

Appendix A to the Council Minutes – 28 October 2020

Item 6 – Questions from Members of the Public.

There was no question submitted from members of the public.

Item 13 – Questions from Members

The Mayor informed the Chamber that no questions had been received to the Leader of the Council and 8 questions had been received to Cabinet Members, Committee Chairs and Member appointed to represent the Council on a Joint Committee had been received.

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

1. From Councillor Kerin to Councillor Coxshall

Thank you Mister Mayor. Can the Portfolio Holder please let this Chamber know how the Stanford-le-Hope Station Redevelopment is going?

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall.

Councillor Coxshall

This project has been through, as I said earlier really, a pause and review as lessons learnt off the A13, and coming out of that is now in a better place. It's more deliverable, more affordable, within its budget envelope, and more importantly, something the residents actually would like to see down there. The scheme is now progressing well, the scheme will be brought forward in two phases. Phase one will be the station site, and phase two will be the transport hub on the opposite side - the opposite side of the road, which we purchased earlier this year. Detailed designs will go into market, and one of the lessons learnt is to get a fixed price to satisfy the concerns of our Members which has been raised at the Committee a few times about how making sure that we don't get inflationary costs and mission creep on the scheme, so we are fixed price on both phases. The preparation and tender documents is now started and we will be drafting the contracts at the same time to move forward.

Mayor

Councillor Kerin, do you wish to pose a second question.

Councillor Kerin

Yes please Mister Mayor, and I'd like to thank the Portfolio Holder for his answer. Just generally, given the importance of this project I do find it somewhat lamentable that it warrants just a paragraph in this report, and just under two minutes worth of speech when it was brought up at Cabinet. So, therefore as a question to follow on, since July 2018 when it was declared in the press that the station plans are still on track, and up until the present day, how much has been spent on external consultants?

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall.

Councillor Coxshall

The external consultants is always expensive, coz like the problem is, I've got to do something and maybe disagree. Consultants are sometimes important in contracts to get the skillset and what we saw in the A13 expansion is we didn't have enough consultants – early time and skills actually in house, and what we've got to do is actually – and there is quite a lot of money and you're going to come out afterwards with how much it is, but I'm not going to say how much that is, but at this stage consultants are important. You can't just blame consultants, external consultants, when you need skills and we need the skillsets in here and instead of employing permanently. We're not a big like Development Corporation, this department, we're a very small department and has to rely on consultants. Development Corporation had, what, eighty staff I think, and we're delivering that with a fraction of that, what we were doing five years ago with the Development Corporation. So, I'm not going to be ashamed, we do employ consultants quite regularly in my department.

Mayor

Councillor Kerin, do you wish to pose a second supplementary?

Councillor Kerin

Thank you Mister Mayor. I know the Portfolio Holder has said before in previous answers about not giving guarantees, but when you look at the timeline of this project I think it's important tonight to give some reassurance to our residents about things definitely being on track, because the delivery timeline from 2016 when it was £12million, in 2018 it was declared to be on track, in February 2019 Cabinet approved another £4million, then there was pause and reflect, then at PTR in July 2020 the figure was £19million. So, can the Portfolio Holder please state for everybody what the final bill is going to be please?

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall.

Councillor Coxshall

It has to be delivered within the budget envelope of the agreed at Cabinet which was £19.7million from memory, just under £20million. It cannot go over that and that's why there will be a fixed price, coz of the concerns at PTR and I've mentioned it here, there's the Member's concern about the fixed price. We've got to get a fixed price, that's a fixed price and have to deliver that and that's why that's right in the contract. You'll be moaning at me there's another consultant to actually design this contract as well, but it's got to be, we can't do this in-house. We've got to make sure we do it properly and that's one of the lessons learnt from pause and reflect from the A13. Yes it's – in the next twenty years this will improve but I do take your point. I get it in the neck from my local colleagues of Stanford West weekly about making sure we get this back on track. I think we've got a great design here, the residents group are very happy about seeing it and we just need to now see some shovels in the ground – I agree with you completely.

Mayor

Thank you. Going on to question two from Councillor Byrne to Councillor Huelin. Councillor Byrne, please read out your question as set out on page 71 of the agenda.

2. From Councillor Byrne to Councillor Huelin

Yes, where does performing Arts sits in with Thurrock's plans bearing in mind the very precarious position the industry finds itself in at the moment?

Mayor

Councillor Huelin.

Councillor Huelin

Thank you Mister Mayor, thank you Councillor for your question. The Council recognises cultural activity like performing arts play an important role within our community, which is why the Council works collaboratively with groups and other local partners such as CVS and Creative People and Places to develop shared ambition around community driven arts activity and we actively support these groups. We're seeking funding avenues and continue to provide community grants. Arts England recently recognised too that performing arts that need help and we ourselves have secured £191,000 of funding to help us reopen the Thameside Theatre, if and only if we can reopen it safely to current guidelines. We recognise that many organisations have found themselves in a difficult position this year. We've promoted government support schemes such as the £10,000 grant system to small businesses, we've deferred rents where possible, and earlier this year arranged around a community arts grant to support artists and community groups delivering in Thurrock. Both BSDF and CEDF funding rounds have

recognised the effects of COVID, helping with repairs and rents as well as funding projects. Council will continue to support organisations as best it can through these difficult times.

Mayor

Councillor Byrne do you have a supplementary question?

Councillor Byrne

Yes please. I never – we seldom here any mention of the performing arts in this Chamber, but we constantly hear about mental health issues. There are proven medical benefits of the performing arts, sufferers keep off the meds and away from GPs. No finer example of that is the Opera House Choir and yet you've stopped they're funding and we've got members already going back to see their GP and are back on the meds. Can you give us any insurances that you will fight for Thurrock funding for these companies, like the Opera House and change everyone's mentality that it's 'only' performing arts.

Mayor

Councillor Huelin.

Councillor Huelin

Thank you Councillor. Firstly yes, totally recognise the mental health issues and health and wellbeing is really greatly helped by performing arts. As to the choir itself – as to the choir itself it's my understanding that the choir were funded by the Royal Opera House and not directly by Thurrock Council. Funding to the Royal Opera House came from the education budget for their works with schools and children, and not the arts budget so it doesn't fall under me. For a more detailed response I would suggest you redirect your question to Councillor Jefferies. As for the choir, like any other performing arts group they are able to take advantage of other funding avenues such as Arts England, the BSDF and the CEDF in the future, and officers here at the Council are here to support them with applications to find other avenues of funding and CVS as well will help them with their applications. We run workshops for people help them to fill out and find funding, so they're more than welcome to come to us.

Mayor

Councillor Byrne, do you wish to pose a final supplementary question?

Councillor Byrne

Yes please. We're going to see a wave of homelessness in Thurrock around Easter time when the eviction notices start taking place with the people in performing arts. Most are now on six months' notice to lose their house, so

can I ask you when you think of performing arts, it's not just about singers: it's about actors; it's about singers; it's about artistic directors; it's about assistant stage managers, backing singers; ballerinas; chaperones, circus performers, clowns; comedians, company stage managers, composers, conductors, concert pianists, contortionists, designers, dancers, it goes on and on and on.

Mayor

Is there a question coming?

Councillor Byrne

Yes – will we agree to treat performing arts as you will with every other industry in Thurrock please?

Councillor Huelin

I will treat all people that come forward from performing arts and arts groups to funding and for support from the Council. I will treat them all equally and fairly. You yourself, and I'm grateful for you coming to the panel, to help us cross-party help fund organisations that are in difficulty. We'll continue to do that. We can't show favouritism to one particular group, everybody's welcome to the same level of support from the Council.

Councillor Byrne

I'm sorry, the question was will we get the same deal as any other industry in Thurrock.

Mayor

Councillor Huelin.

Councillor Huelin

I can't answer for every other industry – I'm the arts Portfolio Holder and I'm answering on behalf of the arts in the Council.

Mayor

Thank you Councillor. Moving onto question three from Councillor Muldowney to Councillor Mayes. Councillor Muldowney will you please read out your question.

3. From Councillor Muldowney to Councillor Mayes

Councillor Muldowney

Thank you Mister Mayor. Will the Portfolio Holder use what influence he has to support the efforts of the CCG in recovering the £490,000 taken from

Thurrock Health Budgets to bail out Peterborough and Cambridgeshire last year?

Mayor

Councillor Mayes.

Councillor Mayes

Thank you Mister Mayor and thank you Councillor for your question. Yes this amount of money, which I'm led to believe is £480,000 not £490,000, was agreed by NHS England to actually be a loan rather than just taking the money. I have actually contacted the Accountable Officer for mid and south Essex to ask for his support in actually getting this money back, which I know you have also done at an overview and scrutiny committee. So I believe we have to keep on pressurising and I've been told that the money will come back. I believe a paper on agreement is going to be approved over the coming – sort of weeks, so that we can actually get a timeframe for this as well, so yes. Thank you.

Mayor

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

Councillor Muldowney

Yes please Mister Mayor. Thank you for your reply Councillor Mayes. I'm glad to hear that you've been speaking to the Accountable Officer for mid and south Essex, as indeed you're correct in saying, I have actually been chasing this issue for over a year through the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny. As you know, you're the only democratically elected local representative of the local health economy, so it is your responsibility to act on behalf of local residents to make sure they receive the health services they need. I was promised by the representative of NHS England at Health Scrutiny Committee over a year ago now that the payments would be started in the next year and would be repaid over the following three years. So that deadline came and went in September of this year and still no firm arrangements have been made for paying back this money. Can you give me any idea from your enquiries when this money will be paid back?

Mayor

Councillor Mayes.

Councillor Mayes

Thank you Mister Mayor. In terms of the absolutes, unfortunately not because the paper is going to be written and that actually will be more detailed. I will be chasing that as you would expect and we are all on board with this. At the end of the day, this money has come out of Thurrock and we need to make sure it

comes back, so we'll keep going. Thank you.

Mayor

Councillor Muldowney do you wish to pose a final question?

Councillor Muldowney

Thank you Mister Mayor. Just to say I'm happy that it's being chased, but I am rather concerned that -

Mayor

Is that a question or a statement?

Councillor Muldowney

And I would, if the health Portfolio Holder would come back to me as soon as possible with a deadline for when payment would start, I would appreciate that.

Mayor

Councillor Mayes.

Councillor Mayes

Thank you Mister Mayor. Obviously I will keep chasing, as I said and I'll update yourself as I know you've been chasing us as well. Thank you.

Mayor

Thank you. Moving onto question four, Councillor Okunade to Councillor Huelin. Councillor Okunade please read out your question as set out on page 71 of the agenda.

4. From Councillor Okunade to Councillor Huelin

Councillor Okunade

Thank you Mister Mayor. Within her portfolio remit of Corporate Strategy and Performance, as well as HR, what plans does the Portfolio Holder propose in ensuring the Council has a diverse workforce at the senior/chief officer level?

Mayor

Councillor Huelin.

Councillor Huelin

Thank you Mister Mayor. Thank you Councillor for your question. All our job adverts display the Council's commitment to diversity and our recruiting managers undertake shortlisting via applications where all of the personal details, like diversity information, has been redacted, so that it's a blind selection if you like, to ensure that there's no unconscious bias. The executive recruitment agencies that support us in appointing the roles, they're briefed very strongly on our commitment to diversity, and our requirement to present an experienced and diverse pool of candidates to us. The Council remain committed to ensuring that we have in place a workforce that represents the diverse community we serve and work is always ongoing to strengthen our approach to workforce and succession planning to ensure opportunities to all existing staff members, to receive training and progress and develop their careers.

Mayor

Councillor Okunade, do you have a supplementary question.

Councillor Okunade

Thank you very much Councillor Huelin for your response. Yeah my second – my first supplementary question is your recently published annual workforce equality data concluded that the Council is representative of the borough in terms of the senior management team. Can you explain how you've reached that conclusion?

Mayor

Councillor Huelin.

Councillor Huelin

Well the gender of the borough, there's like 174,300 precise, we think, residents, 51% of which are female and 49% are male. The Council workers we've got 70% female, 30% male; senior management 54% male, 46% – sorry 54% female, 46% male, so that's pretty representative, we've got more women than men. According to the last census the split on ethnicity for the borough is 85% of white background; 15% of black and other minority ethnics. At the Council staff we have about 71% white background and 11% BME and 18% have chosen not to reveal their ethnicity, so it's difficult to exactly say if we're right on target, but we do our best. We appoint on merit, it's done by actions and words. We try and do unbiased looking at applications, so I think we're representative in the fact that the percentages, if you look, are up or down in the same way. It's not an exact science, as I'm sure you know as you do sit on the General Services Committee that does help appoint staff, so you probably have a better idea than I do if that's done with an unbiased mind.

Mayor

Councillor Okunade, do you have a final question?

Councillor Okunade

Yes I do, and in fact I think there's need for more talk around this thing because this is – this is visibility and I can see what's happening and you can see what's happening without any statistics. So in terms of senior and chief officers you can see that can't you, without statistics. I know you committed in your report last year, you did say – sorry not last year, just last month – you were committed to valuing diversity and the issue is that if you do not even accept that there is issue, then how can you be committed. Okay, my question will then be, because you really do need to look inward and see what you're doing, you've said that yes I'm on General Services Committee, we give jobs, you know, to those but there is gap there and you obviously did say to me that you instruct, and there needs to be balanced representation here. Sorry, this is some issue that -

Mayor

Have we got a question coming please?

Councillor Okunade

Yes I have a question and firstly I would like you to look inward - inward and see the gap and my question is this: can you set a target for the Council to have diversity reflected in the management team, as well as in the majority of areas where there has been under-representation?

Mayor

Councillor Huelin.

Councillor Huelin

I'm not quite sure what you're saying – you're saying we see a gap, and I'm not quite sure what gap, because I would hope that everybody is employed on merit, of qualifications, and experience. Anybody can apply for the job, those job applications are sorted on experience, not on diversity. If people of, I don't know what you're referring to, anybody within the diverse community are not applying then we don't understand the reasons why they're not applying, then we need to look at that. I'd value your help and the input of other people like CVS who do an awful lot of work around diversity, and we can look at that, but it has to be on merit. We can't appoint – we can't use diversity, we employ because they're the right person for the job, not because they're a man or a woman or race exactly. We're both women, I would hope that I got my position on Cabinet due to my experience and that's why you're here as well, and that's what we need. If we're missing something then we need to look at it, but people, I feel definitely, are employed because of their experience and their merit, and not anything to do with their gender or race or any other thing.

5. From Councillor Holloway to Councillor Johnson

Councillor Holloway

Will the Portfolio Holder for Housing repair or replace and maintain the electronic gates currently providing much needed security to older people in our sheltered housing complexes?

Mayor

Councillor Johnson

Councillor Johnson

Thank you Mister Mayor. Thank you Councillor Holloway for your question. I am sure you are aware of the reason why we have undertaken a review of all the electronic gates not only in our sheltered housing complexes but right across the borough that is following a change in compliance regulations which in turn has amplified the fact that the gates are difficult to maintain and expensive to repair. We have involved all the ward councillors as well as the tenants in our consultation and I can advise that a number of suggestions have arisen as part of the exercise and I am pleased to inform you that a report will be presented to the Housing scrutiny meeting at the November meeting which will consider the said review with members and residents. Once I have a better detail from the feedback will of course decide one way or another what the outcome will be for the council gates but that will be in the best interest of all residents in Thurrock.

Mayor

Councillor Holloway do you have a supplementary question?

Councillor Holloway

Yes please Mister Mayor and thank you Councillor Johnson. I think I should have added into my question at no added cost to the older people in the borough. I am happy to say that since I tabled this question the gates in my ward are actually have been confirmed to be replaced. My question Mister Mayor is, Councillor Johnson, I am being told that my residents agreed to pay additional charges when the consultation choices sent to my residents only said either pay or have your security gate removed. I have spoken to my residents which I have 26 letters here addressed to you from people living in the complex who I do know do not think it is acceptable to have to pay for security they currently have. Why are you charging my older people in housing complexes for security they have been living with? Will you do the right thing and not charge older people to live safely in their own homes please.

Mayor

Councillor Johnson

Councillor Johnson

Like I said Councillor there is a consultation ongoing and once I have that feedback I will make that decision. But there are 29 sheltered housing complexes in this borough, only 6 of them have gates. So if we are looking for the fairness of the whole of Thurrock that has to be taken into account. Too much cost over real security would only ever result in security winning. However I do think there is an issue exactly what security gate is offering remember we are just talking about car park gates here. So you know off the top of my head the only security I can see is that security of a car parking space which is not fair for everyone in Thurrock.

Mayor

Councillor Holloway do you have a second supplementary question?

Councillor Holloway

Yes thank you Mister Mayor. I can assure you that my residents definitely don't see this as saving car parking spaces. I would be very happy for you to come and visit the site it is near a very busy school, it's quite secluded and it needs to remain that way. I assure you it is definitely used for the comfort and safety of residents. My question is Councillor Johnson you are going to bill my older residents living there for the next 15 years for the cost of these gates. I have been told they will be replaced. I am not sure what the consultation in the coming months will be but my assurances that they will be replaced. My question is why you think it is acceptable for this Council to pay £10 million on new council offices, £5 million for arrangements fees for billions of debt for officers to tell me there is no money and then charge my older residents in sheltered accommodation for a replacement security gate. Will you do the right thing and not charge the older people living in sheltered housing for their safety in their own homes.

Mayor

Councillor Johnson

Councillor Johnson

I keep repeating this is a consultation and we will get the details of the feedback and then we will make a decision. I haven't said I am going to charge anybody anything. We are looking for the feedback, once I have it we can make that decision. So I repeat there are only six of these complexes which have gates out of the whole 29. We are not just looking at sheltered housing we are looking at electronic gates right across the borough. They are expensive to replace. They are very very difficult to repair as well. I am trying to be fair to the whole borough. We will wait we will see what that feedback is

and when the Housing committee scrutiny has seen the report then we will have more feedback we will make a decision. Thank you Councillor.

6. From Councillor Muldowney and Councillor Mayes

Councillor Muldowney

What steps is the Portfolio Holder taking to address the health and air quality impacts on Thurrock residents posed by the Lower Thames Crossing?

Mayor

Councillor Mayes

Councillor Mayes

Thank you Mister Mayor and thank you Councillor for your question. In 2018, the Council joined with Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea and Kent County Council in writing a letter promoting the production by LTC/HE of a standalone Health Impact Assessment, which was agreed by LTC. The draft combined Health & Equalities Impact Assessment was shared in early August and officers have commented on the draft document. A Summary Paper was produced for the Task Force and then discussed at its meeting on 12 October. Regarding specific air quality matters, drafts of some of the Environmental Statement chapters were received by Highways England and detailed comments have been made, including air quality. These comments have been produced with input from the Council's public health and environmental health teams. Myself and officers will continue to pursue the points and issues raised once the DCO submission has been made. Any outstanding matters will be recorded in the Local Impact Report which is anticipated will be subject to a report to Council in the coming months. Officers and the consultant team are fully aware that this is a critically important issue for the Council and of its residents.

Mayor

Councillor Muldowney do you have a supplementary question?

Councillor Muldowney

I do thank you Mister Mayor. Thank you Councillor Mayes for your reply. I must admit I was very surprised not to see the Lower Thames Crossing included in your report to council last month. It seems like a significant omission particularly as you sat alongside me on the Lower Thames Crossing Task Force and listened to evidence about the existing health issues suffered by those along the route. In fact at the September 2019 LTC task force you highlighted your concerns about the high levels of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in Tilbury and at that point you felt it would be difficult for the Lower Thames Crossing to mitigate, for Highways England to mitigate against the health impacts of the crossing and you are asked for your

concerns to be noted. Is this still your view and if so why was this not included in your report to council last month. If it isn't your view what's happened in the mean time for you to change your mind.

Mayor

Councillor Mayes

Councillor Mayes

Thank you Councillor for your question. Yes I have been sitting in the LTC meetings and it was very difficult to sit through last year and I am very glad the chair has changed on that one. The fact is there is going to be air quality issues it is not up for debate, I've said it, we've all said it, and we've all said the same thing time and time again. The DCO I believe has been submitted now following a conversation I had with the chair earlier so obviously we need to look at the health impact assessment and see what will happen now. The report was based on what we have been doing over the past year and that also included some of the work done by my colleague, the other councillor, so yes my feelings have not changed there is going to be a lot of pollution and the fact is we have said what you have raised the fact that I had said that so thank you very much. So therefore nothing has changed for me but we have to be pragmatic about this as the LTC has been submitted to the DCO and we need to think about how we proceed with this not necessarily go round in the same arguments again. Thank you.

Mayor

Councillor Muldowney do you have a second supplementary question?

Councillor Muldowney

I do thank you Mister Mayor. Thank you Councillor Mayes for your reply and glad that you still agree with yourself now that you are a conservative councillor rather than when you were a Thurrock independent councillor. I note you have been removed from the Lower Thames Crossing task force at last month's council meeting after a quite patchy attendance it must be said as a conservative councillor but I hope you have ...

Mayor

Councillor, Councillor Muldowney we are running really short of time can you get to a question or we will move on.

Councillor Muldowney

I am just getting to it Mister Mayor if you just let me. Ok I am glad that you raised the health quality impact assessment which was brought to the October meeting. This assessment highlighted

Mayor

Where's the question. I want a question. Councillor, Councillor. There wasn't a question, you were taking too much and I have put you on mute.

7. From Councillor J Kent to Councillor Coxshall

Councillor J Kent

Will the Portfolio Holder outline the Administration's plans for the future of the Thameside complex?

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall

Councillor Coxshall

The plans for, as I have been saying quite a bit tonight actually, the plans for the Thameside complex are currently under review to assess the impacts of the virus on the services provided in the building. When we are in a position to discuss the potential futures and the outcomes of the review we will report back here.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent do you have a supplementary question?

Councillor J Kent

The problem with that Mister Mayor is that we have never been told what the plans currently under review were. This has been going on now since January 2017 when Cabinet received a report that told us that the building would likely close in the following year. There was been no further report that has been made public. Will the portfolio holder now commit to publishing a report on plans for the future of the Thameside Complex?

Councillor Coxshall

Yes of course we have got to decide what we want to do with the Thameside Complex. It is a multiply building, we have had questions tonight about how we are going to deliver our culture entitlement, we do that as part of the live work and play, we need that bit, and live is an important element of that. Now the Thameside is how do we deliver that, it was been quite a while, when the administration took over we had ideas on moving the whole lot onto the Grays Beach area and then we were talking about putting it here in the council so there has been multiple conversations at every committees on going forward. But what we can do is actually come to an end of this. I think the Boards, that Grays Board with the money has got to make a decision, the High Street bids have got to come to a decision, the adult college has got to a make decision

whether this moves into the town centre, which was announced tonight by Andrew by moving it out of Richmond Road. There are multiple options all of them need to go through a good scrutiny and as soon as possible. I think that it has got to come to an end and I think we need to decide the way forward. And COVID has delayed this obviously.

Mayor

Councillor J Kent to you have a second supplementary question?

Councillor J Kent

Mister Mayor we have had four years of dither. We need to get to a conclusion. So I will ask the portfolio holder when does he expect to be in a position to give the general public in Thurrock some idea of future plans for that building.

Mayor

Councillor Coxshall

Councillor Coxshall

In due course.

As the item fell due to time limit of the meeting Councillor J Kent resubmitted question 8 for November Council.