

## Councillors Written Questions and the Responses

### Full Council – 20 July 2022

(Questions in *italics and Answers in RED*)

#### **Question to Councillor Chris Mullins (Cabinet Member for Wellbeing) from Councillor Hellier**

*From the minutes of the Full Council Meeting of 23rd February this year, Cllr Duncan Crow asked the following verbal question to which you gave the following answer.*

*Councillor Crow to the Cabinet Member for Wellbeing: "Would you be able to provide any details of what those potential options are for the Waterlea playground site? Will you ensure that you and officers will liaise with local councillors over any future options for the Waterlea site? And what would you say to parents of children in Furnace Green and further afield who were looking forward to an unsupervised play area at that location to replace the adventure playground?"*

*Councillor Mullins, Cabinet Member for Wellbeing: "We are looking at serious options and the intention is to bring something in Furnace Green that people are really going to enjoy and want when they see it. It was a preferred site from an interested company but it's sad we've had to take the decision we've made on the adventure playgrounds but it was necessary in the circumstances. There is the potential for something exciting to happen in that locality. I will be committed to communicating and consulting with local councillors."*

*Virtually five months later, Cllr Crow and myself have yet to hear anything at all from either the Cabinet Member or Officers as to any update and there remains disappointment locally that no progress appears to have occurred. Having not been used for three years, we are keen to see progress with Waterlea being brought back into use to provide a facility for children.*

1. *Please provide any information on progress to date on the future use of the Waterlea Adventure Playground site?*

#### **Response**

Since Full Council on 23 February, Officers continued to explore a proposal from a third party Community Interest Company to deliver an indoor skate park facility / community café / unsupervised play facility at the Waterlea APG site however unfortunately they have withdrawn their interest due to viability concerns at this time.

Whilst bringing forward costed options for Waterlea APG site is an element of the service work programme for 2022/23, the focus has so far been largely on delivering the programme to convert Cherry Lane and Millpond sites into unsupervised play provision as well as establishing the outreach play programme across the Borough. Members will recall that the decision to retain Millpond as an unsupervised site instead of Waterlea was largely driven by feedback received from the community

2. *Can you confirm that the site is earmarked to provide a facility for children, and if not certain at this stage, state what other potential uses are being considered?*

**Response**

The options appraisal process has yet to begin so at this stage we retain an open mind as to how we best provide play facilities in Furnace Green and the wider town and part of this process will determine if the Waterlea site is the most appropriate location for any future provision, mindful also of the budget challenges that we face

3. *Are you willing to arrange a meeting with the Furnace Green ward Councillors and Officers to discuss the future use of the Waterlea site?*

**Response**

Yes, I would be pleased to facilitate that meeting and have asked Officers to coordinate diaries.

**Question to Councillor Jones (Leader of the Council) from Councillor Crow**

*Last month, the McColls newsagent closed down at Furnace Parade, along with the Post Office branch that it operated. This means that there are now two empty Council-owned shop units at Furnace Parade as well as no Post Office branch in either Furnace Green or Tilgate. It has also been reported that the newsagent at Ifield Parade along with its Post Office branch, will be closing in September.*

1. *Across all the Council-owned neighbourhood parades, how many shop units are either currently not operating or have given notice to quit?*

**Response**

Two shops are currently vacant (17 and 21 Tilgate Parade). Offers have been received on 17 Tilgate Parade and 21 Tilgate Parade is yet to go onto the market. No tenants (including Martin McColl) have given notice to quit yet.

2. *Can a (non-commercially sensitive) update be provided as to the Council's progress in bringing the two empty shop units at Furnace Parade back into use?*

**Response**

Both the properties on Furnace Parade still have existing leases and tenants

3. *With Post Office branches being valued by local communities as well as contributing to the vibrancy and commercial vitality of our neighbourhood parades, can an update be provided as to what efforts are being made by the Council to bring back Post Office branch facilities to those neighbourhoods where they have been recently lost, as well as those neighbourhoods where they are due to be lost soon?*

**Response**

Until Martin McColl Limited serve notice to terminate their leases, the Council is not able to do anything. One of the offers for 17 Tilgate Parade does include

the use as a post office, but a post office on its own is not a viable business. The ancillary uses being proposed conflict with numerous other businesses on the parade and could adversely affect existing businesses. This was to be discussed at the Neighbourhood Parade Scrutiny Panel last week, however this was cancelled due to staff sickness.

4. *Is the Council aware of any Post Office branches at any other neighbourhood parades that are at risk of closure and if so, what efforts are being made to maintain Post Office branch facilities for those neighbourhoods?*

### **Response**

Cllr Crow's question misses the point that inadequate Post Office provision is not a failure of the council who has no say over any of this, but the strategy of the Post Office making a vital public service such as a post office dependent on retail chains such as Martin McColl, making the service extremely vulnerable. And the regrettable situation in neighbourhoods such as his own is almost certainly a consequence of policies that his party in Government has allowed to be put in place which have brought Post Office provision to this position and we have already seen foreshadowed in Crawley with the closure of the Crown Post Office in the Boulevard.

The only other Post Office Branch that is possibly at risk of closure is Gossops Parade, which is also contained within the Martin McColl shop.

The asset team has had conversations with the Post Office property department. They have advised us that there is no plan to open new branches on parades and believe that the area is served best by the main branch in W H Smith in County Mall, a view I certainly do not agree with. The Post Office says it is rationalising its branches in many locations, not just Crawley. They would support a post office counter in a suitable shop such as a newsagent. However no suitable offers have been received from prospective tenants which incorporate a post office counter. If an offer were to be received it still has to be in line with the market rent for the parade and the tenant has to pass financial scrutiny and conflict checks with existing users.