

Item 12 – Questions from Members

There were 2 questions to the Leader and a further 5 questions to Cabinet Members, Committee Chairs and Members appointed to represent the Council on a Joint Committee.

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE LEADER

1. From Councillor Ray

Can the Leader assure the members and the residents of Thurrock that the truly scandalous incidents that have taken place in Rotherham and Rochdale are not happening here in Thurrock in any shape or form?

Councillor John Kent:

Mr Mayor, first of all I would say that I whole heartedly agree with Councillor Ray's choice of words, truly scandalous, I think is a very apt phrase to describe what has happened. I don't think it will be possible for the Leader of any Council, anywhere in this Country to give an absolute guarantee in this area. I think it would be amazingly arrogant and show quite breath taking complacency. However, I can tell members what we are doing and what they can do.

I have to say Mr Mayor that I think back to when I first became Leader of this Council back in 2010, at a time when there was an awful lot going on. We had severe financial difficulties, we had little in reserve, we had a planning committee that was making some odd decisions, there was a huge churn of most senior officers, including five directors of Children's Services in four years and we had had an improvement board imposed upon us.

But Mr Mayor, the one thing that gave me sleepless nights was our proximity to the baby P scandal that had happened so recently and that kind of horrible nagging fear, that question, could something like that happen here. Even before I became Leader of this Council, I regularly met with the Director of Children's Services to seek assurances that Thurrock was doing everything that it could to protect our children. I continue to do that, and I hope that each and every member here tonight also does that. I think it is really important that we each of us recognise our individual responsibility to learn from others mistakes and to keep an overview on what we do to ensure our children are safe. Those of us that have children of our own, know this to be true, it is something that we do naturally and we should do it in our corporate parenting role too. The safety of every child in Thurrock should be something that each of us consider. Not just our own children, not just those in care, but every child in the Borough.

Mr Mayor, the Jay report from Rotherham which I have read, and which I would urge every member to read, is one of many such reports across the country which have over time looked into the failings which allow wide-scale child sexual exploitation. There have been similar outrages

in Rochdale, Derby and Oxfordshire, which goes to show that these things can happen anywhere. In every case, something new is identified as a central issue or the central cause and I can say with confidence that Thurrock Council are now partners and take the issue of child abuse, in all its horrific forms, very seriously indeed. So if you do read the Jay Report and its recommendations, you will find that those recommendations that aren't Rotherham specific, are in the main things that Thurrock is already doing.

One of the issues with child protection, identified yet again in the Jay Report, is that it is a subject that crosses so many boundaries within the Council and with other public agencies. Local Authorities and our partners have a responsibility to make sure that those boundaries do not become barriers and we must work hard to ensure that is the case here in Thurrock. For example, we have rolled out awareness courses to staff in all the different agencies that make up the local safeguarding children's board. Making sure they are trained to recognise the signs and that they know what to do when they see the signs. We have also developed close links internally with our licensing team so that they are too trained to see the danger signs especially in the cases of taxis and budget hotels. This has already led to one taxi driver having their licence revoked.

Mr Mayor following the publication of the Jay Report, we and our partners are going back over previous cases where sexual exploitation was raised as a possible issue and checking again. That isn't just recent cases that is historic cases too. We have developed a flexible response approach to respond to and learn from our own cases and the experiences of others. We have already heard from Councillor Okunade this evening about the MASH that we have recently launched. That is the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub. There is now, in this building, a specially designed room where representatives from all different agencies sit and work together. It is a room where reports of possible child abuse in Thurrock arrive and it is a room where discussion between partners is encouraged. Among the organisations represented in the Hub are Thurrock Council's Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care, Youth Offending Service and the Housing Department. Early help services, Health Agencies, Essex Police, the Probation Service, Mental Health Services, Domestic Violence Prevention Providers and Substance Misuse Services. All of them, working together in the same place to ensure a comprehensive and joined up approach to child protection.

Mr Mayor, as I said earlier, there should be no barriers to providing quick efficient effective and appropriate responses. So in order to ensure that we fully consider and respond appropriately to the concerns raised by the Rotherham Scandal, a full report will be presented to next month's Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, detailing the findings from the Jay Report and detailing Thurrock's response.

Mr Mayor when it comes to tackling the abuse of children, we cannot afford to let our focus slip for one moment, and that means that we should remember that around 90% of child abuse actually happens in the home and we should remember that neglect and other forms of physical violence are also abhorrent and indeed the theme of next month's safeguarding children's board conference is neglect and I would urge every member to come along and learn what is happening, learn what we are doing and learn what it is that we still have to do.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Robert Ray:

Thank you Mr Mayor, it is not exactly a question, but I would like to thank the Leader for that broad and wholesome outline of the way that the council and he believes things are progressing, and I feel that that would give a lot of reassurance to Members and members of the community. Thank you Mr Mayor.

Mayor:

Thank you Councillor Ray, Councillor Kent, do you want to say anything else?

Question 2, Councillor Johnson would you please read out your question to the Leader as set out on Page 59 of the Agenda.

2. From Councillor Johnson

Do you consider the sharing of a CEO with the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham was a profitable and worthwhile experience for both Boroughs?

Councillor John Kent:

Yes, Mr Mayor, I do have to say that an experience which saved us £200,000 in direct salaries over two years was clearly profitable for both council's finances. But that is not all, it led to us saving at a rate of almost £1 million per year through over shared services, so on balance, I think it was both profitable and worthwhile for Thurrock. I cannot of course speak for the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

I have to remind members that the Chief Executive first went there because Barking and Dagenham had a need to replace their Chief Executive quickly and after discussions that I had with the then Conservative Group leader here in Thurrock, we were pleased to offer this level of support.

Again, Mr Mayor, when I recently announced the ending of the share Chief Executive role with Barking and Dagenham, I did say that we would continue to discuss similar options with other councils and those discussions are still ongoing. In the meantime, we will continue to share over £0.5 million worth of services each year with Barking and Dagenham, services ranging from our legal services to the 'Get Healthy and Get Into Sport' jointly funded programme.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Johnson:

Thank you Mr Mayor, yes please. Thank you Councillor Kent for your reply, I am sure that those figures can be borne out and I am a little surprised that as it was supposed to have been a partnership that you can't really answer for the pair of you, but anyway, I am receiving conflicting views as to the merits of this merger and would ask that you have a plan B to protect the savings already accounted for and those projected for the future should London Borough of Barking and Dagenham decide to terminate the remaining sharing of services.

Councillor John Kent:

Well Mr Mayor, I don't think there is any possibility of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham for instance withdrawing from the legal services partnership, which is of course three cornered, including Brentwood. We also offer legal services to the London Borough of Westminster as well, so I think there is little chance of withdrawing that.

Of course, we do have to look to make sure that we maximise the sharing of services, sharing of senior officers and senior management with other local authorities and that is just what we are going to do. You know, of course, you know the problem here, really, is that this has become a key political issue for the Conservatives in Thurrock, despite us getting letters of support from everybody from the Secretary of State down to various ministers. In fact the Prime Minister commending authorities such as Thurrock for sharing chief executives in the way that we have done.

I think locally, the Conservatives thought that they could make cheap political capital out of untrue scare stories, about the possible merger of the boroughs and supposed Londonisation of Thurrock. Ideas that were impossible, illegal and illogical. I suppose the ending of these shared arrangements does leave a bit of a gap in the oppositions campaigning but for the record, I would say that I am happy that we should continue to look to share senior management wherever there is a sound business case for so doing.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Johnson:

Yes thank you Mr Mayor. I think the key issue rather than political is the fact of conflicting views, with you saying it is a worthwhile partnership, strength of the relationship, when Councillor Darren Rodwell, who as most people know, is the Leader of Barking and Dagenham Council. He called all the staff together on the 24 September and I am going to quote from him here – he said, he was talking about the vision for the future – “London Borough of Barking and Dagenham needs to focus on London for its future and not Essex” and when asked specifically about the recently ceased sharing of the CEO and I did not ask that question, stated that “the sharing of the chief executive officer with Thurrock may have been a short term gain but would have been a long term loss”. Now, as you informed us this was a mutual agreement to bring this part of the agreement to an end, I presume you are now agree with Councillor Rodwell and consequently the Conservative group that Thurrock should be acting accordingly and focus any sharing of services with more appropriate partners.

Councillor John Kent:

Well Mr Mayor, I have always said that we would look to share senior management wherever possible and wherever most appropriate. It is absolutely clear that these things are best done at a moment in time, and best done when there is a vacancy because frankly it saves you having to pay a redundancy of a chief executive, something I know that the Conservatives had a habit of doing when they were running the council. You start with a deficit, you start with a deficit.

The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham have decided that they wish to appoint a full time chief executive, they have decided that they want to look inwards to London, but that is a decision that is wholly for them to make. Wholly for them to make. We will continue to look far and wide for opportunities to cut the costs of senior management and one of the ways we do that is by sharing senior management.

I have to remind members that we have a saving more than £0.5 million on the cost of senior management contrasted to that we inherited and if you include the cost of senior management with the incorporation of Health, that comes to £800,000 per year that is being saved to the pocket of council tax and the tax payers in Thurrock. I think that is a good deal Mr Mayor and it is something we will continue with.

Mayor:

Thank you Councillor Kent, I will now take the questions that have been submitted to cabinet members and committee chairs.

Question 1, Councillor Shinnick, please read out your question to Councillor Worrall as set out on page 59 of the Agenda.

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

1. From Councillor Shinnick to Councillor Worrall

How many responsive housing repairs is the housing repair service currently having to undertake compared to two years ago?

Councillor Worrall:

Thank you Mr Mayor. Thanks to the way that our housing department has been working on improving our housing stock, through transforming homes and other programmes like tackling mould and re-cladding, the request for responsive housing repairs has fallen year on year. So between April and September 2012, there were 27,230 repairs and for the same this year between April and September there was 19,646. So I did a bit of calculating today and I think that is about 7,584 less repairs this year than two years ago.

I would also probably like to share with Councillor Shinnick that over 4/5 of those 19,000, which is 84%, rated the work either good or excellent. I know that we do need to strive for 100% and it is something that the teams are working towards and I am sure that with hard work we will finally get there.

Mayor:

Thank you Councillor Worrall. Councillor Shinnick do you have any supplementary questions?

Councillor Shinnick:

Thank you. Can Councillor Worrall share with us her own views as to why the numbers have gone down?

Councillor Worrall:

I think it has to be the way that the team actually work. When I took the portfolio and I have spent week on week, I go there every week, to look at the systems of how we track everything, I have to say that I have been pretty impressed. If anybody has got any real issues, I am sure that there are officers that would take the time to take you through, so

that you can understand how we actually deliver our repairs service and also the way that we plan the work that is coming up. For example, the 2,700 transforming homes that we have done in the last 18 months, and also the stuff that we are doing around thermal efficiency. For those that have had transforming homes in your area, I am sure that you will see these people busy making our homes and doing the external walls. We have done over 200 in 18 months, so really lot of houses that are in much, much better condition now.

Next Thursday, in the morning next Thursday, we are going to be doing our first transforming homes walkabout. This is officers, the contractors and councillors, and if it is your area, you will be invited. What we are going to do, we are going to start going in and having a look at the homes that have been done or are going to be done, because what we are doing here in Thurrock is pretty ambitious. It is a fantastic programme and I think that sometimes we need to stand up and say, actually here in Thurrock we are doing a really really good job around transforming our homes. So please, you will be invited, please take the time or if you haven't got it going on in your area, come and have a look in somebody else's area because this is massive, massive work that is happening here in Thurrock, improving our residents' homes. I hope that gives you my view on how we are doing and where we are.

Mayor:

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

Question 2 – Councillor Hebb, please read out your question to Councillor Holloway as set out on page 59 of the Agenda.

2. From Councillor Hebb to Councillor Holloway

How confident are you that our debt collection processes only ever target the right people?

Councillor Hebb:

Thank you Mr Mayor. How confident are you that our debt collection processes only ever target the right people?

Councillor Holloway:

Thank you for your question and I am very confident.

Mayor:

Councillor Hebb do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor Hebb:

It would be very rude not to and I just hope that the confidence she exhibited there is better than when she managed the bin collection changes. She is definitely taking after Councillor Andy Smith with one line answers though!

We have a report, and I am not going to go into it, to be honest with you it is absolutely diabolical reading. One day, some chap got a phone call saying that you owe us money. I am at your house, in fact, no I am at your back door. The man had to pay some money and he had to get it claimed back, there was a digit wrong in his name. What on earth went wrong that the wrong person would be targeted for a single digit wrong? Now, I want to work with you here, to be honest with you, we will happily support a review of that process if you will commission it, because I think that is a gap that has to be addressed immediately and can never happen again.

Mayor:

Councillor Holloway?

Councillor Holloway:

Yes, I think I will remain confident and I think that while you highlight a particularly awful story, I think you know that case is quite unique actually, and we shouldn't really talk about individual cases, it is not really the done thing to talk about individual cases, but I can assure the member that out of 15,000 liability orders, there have been less than 10 complaints. 15,000! I agree that that one case should not have happened at all, but I think when you deal with the amount of processes that we deal with, there are going to be mistakes. We do a huge volume of transactions. I will say that it is not acceptable, it is really not, but 15,000, I hope you can agree that actually, that is a good system. I can also add that our collection rates for council tax and business rates are actually in the top quartile of all councils and that could not really be achieved with excellent processes. So I hope you can agree that this was an exceptional and unacceptable case, but truly an exceptional one.

Mayor:

Councillor Hebb do you want to pose a second supplementary question?

Councillor Hebb:

I will just say ever so briefly, thank you to the portfolio holder for her response. Yes, ultimately the data does show some positive trends, there is no doubt about that, I review that with Sean once a month. But one case like this is just too much! So if you are that comfortable, or very confident, was the expression you used, we are offering to work

with you on a review, or are you happy to stake your personal reputation on the matter, that this will never happen again.

Councillor Holloway:

As I said, I really don't think there needs to be a review. I can't really agree to one with one case verses the figures that we are dealing with. As I said, it is a huge volume of what we are dealing with. I would love to say that it would never happen again, but errors do happen with everything, but I do feel confident that 15,000 processed with less than 10 complaints, is an excellent record.

Mayor:

Thank you Councillor Holloway.

Question 3, Councillor Hebb, please read out your question to Councillor Gupta as set out on page 59 of the Agenda.

3. From Councillor Hebb to Councillor Gupta

Assuming your consent in cancelling the recent Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting in September, why do you think that "purdah" is a tool to prevent the work of local government commencing as per normal?

Councillor Gupta:

Mr Mayor, it must be a long time ago when a Councillor in this chamber asked a question to the Chair of Scrutiny. I consider myself lucky! Mr Mayor, when I read Councillor Hebb's question, I was somewhat bemused. He was supposed to be chairing the September meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee whilst I was on holiday. I assumed, as he did, that he would have been consulted as the acting Chair before Democratic Services cancelled the September meeting. Asking this question, I do not think that Purdah, or the pre-election period as it should be known, is a tool to prevent the work of the Council. In my opinion, it is a tool to ensure fairness for all candidates and contesting that election. I understand that it is how it is used throughout the country at the national and local elections. However, our constitution gives the right to the Councillors to ask for an additional meeting, if they think that it is needed to finish up any urgent business. Mr Mayor, before I went on holiday, I did suggest on the 3rd October for an additional meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This suggestion was sent to all the members of this committee. I understand from the Democratic Services, only Councillor Gerrish, sent his acceptance. There was no take up from any other member. I was wondering whether Councillor Hebb, sent his consent to attend the additional meeting?

Mayor:

Thank you Councillor Gupta. Councillor Hebb, do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor Hebb:

I will do, and, let's be frank, me covering your chairmanship, I actually had to go to my manager at work and ask him to take holiday to do it, so please don't throw that back in my face. By the way, Councillor Gupta, I was not notified of that. I had an email from Democratic Services that you had consented to the cancellation of that meeting. Anyway, by the by. I do not believe that Purdah should throttle the work of local government, but it should prohibit the undue positive publicity for any candidate. I do believe that. My point being is, do we need to establish a set of rules of things that are purdah permissible or purdah excluded? There are some things we could have talked about at that Overview and Scrutiny that would not have affected the West Thurrock by-election and indeed any election in the future. We cannot keep using purdah as an excuse to stop the engine of this council operating.

Councillor Gupta:

I think this is something that which the Monitoring Officer should be looking at. You should be contacting the Monitoring Officer or the CEO.

Mayor:

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

Question 4 – Councillor Redsell, please read out your question as set out on page 60 of the Agenda?

4. From Councillor Redsell to Councillor Holloway

On Wednesday 17 September 2014 the Council suffered an IT failure which rendered the new Council's PC and Telephone system near useless, can the Portfolio Holder advise what went wrong and what she is doing about the matter?

Councillor Holloway:

The IT problems experienced were an unfortunate result of the combination of two factors. The first the failure of a network switch on the evening of Tuesday, 16th September and the second a fault within the software of the replacement switch only became known on Wednesday the 17th September.

Mayor:

Councillor Redsell do you wish to pose a supplementary question?

Councillor Redsell:

I do, thank you Mr Mayor. We seem to be at the moment going through an IT fiasco at the moment. Our telephone system is breaking down on several occasions, officers are not logging onto their phones. We have members ringing numbers which are untraceable, the council knows when we are calling, our number comes up, it is a shame it doesn't work the other way round. Why are we not revisiting the council's system and realising that it is not fit for purpose and also that the council has got it wrong.

Councillor Holloway:

Thank you Mr Mayor. What I find really difficult about answering this question, and I do have a full response, and you know the problem I find is that we had a digital event booked in this evening from 5.30pm – 6.30pm and not one member of the opposition attended, although I did receive a very kind apology from Councillor Roast. What would have been discussed at that meeting, if Councillor Redsell you would have attended, would have been an explanation as to why the things keep happening. Why there are difficulties, why the system needed to be changed, the benefits of the system and the future of the system and what it means for the Councillors and residents.

Sadly, you did not show up and now I have to give you a response that sadly you would have got earlier.

The IT system needed to be replaced because there were a number of complaints from Councillors and officers, that it was outdated so it needed to be replaced. There needs to be new ways of working, change is good, change has to happen, it saves money, it is better for residents and like any failure, it does happen. Technical systems will break, and it won't keep happening, we are going to fix it. However, what we are doing, just so that members of opposition can actually work their new technology, is a reminder of materials produced, I am sure officers will very kindly go through any continuing issues, but I do assure members that it is a fantastic system, and it will be great for residents. If there is another event to talk about it, come along and then you won't need to ask these questions.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Redsell:

Thank you, I wasn't going to, but I will come back on that. We can't all get to meetings that you have, we have other commitments to go to. We have got a system, I have put many complaints in, and as the Chief Executive knows I have put complaints into him to. It is not a case of us not being able to work the system that we have got, it is just not being given to us in the right way. We cannot use it, we have got debt collection officers using mobile phones that are untraceable. We have got systems where I mentioned before, we have not got the numbers, we cannot get through to people because they are not logging onto their machines.

Mayor:

Councillor Redsell is there a question to this?

Councillor Redsell:

Yes, why are debt collection officers using mobile phones which are untraceable to residents?

Councillor Holloway:

That is a very good point and again if there are individual cases where that is happening, that is something to raise with officers.

5. From Councillor Tolson to Councillor Fish

What is our current recycling rate?

Mayor:

Question 5, Councillor Tolson, please read out your question as set out on page 60 of the Agenda.

Councillor Tolson:

Thank you Mr Mayor, I will withdraw it as Councillor Fish is unwell. Thank you.