

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE

4 OCTOBER 2022

Item 4. Questions from Members of the Public

i) The following question has been received from Gary Struppe of Godalming:

“As a long term resident of Godalming I was horrified to hear of the Council’s plans to build housing on the Crown Court car park, a cornerstone of the central high street, and construct some replacement multi-storey parking on the Bury’s site. I should like to ask the Executive:

1. Why, given this is a major proposal for our community, the Council initially planned for only a limited consultation during the busy summer holiday period and designed a questionnaire that deliberately excluded those people wanting to object. In particular, why were these people unable to opine they did not want any housing to be built on Crown court nor given the chance to express that view?
2. When and how does the Council intend to analyse and subsequently present to members of the public the feedback received from the questionnaire and will the Executive please give a clear assurance that this analysis will include the views of the many people I know who have written directly to the designated consultation email address with their views as the questionnaire did not give them a chance to adequately express their opinions?
3. Will the council provide a commitment and undertaking that it will halt its plans for building housing on Crown Court and for constructing a multi storey car park if the majority of questionnaire, email and other respondents disagree with these proposals?”

Response from Cllr Mark Merryweather, Portfolio Holder for Finance, Commercial and Assets:

“Can I firstly thank Mr Struppe for a very timely question and recall, especially for our non-Godalming members, that the concept of building some housing on Godalming’s Crown Court car park is only one of several possible elements that have been identified and studied over many years, by us and our predecessors, as part of a potential package of measures that’s capable of resolving the significant pressures we face with our inefficient, indeed wasteful office building: something that we can’t afford to ignore.

It’s actually been quite remarkable how many residents are able to remember the cottages that were on the Crown Court car park site for decades up until the 1960s but be that as it may we’ve started with the assumption that most residents are used to the car park as it is now, and we’ve worked on that basis.

We're a financially and environmentally responsible Council and the housing we're contemplating would only be for low density, sustainable homes developed by us, and for us to rent at affordable and ethical rates on both the Crown Court and Wharf Road car parks. They would still have to be viable enough to contribute desperately needed recurring revenue income that would not only help pay for the homes themselves but also contribute to a refurbishment of the Council offices that we think could both save hundreds of thousands of pounds in costs that the offices currently waste every year and save tons of carbon that they emit annually.

This is not only a major question for Godalming but a significant issue for every Council taxpayer in Waverley, all of whom are currently footing the bill for the status quo. That is why it has been a regular feature in our public Executive, Council and Overview & Scrutiny meetings since 2019, and some specific public updates I've given myself including for example to the Executive on 3 March 2020 which was considered by the full 9 June 2020 Council.

But, as of now there are still no formal definitive proposals and the current round of preliminary engagement is intended to:

- *remind residents of the specific problems we face around The Burys which would be irresponsible to ignore;*
- *to explain the concepts and options – out of the dozens and dozens we've considered and tested – that have survived preliminary analysis and seem to be the most viable - or not - and why, and*
- *most importantly, to seek residents' feedback so as to inform the next phase of work only after which firm proposals may – or may not – emerge: proposals that can only then be taken forward for formal consultation.*

For where we are, at such a tentative stage, such a preliminary round of engagement like this is unprecedented:

- *not only has all of the work to date involved the elected members of this Council but the most recent phase of work that led up to it involved Godalming Town Council too;*
- *our online publicity campaign has been supplemented not only by a standing exhibition in the lobby of the Council offices but also special in person events for Council staff and the two in-person public drop in events on Godalming High Street, and*
- *this engagement has still not closed, and indeed further events are still planned including – but not limited to - a public webinar on Zoom in just over 2 weeks' time on 19 October.*

The survey questionnaire itself is only one component of the engagement as a whole which was designed to be structured but flexible. So, not only does the questionnaire itself repeatedly and explicitly invite and provide space for individualised responses regardless of whether they are positive or not, we have also – as Mr Struppe notes even in his own question - plainly invited residents to comment outside of the questionnaire directly to us through the in-person or electronic means we've provided. We're also conscious that residents have also wanted to discuss the project on social media, which we've also tried to track, and residents have always been welcome to use the other pathways the Council provides, the most obvious example of course being this very question that I'm responding to now.

We are tracking engagements and based on the data so far, I hope I can reassure Mr Struppe that his concerns about the survey do not seem to have crystallised. The rate of engagement has been steady since July, throughout the summer and since: it's now October and the engagement is still very much ongoing.

I can also reassure all residents that we are recording for analysis all of the feedback that we receive, regardless of the source, or that nature or degree of the opinions expressed. We're extremely grateful for ALL of the constructive feedback we've received, of all flavours, which has been gladly accepted in the spirit in which it's been offered.

I must also caution though that the feedback is not always as binary as might be pre-supposed. For example, consider a resident who, mistakenly, believes we're contemplating doing something to Bury's Field and who's feedback opposes that but is otherwise silent. In fact we and this resident are wholly in agreement and we've said from the outset that for us at least Bury's Field won't be touched. In substance, this resident has actively interacted with the engagement in a way that supports our position on Bury's Field and is neutral on the options actually on the table.

It is also important to consider not only the ratio of feedback of any flavour generated to the volume of interactions that residents have had with the engagement but also the ratio of engagement interactions to not only the residents of Godalming but the residents of Waverley as a whole.

As of last week, and prior to the High Street events, just for example:

- *The actual survey itself had generated 859 responses;*
- *The website providing project information together with the online copy of the survey had 3,788 hits with 3,035 unique visitors;*
- *We'd received 290 direct email responses and online comments outside of the survey, and*
- *Our video, uploaded to the Waverley YouTube Channel and shared on Social Media, has so far been viewed 1,012 times.*

This unprecedented engagement was and is purposed to inform the next more detailed phase of assessment. Should that pathway lead to definitive proposals or plans of any sort which this Executive supports, these would still be subject to formal public consultation, Council scrutiny, and then of course approval at least by this Council acting for itself and as the Planning Authority.

For now, we will continue to study in multi-dimensions the surviving options which could, possibly, resolve some of the clear and present problems in and around the Burys that are only going to get worse. We're doing so because we're a fiscally responsible Council that has sustainability – financial and otherwise - at its core. I've remarked already elsewhere on how the uncertain economic climate may affect our capital projects as well as our revenue budgets but even since this engagement started the conditions have worsened and uncertainty increased dramatically. This is making the pressures on us even more severe while at the same time undermining our ability to take measures deal with them."