

Item 14 – Questions from Members

Mayor

Questions from Members in order they were submitted, we have up to 30 minutes for this item. There are three questions for the Leader and 7 questions to Cabinet members.

I would like to inform the Chamber that in accordance with Council procedure rule 14.16, Councillor Hipsey has advised the Deputy Monitoring Officer that he wished to withdraw his question to Councillor Andy Smith. I would also like to inform members that question 4 from Councillor Redsell will now be answered by Councillor John Kent.

Questions are set out in the printed agenda on pages 119 – 110. For the benefit of the recording I would ask those members who have submitted questions to please read out their questions when asked to do so.

Question 1.

Councillor S Little please read out your questions to the Leader as set out on page 109 of the agenda.

Councillor S Little

Thank you Mr Mayor. Please can the Portfolio Holder tell me how many village halls the Council is responsible for?

Councillor J Kent

Mr Mayor if I refer back to the table on 116 you will see that the council has 19 village halls.

Councillor S Little

Well actually under the FOI Act we actually had 16 but nevertheless as an owner of a village hall you have a legal requirement to ensure the uses of that facility are safe. Can you explain why the gas certificate for Bulphan village hall was due in January and we are now in July with no certificate?

Councillor J Kent

I am not sure that I can answer that, what I can do is look at the lease of Bulphan Village Hall that says it is beholden on the leaseholder that is the operator of the village hall to make sure that that gas certificate is in place. So I will ask the lands people, Environment I think it comes under, to take it up with the village hall committee.

Mayor

Do you wish to pose a second supplementary question?

Councillor S Little

I appreciate what you are saying and I have read the lease and the council are responsible. But going back to the Cabinet report where you wax lyrical that you thought £135 - £150 was an acceptable amount to pay for gas servicing as it is a vital safeguard to residents even though other authorities only pay £68 for the same service then why are we undervaluing the safety of residents who use these facilities, the elderly and the youth, I am really concerned about it.

Councillor J Kent

Mr Mayor I can only repeat that is a responsibility of the leaseholder. I know that in previous years the Council has gone above and beyond what it is contractually obliged to do, and has carried out some of these inspections, frankly we do not have the money to carry on fulfilling the terms of a lease that should be fulfilled by others.

Now I am perfectly happy to go back to have a look to see if there is some flexibility just to get it done for this year but I think in future years village hall committees, I think the Bulphan Village Hall pays the princely sum of £1.50 a quarter for the lease. It is beholden upon them to be paying for the gas safety check.

Mayor

Question 2 Councillor Hebb please read out your question to the Leader as set out on page 109 of the agenda.

Councillor Hebb

Thank Mr Mayor and thank you Leader, please can you provide the Chamber a detailed analysis of what impact the public sector pay strike on 10 July had on the tax paying public of Thurrock?

Councillor J Kent

Thanks Mr Mayor, the strike action held on 10th July formed part of a national strike action taken by various major union bodies also trade union recognised by the council, GMB, Unison and Unite and the Teaching Union the NUT.

Union members of these trade unions who are employees of the Council were therefore balloted for the views of whether to participate in the national strike action and any employee who participated in the action will of course not be paid by the Council for the day. A full contingency plan was put in place in advance of the strike action which helps minimise the impact to services. Therefore the majority of services were able to continue with the exception of household waste and recycling services which were suspended and resumed to full service the following day. 3 out of 6 libraries were closed and of the 18 currently maintained schools 7 were closed for

the day due to strike action and 2 were partially closed due to having cancelled some classes due to strike action.

Mayor

Councillor Hebb do you wish to propose a supplementary question?

Councillor Hebb

I do and I thank the Leader for his response, I am glad that he is so blasé about it as you will probably know we are doing it again on 30th September.

So it is up to all the parents out there getting holiday forms out and it is time to waste some of your holiday entitlement. Are we confident that this authority did everything we could to prevent a strike action and is it high time that the balloting law was changed to make it fit for purpose and like the real world.

Councillor J Kent

Mr Mayor I have always always taken the view that by the time we get to strike action there has been failure on all sides, but I have to say that for public sector workers that had to undergo 3 years of no pay increase at all, then 2 years of a 1% pay increase, at some time they are entitled to say enough is enough and stand up and be counted.

And I think it would be a reprobate step were we to say to people in this country that they should not be allowed to go on strike. As for having another look at the ballot laws I think that is something we have to be very careful before we approach. You know ballots be they ballots for industrial action, or be they for to elect Members of Parliament or dare I say to elect Councillors are not perfect. And yes you have to say that some of the strike ballots were carried with very small majorities but I will remind Councillor Hebb that he was elected 4 years ago on the positive vote of no more than 15% of the voters in his ward and we have to remember that it is actually not a referendum either when it comes to strikes. It is strike ballot therefore, no I don't think that the ballot is something that we should be reopening or looking to change the terms.

Mayor

Thank you Councillor Kent. Councillor Hebb do you wish to pose a second supplementary question?

Councillor Hebb

I will and thank you for reminding everybody of my popular vote. There is a big difference however at least I actually asked the people what they want rather than imposing dogmatic views on them from the left.

Mayor

Thank you Councillor Hebb.

Question 3 Councillor Gledhill please read out your question to the Leader as found on page 109 of the agenda.

Councillor Gledhill

Can the Leader of the Council outline what services we are sharing, with which local authorities and what actual savings we are making with each service please?

Councillor J. Kent

Mr Mayor in outline, we share, that is to say we work with other public bodies and authorities and achieve a financial gain, in 27 different areas and with 17 different authorities or public bodies. I will circulate the full list to Members and the press tomorrow. This is producing an annual saving to Thurrock residents of around £1.56 million plus further procurement savings on top of that.

Mayor

Councillor Gledhill, do you wish to propose a supplementary question?

Councillor Gledhill

I do Mr Mayor and would ask Councillor Kent, obviously thank you for your answer and if you would bear with me on this one.

Earlier this year an FOI request showed that one service shared with Barking and Dagenham, with a saving as purely co-incident. Other shared services with Essex local authorities is marked down as not quantified and others that you will circulate the list of later on to the press and other Members have been marked as not applicable.

With this in mind do you not feel it is about time that we carry out a full peer review on everything we share to find out what the value for residents is rather than just the money saved? Thank you.

Councillor J. Kent

I tell you what would be useful Mr Mayor, if Members opposite want to talk about FOI requests and expect us to comment on it, then at least have the decency of showing it to us in advance then we might be able to answer the questions.

Mayor

Councillor Gledhill do you wish to pose a second supplementary question?

Councillor Gledhill

Yes thanks Mr Mayor I am surprised that actually the Leader of the Council does not actually go through the responses for FOI requests. We tend to try and find some of the answers that we can't get direct.

With that as an aside, do you not feel it is about time that we looked at other different models of sharing, buying or selling our services with other local authorities and outside bodies to try again to maximise potential savings and income and give better value for our tax payer?

Councillor J. Kent

Thank you Mr Mayor. And Councillor Gledhill is of course right, we should be doing that. He will be well aware that he, I and the Chief Executive have already spoken about how we may take that forward.

Mayor

Thank you Councillor Kent.

I will now take the questions that have been submitted to Cabinet members and Committee Chairs.

Question 1. This question has been withdrawn at the request of Councillor Hipsey and in accordance with council procedure rule 14.116.

Question 2, Councillor Sue Little please read out your question to Councillor Smith as set out on page 109 of the agenda.

Councillor S. Little

Thank Mr Mayor, can the Portfolio Holder please give me an update on the action being taken across the Borough regarding fly tipping?

Mayor

Councillor Smith please respond to the question.

Councillor P. Smith

Thank Councillor Little for your question. I will try and give you as full an answer as we can and then look forward to the supplemental.

We know that the environmental team now only have 2 people to carry out this work. In the first three months of this year we have dealt with 395 fly tipping incidents and this is up from 288 in the previous year.

What they actually do is go to these fly tipping spots and they look for evidence to see if they can find out who has performed this fly tipping action. Which is one of the reasons why you will find the rubbish is there for a longer period than we would like because our officers are actually carrying out an investigation to try and ascertain who has put that rubbish there.

If they do find evidence then the next stage is to see whether we can carry out prosecution action against that person. If we can we will carry out that prosecution action and we will continue taking them to court and make sure they pay what they owe.

What I would like to do is deviate slightly here what householders need to understand is if they pay someone to take their rubbish away and that person subsequently just throws it in the street somewhere and we can actually identify that rubbish back to the homeowner who paid someone to take it away, we will prosecute the homeowner and the person who did the fly tipping. Homeowners need to be careful when they say to someone can you remove this rubbish, because if we find it on the street we will come back and prosecute you.

What I hate about new technology and passwords is that they turn off at the most inconvenient time. I can't complain because I am partly responsible for this bloody pile of thing.

If fly tipping is actually carried out on council land then we get our people to remove it. If it is actually on community land or private land it is down to those people to remove it. If the land is unregistered then we try and get the community payback people to remove that rubbish. If on private land it is probably that there will be a lot of arguments and debate as to whether they would remove it.

There is some good news, in April we purchased 6 covert cameras and they now being placed around the area and borough on sites where people consistently dump rubbish and they seem to use the same areas and you can pick them out, you find them while you are driving back and forwards to the shop, coming here, they are the same area. But what we are doing is putting the cameras up and signs. Where we have put the signs up people have stopped using the sites for dumping so we will continue to do that as we carry on forward.

Mayor

Councillor Little do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor S. Little

I sympathise with Councillor Smith. Going back to your predecessors report last October where she stated she was going to educate fly tippers do you agree with this sentiment?

Councillor P. Smith

Education takes several processes of educating somebody. By what I have said there is that we will prosecute people and the other one is by people reading in the papers when we have prosecuted somebody. And you only have to look in the paper recently and I know it is slightly different and people might not connect the two, but there has been this incident with this gentleman whose dog fouled on an area, he was asked to clear it up, and he was fined. If he had paid that fine straight away it would be a £50 fine. He elected not to, it went to £75 in the end, I have got the article somewhere, I think he has ended up paying £2,000 because what he did, he took us to court and challenged us, he lost. He then was going to appeal and take us to high court, or whatever other court further up. He lost that. Now this is the way of getting the message across. We will not tolerate fly tipping, we will prosecute to the maximum amount that we can and that is one of the other forms of education.

Mayor

Councillor Little do you wish to pose a second supplementary question?

Councillor S. Little

Yes Mr Mayor. Really to educate someone you actually need to know who they are, and anyone who fly tips is a criminal and they ought to be prosecuted but to educate them you have to know who they are. How many prosecutions have you had please?

Councillor P. Smith

I will actually give you answer afterwards to the whole Chamber in writing as to how many prosecutions have actually taken place and try to give successful and unsuccessful prosecutions if we have that information.

Yes I will pick up some other points, yes it is a criminal act and that is why we take it seriously and we will prosecute these people. As I said education takes many forms and may be prosecution, massive fines is a way of educating these people because criminals are actually in it to make money therefore let's make it not cost effective for them to dump their rubbish in our borough.

Mayor

Thank you Councillor Smith. Cllr S Little, Thank you

Councillor Redsell please read out your question to Councillor Holloway as set out on page 110 of the agenda.

Councillor Redsell

Thank you Mr Mayor. Councillor Holloway, when is the Council going to deliver decent telephone system that is fit for purpose for both members and officers?

Councillor Holloway

The existing 25 year old obsolete telephone system is being replaced and is being installed in three phases; we are currently half way through.

Mayor

Councillor Redsell, do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor Redsell

Thank you Mr Mayor. I sort of have two questions in one if you could bear with me. Why are officers not logging onto their phones which they have on their desks? We have certain numbers that are just un-connectable and with messages that do not match the person.

Also why is it that when ringing into the call centre, members and residents are left on the phone with just a ringing tone and then put straight back to the call centre. There are many companies out there which have a system much more streamlined than ours. What are we getting out of our Council telephone system?

Councillor Holloway

I'm happy to answer two questions in one. I understand it's in particular the Housing department that have had a few issues and the Director of Housing is aware of these issues that have been happening. What should happen is that when someone logs on to the computer, it automatically logs into the phone. What we've got here is just a case of forgetfulness which I think is understandable bearing in mind the work load of our housing officers and in the next few weeks we will ensure that the system is fit for purpose so that when you log onto the computer you are logged into the telephone.

With regard to the call centre, I completely agree with you, I've actually tried to ring the call centre and been kept on hold, so it is quite strange so I've raised this with officers and asked them why we haven't got a better system so that is being taken up already.

Mayor

Councillor Redsell, do you have a second supplementary question?

Councillor Redsell

No Mr Mayor.

Mayor

Thank you very much. Question 4, Councillor Redsell please read out your question to Councillor John Kent as set out on page 110 of the agenda.

Councillor Redsell

Thank you Mr Mayor. Can the Portfolio Holder inform the Council what has happened to the roundabout sponsorship which was developed in 1997 to recognise and improve the appearance of the borough?

Mayor

Councillor Kent?

Councillor J. Kent

Thank you Mr Mayor. I have to say I'm not quite sure Councillor Redsell means by what has happened, but I can say that sponsorship continues and has brought in over £5,500 in the last 3 years.

Mayor

Councillor Redsell, do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor Redsell

Not much of an answer actually. Just wondering why we have so many roundabouts and no sponsorship. We had one at Blackshots for Thurrock & Basildon College which was withdrawn and I just think with revenue that could be coming into the Council we are just wasting, we have many firms out there who want to take up roundabouts are not being perused, I just really want to know what we as a Council is doing to get the businesses in to take the roundabouts up. Perhaps we should reduce the amount they have to pay?

Councillor J. Kent

Thank you Mr Mayor. As Councillor Redsell will know we've already discussed tonight the budget constraints that we have and the kind of cuts that we are facing, for that reason it has been considered necessary for the Council to look at many different ways that it might be able to raise funds through things such as sponsorship and advertising. £5,500 over the past 3 years I have to say does not seem sufficient to me either for that reason, a full review of sponsorship and advertising has been commissioned from the Communications team which is why this function has passed to me from Councillor Fish.

A proposal is currently being finalised that will incorporate different proposals to continue to improve the boroughs appearance and to generate more income.

It would not be appropriate at this moment to go into exact detail of the proposals as they just haven't been finalised but I'm sure that Councillor Redsell will be pleased to note that both of us take the appearance of the Borough and the opportunity to raise income very seriously. That is why Councillor Redsell would have noted in my report that we set an income generation target of £100,000 for the year ahead.

Mayor

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

Councillor Redsell

Thank you Mr Mayor, thank you Councillor Kent. Just perhaps we or the Council can go back to Thurrock in Bloom that was started in 1997 perhaps Thurrock in Bloom would like to go in with us to help to sort out the roundabouts we've got. Thank you.

Councillor J. Kent

Well I think that at the moment we are back to those two kind of core aims of this scheme. I think the first roundabout that we treated in this way was way back, way further than 1997. It was the Hogg Lane roundabout in the Grays end of Hogg Lane where Industrial Chemicals installed what kind of affectionately became known locally as Stonehenge.

That one, at a cost in those days in excess of £10,000, just made that roundabout and that entrance to Grays look much much better, that's number one. But number two for us has to be to absolutely maximise the income that we can get from this form of sponsorship and I'm really not sure that getting Thurrock in Bloom to do it will fulfil that aim.

Mayor

Thank you Cllr Kent. Question 5, Councillor Hebb please read out your question to Councillor Andy Smith as set out in page 110 of the agenda.

Councillor Hebb

Thank you Mr Mayor. Please can you provide an update on the bend leading to Wharf Road from the Green, Stanford-Le-Hope specifically what the results of the assessment you committed to have produced, what the forward plan is to reduce the likelihood of any more motor vehicle accidents in this area?

Mayor

Councillor Andy Smith, will you please respond to the question?

Councillor A. Smith

Thank you Mr Mayor and I think we already know the answer to this as you have been chasing the officers haven't you on this? And you know injury accidents are recorded and monitored across the borough on an ongoing basis. Each year we use this information to develop our programme of road safety engineering improvements. Unfortunately the Wharf Road junction road has been reviewed as part of the process, but doesn't meet the criteria for remedial engineering measures in the

current financial year. But we will continue to monitor the situation and inform members should circumstances change.

Mayor

Councillor Hebb should you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor Hebb

Yes please and actually we have something different now and that's called a bit of hope, so it might not be this year, but it might be a year in the future. I was just wondering the date that assessment was and I was wondering if you could send me a copy of it because officers haven't had the decency to do so, as of yet.

Councillor A. Smith

I'll certainly arrange. I know this area very well; I'll certainly arrange that, thank you for your question.

Mayor

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

Councillor Hebb

No.

Mayor

Thank you very much. Question 6, Councillor Brian Little please read out your question to Councillor Andy Smith as set out on page 110 of the agenda.

Councillor B. Little

Thank you Mr Mayor. Can the Portfolio Holder update me on the RIO waste facility in Orsett, which he stated he would look into at the Council meeting in November last year?

Mayor

Councillor Andy Smith, please respond to the question.

Councillor A. Smith

Thank you very much Cllr Little. Not only have I looked into it, but I'm running out of patience as I'm sure you are as well in this area. We've been chasing them for many months now to put in a planning application, in fact two planning applications, which were due to be submitted in April now we might get them at the end of this month

that will regularise the situation and the planning committee will make their decision so I don't want to go into too much detail as I know you're on the Planning Committee, but they have been delayed apparently due to topographical survey work.

The applications will seek approval firstly for the continuous use of aggregate recycling at the site and secondly a continuation of mineral extraction and restoration of the site. Officers are chasing them all the time on this matter as it's very serious. We've now issued a formal letter to the site operator and given them a final 28 days to submit the applications or we will take enforcement action, final 28 days, the clock is ticking on this one as it is a very serious serious matter and we will enforce.

Mayor

Cllr Brain Little, do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor B. Little

Yes please. Understanding that we seem to be moving somewhere although we haven't got anywhere, residents are still being effected by this facility to the point that even in this weather, children are being kept indoors and windows closed such has been the smell. This site cannot be controlled if it does not have planning permission, but it is operating illegally. Can you assure residents that you will finally take charge to resolve this situation and that incidents that we should be monitoring, are not being, allowing the residents to be the monitors rather than ourselves.

Mayor

Councillor Smith?

Councillor A. Smith

I think you wrote this before you heard my reply to the previous question. As you know I have taken charge, this is a very serious matter but my officers are very diligent but they do comply with government guidelines and the Tory led government insist that enforcement action should only be taken as a last resort.

Mayor

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

Councillor B. Little

Yes please. I did understand your answer, thank you very much for the information. My point was that we should be monitoring these sites and I was asking you whether you had any monitors going on rather than my residents.

Councillor A. Smith

We definitely are monitoring this site, yes.

Mayor

Question 7, Councillor Kelly would you please read out your question to Councillor Andy Smith as set out on page 110 of the agenda.

Councillor Kelly

Thank you Mr Mayor. Can the Portfolio Holder for highways outline what plans the Council has to roll out more green verge hardening schemes like those seen in stretches of Lenmore Avenue and Rectory Road? Thank you.

Councillor A. Smith

Councillor Smith. Thank you Councillor Kelly for that question and I think inferred in that is that it's been a great success hasn't it, the scheme?

And we'd all like more of them I expect you all want more in your wards and claim the credit for it later or perhaps at the time. Oh a joint photo, I'll accept that, but not before the election.

Last year funding was made available to trial a verge reinforcement as you say, some of the worst damaged areas of verges around the borough were selected for the trial, works have been completed and are being monitored and therefore we have received a large number of requests because it works, it works very well, its very successful, and we are keeping the requests on file and should we get further funding opportunities becoming available in the future perhaps somebody might want to sponsor these because they're very much desired and they're very good.

Unfortunately they aren't very cheap; the cost of verge reinforcement is approximately £75 for every square meter. And small areas cost even more than that. We could do an alternative method of repair, using stone which is half the price, but its not half as good even because it can cause damage to vehicles and doesn't last as long so we know the feedback from residents is very positive and we are looking to identify funding to carry out more treatments and we will select sites on the basis of need and location. But we are well aware there has been more demand than we can pay for.

Mayor

Councillor Kelly, do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor Kelly

Thank you Councillor Smith and yes, I agree it's been a fantastic success as you are aware the protective matting in Lenmore Avenue was suggested a number of years ago by my ward colleague, Rob Gledhill a few years ago made possible by extra

funding made from government last year and without that one of the most appreciated improvements in Lenmore Avenue and Rectory Road.

On this, could you let me know and residents in my area know when the rest of Lenmore Avenue will have this matting installed if of course there is further funding available.

Councillor A. Smith

There's two big if's on that but when we get round those if's we'll let you know if we can do any more but we'll have to look out for other wards as well. And thank you for congratulating me and my department as well.

Mayor

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

Councillor Kelly

Yes, thank you Mr Mayor and would it not be better to use some of the one off funding for things like parking tickets or section 106 money as well as lobbying government to ensure everyone in Lenmore Avenue has the benefit of the matting and not just those at one end. Thank you.

Councillor A. Smith

Cllr Smith: It'd be a great idea to take money from everywhere but the Leader might not appreciate it.