

Policy & Resources Committee Meeting – 5th October 2022**Agenda Item 10.1****Community Infrastructure Levy****WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL - CIL REQUEST**

A remote meeting was held on 20th September 2022 by Wokingham Borough Council in relation to a co-funding bid for a refurbishment project of the lakeside at California County Park, Finchampstead.

WBC has already invested £3m into California Country Park, upgrading parking, installing new bike storage, upgrading the café facilities and the play area, the Lakeside project is the final part. WBC consider the park to be a major park in the Wokingham Borough, alongside Dinton Pastures, and more residents from outside Finchampstead visit the park than Finchampstead residents.

The project consists of a new information point, installation of various new pathways, upgrading of existing paths, picnic area with seating, wildflower areas, flowered lawn, screening of kiosk, various planting schemes and the installation of a boardwalk with a viewing point.

There is no overall timeframe for the project at this point and the project will depend on the funding secured. It is anticipated that the project will take about a year to plan, and work would start September 2023. Some aspects of the project are optional, based on if full funding was secured, so some aspects would be dropped if there was not enough funding.

The overall amount being requested for the project from other Town/Parish Councils is based on their proximity to California Country Park and the amount of CIL available to the individual town/parish:

Finchampstead PC	250,000	43.5%
WBC	100,000	17.4%
Woodley TC	50,000	8.7%
Wokingham Without	25,000	5%
Arborfield	25,000	5%
Barkham	25,000	5%
Charvil	25,000	5%
Shinfield	25,000	5%
Twyford	10,000	2%
Winnersh	10,000	2%
Earley	5,000	1%

Visitor figures have been gathered based on actual bookings taken for the paddling pool in 2020, 2021 and 2022 using full postcode, however the figures are not indicative, as they do not show the number of visits from people just visiting the park, but who did not use the paddling pool.

The map shown as part of the presentation implied that most visitors to the park are from Woodley, Earley, Winnersh, Twyford and Wokingham Without and that there are a low number of visitors from Arborfield.

Woodley TC have indicated that they will not be contributing and Shinfield PC suggested that, with the amount of development they have in their parish, their CIL will be spent on infrastructure for their area. The general concerns raised by other attendees were that the data showing visitors from outside Finchampstead visiting the park highlights a possible lack of facilities across the borough and that it was encouraging people to use their cars more to visit facilities that were not walking distance etc.

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Agenda Item 10.2

Community Infrastructure Levy

SSEN Resilient Communities Fund Grant – Match Funding

As councillors are aware, officers have revised and updated the On-Site Emergency Flood Plan in relation to Maiden Erlegh Lake and this document is now lodged with DEFRA in accordance with the legislation. As part of this plan, we need to ensure that the equipment Earley Town Council has at its disposal to deal with such emergencies, is appropriate and in good order.

Officers have reviewed the matter and identified areas in which it would be beneficial to update or replace existing stocks. An application for funding was therefore made to the Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks Resilient Communities Fund, a body which supports groups and organisations in flood prevention and management work. Examples of items to be purchased include:

- Replacement generator
- Portable LED lights
- Torches – head and hand
- Insulation blankets
- Dry suit

The application was successful, and Earley Town Council has been awarded £2,100.57 to be put towards the purchase of the required supplies.

The total cost of the equipment is approximately £4,400 and I am **recommending** that the balance be taken from the town council's CIL fund. The CIL officer has WBC has agreed that this would be an appropriate use of CIL funds.

Jo Friend

Town Clerk

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Agenda Item 10.3

Community Infrastructure Levy

Community Garden Project

A request for funds has been received from the garden group at Lower Earley Salvation Army, to assist them with their plans to develop a sensory garden for the community. The application is for £2,000. Their initial approach was to WBC where the CIL officer indicated that this would be a suitable project for CIL funding and directed them to Earley Town Council.

A grant application form has been completed in order that the relevant information is provided, this will be circulated separately to members of the committee. Further details from the applicant about the project are as follows:

Since 2020 we have been restoring the grounds around the Lower Earley Salvation Army. We are a very small team and have to date self-funded the work with some small support from Wickes with some supplies and M&S with a few plants. We are in our third year of development and now require some help with funding.

Our vision was that our garden would be open to the community as somewhere to sit and take time to reflect and find rest, which was so important during COVID and remains so today.

Since 2020 our building has been opened-up to support the COVID vaccination programme and still in 2022 we are offering our building for booster vaccinations and flu vaccinations. We have developed a close relationship with Brookside Surgery and support their 'social prescribing' initiative through our open garden club. We also offer our building on a Sunday afternoon for the Hong Kong families to meet. We also host the Contact Centre twice a month on a Saturday afternoon and the slimming club on Saturday mornings. So our building is getting widely used outside of our own church activities.

Our plans are to develop a sensory garden close to the coffee hub so that everyone can enjoy the sight, sound and vision of the garden. However, this does require hard landscaping and although we will approach local DIY stores for supplies we do need to fund the work by the professional. We are looking for a grant of around £2,000 to fulfil our plans. We also have a large strip of wasteland which we are developing to make it more attractive for all the residents who walk down the pathways. We have made an oasis area, and we hope to continue to develop our wild flower garden and our planting will include plants that survive in hot climates.

Over the last two years we have had lots of wonderful comments and a great deal of encouragement from local people.

Jo Friend

Town Clerk



Background

Reading Welfare Rights was established in 1988 to provide free advocacy, support, advice and guidance to people about their rights to state benefits. We specialise in providing this support to people who have the most complex needs.

We have recently secured a nationwide contact with HM Courts and Tribunals Service to provide online support to people who are appealing initial decisions regarding Personal Independence Payments – a non means tested benefit for people with significant physical and/or mental health conditions.

We now seek to extend our catchment area beyond the borough of Reading and are seeking additional funding to offer our full range of services to local residents in your area.

How we work

We can be reached by phone, email, through our website and social media platforms. When possible, we run outreach events which we advertise with residential leaflet drops in the locations where they are to be held. This is an important part of our communications strategy, as it helps us to connect with those who are digitally excluded and so may find it hard to access support.

The present team

This comprises a CEO, 1 full time caseworker, 3 part-time caseworkers, 4 volunteers and a team of 7 Trustees. Our paid team is comprised of 3.8 full-time equivalent members of staff working 147 hours each week. The CEO post is presently 100% funded by our National Lottery grant, as is 50% of our full-time caseworker.

Currently, we have to signpost 20% of those who ask us for help to other organisations, as our team are fully occupied helping existing clients. We therefore need to expand our service to support the increasing number of people now coming to us for help, including those from outside of Reading whom we want to start supporting, which is why we are seeking additional funding.

Current financial position

Since 2016, our capacity was depleted, year-on-year, due to severe Government cuts to our principal funder Reading Borough Council. We also came to the end of a substantial, long-term grant from a local charity. This required us to reduce 40% of the working hours of our staff and inevitably, our level of service to clients.

However, since 2019, we have been rebuilding capacity through; a large grant from the National Lottery Community Fund, various smaller grants from local funders, additional innovative fundraising activities, such as crowd funding and most recently from a government contract to help digitally excluded people to appeal benefit decisions online.

We need to continue securing funds because the current economic situation and the cost of living crisis is reaching crisis point for our most vulnerable citizens.



Our impact

We support clients from initial application for benefits such as Personal Independence Payments, Attendance Allowance, Pension Credits and Universal Credit, through to appeals and tribunal advocacy. We help clients secure benefits they are due, so helping provide them with the financial security to get on with their lives. This is demanding work, as clients often lack the skills to navigate the increasingly complex, digital benefit system themselves and so need a great deal of support from us. We often have to intervene at a critical moment when people are in real crisis, but always strive to help them become more financially secure and to grow their confidence in managing their own money, where possible.

Between June 2021 and May 2022, we supported 1,087 new clients who presented us with **1,640** complex, time consuming issues. Over this 12-month period, we secured **£546,210.74** in benefits for our clients.

The need

The demand from vulnerable people for help in claiming benefits constantly increases and adverse changes in benefit regulations have left many people with their benefit awards being withdrawn. These people are often the least able to understand the benefits landscape, yet are the most deserving and appropriate recipients of that support.

We presently have to ask some clients to wait until we have capacity to support them, which is often difficult as benefit appeals are date specific. Our team have to juggle their challenging workloads to meet these deadlines. We are also seeing a steady increase in client numbers, particularly now in regard to people with mental health conditions. This has been partly driven by the impact of both Covid and the current cost of living crisis on those who were already really struggling, but now just cannot cope at all: and for whom life will soon become even harsher when energy prices increase, yet again

Brief case study

Mrs J, 74, came to one of our outreach surgeries. She was extremely distressed and traumatised by what had happened to her. She needed time to trust us, but eventually disclosed that she had suffered significant psychological and physical abuse by family members. Fearing for her life, following death threats from her husband, with help, she fled the home, which she jointly owned, to a safe house, but had lost her home - and access to her bank account.

Mrs J had tried to apply for Pension Credit by phone, but was told that as a home owner she would not qualify for the benefit. We applied online for her and advised the Department for Work and Pensions that we were acting as her advocate. When briefed about the domestic violence that this lady could not express and its impact on her, the Department was then fully supportive and arranged for Mrs J to receive the Pension Credit that she so desperately needed to start her new life.

Our request for financial help

We need skilled, experienced caseworkers to help people like Mrs J – and more capacity to meet increasing demand in general. The cost of one hour of support from our caseworkers is £16, including all on-costs. £116 therefore pays for ten hours of support, which is a significant contribution. Clearly, the larger the donation, the more people we will be able to help.

How many caseworker hours can your organisation donate to help us to help more vulnerable people?

August 2022