

Appendix A to the Council Minutes – 27 July 2016

Item 6 – Questions from Members of the Public.

One question was submitted from members of the public.

1. From Mr Perrin to Councillor Coxshall

In 2014 I raised the issue of the £600,000 gifted to the Council by the Heritage Lottery Fund to spend on improvements to the Mardyke Valley. Can you tell me what improvements have been made since 2014 and if any improvements are currently ongoing?

Councillor Coxshall

Well, I never thought I'd be answering questions from Mr Perrin! In 2005 the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded £611,000, like you asked in the last question in 2014, this was for a three year Mardyke Valley project on behalf of, led by, Thames Chase and including Thurrock Council. Although the project finished in 2008, it included provision for the ten-year management plan produced to make work to deliver the project rather than make further improvements at the Mardyke Valley.

Mayor

Mr Perrin, do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Mr Perrin

Thank you, Madam Mayor. I do not know if you or any other Councillors have recently walked the Mardyke Valley, either from the Davey Down entrance or the Ship Lane entrance. I have attempted to do so twice in the last seven days, yesterday 26 July being the most recent. I had to walk a gauntlet of brambles, nettles, and in some areas ankle-deep pools of stinking, stagnant water on what was supposed to be designated walkways. I also climbed the steep stepped walkway, which had a handrail rendered useless owing to the overgrown vegetation. The entrance to this step way is located off Cullen Grove, near number 52. In short, far from being a pleasant walk, it was a hazardous journey, fraught with danger. Should you consider my comments to be an exaggeration, I ask you, and any other Councillor, join me in a walk along the Mardyke Valley so that you and they can judge if the £600,000 has been well spent and provided the people of Thurrock with an asset that is value for money.

Councillor Coxshall

As we've said, Mr Perrin, the £600,000 was spent in a three-year period. I think Councillor Kent answered this question to you as well in 2014 actual capital works a ten-year management plan was put in place and reviewed in

2014. In 2014 it showed that this Council had spent £200,000 extra maintaining that in 2014. There have been no figures in the past five years because it hasn't finished in 2018. This Council at the moment is reviewing the alternative management options at this very moment for the Mardyke, in place for what happens after 2018. I take your point that there are issues around the walkways, the public walkways, but I think every Councillor in here has had said issues, I know personally, my public footpaths have been impossible to walk around in certain places in Corringham, are very, very bad. As you know, we have "Clean it, Cut it, Fill it" and the problem is, what we have got to do is actually deliver a reasonable, clean, cut area. Two of those priorities I mentioned there, so I will certainly take that back, understand that we have got to do more there and actually look into why the management is failing, let's be honest. We're nearly at the end of the management plan for up to 2018, we then will look and see issues of how we can, who can carry on looking after that, from 2018 onwards, and whether that needs to come back to the Council or be into a private outsourced vehicle.

Mr Perrin

Thank you, Madam Mayor

Item 12 – Questions from Members

The Mayor informed the Chamber that 8 questions to Cabinet Members, Committee Chairs and Member appointed to represent the Council on a Joint Committee had been received.

Questions from Members to the Leader, Cabinet Members, Chairs of Committees or Members appointed to represent the Council on a Joint Committee in accordance with Chapter 2, Part 2 (Rule 14) of the Council's Constitution

1. From Councillor Duffin to Councillor Gledhill

Is your Administration still proposing to only debate decisions and reports at Cabinet that have passed through pre-scrutiny at the overview and scrutiny committees first?

Mayor

Councillor Gledhill

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor, and thank you Councillor Duffin for your question. No, to be clear I said that all major decisions would go through the pre-scrutiny process before coming to Cabinet. The Cabinet has a specific role to make decisions, not just debate them. There are some decisions that would not go through scrutiny, such as the recent insurance report that came to Cabinet last week, certain procurement projects or indeed decisions that are

deemed “urgent”, for example if a road has collapsed and we need to spend vast sums of money from the capital fund to ensure that it is reopened. However I do feel that the scrutiny process is extremely important, I do feel that we have not used it properly in the past and we should start using it with pre-scrutiny as we go through for all those major decisions. It’s not going to be as easy as I’d hoped, it’s going to take some time to make sure that all these decisions can go through the process, because of course the previous administration didn’t believe in this process so of course there will be some decisions that come in quick and not allow us to have enough time to go through the pre-scrutiny. Thank you.

Mayor

Councillor Duffin, do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Duffin

Are you not worried that big decisions could take up to three months to then be made, because that’s effectively what we’re going to see with the move to a more committee system? If the big decisions need to be made, are we not going to force them through quickly?

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you, Madam Mayor and thank you, Councillor Duffin. As said, there is obviously going to be some leading time into this. I would much prefer that there be more Overview and Scrutiny Committees held, to be brutally honest, and that would allow not only the Cabinet to be held to account more regularly, it would also enable Members to have a much bigger and longer oversight at some of the many complex things that we have to deal with as a Council and give residents confidence that we will hold ourselves to account and that we will answer questions that need to be answered.

Mayor

Councillor Duffin, do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor Duffin

I support your move to more of a committee system. I would just wonder though, that when you’re moving more decisions away from Cabinet and down to the Committee system, do you not agree that paying yourself and your Conservative colleagues £120,000 a year of tax payers’ money to make less decisions surely is a saving we should be looking to make?

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you, Madam Mayor and thank you, Councillor Duffin. Again, as I said, we make the decisions; Overview and Scrutiny make recommendations, which is completely different. So we will still be held accountable, after it’s

gone to scrutiny or if it doesn't go to scrutiny on what we say; we of course could, as the last administration did, quite regularly just ignore the recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny. I don't think that's right, we should take that on board and that should be part of the built in process, it's the same as the built in process with any other Local Authority. So, no, it's not the kind of savings we should be looking at because if we went to a Committee system there would still be a Chair of the Committee earning the same kind of allowances so it would all be shifting from one area to another, so no, but thank you.

2. From Councillor Jones to Councillor Gledhill

Mayor

Councillor Jones, could you please read out your question as on the Agenda.

Councillor Jones

Thank you, Madam Mayor. The Conservative Administration's new agenda programme for Thurrock - Clean It, Cut It, Fill It. Has this been costed?

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you, Madam Mayor and thank you, Councillor Jones. You will no doubt be, I should hope you're not surprised actually, to hear that the answer is yes, it has been costed. As with everything the Council does there is a cost and that will have to be factored into the level of service the Council supply to meet any requirements for this project, or indeed any of its projects.

Mayor

Councillor Jones, do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Jones

I do Madam Mayor, thank you very much. The reason I ask this question, quite simply is because it was stated by yourself, you just stated it just now, major decisions at scrutiny, that all ideas, agenda programmes, before being advertised or implemented were to go through the process of the Scrutiny Committee so all could be involved in the decision making process before it came to Cabinet, and then on to Full Council. This agenda seemed to have escaped the net. Question two; could you inform the Chamber when these costings were carried out for this process?

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you, Madam Mayor and thank you, Councillor Jones. Obviously it is still the decision of the Cabinet to decide what becomes a priority. You must remember, of course, that over the past two years you, and your party, have backed up the cuts that have been proposed by the former administration,

and in this particular area came to somewhere in the region of £1.8 million and I think somewhere in the region of sixty staff being cut. So yes, we could have waited another three or four months to start making the borough look better, or we could have just grasped the nettle, if you'll excuse the pun there, and got on with the job, which we have. In response to 'when was this done?' this has been done over a period of time with officers coming forward with various sums for various different levels of service and I for one and indeed my Cabinet Member, Councillor Tolson, do not think we should go back to a period in time, for instance 2014 or 2012, with a certain amount of staff and certain amount of equipment, we should be looking forward to what we can do this year, what we can do next year and what we can do for all future years.

Mayor

Councillor Jones, do you wish to pose a second supplementary question?

Councillor Jones

I do, Madam Mayor. Thank you, Leader. You make it sound like I don't want a good borough, I do and I don't remember being part of that cut that you were on about and stuff like that. Now, we all know about the "fill it" part of this agenda programme, because the Council basically made us all aware that they are trialling a new system for filling in the potholes, which actually should have the effect of making the limited funds available go further. I've seen this in action and I must admit I'm quite impressed, and recently with the weather, both being extremes water and heat, it seems to be holding out quite well. Added to the fact that the Department for Transport also has allocated an additional £110,000 this year to Thurrock Council for pothole repairs, so for the "fill it" part of this agenda programme we all know where some of the money is coming from, where is the extra money coming from for the "clean it, cut it" part of the programme? Thank you.

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you, Madam Mayor and thank you, Councillor Jones. This will come from existing budgets; it will not come from reserves. It will come from savings that we can make in-year, for instance we have a member of staff who is leaving us voluntarily and we will not be replacing that member of staff immediately. That saving for instance, the in-year saving in there will go towards the "clean it" aspect of it and there will be very similar viaments within the system to make sure that happens.

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO CABINET MEMBERS, COMMITTEE CHAIRS AND MEMBERS APPOINTED TO REPRESENT THE COUNCIL ON A JOINT COMMITTEE

1. From Councillor Duffin to Councillor Tolson

Please could the Council publish on its website the monthly grass cutting calendar as many residents have concerns over the Council's promises to cut

their grass and this way residents and Councillors can make sure that they are getting the promised services that they pay their Council Tax for?

Mayor

Councillor Tolson, could you please answer the question.

Councillor Tolson

Evening, Madam Mayor. Thank you for your question. Yes, we will be doing that because it's something I raised at my first meeting in June. We aim to be having it on within the next few weeks; maybe a month and we will be publishing parks and major routes cutting.

Mayor

Councillor Duffin, do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Duffin

If it's just parks and major routes, what about all the other green spaces because myself and Councillor Jones had to go to the ends of the Earth to get a piece of grass that was apparently the fault of Newham, then another part that was the fault of DP World. Are we going to get actual solid detail on everything or are we just going to get the three biggest areas and everywhere else ignored?

Councillor Tolson

Yes, thank you very much. Well, as Councillor Gledhill alluded to earlier Madam Mayor, you will remember this because you chaired the July 2014 O&S Committee meeting where a saving, or cut, was brought forward of 46% of staff in street and parks, that equated to 59 posts being deleted. So if you've said 28 in parks and 28 in streets, the service has been under pressure. Now, when you're saying about 'Newham' are you talking about housing land? Once we've got consistency, and I will actually pay tribute to the small and dedicated team that we've had actually, who have worked extremely hard, and they have never known it like this because they've never had 59 posts deleted before, a 46% cut that UKIP colleagues of yours voted for in the February 2015 budget, so that is your UKIP and Labour legacy.

Mayor

Councillor Duffin, do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor Duffin

Just a point of information that it's your party butchering Local Government but we won't go down that route or present the graph of doom. I'll go back to the second question I actually asked and you didn't bother answering; will you

give us information on every piece of Council grass, when it's being cut, or are you just going to give us the three big parks, because you didn't answer that question so I'll ask it again.

Councillor Tolson

No.

Mayor

Councillor Smith, could you please read your question out, as it appears on the Agenda.

2. From Councillor Smith to Councillor Gledhill

How many repeat visits (more than 3) for minor/intermediate and major repairs have TBC repairs contractors made in municipal year 2015-2016?

Mayor

Councillor Gledhill, could you please answer the question.

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor and thank you Councillor Smith for another insightful question. Between April 2015 and March 2016, Mears reported that 2053 jobs had more than three appointments. On the average of around 30,000 repairs a year this is 6.84%. These repeat appointments were for visits and take into consideration the additional work that may be identified as part of it, for example the installation of a bath may then need new plastering, or indeed some tiling or some painting done which will then give you a repeat visit. At this time I have not been able to identify where residents have had repeat visits because the wrong traders turned up or the tradesman has turned up without the parts to complete the job, or where the wrong job has been booked. I will be asking officers to see if this can be drilled down to that level. Thank you.

Mayor

Councillor Smith, do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Smith

Thank you, Madam Mayor. I'm bewildered at the number of times I hear that TBC contractors have had to revisit a resident's home to affect a repair, in fact it's ongoing, it's not a daily occurrence but it's certainly every week. Just last week a resident reported a leaking radiator and Councillor Gledhill will join me in not being impressed that five visits later the final contractor diagnosed a faulty pump, and I will certainly forward that to you if you wish. During this

time the family with young children under ten were without hot water for nearly a week. Is this reasonable service?

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor and thank you, Councillor Smith. On this individual case, no. Unfortunately I'd like to say that this was an individual case but I hear this all too regularly myself, where people are left without essential services within their house because either the wrong contractors turn up, or they're unable to fix it at that time, or for whatever reason. We've got to remember, of course, 2053 jobs where there are more than three appointments that really should be a daily occurrence, it's terrible to say but that's somewhere in the region of ten a day and it's not acceptable, absolutely not acceptable at all. If you'd like to pass me that particular case on, I will indeed look into it. I'll also be looking into the way that there should be an acceptable standard of services that a resident can expect, irrespective of what repairs need to take place, you're quite right, no family should be left without hot water, for however long, we should at least be able to fix that or at least give them some form of alternative than their boiler.

Mayor

Councillor Smith, do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor Smith

Could we expect Thurrock Council's housing repair supplier to improve on this level of service, which Councillor Gledhill just touched upon, thus bringing to an end the merry-go-round of visits by contractors, and moreover would the Portfolio Holder seek to reinforce only tradespeople with the correct qualification and skill are deployed, and penalise the contractor when failing to affect a repair promptly?

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor, thank you Councillor Smith. I'm beginning to think you've had my office bugged at times because these are exactly the problems that I wish to make sure are tackled. It is no point sending a carpenter out to do the job of a plumber. It is no point, as my own mother found out, to send a plumber to deal with an electricity problem. About a week ago I met with the Tenant Excellence Panel who informed me that the information that they have is that this part of the service is improving and that it is not as many. I have asked officers to try to back that up, to make sure that the figures they are getting from Mears correlates with the figures we're getting from Mears, and yes, it's just not acceptable if we have the wrong person turning up. I will be asking for a lot more information, and not just asking for that information but acting on it. I will also be sharing that obviously with Councillor Spillman who is the Shadow Member for Housing; indeed I've asked him to be included in the Tenants Excellence Panel meetings so he can hear, direct from those tenants that are dealing as part of the Excellence Panel with Mears and the

repairs to see their views of what they see. Unfortunately, of course, we get a bit of a jaded view because we only get the ones that fail; they get the ones obviously that work first time. Thank you.

3. **From Councillor B Rice to Councillor Gledhill**

Thank you very much, Madam Mayor. Councillor Gledhill, how many Thurrock households are currently classified as homeless?

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor, and thank you Councillor Rice for your question. The number of households defined by Statute for homelessness changes on a daily basis and we actively manage the service and try to help those in need. To answer the question I therefore asked for a snapshot of the last day of June to provide figures, it should be noted that we only have figures for those who approach the Local Authority for assistance not those that approach other agencies. At the end of June we had 162 households that were going through the process of being assessed on whether they meet the statutory duty of homelessness or not. A further 82 households had been through the investigation stage, of which 81 had had their homelessness duty accepted and they were waiting for accommodation either private or social sector housing. 31 had been assessed as having no duty from the Local Authority and would be provided with advice and assistance. On that date, Thurrock Council had 85 households in temporary accommodation that were classed as homeless.

Mayor

Councillor B Rice, do you have a supplementary.

Councillor B Rice

Madam Mayor. Thank you Councillor Gledhill for those figures, and I wondered if you have had a chance to read, and I'm sure you have, the Thurrock Tenancy Policy, in particular the bit around succession. Now I'm really quite perturbed about this part of our policy and I just want to say a few things about it. It's a very complex policy because of the Localism Act in 2012 as you no doubt know. Residents who have been both informal and formal carers, or indeed are children of tenants are treated differently because of the 2012 Localism Act. Some are automatically given the right to succession, and some it's a discretionary look at with a panel, so all I'm asking you Councillor Gledhill, with no tricks or anything like that, I just want you to give your assurance that we can go and have a look at this policy again so that we can give some continuity to our residents, and that people will be treated equally across the board so we as councillors will be able to say 'this is the fact' and not 'well if you moved in before this date, or if you moved in after that'. I'm asking for that policy to be looked at, please. Thank you.

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor and thank you Councillor Rice. I probably should ask if there's a doctor or medic in the house, because some people might be shocked at my next answer, so shocked that they may actually need that help. I actually agree with Councillor Val Morris-Cook, who was Portfolio Holder for a number of years on this very subject. The Policy is not a stone tablet; it is not something that we etch out, whack on a shelf and leave until we decide to have a look at it again. It needs to be a living, breathing programme. I am more than happy for this, amongst other things on tenancy agreements that we have, to be looked at potentially to be changed, obviously in line with the Law and legislation. There is a number of new legislative changes coming through, as you know, that would have gone to Overview and Scrutiny I believe it was on the 21st, but I am more than happy for all of this to be reviewed. It is no point, as I say, having a slab of stone sitting on a shelf somewhere, it's not the way we should work as a Local Authority. Needs change monthly, needs change yearly, so we do need to make sure that we're moving with the herd on this.

Mayor

Councillor B Rice, do you have a second supplementary question.

Councillor B Rice

No, I just want to say Thank you to Councillor Gledhill, thanks.

Mayor

Okay, thank you. Councillor J Kent could you please read your question out, as set on the Agenda.

4. From Councillor J Kent to Councillor Tolson

There is a severe problem of dumping in back alleyways in the Grays Thurrock ward. This is of course not a new problem and not a problem confined to Grays Thurrock.

Does the portfolio holder have any plans for helping residents deal with this scourge?

Mayor

Councillor Tolson, could you respond.

Councillor Tolson

Thank you very much, Madam Mayor. Thank you, Councillor Kent, for your question. Just as there was an upward trend with fly-tipping in the borough our enforcement officers, there was six in the Public Protection team and six

enforcement officers, were cut to two in the February '15 budget, supported by UKIP. So, we went from twelve to two at a time when the trend for flytipping was going up. Yes you know that we've brought an enforcement document forward, you know that we also have waste enforcement contracts now coming into force in the borough, there was a resource before but it was removed now it's being put back again. So, you are aware that we are concentrating on this matter at the moment.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent, do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Yes, Madam Mayor. I'm sure that residents will be glad that come September there will be a paper that goes to Cabinet that looks at enforcement. Until then though, what practical steps can the Portfolio Holder outline to help residents to deal with and clear some of the rubbish?

Councillor Tolson

Thank you. So, we are going to have a clean-up of the borough, Madam Mayor, and we are going to be using CCTV because some residents that don't act in this deplorable way find it very antisocial and very irritating that other neighbours do act in that manner. So what we want to do is, we've already mapped where fly tips happen, predominantly it is Grays but it does happen across the borough too, so ideally what we want is witnesses and enforcement action if we get the evidence, but that is what we are proposing shortly. A campaign to stop it.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent, do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Yes. Again, an answer that's about enforcement and not dealing with the problem on the ground. I've yet to see a CCTV camera that can actually lift up a mattress and put it in a skip, perhaps that would be helpful Madam Mayor. In the William Street area of Grays residents have totally cleared the back alleyway between William Street and Arthur Street, but they're left with a good deal of vegetation. In an alleyway in John Street there are piled up a chest freezer, cans, bottles, mattresses. Residents are quite prepared to help clear the refuse but they need a skip. Will the Portfolio Holder undertake to meet residents half way and perhaps clear the weeds with weed killer in the one back alleyway, and provide a skip so that residents can clear the other?

Councillor Tolson

Well, as I said, we will be doing a pre-clean of the borough, and Councillor Kent has alluded to CCTV but he never asked for any in that area, and neither has any Councillor that represents that Ward.

Mayor

Councillor Barbara Rice, could you please read your question out as it appears on the Agenda?

5. From Councillor B Rice to Councillor Tolson

Thank you very much, Madam Mayor. Right, okay. Following reports of the council failing to cut grass at Blackshots leading to residents having to do the job themselves can the portfolio holder explain what steps she is taking to ensure this doesn't happen again?

Councillor Tolson

Yes. Reports on this, Madam Mayor, are sketchy and, as with anything, if you want it cut in the borough, as I've told you, we've had less staff, assets sold, I told you that last month when I don't believe some Councillors were present. Something put in for repair, the spearhead, which is the first cut of the season, that didn't even get its MOT or service until June; it's supposed to be out cutting in the borough in March. So, you report it, that's the first thing and there isn't any interviews or reports coming through for Blackshots, but what we have done, because we was in such a shambolic situation, is we hired in a tractor, a trimax rotary and a flowell, prior to this Blackshots event because we needed equipment to get on with the job, and now we've just got another tractor on hire, a further tractor.

Mayor

Councillor B Rice, do you wish to raise a supplementary question.

Councillor B Rice

Well, thank you for letting us know just how many staff the previous administration disposed of. The issue, Madam Mayor, that I'm referring to tonight, and Councillor Tolson, is the football pitches – I'm going to pass these around – these are football pitches at Orsett Heath, football pitches, Madam Mayor that was raised and dug out and built from the proceeds of 106 monies, from the development over at Woodview. Okay? At the beginning of May they were in pristine condition and conformed to the football pitch maintenance schedule, okay? Which clearly states that we cannot have more than 60mm on any football pitch. Madam Mayor, I'm going to pass these around 'cause it's an absolute disgrace and I'm absolutely disgusted and I want to know how this is going to be rectified, 'cause it won't be rectified by a cut, Madam Mayor, it's gone back to heathland. Okay? Because of neglect we

now have 4ft high thistles, all across the heath, okay? Not lovely pristine green grass, so it's not down to getting rid of staff, this is a problem that we need to have solved and we need to have solved now. We have continually in Chadwell-St-Mary reported week on week. The question is, when is it going to be resolved? That's the question, and how was it allowed, Madam Mayor, to get to almost 4ft high, and also – No! This is since May Councillor Halden! - Madam Mayor, this has been since May okay? That's when it's grown since. It's an absolute disgrace, complete waste of 106 monies and I want to know how we're going to rectify the situation.

Mayor

Councillor Tolson.

Councillor Tolson

Okay, thank you Madam Mayor. Well, I really can't understand why Councillor Barbara Rice is getting so animated given that the minutes of the CGS Committee in July '14 are a historical document and all the Committee Members on that expressed concern at the nearly 50% cut of staff. You wasn't here last month, I've told you that you've got rid of 59 posts in frontline street services and parks so if you've said 28, you've then later sold assets that we could've used for a window of time. The previous Portfolio didn't check on the spearhead and it went in for MOT in November and didn't come out until June '16! This really is something of your own sewing, isn't it? You reap what you sew and you haven't done very well at all, it's appalling your shambolic record. So, report it and we'll get it cut!

Mayor

Councillor B Rice, do you wish to pose a second supplementary question?

Councillor B Rice

Okay, I did not receive an answer. I have stated and told you that this was in pristine condition in May. I am animated, absolutely, and so will the residents of Thurrock be when they see what a waste of money we've had in this Authority in the last two months, and where are our kids going to play football come September?

Point of order

The question: how is this going to be rectified for the children of Thurrock to be playing football in September? That's the question.

Councillor Tolson

Yes. Report it and it will be cut.

Mayor

Councillor Kent, would you like to read your question as on the Agenda, please.

6. From Councillor J Kent to Councillor Hebb

What is the current Thurrock Council savings target for the financial year 2017/2018?

Mayor

Councillor Hebb, please answer.

Councillor Hebb

Thank you, Councillor Kent, for your question. The medium term financial strategy showed a projected budget gap of £7.4million in February of this year and the MTFs is currently being reviewed and will be presented at Cabinet in September of this year. The Conservative Administration's commitment to "Cut it, Clean it, Fill it" and the pilot which has been planned will be used to determine any additional funding which is necessary to be directed towards the priority. So, to call it out, I have requested that a range of targets between the £7.4million previously reported and up to £11-12million, to give all Members real choice in the future, are brought forward to all members to consider in the future. This is following feedback from yourself, last year, and following some feedback from yourself, Councillor Kent I have also requested that the previously adopted Panel Review budget process be evolved into a new, strategic process, a process where priorities are set, budgets are allocated to those services, contra to the previous top-down cuts we've lived with for the last six years. A process which will have cross-party involvement, it will have staff involvement, and I'm really passionate about that one, and Cabinet leadership at heart. The new budget setting process will be called the Council Spending Review, and it is this process which will define the new Thurrock offer for the future. In essence, we are looking to save more so we can spend more on the environment of Thurrock. To do that, looking at £18.5million over two years may simply not do, as all we will be doing is currently maintaining the existing standards which, let's be frank, are absolutely not good enough. Our residents deserve a better Thurrock, a Thurrock that will now be forged, from now on, through the Council Spending Review, taking a hard look at how we spend, what we spend and the decisions on where we put the money and making decisions with the wishes and needs of alarm clock Thurrock first and foremost in our minds.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent, do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor J Kent

Madam Mayor, setting a balanced budget is an arduous and long task, I know, I've been responsible for it for the last six years. I'm therefore concerned that we've had no report presented to Cabinet or to Council on planning for a balanced budget for 2017-2018. As we have no cabinet meeting until September, the first public sight of these plans on delivering a balanced budget for 2017-18 will be practically half way through this financial year. Is the Portfolio Holder really satisfied that that is appropriate?

Mayor

Councillor Hebb

Councillor Hebb

Absolutely, and I thank you for the question. The truth be told is, you're going to be engaged throughout the whole process, Councillor Kent, as will all political groups. We'd had an undertaking and you and I had a conversation about the previous year's system not being the best system, we've agreed that all parties will be involved in the process. So you have an undertaking from me, and while we're talking about a legacy of Councillor John Kent, let's just remind everybody about the reserves that we've had to look at since coming into office. For six years we've been told by the Labour Administration that the reserves have been built up and saved for a rainy day, when I asked when a thorough review was last completed the answer was 2010-11; six years ago! Six years ago we sat down, wrote on a bit of paper how much we've got to spend and what our commitments were if something bad went wrong and we haven't reviewed it ever since. Six years! David Cameron had just become Prime Minister, we were still in a recession caused by inadequate banking control and public spending, we had the London riots, we had the Diamond Jubilee, we had the Olympics, Cyprus has been bailed out, you know nearly every country in Greece has been bailed out, just recently we voted to leave the EU and not once have we done a thorough review of the reserves. This is absolutely unacceptable, so I can announce that I have instigated a thorough review of the general fund balance and again to call it out, should the professional comprehensive guidance come out and emerge that we need to bolster the reserves so to support Thurrock for a rainy day, then we will fix the roof while it's shining and we will plan to ensure that those reserves are maintained at the level that is as recommended by professionals, something his administration forgot to do for over half a decade.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent, do you wish to ask a second supplementary.

Councillor J Kent

Yes, does Councillor Hebb recall every year, when we come to set the budget, reading the Section 151 officers' Section 25 statement that includes a

review of the level of reserves? Does he not recall voting on that every year? Does he further not recall that when the Labour group took the administration in 2010, the level of reserves that we inherited was £1.8million and that it took us years to build up reserves to an appropriate level of £8million? And does he understand that people will be concerned that the noises that the Administration is making is to go back into this kind of slash and burn, spend the reserves and let somebody else come in to clear up the mess?

Mayor

Councillor Hebb.

Councillor Hebb

Let me look you squarely in the eye and call you out. This Administration, despite all the rhetoric and rubbish on social media, is not going to use reserves to fund cuts. The reserves are our bank account for a rainy day. I am not going to put the future of all of your children, my children and my grandchildren at risk to use reserves to cut back, to mitigate the damage caused by cuts. We will find those cuts by being innovative and with respect, with working together and not against each other.

Mayor

Councillor Redsell, could you please read your question out as it appears on the Agenda.

7. From Councillor Redsell to Councillor Gledhill

As I am still getting a regular complaints about damp and mould can the portfolio holder say whether he is happy with the current service being provided to tenants in respect of treating and resolving these issues in Council properties please?

Mayor

Councillor Gledhill

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor and thank you Councillor Redsell. For a long time I've said I'm not satisfied with the service that we're providing to tenants regarding damp and mould. It is a difficult issue to solve, not one that is simply just replacing a tap or fixing in a new socket. Last year the sample of those residents who had works to tackle the problem only 44% said they were satisfied with the service and only 1/3 of them said that the problem was eventually fully resolved. I'm sorry, but anyone who would be satisfied with that level of satisfaction or that level of success would seriously be letting our residents down, so no, I am not happy with it.

Mayor

Councillor Redsell, do you wish to ask a supplementary question.

Councillor Redsell

Thank you Madam Mayor, thank you Councillor Gledhill. That's actually shocking. I was told that the Council spent nearly £200,000 on all types of repairs last year; in that case could you tell me what is being done to stop the problem and improve satisfaction?

Mayor

Councillor Gledhill

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor and thank you Councillor Redsell. I think the figure you were talking about was actually £240,000 on somewhere in the region of 950 separate jobs, or separate properties that were visited, of which 123/125 had more than one visit. So what we're talking about is 1 in 10 properties getting at least one visit in relation to mould which is not good. But to your substantive question; damp and mould are sometimes misunderstood problems. I've asked officers to look at different solutions to damp and mould and we've broken these down into two areas. Firstly, the fabric of the building – that includes the way it was constructed and the way it's been looked after. Our housing stock has for many years been underinvested and this is beginning to show clearly, and this is not a slight at any particular administration this goes back for some significant time. Secondly is the tenants' lifestyle issues and the way they actually live within the property. What we're doing now is we are currently changing the process in regards to damp and mould. Previously if a tenant reported damp and mould what would happen is someone would go out, clear it up with antifungal paint and wash. That sometimes would rectify the issue, if not they'd come and get a repeat visit and it would be some time before someone qualified would come along to see what the cause is. That will now change. We will now be putting the horse in front of the cart and the qualified damp building surveyor will go first, he will identify whether it's the fabric of the property, if it's damage to the property or whether it is the lifestyle or the way that tenants are using it. If it is found that there is a problem with the tenant our resident liaison officers will be liaising with them to explain how to do things better, how to make sure that condensation and damp isn't kept within the property, obviously to help inhibit the mould. So we're hoping actually by changing the process completely will stop the repeat visits, will identify the problems and where it is a fabric issue we'll deal with that rather than just blame it on the tenants. Thank you.

Mayor

Councillor Redsell, do you wish to pose a second supplementary.

Councillor Redsell

Thank you, Madam Mayor. I think Councillor Redsell has answered my next supplementary question, but a lot of my residents have actually been told it is their lifestyle that is causing the problem and the advice of officers is that they really could, and the underlying problem with the property that they're in is ignored. What are we doing about these special cases? Thank you.

Councillor Gledhill

Thank you Madam Mayor and thank you Councillor Redsell. I know, from someone who lived in a private rented accommodation that was regularly high-humidity and mould problems, I was really annoyed and indeed shocked when my landlord was telling me it was all my fault, I needed to open windows, I needed to not dry washing indoors, something which I actually did open windows and didn't dry washing indoors. What was interesting was when I managed to record the humidity in the property when I was on holiday for two weeks and it was clear there was a fabric issue with the property, not with the tenant, i.e. me. This is going to happen with our tenants as well, and where there are extenuating circumstances where tenants do feel it's not what they're doing is the problem, and sometimes tenants have got no alternative but to dry washing indoors if they live in flats or live in areas where washing just can't be hung up, then we will have to look to see if there is an alternative to help that resident live a decent, normal lifestyle and be able to carry on living at the property but be able to carry out those day to day things, like cooking, like cleaning, like indeed washing and drying stuff inside. That will be dealt with on an individual basis, not as a block for each individual area. Thank you, Madam Mayor.