

Runnymede Borough CouncilFull CouncilThursday, 29 February 2024 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Council present: Councillors S Saise-Marshall (Mayor), R Bromley (Deputy Mayor), A Berardi, D Clarke, D Coen, MD Cressey, MK Cressey, V Cunningham, R Davies, S Dennett, J Furey, T Gates, E Gill, L Gillham, T Gracey, M Harnden, C Howorth, J Hulley, E Kettle, A King, R King, S Lewis, C Mann, J Mavi, I Mullens, M Nuti, N Prescott, S Ringham, M Singh, M Smith, P Snow, S Walsh, D Whyte, S Whyte, S Williams, M Willingale and J Wilson.

Members of the Council absent: Councillors A Balkan, T Burton, M Darby and S Jenkins.

84 Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor provided an update on the events and engagements that she had attended since the last Council.

85 Minutes

The minutes of the following meetings were confirmed and signed as a correct record:

- Council held on 8 February 2024
- Standing Council Tax Setting Committee on 22 February 2024

86 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Balkan, Burton, Darby and Jenkins.

87 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

88 Speaking or Questions from Members of the Public under Standing Order 12

(a) Aileen Owen Davies asked the Leader of the Council:

“The whole landscape of Runnymede is considerably less “green” than it was a few years ago. In my part of Runnymede very few trees seem to have been planted. There are so many spaces which could become little mini forests such as suggested by the RHS, I have seen no evidence of this. There are many other places where trees would enhance the look, air and carbon absorption of the area.

Increasing green cover will be a benefit to the beauty of the area and with the looming Climate Catastrophe, it is hugely important. They offer shade, habitat for birds, insects and other wildlife, as well as benefiting the quality of the air.

Trees in Conservation Area gardens cannot be either pruned or felled without council permission. Trees in other gardens can be felled whenever the owners wish. There should be similar controls for all properties. Presumably those on public ground do have to have council permission.

So I ask now, how many trees have been felled in Runnymede and how many have been

planted during the past year and what is your “greening” plan for the future?”

The Leader replied in the following terms:

“It is great to have advocacy for more trees in the borough. That said, it’s worth noting that the benefits of green areas and carbon sequestration can also be achieved in lots of other ways, in addition to the planting of trees. Habitats provided through grassland, heathland, and even wetlands, can offer substantial wildlife benefits, not to mention the absorption of carbon dioxide.

Runnymede Borough Council is seeking to maximise its efforts to achieve greater conservation value to our sites through stewardship schemes, volunteer provision and changes in policy. The Council will shortly be considering a new meadow policy – to name one example – and we are actively working to bring forward a Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, to name another. The intention of these, and other policies and strategies, is to ensure that there are strong themes of commitment to both the conservation of biodiversity, and to address climate change in support of our Strategy approved in 2022 as part of our Corporate Business Plan.

This Council will also be working with developers to realise the benefits of biodiversity net gain responsibilities within Runnymede. Furthermore, the Council appointed a Biodiversity Officer in October 2023 with a view to reviewing policies and making positive contributions to both nature conservation and climate change. I am proud that the Council has a set out a commitment to supporting our environment that is further set out in our Climate Change Strategy.

In terms of specifics, in response to your question – over the last 12 months the Council has felled approximately 70 trees due to their condition (either dead, diseased or for reasons of health and safety). At the same time, the Council has been responsible for the planting of approximately 540 trees. A ratio of just under 8:1.

Through our Environment and Sustainability Committee this Council has, since last month, commenced a tree audit of the estimated 35,000 trees that Runnymede Borough Council is responsible for which are sited on communal land, in parks, open spaces, suitable alternative natural greenspace sites, on amenity land and across estates. Following this audit we are exploring the possibility of people adopting trees or becoming tree wardens to further foster the link between our residents and our lived environment.

In respect of trees on land that the Council is not responsible for, we do not hold data on the number of trees felled or planted within private woodlands or gardens, although any trees covered by a Tree Preservation Order would require a private individual or business to contact the Council to seek approval prior to any work being undertaken on those trees.”

Aileen Owen Davies asked whether there were agreed plans for planting trees, or for preventing the felling of trees in conservation areas? The Leader committed to providing a written response to this question.

(b) Deborah Long asked the Leader of the Council:

“A lot of Runnymede residents are concerned with the power the wealthy landowners seem to have over the council and planning department.

I hope the billionaires aren't intimidating the council into passing the planning applications and that they are dealing with them as they would any other individual's planning application and they follow planning due process.

Is the planning department urged not to refuse planning applications because they can't

afford to fight the constant appeals?”

The Leader replied in the following terms:

“Each planning application submitted to the Council is considered in the same manner and they are assessed on their individual merits as required by planning law. All applications are treated in the same way regardless of who they are submitted by.

To the best of my knowledge, no person is attempting to intimidate or otherwise unduly influence the Council or Planning Department in to approving planning applications.

Where the Council decides to refuse planning applications it can only do so where there are clearly defensible grounds that would stand up to scrutiny at appeal. There is no instruction or policy adopted to not refuse planning applications based on concerns about the possible cost of fighting an appeal. Planning applications will only be approved or refused on their individual merits.”

There was no supplementary question.

89 **Petitions**

There were no petitions.

90 **Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order 13**

(a) Councillor R King asked the Leader of the Council:

“Can the Leader confirm the total and Individual departmental costs from the use of agency staff for this financial year so far and for the previous 22/23?”

The Leader replied in the following terms:

“The annual total costs of agency/interim staff for 2022/23 and 2023/24 to date is detailed in a table before members:

Casual/ Agency Expenditure – Account Codes 0030 & 0200		
	2022/23	2023/24
Description	Actual payments	
	£	£
HRA		
Special Services Management	390.71	-390.71
Repairs – Supervisions	62,021.97	0.00
Housing General Fund		
Home Improvement	77,220.26	28,397.00
Housing Standards	5,568.00	-27,630.08

Benefits Service	1,500.00	1,000.00
Housing Advice	49,200.83	31,389.66
Community Services		
Day Centres	0.00	1,478.00
Leisure & Sports Development	2,420.00	2,029.00
Environment & Sustainability		
Parks and Open Space	75,137.67	3,656.49
Refuse Collection	177,821.99	76,915.23
Trade waste collection	27,784.65	12,018.02
Depot serv. Control	0.00	11,906.70
Grounds Maintenance	2,468.40	55,370.53
Recycling	294,517.67	127,390.84
Green Waste	55,569.39	24,036.01
Street Cleansing	148,768.80	99,403.73
Car Parking	9,126.00	0.19
On-Street Car Parking	16,947.99	0.00
Planning		
Development Management	-1,356.75	0.00
Corporate Management Committee		
Corporate Property	219,412.42	365,751.68
Financial Services	74,482.40	2,003.55
Computer Services	2,632.04	23,929.00
Procurement Services	19,433.09	0.00
Human Resource Service	16,620.40	37,613.60
Law and Governance – Legal	164,062.21	146,907.75
Total	1,501,750.14	1,023,176.19

All councils like Runnymede benefit from a workforce plan that includes both substantive and temporary staffing to ensure there is agility to flex and meet the needs of service delivery, for example where work is fluctuating rather than linear (e.g. support to specific projects which have a fixed term).

Agency/interim staff costs can in the main be attributed to:

- Cover for vacant posts which are predominantly in 'hard to recruit to' specialities.
- Interim cover pending recruitment to substantive posts.
- Cover for front line services which provide day to day services to the community.
- Specialist and technical expertise that is only required for specific pieces of work or a finite period.

Not all vacant positions are covered by interim or agency staff within the Council. If other cover arrangements can be achieved within teams, this is applied in the first instance.

To date this year Runnymede spends approximately 5% of its overall staffing budget on interim/agency staffing which is less than the average for local government reported as 6% in September 2023.

The anticipated reduction in agency spend for a full year is circa £250k, thus demonstrating our dedicated drive to reduce agency spend in the last year, but accepting that there is more work to do in this area.”

Councillor R King asked what was being done to reduce spend on agency staff in Environmental Services, where he felt costs appeared to be particularly high? Councillor Gracey stated that areas of high agency staffing costs would be reviewed as part of the workforce plan which was being developed for member consideration in the next municipal year.

(b) Councillor A King asked the Leader of the Council:

“With the UK now in a recession, the ongoing migration to Universal Credit and the end of Household Support Fund funding from April, what is his administration’s plan for helping residents from April who face real financial hardship?”

The Leader replied in the following terms:

“This Council is committed to supporting our most vulnerable residents, through administering of national and local direct support funds, delivering critical services such as our day centres and meals at home, through our social housing, council tax relief and support for community organisations. I am proud that the budget we approved at our last meeting included nearly £2million for the provision of care services for the elderly and vulnerable in our community and nearly £400,000 of grant aid funding to support voluntary organisations in the Borough, provide Council Tax hardship support and grant aid rent abatement.

In addition, this coming year, officers will undertake a full review of the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2025/26 to ensure it continues to support our most vulnerable residents whilst remaining affordable to the Council. Officers will continue to look at opportunities to further simplify the scheme for working age residents whilst ensuring that it offers the most vulnerable a safety net that is affordable to the Council.

Runnymede Borough Council continues to offer hardship relief under section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 to anyone struggling to pay their council tax, and we will continue to signpost and support residents to claim other welfare benefits that they may be entitled to.

In addition, the Council is embarking on a pilot to introduce a Financial Inclusion Officer who will be able to work collaboratively across all areas of non-payment ensuring that payments are allocated fairly and objectively with a transparent process, and with clear policies and procedures to ensure income is maximised. Whilst working with residents in a more inclusive way, we will aim help break the cycle of debt and enable more positive outcomes for families struggling with the cost of living crisis.

The Housing Service will continue to support tenants though making an additional contribution of £30,000 next year to the Discretionary Housing Payment fund to be utilised for HRA tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit or the Housing Element of Universal Credit and facing financial difficulty. A further £20,000 has been allocated to a Discretionary Hardship Fund to enable us to support residents unable to meet their liabilities or who are facing a change of circumstances leading to hardship. This fund enables us to assist tenants who are not in receipt of housing related benefits. The Housing service employs a Tenant Support Officer who works with tenants to maximise their income, assisting with backdated applications and ensuring they are in receipt of their full entitlement.

On the picture nationally, we do not yet know if there will be a Household Support Fund from April 2024. The Department for Work and Pensions has said that it remains under review and any announcement may be part of the Chancellor's budget announcement on Wednesday 6 March 2024."

Councillor A King asked whether there was to be any support for those on legacy benefits, before their migration to Universal Credit? The Leader committed to providing a written response to this question.

Councillor R King asked the Leader whether he regretted not voting for a Council Tax cut for those on low incomes? The Leader stated that he supported how he voted and reiterated that any support the Council provided to residents needed to remain affordable.

(c) Councillor Davies asked the Leader of the Council:

"Network Rail's funding settlement for 2024-2029, was recently approved by the Leader's own Conservative government, and within that settlement £1.2 billion was slashed from its budget, which is 6% of its total. With the corresponding Office for Rail Regulations report and vocal warnings from engineers and track side safety teams, sounding alarm bells that this will increase safety risks, reduce reliability on the network and almost totally remove community match funding for projects like level crossing replacements, is he as disappointed and angry as me that Runnymede residents are now doomed to face more delays, a less reliable service and more potential barrier down time at crossings because of cuts made by his own government and MPs?"

The Leader replied in the following terms:

"Thank you for suggesting it is my Government. Before coming to the substantive point, I would note that it is the King's Government and that of all people in the country.

As you will be aware, funding for Network Rail is beyond the remit of Runnymede Borough Council, however I share concerns around the performance of Network Rail, especially in relation to the excessive delays around level crossings most notably in and around Egham.

I would like to put on record my thanks to Councillor Alex Balkan and our MP Dr Ben Spencer for their work campaigning for urgent improvements to the service and a reduction in delays experienced by residents.

Having been engaging with Network Rail since alleged "improvement works" last summer, residents unfortunately are continuing to experience delays. Just last week our MP raised this matter to the Prime Minister during Prime Minister's Questions and has referred Network Rail to the regulator requesting an urgent inquiry and intervention into the situation.

I hope all members will join me in offering our support for this campaign so that we can work together to improve the service that so many of our residents rely on."

Councillor Gillham asked whether the Council could ask for more details on the specific upgrades that Network Rail asserted that they had made, given that there appeared to have been no tangible benefit? The Leader agreed that there appeared to have been no benefit to residents from Network Rail's claimed upgrades and welcomed the support of all members in holding Network Rail to account.

Councillor Mullens asked whether the Leader was aware that the level crossing downtime in Egham would be longer as a result of Network Rail's works? The Leader confirmed that he had not previously been made aware of this.

(d) Councillor Kettle asked the Leader of the Council:

"Will the leader join me in thanking officers for their proactive support and efforts to listen to local residents, and mitigate the disruption caused in Englefield Green by large scale funerals, whilst ensuring that loved ones are treated with dignity and respect at the most difficult of times?"

The Leader replied in the following terms:

"Thank you for highlighting this work. I'm aware that officers from Environmental Services have engaged with residents and stakeholders from around the Green to discuss their concerns. That dialogue remains ongoing, and our officers are actively talking to local representatives including the church about where Runnymede Borough Council can, realistically, help. Officers have also engaged our local Police in the conversation and reached out to Surrey County Council to highlight that highways parking enforcement issues have arisen in the area.

I am conscious that there are limits to what our officers can do to mitigate some of the issues that have been raised, but I am pleased that they have been proactively engaging with some of our community leaders to explore ways in which we might improve the local experience for our residents whilst being sensitive to the needs of grieving families. The way we communicate and respond to these issues has been improved because of this dialogue, and Environmental Services continue to look at how we can help to get things right, as far as practicably possible.

The discussions have shone light on how much the work of our cemeteries officer and her colleagues working out of our Chertsey Depot has been appreciated by the local community, and I absolutely share the sentiments of your question and would offer my sincere thanks to all the officers involved."

91 **Recommendations from Committees**

91a **Climate Change Action Plan - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee**

It was proposed (by Councillor Gracey), seconded (by Councillor Coen) and **resolved** that, subject to a review by the Corporate Management Committee in six months' time:

1. The Runnymede Borough Council Climate Change Action Plan, attached at Appendix 1 of the officer's report, be adopted subject to the following matters being reviewed, for inclusion where required via the officer delegation in 2 below:
 - a) The text in action 3.8 of the Plan, in relation to London Heathrow, being amended to avoid giving the impression that the Council supported its intentions for expansion.
 - b) Local Plan Review actions under the Active and Sustainable Transport section to

being amended to reference the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods.

- c) The addition of figures to show the number of actions falling under the indicators of the Action Plan key, in relation to timeframes, indicative carbon impacts and costs.
2. The Corporate Head of Planning, Economy and Built Environment, in consultation with the Chair of the Corporate Management Committee and the Climate Change Member Working Party, be authorised to carry out periodic (at least on an annual basis) reviews and make minor amendments to the Climate Change Action Plan as necessary.

91b Pay Policy Statement - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee

It was proposed (by Councillor Gracey), seconded (by Councillor Willingale) and **resolved** that the Annual Pay Policy Statement 2024/25 be approved, subject to the alterations noted in the summons being made.

91c Members' Allowances Scheme 2024/25 - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee

It was proposed (by Councillor Gracey), seconded (by Councillor Howorth) and **resolved** that the following be implemented at the point the staff pay award for 2024/25 was agreed:

1. The 2023/24 Members' Allowances Scheme be withdrawn with an end date of 31 March 2024 inclusive.
2. An updated Members' Allowances Scheme, to incorporate an uplift to the basic allowance and special responsibility allowances, commensurate with the staff pay award (but not including any lump sum provisions or similar), be agreed with an implementation date of 1 April 2024 inclusive.
3. Any adjustments to basic and special responsibility allowances (either additional payments or recovery of payments made) be backdated 1 April 2024 inclusive.
4. That the Corporate Head of Law and Governance be delegated authority to implement the revised Members' Allowances Scheme to give effect to the above, and undertake any necessary measures to do so (such as advertising it in a local newspaper, or authorising the recovery of payments made).

91d Preliminary consideration of mayoral selection - recommendation from the Corporate Management Committee

It was proposed (by Councillor Gracey), seconded (by Councillor Gillham) and **resolved** that Councillor Elaine Gill be nominated as Mayor for the 2024/25 municipal year.

92 Preliminary consideration of deputy mayoral selection

It was proposed (by Councillor Gracey), seconded (by Councillor Gillham) and **resolved** that consideration of this item be deferred until the meeting of the Council on 25 April 2024.

93 Review of allocation of seats to political groups

It was proposed (by Councillor Gracey), seconded (by Councillor R King) and **resolved** that:

1. The seats currently allocated to the Conservative Group on the Environment and Sustainability Committee, and the Licensing Committee (including the associated sub-committee), be allocated to Councillor Bromley.

2. All other seats on committees be allocated in accordance with the arrangements agreed at the annual meeting of the Council on 17 May 2023.
3. The Council note group leaders were able to make appointments to committees in accordance with Standing Order 22.8, and that this provision did not apply to Councillor Bromley, as the seats in 1 above had been allocated to him as an independent councillor i.e. a councillor not in a group represented on the Council.

94 **Notices of Motion from Members of the Council under Standing Order 15**

Motion a) To seek to abolish the role of the Police and Crime Commissioner and redirect the resources to frontline policing.

The proposed motion, as set out in the summons, was moved by Councillor D Whyte.

The proposed motion was seconded by Councillor Smith.

The proposed motion was **CARRIED**:

Motivation:

This motion is being brought forward by the Runnymede Liberal Democrat Group to seek the better use of council tax receipts and to deliver more effective services for residents by abolishing the role of the Police and Crime Commissioner.

The Council:

1. Recognises the bravery and hard work of Surrey's police officers, Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), and staff in trying to keep our local communities safe.
2. Notes that despite their efforts, and Surrey residents paying the highest council tax in England for their police force, just 150 out of over 2,700 residential burglaries were solved in the year to August 2023, and there were over 6,500 vehicle crimes, representing an annual increase of over 14%.
3. Believes that many more crimes could be prevented in Runnymede with an increased community policing presence and that many of our communities have seen a drop in police visibility and presence over recent years.
4. Notes that the operating budget for the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey, including staff and running costs, is £1,667,000, representing an increase of nearly 70% since March 2021.
5. Further notes that, according to Home Office statistics, the number of PCSOs on Surrey's streets reduced by nearly 50% from 140 to just 71 in the two years since March 2021.
6. Believes that the costs of the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner should be spent on providing frontline police services, funding the equivalent of around 70 new PCSOs.
7. Further believes that, regardless of the incumbent's political allegiances, it is clear that the role of Police and Crime Commissioner is not necessary and should be abolished, with its functions transferring to Police Boards, made up of local councillors and representatives from relevant local groups.

The Council resolves to:

Call on the Leader of the Council to write to the Home Secretary expressing this Council's view that this needlessly political role should be abolished, with the financial savings reinvested into frontline policing that would benefit Runnymede and all of Surrey.

A named vote was requested on the motion, with the voting as follows:

In favour of the motion (19)

Councillors Berardi, MD Cressey, Davies, Gates, Gill, Gillham, Harnden, Kettle, A King, R King, Mann, Mullens, Ringham, Singh, Smith, Snow, D Whyte, S Whyte and Williams.

Against the motion (17)

Councillors Saise-Marshall, Bromley, Clarke, Coen, Cunningham, Dennett, Furey, Gracey, Howorth, Hulley, Lewis, Mavi, Nuti, Prescott, Walsh, Willingale and Wilson.

Abstentions (1)

Councillor MK Cressey.

95 **Minority Group Priority Business**

There was no minority group priority business.

96 **Press and Public to be Excluded by Resolution**

There was no exempt business.

(The meeting ended at 8.49 pm.)

Mayor