
- Working with partners across Surrey to bid for funding to improve our Council housing stock.

Since the scorecard was completed, we have employed a Policy and Sustainability Specialist and an Ecologist. We are also working with other Surrey Councils to find and share best practice, as well as to identify areas to focus on. This Council has had to make savings of £5.5 million pounds over three years to get its finances back on track and, unlike a number of Councils last year we were able to deliver a balanced budget, and we anticipate will be able to deliver a balanced budget again this year. There's a balance here between what we can do.

If you think there's areas that we should pay more attention to, please send them to me with costings and an idea of where we could make those savings to pay for them.

With regard to the Corporate Plan, I'm not in a position to give any definite commitment because it's not been agreed yet by all the stakeholders but given that this Council passed a climate change action motion and an urgent need to reduce our carbon footprint in February 2020, I'm pretty confident that climate change mitigation will be one of the objectives within that plan.

Question from Councillor Cooper

Question to the Leader of the Council (Councillor Sayer)

An article in the Daily Telegraph published on the 21st November 2023 under the heading "'Poor' councils make £1 billion a year from car parks". It goes on to state that Westminster Council makes £72 million a year, Kensington & Chelsea £41 million etc. Now, whilst I appreciate that Tandridge District Council is nowhere near that league it did concern me that it was noted that, "At the other end of the scale, Tandridge District Council in east Surrey generated less than £1,000 in parking profits last year". Please could you confirm where these figures came from and if remotely correct, what is the administration doing about this apparent opportunity to generate some money for the council?

Response from the Leader of the Council (Councillor Sayer)

The details of the car parking, income and penalty charge notices are published each year on our website. For 2022/23, income from off-street car parking charges was £116,622.59. Income from Penalty Charge Notices was £20,051.59 pence. In total, income was £136,674.18. I understand the figure quoted in the Daily Telegraph article is the net position of the charges received in 2019/20 against the cost of the service taken from Government returns. It's problematic to compare the cost of the service between different local authorities as there will be differences in what they include as the cost of the service now.

The article has a headline stating, 'Poor Councils make £1 billion a year from car parks.' The article itself states local authorities have benefited from a 10% rise in income from parking fees since 2017/18 and are now making £962m a year now. The headline on a newspaper is usually written by somebody who is not the journalist who wrote the story, so it doesn't always match and in this instance, it doesn't really seem to match at all.

The story seems highly suspect, because it's quoting councils like Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea, which get a massive income from on-street parking charges which we don't have. There is Brighton and Hove and if anybody's ever tried to park in Brighton and Hove, I can tell you it costs you a lot of money on or off street.

The rest of the paragraph reads 'at the other end of the scale, Tandridge District Council in East Surrey generated £1,000 in parking profits last year, while 45 local government authorities, including Dudley and Plymouth, made an overall loss on parking once staffing and upkeep was taken into account.' The rest of the article reads 'Hugh Blaydon of the Alliance of British Drivers, a not-for-profit organisation, said that motorists were being treated appallingly by Councils, with parking becoming less available and more expensive. He added, "We know Councils are short of money, but why should motorists have to bear these costs? Councils have increased parking fees in part to try and plug holes in their finances. Kirklees Council in West Yorkshire recently approved plans to raise fees in January to help make savings of more than £47m in next year's budget. Mark Eastwood, the Conservative MP for Dewsbury, called the increases extortionate at Prime Minister's Questions and accused the Labour run council of punishing hard-working families and destroying the high street in our towns and villages."

This administration has no intention of punishing hard-working families and destroying our high streets. In fact, we want to do everything we can to support our high streets because they're small and not destination centres. They're exactly the kind of high streets that are vulnerable to recession and the high cost of living increases. We will not be proposing removing the 2-hour free parking in next year's budget and our only proposed increase in parking charges for the 2024-25 budget is an inflationary one of 5% on the current charges.

Supplementary Question

Every part of the Council must try to help with the £5m deficit, so I am curious why you're ignoring the effort that could be put in that could help us meet the deficit?

Response from the Leader of the Council

We have saved £5.5m in three years. There is no deficit this year. We should balance the budget and that's what all the signs are pointing to so far.

Supplementary Question

We could have used £5.5m to improve services had we put up parking slightly or reduced free parking to one hour. It seems like an opportunity to improve Council services without hitting people hard.

Response from the Leader of the Council

I don't know how much money the Council would make if we dropped it to one-hour free parking. In my own ward, Oxted, I believe it would have a significant effect on visitor numbers. I would like to keep free parking not just in Oxted but everywhere else in Tandridge, because I do not think we have sufficiently large towns that will attract people unless we can offer that sort of incentive.

Question from Councillor Cooper

Question to the Chair of the Housing Committee (Councillor Pursehouse)

At page 37 (Minute 179) of the council agenda, the minutes of the Audit and Scrutiny Report mentioned that members raised questions about the Housing Committee KPIs being off target. The actual agenda for the Audit and Scrutiny committee (page 86) stated that for KPI H04 there were 59 households in temporary accommodation when the target was 30. Also, that for KPI H05 (page 87) the report stated there were 483 people (should that have been households?) in urgent need. The number had increased by 20 households over the last quarter and the target was 275 households. Please could you state how many people are involved in these figures?

Response from the Chair of the Housing Committee (Councillor Pursehouse)

The short answer is no because we don't keep that kind of record. I will give you some other figures that I hope will be of some help and you're right, it should have been 483 households rather than people.

1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed	Total
80	186	196	21	483

Unfortunately, there's lots of permutations and to get to the figures that are requested by Councillor Cooper would take about 10 hours of officer time going through each of the applications. I'm not prepared to ask officers to do that, I hope you will understand that.

As I said at the Audit and Scrutiny Committee, I do not consider these are genuine KPIs. KPIs should show you where you've gone wrong, what you can do to address things. It's just not possible to control what we've got by way of people who need emergency accommodation. They are not KPIs in my view and we will be reviewing the KPIs at the Housing Committee. Such a problem is temporary accommodation and the demand for it that the Government is giving us money to help with it.

I would like to look at what we have done. Since 2018 we have housed 1,031 households. In 2018/19, 151 came off the list, and we steadily increased that figure each year all the way up to 2021/22, with 207 coming off the list. There has been a slight glitch due to delays in building homes as a result of the Ukrainian war. This year, another 121 have been housed.

The Council has built a hundred homes for rent since the start of the building programme. Officers are currently actively working on 16 new sites, the equivalent of 197 units, 54 of these are due to complete in the next year. We've acquired land from the Sea Cadets and have had offers accepted on two further sites. We've secured investment partnership status with Homes England which gives us access to grant money to help us build even more homes, more than £1.45m worth of funding so far.

We have the Buyback Programme, where we're buying back houses that have been part of the Right to Buy scheme. We've had the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) programme, which will provide additional homes for rent, with 23 in the pipeline. 3 of the LAHF properties are specifically for temporary accommodation as part of the Government help. In the Autumn Statement the Government announced a third round of LAHF and this will include further grants for local authorities to acquire more temporary accommodation.

We are also pursuing other initiatives, including tenant incentive schemes, assisted purchase schemes and relocation strategies, as set out in the Housing and Homelessness Strategies.

If we had the land, we could build more houses. If we want to acquire land, we have to bid against developers, who will outbid us every time. We have to do deals with other Government agencies and we have been doing that. The Housing Department has been working with developers to achieve more affordable housing whenever there is a development.

Councillor Cooper, if you have any genuine suggestions of what we might do further, please feel free to come directly or through Councillor Hammond, who is your representative on our mid-cycle meetings for the Housing Committee.

Supplementary Question

I am disappointed the KPI doesn't realistically show what is going on. I am also disappointed to know that we don't know how many people are actually involved. We have to think about providing homes for people, and if that means we have to outbid developers, the Council should think about doing that.

Response from the Chair of the Housing Committee (Councillor Pursehouse)

I don't think it is a KPI as I won't be happy until there are no people on our A&B list of housing needs.

If we outbid developers, it would cut down the amount we can spend in other ways, the sites would be unviable, and we would have to charge such a high rent to our tenants that it would no longer be affordable rent.

Supplementary Question

I understand the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is separate from the General Fund. We can borrow money at much lower rates than any developer. I am not sure how it affects general expenditure.

Response from the Chair of the Housing Committee (Councillor Pursehouse)

Yes, it doesn't go into the General Fund. But the HRA is not a bottomless pit. The money comes ultimately from tenants, and if we borrow money, we have to pay it back. We borrow money to build and to buy land. The HRA has to service that debt, and we try for a 30-year payback so at the end of that time, it should not cost us. The HRA is subject to financial rules.