

Wokingham Borough Council Report

The end of the year has been dominated by the untimely loss of our colleague and friend Paul Fishwick, executive member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways. But, sad and bereft as we all feel, we are trying to take inspiration from Paul – both in terms of his willingness to take tough decisions and his commitment to public service.

It has been a year of considerable achievement. We increased our number of seats on the council in the local elections of May. Given that we had been running the council without a majority since May 2022, to move forward was a very positive outcome.

The context of the elections did not help us – every voter had three votes. The Conservatives were the only right of centre party on offer (Reform fielded no candidates) leaving them as the sole repository for right-wing votes. We, by contrast, were one of three left of centre options, along with Labour and the Greens. In a normal election, where electors have only one vote, we can squeeze Labour and the Greens; but in this election, Labour and Green voters could salve their conscience, and simultaneously vote tactically, by spreading their votes. The number of split ballot papers far exceeded what we had anticipated. It probably cost us some colleagues, and denied good candidates victory, while helping the Conservatives.

We also can be proud of lots of achievements on the council, including

- managing the council's finances effectively in a very challenging environment: our good stewardship has been recognized by the consultancy Impower, which has ranked Wokingham fifth out of the 151 council providing adult and children's social care in terms of outcomes delivered per pounds spent – given that we receive the least core revenue support from central government of all the 151, this is no mean achievement
- agreeing a local plan that puts us on the pathway to security against speculative planning applications that we want to refuse; protects more than 100 Local Green Spaces; creates 13 much larger Areas of Landscape Value, where development is controlled; includes policies to secure the highest levels of energy efficiency in new homes and commercial buildings; secures 40% Affordable Housing on new major development sites and a new threshold of five dwellings to trigger and Affordable Housing contribution; delivers a new secondary school in the south of the borough, where it is most needed; and will allow the creating of a new country park
- adopting a Community Vision, based on joint working with external partners in the voluntary and charitable sector, business, faith groups, health providers, educators, including the university of Reading, and the Youth Council – a great example of empowering our community
- drawing up a Council Plan, informed by the Community Vision but also reflecting Lib Dem priorities and approaches, especially partnership working
- developing our strategic partnership with the University of Reading, which is helping us with our Climate Emergency work, our education and skills agenda, business support, and arts and culture

- persuading the Berkshire leaders to create a Berkshire Prosperity Board, which will help us bid for external funding for cross-border infrastructure projects and Affordable Housing schemes
- adopting the Marmot principles to reduce health inequalities and produce better health outcomes for all – this involves a whole-council approach to tackling challenges such as poor-quality housing and unhealthy diets
- promoting a truly cross-council approach to prevention, early intervention, and invest-to-save to help reduce costs downstream – a good example is repurposing some of our unused commercial properties to increase our temporary accommodation to help those made homeless, saving us considerable sums of money in expensive emergency placements in bed and breakfast accommodation, and providing more stability and security for the families involved
- opening a new care home for the elderly to increase in-borough provision
- opening new SEND units in schools, increasing provision at Addington, and working to secure the delivery of two new SEND schools in the south of the borough

There are many more achievements that I could list, but this gives you a flavour of the difference we have been able to make, even in a very challenging financial environment.

Finally, I want to thank all of you for the work you do to sustain the Liberal Democrat councillor group. Without your help, we would not be able to do what we do to try to make life better in Wokingham Borough.

Stephen Conway

23 November 2024