

Item 13 - Questions from Members

Five questions were submitted to the Leader of the Council and a further five questions were submitted to Cabinet Members.

Questions from Members to the Leader

1. From Councillor Hipsey

Would you please confirm whether the sound barrier that has been installed by contractors employed by DP World along parts of Corringham Road, Stanford Le Hope, the entire route of the Manorway and along the A13 from Stanford Le Hope to Orsett, meets safety collision standards and whether the coating treatment used on the barriers is resistant to deliberate or accidental fire hazards?

Councillor Kent:

Mr Mayor, yes the barrier does meet safety standards and yes it is fire resistant. The noise barrier met the requirements of the Road Restraint Risk Assessment process, known as the RAP, a test which was carried out, the process determines which road side features would require protection using the installation of a crash barrier. Along the road from the A13 to Hardie Park, crash barriers have been installed where deemed necessary by this process in order to prevent vehicles from hitting the noise barrier. From Hardie Park to the Sorrells, the risk assessment will be carried out and crash barriers installed wherever necessary. The section of the noise barrier in front of around 215-221 Corringham Road, is currently under review. The kind of acoustic barrier that is being used here is fully tested and is fully resistant to fire.

Councillor Hipsey:

Yes I do Mr Mayor. As the Leader and many members of this chamber know, I do many miles throughout my working week and I have got to say this must be the only barrier protection that I have seen where the wood and panels actually run in a parallel manner, not horizontal. If you go along major road infrastructures or neighbouring towns, villages, through residential areas, you will find that wooden panels are normally in a fashion where there are actually horizontal and not parallel like this one.

Now I'm no highways expert, but one thing I do know is that if you hit a metal fence post which has got to be about 8ft high there, they must be 2-3 foot in the ground, and if you hit one of those fence panels at an angle, it might even end up looking like a skewered piece of meat if you pardon the expression because those fence panels are at a parallel fashion. When you hit something that is in a horizontal position, they fold around you and that's why I'm actually asking this question, whether they can actually withstand a deflection, hit or whether they are going to shatter into somebody's car or lorry. And finally Mr Mayor, the actual top capping on those fence panels are something like

75mmx50mm, which would resemble quite a long pole and coming through a lorry cab I wouldn't want to see the mess it would make, so I would actually ask the Leader and also the Highways Engineers to take a very, very serious look at those fence panels.

Councillor Kent:

Yes, Mr Mayor, of course were happy to look and just to make sure that all the necessary assessments have been carried out. But as I said originally, the barrier is in fact a noise barrier, it isn't a crash barrier.

The Road Restraint Risk Assessment process tests determine where a crash barrier needs to be installed in front of that noise barrier in order to do all we can to prevent the kind of accident that Councillor Hipsey has rather graphically set out. I did discuss this earlier today with David Bull, the Director. David also takes this very seriously and we both will give the commitment to go back and have one more look just to make sure we are doing everything we possibly can to maximise road safety in that part of the borough, as we do in all parts of the borough.

2. From Councillor Kerin

Can the Portfolio Holder for Education please inform this chamber of how many Thurrock schools he visited in the academic year 2013/14?

Councillor Kent:

Thank you Mr Mayor. In that period I have visited 32 of our schools with the Director of Children's Services in order to meet head teachers, chairs of governing bodies, other teachers and to tour the schools.

Arrangements are currently being made for us to visit the rest of the schools in the borough.

Other visits that have been made include the Harris Academy and the Hathaway Academy in August, on the day the GCSE results were being given out. I am also a Governor at Thameside Primary School so visit there quite regularly, and I have visited the local schools and college that my children attend as a parent.

Councillor Kerin:

Thank you Councillor Kent. Of the schools you have visited, can you tell us how many have been directly or indirectly helped by the Thurrock Education Alliance?

Councillor Kent:

The Education Alliance is a relatively new body that was born out of the Education Commission. There are head teachers that sit on the alliance and I'm sure in time every school in the borough will be touched and assisted by that process. But I have to say that we are

making really very, very good progress in improving the quality of education for all of our children in the borough.

We had more good news from Ofsted this week, with Thameside Primary School celebrating its 'Good' Ofsted rating and the Sunshine Centre in Tilbury secured what I think is actually the best early years Ofsted report that I have ever read as it was given an 'Outstanding' finding.

I have to say Mr Mayor that when you go back to 2010 when we took the administration for our primary school children 33% of them were at schools that were 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. Mr Mayor, I think that that was shameful; today it's up to 77% of our primary school children. I have to say that that is still not good enough; our aim has to be that every education setting that we have is rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted.

I think we have made tremendous progress, people know that routinely we have been in the bottom 3 or 4 when it comes to those Ofsted league tables that are published at the end of the year, and I have to say that we have risen from being 160th on that list in December to being 101st on that list, so again making really good progress and I'm sure that the Education Alliance will help us to accelerate that progress even further.

Councillor Kerin:

Thank you Councillor Kent. Alluding to Ofsted, do you know how many schools in Thurrock are expecting to have their overall effectiveness rating improved from either a 3 to a 2 or a 2 to a 1?

Councillor Kent:

Interesting question Mr Mayor. If you look at the 42 primary schools that we have in Thurrock, I think 20 of them improved in their last Ofsted inspection compared to the previous. 16 remained the same and 5 actually went backwards.

We would hope that every school that is inspected between now and Christmas certainly, would see improvements in its Ofsted effectiveness ratings. Of course, we don't know which schools are likely to be inspected, what we do know is that head teachers and chairs of governing bodies as some schools are sitting in nervous anticipation, but I am you know quietly confident that all those schools that we expect to be inspected, the majority of them will see the progress that they have made being validated by Ofsted.

3. From Councillor C. Kent

The Coalhouse Fort Project, and others, have long wanted to see the completion of the Two Forts Walk, between Coalhouse and Tilbury Forts. Given the scale of funding cuts the council is facing over the next

three years can the portfolio holder give any hope that this important initiative can be completed?

Councillor J Kent:

Yes, Mr Mayor, and I do have to point out that this question was originally for Councillor Andy Smith. I have to say that it is good to be able to report that after years of waiting, years of asking, I think the end of this target is in sight, so despite the funding issues that we are facing as part of our successful Local Fund Bid in the summer, improvements to the Two Forts Walk have now been approved.

The business case which supported the successful £5 million bid included a package of measures to develop the Thames Riverfront route from Purfleet to Stanford le Hope and to Corringham which will include work which will address the gaps in the Two Forts Way section. This will look at providing improved access over the sea wall and connecting existing sections to provide a complete route from Tilbury Fort to Coalhouse Fort and back of course.

The importance of the Two Forts Way is shown by its inclusion in the recently opened Thames Estuary Path, which provides a 29 mile walking route from Tilbury, through Stanford and Corringham, all the way to Leigh-on-Sea. Local Growth Fund money will come on stream from 2016 and our Planning and Transportation team will be inviting stakeholders to work with us in order to draw up detailed implementation plans later on this year.

Councillor Cathy Kent:

Can the Portfolio Holder confirm in light of the budget cuts facing the authority over the next few years whether we will be in a position to include cycle paths along the route?

Councillor Kent:

The Local Growth Fund bid also included money for cycling and I am sure that we will be able to take some of that money and where we can add cycling to the Two Forts Way.

4. From Councillor Snell

Could you please advise how much has been budgeted for the renovation of the civic offices?

Councillor Kent:

Mr Mayor, the budget for the renovation of the Civic Offices over the whole period of programme is £3.5 million, or as it says here £3,627,187.43. I still want to know what the 43p is for.

Mr Mayor, it is of course really important that in these straightened times we make sure that we are making the most efficient use possible that we can of all our assets and that includes and that includes all of our buildings. So if members, members that have been here long enough, go up to the 4th floor they will see an area that 18 months ago had 10 people working there, it now routinely has 40 or 50 people working there, and as we carry out the same plan of transformation to each floor of the building we will end up with a whole floor that is empty, which we will be able to offer for leasing to other public bodies or private industry and we know that there is a shortage of good quality office space here in Grays, so we are confident that we will be able to lease that.

It will also release an awful lot of room potentially on the ground floor and members will be asked to have a look at the needs for the member's area, where the most appropriate place is for the member's area, because we should be able to least part of the ground floor for other commercial activities. Restaurants for instance, coffee shops, taking advantage of the fact that we now have the Campus opposite us, those things together could bring in something in the region of £300,000 worth of income to the authority which starts to offset the cost.

The other thing that we have to bear in mind as well is that the business case to invest in renovating and updating the Civic Offices was based on the concept of creating here in this building, a central hub that would enable flexible working and would release property asset elsewhere, in particular the Culver Centre. The Culver Centre running costs and savings would be in the region of another half a million pounds. There would then of course be the capital receipt of selling the Culver Centre which would be another somewhere in the region of £2.5 million which again starts to cover the costs of the renovation of this building and give us a year on year saving which is of course vitally important.

Councillor Snell:

That all sounds really nice and I'm sure that the new offices will look impressive, but in the time we are making redundancies and were seeking cuts in services all over the place, was it wise to do this now? I don't see it is imperative to do it now, could we not have saved the money and postponed that to a time when maybe the Councils got a little bit more money to spend?

Councillor Kent:

No, I think frankly the time to do it was probably 10 years ago. I think we are a little bit late to the party but don't, you know, I really urge people not to think about it in terms of spending £3.5 million on the building and getting nothing back.

We will, in 2 years' time, be making a saving as a result of it. It's a little bit akin to saying you're a bit strapped for cash at home so you put off that essential maintenance, you know, not replacing your boiler isn't actually an effective saving, replacing that boiler will be more efficient, you'll save money in the long run. It's exactly the same with this building, we have to invest in this building, invest in the fabric of this building and use it as an asset that we are going to sweat to make sure that we do get more efficient working and savings in the long term, in fact it's not even savings in the long term, that £3.5 million will start to, will be repaid in 2 years and after that we will be making savings on it year in and year out.

5. From Councillor Wootton

Following the retirement of the mobile library service manager in Autumn 2013, why has it taken a year to get this valuable service for Thurrock residents back on the road?

Councillor Kent:

Well, Mr Mayor, whilst it hasn't been a year, I do fully do take Councillor Wootton's point, and it is a question that I myself have asked of officers. The good news of course is that the mobile library is now back on the road, it was at the Orsett Show on Saturday and I was glad as I always am to go and have a look at it and it was back on the road making its regular stops on Monday.

The service has been off the road since the retirement of the previous driver in December last year. A replacement was in fact found and should have been ready to start in February, but owing to unexpected circumstances the driver was unable to take up the post. A combination of the need to re-advertise the role and appoint a suitably qualified driver within our very tough financial constraints meant that that process took an awful lot longer than would have been desired, but as I have said the mobile library is now back up and running and it is out there serving the community.

Councillor Wootton:

But at this point I do think that we should express appreciation for the last mobile library manager who was in his post for just over 30 years and I think that was an extremely significant contribution to the residents and the community of Thurrock.

I'm pleased to hear Councillor Kent acknowledged that perhaps there were, it took longer than it should have done. I'm not surprised to hear the debate about was it a year or wasn't it a year, my residents on Chafford Hundred tell me that actually it was late summer, Autumn time, but because of the considerable amount of holiday that the incumbent had in reality although the service disappeared off the streets, there was a delay, so the reality is residents have been without this service since October/November of last year. But it took due to the

processes, until the 25th of May this year to even advertise it internally and so my question really is would the Leader agree with me that the process was not good in this particular case, lessons can be learnt and we should be able to do better in other vacancies next time?

Councillor Kent:

Mr Mayor, there is seldom a set of circumstances where there aren't lessons to be learnt, we always look at lessons to be learnt and to do just that.

Questions from Members to cabinet members, committee chairs and members appointed to represent the council on a joint committee

As apologies had been received from Councillors Holloway and Worrall, the Leader of the Council provided a response to the questions that had been submitted to each Cabinet Member.

1. From Councillor Gerrish to Councillor Holloway

How does our council tax collection compare to previous years?

Councillor Kent:

Mr Mayor, in 2009/10 the Council collected 96.43% of Council Tax due in year which was at the time putting us in the bottom quartile nationally. Since that date we have seen a steady increase through to 2012/13 where we collected 98.9% of Council Tax due in year.

Mr Mayor, that is the equivalent of an additional £1.3 million per annum of income that we can use to protect front line services. Members will of course be aware that the Government scrapped Council Tax benefit in 2013/14 and we put in place a local Council Tax scheme where for the first time some of our most vulnerable residents were going to have to pay up to 25% of Council Tax for the first time. This did see a small reduction last year of 0.38% in Council Tax collection rate reflecting those amounts due from those more vulnerable residents.

Despite this, Thurrock have the 2nd highest collection rate in Essex only behind Uttlesford and still leaves us in the top quartile nationally comparing very favourable to the Council's regular bottom 3 position before 2010.

Councillor Gerrish:

Clearly Council Tax is a very important component of our total income as a Council, how does our Council Tax rate compare to the rest of Essex and other comparable unitary authorities?

Councillor Kent:

I think Councillor Gerrish knows that answer. We do levy the lowest Council Tax in Essex and as far as unitary authorities are concerned, my memory tells me that we are the 4th lowest Council Tax of any unitary authorities. I look to Mr Clark to make sure that is right, yes it is, thank you. And whilst we are happy to have a low Council Tax, Mr Mayor because it protects our residents, I do have to say that if we were levying Council Tax at the Essex average, just at the Essex average, that would give us an additional income of £6.5 million per year over the next 3 years that equivalent to half the savings that we need to make, so I do think it's important to reflect that whilst were proud to set the lowest Council Tax in Essex, there is a downside to it as well.

2. From Councillor Jones to Councillor Worrall

I have been working for some time on behalf of several residents in my Ward who have been waiting for repairs to be undertaken to their properties, ranging from fitting extractor fans and shower trays to a kitchen replacement. Could the Cabinet Member for Housing please work with me to look into why it takes so long to get repairs completed on some residents' homes in my Ward?

Councillor Kent:

Thank you Mr Mayor. Councillor Worrall, as Councillor Morris-Cook before her, has made it clear that they are always available to talk with members about ward housing issues, and I have no doubt that if you ask Councillor Worrall, once she returns from holiday, she will be more than willing to help if she can.

I'd also like to take the opportunity to say that overall the waiting time for responsive repairs in Thurrock are at an all-time low and are of course consistent with Council policy. I think, just by way of warning, it will be difficult to give general answers to what I think may be some specific questions behind this question and of course, this is not a forum to discuss those though I will try to help as far as I can with any supplemental.

Councillor Jones:

Mr Mayor, I won't go into detail with my case studies, as I feel we may be here all night. Like many members of this chamber, I have spent untold time checking on progress of delays with some of these repairs.

For the record Mr Mayor, I would like to put down that them ladies in Members Services deserve gold medals for putting up with myself and my fellow colleagues.

With that in mind, can the Cabinet Member for Housing please look into the way that Councillors are updated on repairs requested? If

Councillors are kept informed as to the progress of the delays in repairs this information can be passed onto the resident without delay.

Councillor Kent:

I think all of us, Mr Mayor, that have significant Council housing in our wards suffer the same frustrations. What I can say is that the housing service is immeasurably better and performing immeasurably better than it was 3, 4, 5 years ago however it is still not good enough.

If there is any delay in a responsive repair being carried out, if there is any error when that responsive repair is carried out, then the service is still not good enough. I do have to say that with 10,500 properties across the borough, you are bound to get that 1 or 2 that go wrong, and one of the things that you do learn in this role is that you get those people that come to you when something has gone wrong, you get far fewer that come to you to say actually that went really well, thank you.

The point about communications is well made and it is something we look at and take on board.

3. From Councillor Redsell to Councillor Worrall

How many void or empty properties do we have in Thurrock at this time?

Councillor Kent:

As of last Monday, 1st September, the Council had 107 void properties.

That's equivalent to 1.1% of our stock, a figure that places our performance in the top quarter of any social landlord. The figure has dropped remarkably since we started overcoming the issues of the awful Morrison contract that we inherited, a contract that let the Council down, let the tenants down and put us in a position too often of having to defend the indefensible.

At the same time of year in 2013, 1st September, there were twice as many voids 215; 2 years ago it was over twice that, 482. So, I think Mr Mayor we can confidently say that things are getting better.

Councillor Redsell:

Thank you Mr Mayor. Thank you Councillor Kent. Just could you let us know how many days the turnaround is for void properties coming back for people to be housed into?

Councillor Kent:

The average turnaround time for repairing a void at the moment is 33 days, that is the fastest time that we have ever seen and it's quite

remarkable when we see the quality of homes that we now let following them being void.

4. From Councillor Redsell to Councillor Worrall

What steps are in place to stop residents from having too many pets in flats?

Councillor Kent:

Mr Mayor, the Council's new tenancy agreement has specific clauses regarding keeping pets and controls of pet's behaviour. Failure to keep these terms and conditions will be a breach of tenancy for which ultimately the tenant could be evicted, although this would be a last resort as we would be working with the tenants to resolve issues wherever possible.

Councillor Redsell:

Thank you Councillor Kent. I just feel that perhaps we could tighten up slightly on, obviously were having dogs chipped by the Council, is it we could do something for the cats too cos we have a big problem with cats that are not being neutered and left to run riot on quite a few of the estates. Thank you.

Councillor Kent:

Well although I'm not prepared to neuter cats for myself, I will explore the possibility with Directors of finding a fund or a charity that may assist us in doing that.

5. From Councillor Halden to Councillor Okunade

Can the Cabinet Member inform the Chamber what overspends or underspends have been recorded for the children's social care department budget in recent years and whether the department is on track to having a balanced budget by the end of the current financial year?

Councillor Okunade:

Thank you Councillor Halden. Just quickly, you can confirm to me later, am I right in guessing you are the new Shadow Portfolio Holder for Social Care? You can confirm later, but I will give you an answer to your question.

There has been a significant increase in the cost of children's social care in the last 4 years due to both the demand for children's care placements and the cost of individual placements. In relation to the budget position, this has been reported at the Children's Services level and therefore the over or underspend year by year is on the total children's services budget including education which has made in year

cost savings decisions to support increasing costs in social care. So the budget position as requested for the previous years, we had a underspend of £378,000 in 2010/11, and in 2011/12 there was an overspend of £1.4 million and 2012/13 overspend of £1.8 million and in 2013/14 there was an underspend of £131,000. I can also report, that current budget forecasts shows the Social Care budget to be on track for a balanced position for 2014/15.

Councillor Halden:

Thank you Mr Mayor. The Portfolio Holder will be aware that in the budget 2012/13, we agreed a sum of £500,000 to pay for an independent audit of the department. I understand the audit has been completed from the last committee meeting, but when the findings were presented to committee, 7 appendices were missing. I ask at the meeting in July and in the meeting just last week for these appendices to be circulated, they still haven't been, it's been 3 months but we still have no evidence whatsoever to whether or not an audit was carried out on the department that was almost 2 years ago now.

Mr Mayor:

Councillor Okunade, we are now out of time, can you just briefly....

Councillor Okunade:

Well I can just say that an apology was given at the last meeting for the omission in submitting that and I should chase it on my behalf and get it sent out. Thank you.