

Stratfield Mortimer Parish Council

Full Council 09/01/2025

West Berkshire Council Service Delivery

Agenda item 24/108 9: To resolve recommendations made by The Finance and General Purposes Committee regarding the proposed service delivery offers and agree any actions to be taken.

Email Received From West Berkshire- Countryside Manager

To all parish clerks and chairmen

Happy Christmas and new year to you all, I hope 2025 is a great year for you all.

I need to draw your attention to 3 initiatives that the Countryside Service is currently involved in, and for which I would appreciate your time and attention. On the back of previous discussions at the most recent District Parish Conference (DPC) I attach the Brochure on Service Delivery Offers for Town and Parish Council's. Two of the items below relate to this document and the discussion at the DPC.

Some of you have contacted me previously and so as promised this email provides more detail.

District Bins

As you will be aware we have consulted again this year on the reduction in the number of dog and litter bins provided by this council. The consultation also introduced a proposal for the council to open up discussions to transfer the care and maintenance of bins to local councils. Page 10 of the brochure also makes reference to this option. This consultation has now concluded and it appears that the provision of dog and litter bins remains highly valued by the community.

There are 325 bins provided as part of our grounds maintenance contract across the district, with 750 (average) emptying occasions each week across the district. This is the absolute maximum number the contractor can manage with the current allocated workforce. Increased use and demand in some areas, and contractor recruitment and retention issues are stretching the service to the point where some bins periodically overflow. We cannot continue to increase the budget to accommodate increased bin servicing and in fact there is a case to reduce the number of bins overall in order to better service those bins which remain. The bins which are currently installed across the district were provided over the course of many years, and in response to local issues at that point in time. There has never been a systematic review of their provision until now.

At this stage my intention is only to seek to open up discussions with parishes on the opportunity to transfer bins into your care and maintenance in line with the consultation and the brochure. There are advantages in local management of these bins, not least that each parish can determine the requirement for individual bins and the frequency of emptying in order to tailor provision to local needs. Clearly you will require further information before considering the matter further, therefore I am more than happy to discuss this further and suggest a means to do this at the end of this email.

Tree Health Inspections and Management

Page 9 of the Brochure refers.

The need for tree works will sometimes become self-evident to tree owners, including local councils. In many circumstances, however, there will be a need for systematic surveys and inspections to be conducted by competent persons with skills in areas such as the recognition and interpretation of the origin and significance of poor health caused by damage or physiological stress. These surveys will be required in order for a defence to be made in the event of an insurance claim for damage or personal injury. The risk from trees although generally low is growing as a consequence of ash dieback disease <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/tree-pests-and-diseases/key-tree-pests-and-diseases/ash-dieback/>.

We are therefore very interested in speaking to you about your trees and the potential for the council to offer a tree inspection and management service to local councils. The following is the general concept but can be modified in light of discussions. The proposal:

We receive enough interest from parishes and town councils to allow the council to recruit, part time, a trained arborist/tree inspector to carry out visual tree inspections on behalf of parishes, so that all trees are surveyed at least every three years

All inspections are recorded on software and the information stored there can then use to defend themselves against claims

The tree inspector also estimates the cost of any works involved to mitigate risk based on known schedules of rates and provides this to parishes

The parish decides to either fund the works or absorb the risk

Note that this councils approach to trees is to carry out the absolute minimum required in accordance with good practice – work on trees is always a last resort - so this is not a matter of finding work for contractors unnecessarily

This precautionary approach requires regular inspections

If the works are to be funded the tree inspector will then oversee works – carried out by the council's term contractor, or another contractor on our approved list

All additional management costs are bourn by the parish

In terms of costs per parish, we would need to work this out based on numbers of trees but the idea would be that the parish buy into the service on a 2 – 3 year basis, with an annual subscription fee payable

The more parishes that come on board the lower the costs due to economies

The tree inspector will be supervised here in the Countryside Service

After 3 years we will review the arrangement and if the process works then we will offer a further buy in arrangement to ensure the ongoing health of the tree/s

I cannot give an accurate figure on costs but £1500 -£2000 per annum maximum for those parishes with the largest number of trees is a possible ceiling we would look to work to, less for those parishes with much fewer trees. This subscription provides an annual visual survey, data handling, advice (general advice and any in relation to insurance claims) and management overview of any works carried out (arboriculture works are an extra cost). It is entirely possible to schedule any works required over a set period of 2-3 years depending on risk and priority.

I'd like to bring the cost down, we have no intention to make a profit, in fact were very much limited in this respect. The advantage to WBC is that an extra member of staff assigned to this work provides additional capacity to deal with general enquiries within our communities.

Local councils need to consider their increasing liability for matters such as ash dieback disease and property damage, community risk for trees more widely.

Playing Pitch Strategy

The council have procured a consultant to carry out its Playing Pitch Strategy, this is a document required for planning purposes so as to ensure that appropriate capacity is achieved to support grass/artificial pitch sport across the district, more information here: [West Berkshire Playing Pitch Strategy - Final 05122019.pdf](#). The process involves examining demand vs supply (both public and private) across the district.

In the course of the review of the current document it is clear that we have a deficit of grass/artificial sports facilities within the district (again both public and private). This email is therefore a gentle request that if you have land under your ownership and control which might be suitable for sport, either grass, or to be developed with an artificial surface for a range of sports use then please let me know. Similarly, if there is any land, regardless of ownership, which is in your parish and which you consider maybe suitable for sport, football, rugby etc., then again please let me know.

Some parishes may already have been contacted by Stuart Todd Associates, our consultant.

Sincere apologies for the long email but it saves sending multiple emails, something I expect you prefer to avoid.

It is my intention to circulate a virtual Teams meeting at some stage towards the end of January (Im about to go on leave) or early February so that Parishes can ask any questions and get further clarification. How these proposals shape out will take time and further discussion but an initial meeting is at least a start.

Kind regards

