

Item 22 – Questions from Members

QUESTION TIME

There were 3 questions to the Leader and a further 7 questions to Cabinet Members, Committee Chairs and Member appointed to represent the Council on a Joint Committee.

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE LEADER

1. From Councillor Halden

In principle, does the Leader of the Council expect to see the council actively support trusts that hold community assets, such as the Homesteads village hall?

Councillor J. Kent:

Yes, the Council has a history of providing financial and advisory support to village hall management committees who carry out an important job in running valued community meeting places. Very often this support has gone beyond the Council's responsibility as defined in the formal legal agreements between the Council as landlord and the management committees as tenant.

However, there is of course increasing resource pressure and that is likely to mean that management committees will be asked to operate on a more self financing basis in future. The Council will of course continue to provide as much support and advice as it is able to.

Mr Mayor if Cllr Halden has specific examples of where support has not been forthcoming perhaps he can speak to me outside of this meeting and I will be happy to look into them.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Halden:

Thank you Mr Mayor. For your answer the Councils support of the Homesteads Village Hall has been broadly good, the village hall is now so successful and popular and is now looking to expand and improve the premises that it holds, but as a Council asset and operated by a trust, not operated by a private entity, some of the advice seems to have been a little bit muddled and I wonder what the Leader of the Council's opinion was on if maintenance expansion or improvement works were necessary.

Would the Council be open to the idea of perhaps tendering with any other joint tendering bids that were going on that Community Assets could bugsy on the back of and try to achieve economy of scale?

Councillor J. Kent:

Of course Mr Mayor that is something that we could look at, as we have various developments going up around the place we could look at, whether we can as you say, piggyback on the work that has already been done. We are happy to look at that but in the first instance you would probably be best served raising that directly with the Assistant Chief Executive so that we can cut out the middle man here and see if we can get some action.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Halden:

No

Mayor:

Councillor Halden, please read out your question to the Leader, as set out on page 223 of the Agenda.

2. From Councillor Halden

Can the leader outline the next steps in establishing a joint economic board with Southend, pending a response from government regarding our consultation response?

Councillor J. Kent:

Mr Mayor, I really do believe that the debate on English devolution is an important one and I want to ensure Thurrock is in that debate and putting forward options and arguments that deliver the best outcomes for our communities and businesses. There is a real opportunity now for more powers, responsibilities as well as for funding to be retained closer to where decisions are taken that address local issues and where opportunities can be properly realised.

An important question for Thurrock has to be, is what economic geography would our interests be best served? For me it is fairly obvious when you look at the statistics, for example 67% of Thurrock workers go to work somewhere in Thames Gateway South Essex, the majority actually both living and working in Thurrock of course. 27% travel into London to work with less than 3% commuting into the rest of Essex. For commuting patterns you can also read business supply chains and business routes to market. So it is clear to me that businesses and community in Thurrock have interests that live within the Thames Gateway South Essex, and it is for these reasons that we are working with colleagues in Southend on a combined authority to

strengthen collaboration on transport investment and integration in promoting growth and delivering jobs.

So while we will pursue this initiative with our colleagues in Southend, assuming of course that Government proposals are confirmed, an even better outcome would be stronger collaboration on transport and economic development across the whole of south Essex including our colleagues in Castle Point, Basildon and Rochford. This of course required the involvement of the County Council as well as our District Friends.

I am delighted that our colleagues at Southend Council also agreed at their cabinet meeting last week to work with us to pursue a combined authority. The day after our cabinet meeting two weeks ago I wrote to the Leader of Essex County Council to urge the county to get involved in helping to shape this exciting opportunity. I regret to say that I am yet to receive a reply. Councillor Woodley, the Leader of Southend Council and myself, have jointly written a letter to the CLG Minister Greg Clark informing him of our intention and ambition and calling on Government to support us. Officers have been in touch with CLG civic servants and with the Local Government Association to secure support and advice.

It is worth remembering that it is a Combined Authority that we are exploring with Southend, not a joint economic board, and that similar discussions are on-going to establish a model for devolution for the whole of what is known as Greater Essex. While we will take part in those wider discussions I remain of the view that Thurrock's best interests are served by decisions being reached as locally as possible, in Thurrock or across South Essex and not in Chelmsford.

There will be discussions about the Combined Authority at the Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership meeting on 4th February, as well as of course discussing the new partnership arrangements that will commence on April 1st. We are also convening a South Essex transport summit in March and I am very pleased that Lord Heseltine has agreed to meet with us to discuss our plans for Thurrock and South Essex. A business case for a Combined Authority will be prepared over the coming months, one that sets out its scope, responsibilities, funding and governance. It is very important that we consult widely during that process.

It would be very helpful if the opposition could support this initiative by taking part in the transport summit and working with their party colleagues in Chelmsford to persuade the County Council to join with Southend and Thurrock and with South Essex districts to help shape and take part in a Combined Authority for South Essex.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Halden:

Thank you Mr Mayor I am glad that Councillor Kent joins me in being an ardent fan of Lord Heseltine, if the Leader of the Council is prepared to involve us in those conversations with County Council and other colleagues, yes we are prepared to support you.

I think this is a fine move to give us more clout in our immediate economic region. My supplementary was based on surely the Leader thinks it that we need to sell the benefits of working with some of our more natural neighbours such as Basildon, such as Castle Point, and I know that the Leader has already alluded to that, but how does the Leader envisage selling the benefits to these boroughs?

I think the case has been made for Southend. I am glad Southend have taken it on board, myself and Councillor Gledhill are prepared to join in the conversations and be constructive with other colleagues. How does Councillor Kent envisage selling the virtues to smaller district councils which have been beholden to a county authority for a long time?

Councillor J. Kent:

Mr Mayor I think it is about looking at where people that live in South Essex work, where their economic pull is, and it is not frankly towards Chelmsford. We need to make the case very strongly that if you allow yourself to get in a combined authority that is looking at the whole of Essex then you have to take your chances alongside places like Uttlesford and Tendring. We have to make sure that the Thames Gateway with South Essex is the powerhouse of the south east local economic partnership, maintains the wealth that will be creating as much as possible here in south Essex and we don't see it distributed around the county. I think that is an argument that we are winning with district colleagues and I am hoping that we will make progress pretty quickly. Progress that will be easy to make with Conservative colleagues here lobbying their Conservative colleagues in those districts.

Councillor Halden:

I have already given Councillor Kent my assurance that myself and Councillor Gledhill will. The cabinet paper of Councillor Kent set out the tremendous economic benefits working with Southend. They succinctly none of which benefits appeared in the shared management paper regarding Barking and Dagenham. Given the next question from Councillor Ray which is sycophantically in favour of the administration one could also suspect that Councillor Kent helped him write it. Perhaps Councillor Kent can explain that Barking and Dagenham was originally the right way to go and why the only way really is Essex.

Councillor J. Kent:

Mr Mayor I can assure Councillor Halden that Councillor Ray needs no help in drafting his own questions and I had for just one minute thought that Councillor Halden had understood what the benefits of working with another councils are. Two entirely different things for two entirely different purposes. Mr Mayor it is clear they still don't get it.

Mayor:

Councillor Ray, please read out your question to the Leader, as set out on page 223 of the Agenda.

3. From Councillor Ray

It seems I have already kicked some hornets nest up, but I will carry on.

Would the Leader agree with me that now discussions are taking place with the authorities at Southend about the possibilities of sharing services, the Conservative propaganda of Thurrock merging with Barking and Dagenham was no more than propaganda without any foundation of truth whatsoever?

This may be part of this month's propaganda landing through my letterbox.

Councillor Coxshall:

You are going to receive more.

Councillor J. Kent:

Well Mr Mayor nobody will be surprised if I start my answer by saying yes. I believe that propaganda without foundation is absolutely the right phrase. I have to say it was wheeled out again at the Aveley by-election and I would like to thank Councillor Ray, Councillor Aker and their colleagues for not jumping on the bandwagon.

I have to remind everybody here that just by sharing the Chief Executive and Assistant Chief Executive and a Head of Legal Services for around 2.5 years we have saved over £600,000 for the Council taxpayers of Thurrock. That is without the savings that have accrued for sharing all of the other legal services, insurance team, strategy team and training services amongst other things. So it is disappointing that the local conservatives still don't seem to understand the realities of the situation and I have to say that I find it really disappointing.

Two and a half years ago the then leader of the Conservative group was all in favour of sharing the Chief Executive; he saw it as following up on the success of our shared legal services team. The then lead of the Conservative group was even on the joint Barking and Dagenham

and Thurrock Member panel that appointed Fiona Taylor, who is sitting next to you Mr Mayor, to her post.

But now things have moved on, the Chief Exec leaves Barking and Dagenham on Friday and over the next few weeks all those shared management with exception of legal services will separate. It was never a merger and to allege otherwise was and still is scurrilous rubbish. I use the word is because as Councillor Ray has pointed out, local conservatives appear to be well behind the times and still trying to pebble the merger line in their latest literature.

They also confusingly say that they don't want council tax money spent on staff driving up and down the A13 so presumably they do have the same objections to us heading the other way to Southend as we were discussing a little while ago. Only it seems not, it seems they are in favour of officers being able to turn right as they leave Grays going towards Southend but not in favour of turning left when they leave Grays.

Much noise in the chamber.

I want to know what they think about heading north to Brentwood which we are doing as well these days, again building on the success of our shared legal services partnership with Brentwood. Thank you Mr Mayor.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Ray:

It has actually taken the wind out of my sails for that enjoyable reply. I don't have the same enthusiasm as my fellow colleague on the opposition side on my left for Lord Heseltine, let me make that clear. Can the Leader tell us the benefits for the people of Thurrock, I know early stages, an idea of broad financial benefits we could achieve?

Councillor J. Kent:

If that is the financial benefits of a combined authority, if that is the question, it comes in more ways than one. A combined authority as part of English devolution is about the Government passing powers down to collections of local authorities. So if you look at a collection of local authorities across south Essex, I could suggest, almost off the top of my head, that if you look at Southend Airport if one or two percent of the aviation tax that is paid for flights going in and out of Southend were to accrue locally for transport infrastructure that would be a real bonus. If we were able to keep 2% of all the crossing tolls for transport projects in South Essex that would be a benefit. If we were allowed to keep £1 of the tax on every container that comes into Tilbury, or London Gateway or Purfleet that would also be a tremendous boost.

But the big boost would be able to make sure that our communities have the skills they need to get the jobs that will be created, and that we would have the power and influence to make sure that those jobs are able to give us the greatest share of business rates in the future. One of the schemes that we run of course in conjunction with Basildon and other is being able to retain a greater share of business rates by already working together, so we are working on foundations that have already been set. And that Mr Mayor is helpful.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Ray:

Yes Mr Mayor thank I appreciate that and agree that it is very early days, what I was trying to find out if there was a ballpark figure of how much in pounds sterling is possible be achieved, there is a concern as with the fiasco with the previous thing we were talking about, that the civic authority as sitting in this chamber, could that be impaired. This is what the people of Thurrock would like to know.

Councillor J. Kent:

I am not going to put a ballpark figure on what the financial benefit to Thurrock Could be I think that is something for another day. As far as civic aspect of Thurrock there will be absolutely no impact whatsoever. And if you think about the Manchester City region, Salford is still Salford with a Mayor, Manchester is still Manchester, Witham is still Witham with its elected mayor, they all keep their own identity, but what they do is pull their resources to make sure they get, by working together, a bigger bang for their buck, and I think that is what we are looking at here.

I have to say Mr Mayor that we go back to the original question, working with Barking and Dagenham and the scurrilous stories about a merge that was never on the cards, the other things that the Conservatives are saying is that they don't want a London Borough of Thurrock. I have to say I wonder how they respond to a document called Southern Powerhouse that was published on Monday authored by Andrew Boff of the Greater London Assembly Conservatives that says amongst other things that time has come due to growing populations pressures for the role of the GLA to be reviewed, extend of London's influence examined. Many of London's transport and economic issues are often significantly impacted areas that are situated outside the confines of Greater London.

Given London's changing needs and growing challenges it is reasonable to suggest that as and when the Herbert Commission was established the remit of the GLA and associated institutions should be

assessed. The likely outcome is that London will in a collegiate manner need to assert greater influence over policy decisions outside the M25.

They published a map Mr Mayor which people won't see but it is called the area of opportunity outside London and that area of opportunity you can see in orange takes in the whole of Thurrock. Mr Mayor I look forward to Thurrock Conservatives now lambasting their colleagues in London in the same ways as they have us.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Hebb, please read out your question to Councillor Gerrish, as set out on page 223 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 Hebb to Councillor Gerrish

Over the past three years, Thurrock Council has used a multi-million pound Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF) on a programme encouraging Thurrock's residents to get out and walk or cycle around Thurrock via door-to-door canvassing activities and leaflets. Can the Portfolio Holder confirm how much has been spent on Rights of Way / footpaths across the borough?

Councillor Gerrish:

Thank you Mr Mayor. Our pioneering Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF) programme was broken down into a number of work streams. Over the last four years we have spent over £800,000 on walking and cycling improvements.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Hebb:

£5million on LSTF in hindsight it was the best thing to do to, use it as canvassers but there is a positive gap. There is an association of the Thurrock ramblers who have done a fantastic piece of work creating their own proforma and audited every right of way about what is a good standard and what is not. They are crying out for support and assistance to get these rights of way back to standard would you consent to meeting myself and the Thurrock ramblers to progress that matter?

Councillor Gerrish:

I'm happy to meet with the group that you suggested and to give further background of the LSTF in that the funding stream that was bid for was the purpose of behaviour change initiatives and how that ties in with integrated transport block capital funding, obviously you would expect more of that revenue spend to come from the LSTF. Where we go from here the member will know that by 2020 the Government is required to have a definitive map of paths in the Borough and this is coming into focus and we have an officer working on this and I would be happy to meet with the rambles to take this further.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Hebb:

No.

2. From Councillor Hebb to Councillor Fish

Residents of Stanford are getting increasingly frustrated about wheellie bins being emptied and left in front of their driveways after collections, and not being put back the way they were found. What can the Portfolio Holder do to resolve this behaviour?

Councillor Fish:

Thank you Councillor Hebb for your question.

I have to say that I am a little surprised by your query, as having checked the records, there has not been a single complaint about this type of incident from a resident in the Stanford area since before November 1st last year. There are eight waste collection rounds working in the Stanford area across the residual, recycling, green waste and bulk bin services.

Whilst I am happy to reinforce our standing instruction to crews to return bins to the point at which they were left by the resident it seems to me that to simply give a blanket message to all employees working in the area that they are providing a poor service is not really going to resolve what can only be a very localised problem.

If you have specific locations and dates of poor performance you can as most Councillors do speak with or email John Gilford, Waste and Recycling Manager or if you wish I will take it up directly with the waste collection team on your behalf.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Hebb:

Thank you Cllr Fish for your response. Unlike Thurrock Labour I do have evidence behind some of the claims that I will try to substantiate in public.

There are emails in which the Chief Executive has been copied into and there are emails to the officer you mention. I also have photos which I can furnish you with.

I wasn't going to make this a beating session, a 'them and us' session I was just going to ask the question but clearly we have decided to make this party political.

Will you commit to speak back to the workforce. There is a problem it goes back to my piece on Hardie road and Bevin walk road earlier. One resident goes to park on the driveway with a baby in the car and can't park on the driveway, does she leave the baby in the car or in the house on its own whilst she moves the bins it is a pure matter of logistics. I just need the bins where they were taken put back to where they were taken. It's a simple question to be asked I am not being political will you support me with that?

Councillor Fish:

Yes

Mayor:

Councillor Sue Little, please read out your question to Councillor Gerrish, as set out on page 224 of the Agenda.

3. From Councillor S. Little to Councillor Gerrish

Can the portfolio holder outline how Thurrock Council engages with surrounding local authorities in cross or near border issues such as for instance the A13 widening, land sales and possible planning Applications?

Councillor Gerrish:

Obviously this is potentially a very broad question indeed that takes in portfolios such as strategy, finance, transport planning and various other areas of the Councils operations. The duty has fallen to me to respond to line up across these areas. If you would like to explore in any more depth of those particular portfolios we can come back to you in more detail.

Council staff engage with surrounding authorities at number of different levels. Strategic transport issues and funding are developed the South East Local Enterprise Partnership and Thames Gateway South Essex.

The Council are consulted on major planning applications from neighbouring authorities and in return we consult other authorities on strategic applications in our area. The Localism Act 2011 introduced a requirement on local authorities to undertake a Duty to Co-operate on planning issues that cross boundaries particularly relating to strategic matters. Examples of such issues would be housing, employment, transport infrastructure, minerals and waste and strategic sites. Local authorities are required to demonstrate that they have undertaken the Duty to Co-operate as part of the Local Plan process.

Thurrock Council is preparing a Duty to Co-operate protocol setting out how it will undertake the Duty to Cooperate with regard to its emerging Local Plan. In addition, Thurrock is working with other South Essex authorities on strategic matters and currently preparing a Statement of Cooperation and technical evidence such as the Strategic Housing Market Assessments. Under the Duty to Cooperate the Council formally responds on Local Plan consultations from other authorities in Essex, Kent and London as well as regional mineral and waste plans. The Council is also involved in the current process of the alterations of the London Plan and the emerging London Plan Review intended to begin this year.

Mayor:

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

Councillor S. Little:

Basildon and Brentwood have drawn up plans for the Dunton Garden Village for 6000 new homes, travellers sites and widening of the A128 right on Thurrock's borders.

Can the portfolio holder please tell me what plans he has in place to protect my rural village along the A128 Thurrock side and more specifically the Lower Dunton Road which is already a very vulnerable and poor quality road and at its narrowest is barely 12 feet wide and cannot possibly take any more traffic through, what would be one of the main roads that they could travel along coming into the Borough, and with my rural villages particularly Bulphan and Orsett they use the A128 at all the junctions and crossings in and out so I would like to know what is going to happen.

Councillor Gerrish:

Very happy to respond at the moment as I understand that particular application is subject to a formal consultation and I am very happy to consult with Councillor Little and any other Councillors before the Council submits our formal response.

Mayor:

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

Councillor S. Little:

Considering that we had shared services with in particular Brentwood Council would it not have been more prudent for one of the officers to actually tip us off to what was happening rather than give this consultation and we have only had it two weeks in the Council. Wouldn't it have been worth giving us a nod and letting us know that we were having 6000 houses going dead on our border?

Councillor Gerrish:

Thankyou Mr Mayor. I am sure there are a number of ways we would have liked to be better informed about what was going on in other Local Authorities. In terms of where we are at the moment I think we have an opportunity to respond as an Authority and therefore take that opportunity and I am very happy to shape that with anyone who wishes to contribute.

Mayor:

Councillor Hague, please read out your question to Councillor Gerrish, as set out on page 224 of the Agenda.

4. From Councillor Hague to Councillor Gerrish

What is the Council's policy for the maintenance of road markings on roundabouts and junctions?

Councillor Gerrish:

The intervention level for replacing road markings on junctions and roundabouts is when there is about 70% wear to the markings.

Mayor:

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

Councillor Hague:

Is the Portfolio Holder aware of a number of our key roundabout are in a poor state of repair, the white lines around the roundabouts in particular. A number of residents have come to myself about the Dartford Tunnel Roundabout, the Treacle Mine and I've witnessed a number of near incidents because of the difficulty of maintaining lane discipline when the white lines are not sufficiently visible.

Councillor Gerrish:

I am not happy about the markings across the Borough and have made my views known to a number of officers and believe there is a lot to do to get on and improve and look at all the available funding resources and bid on funding as we need a plan of improvement on road markings across the Borough.

The fundamental problem is that we don't have enough money as a borough to do all of the resurfacing work to improve Highways to get on and meet that challenge in its entirety. However I am absolutely resolved to where we can make good progress especially in road markings and safety issues and I will take this up as an absolute priority.

Mayor:

I am going to move on to Item 23 now, reports from Members and Officers representing the Council on outside bodies.

Councillor S. Little

Excuse me Mr Mayor. I was going to withdraw my next question and ask that it be put on the next Council agenda please. Thank you.

Councillor C. Baker

Mr Mayor. Obviously I will have to do the same.

Mayor

Thank you.