



COUNCIL MEETING – 19 July 2006

Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 1

From: Councillor Collin

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Safety

'Could the Portfolio Holder inform Council what the performance was in the District for Violent Crime last year (ending, I presume 1st April 2006). Specifically

- How many violent crime incidents were there?
- What was the percentage change from the previous 12-month figure?'

Reply

'In the year ending 31 March 2006 there were a total of 1,400 incidents of violent crime in Winchester District.

This is against a target of 715 incidents for the year, but this target was based on the Police's Winchester Town area not the district so is not comparable. The actual number of incidents in the Winchester Town area was 894 in 2005/06. This was above the target of 715 but was a reduction of 16% from 2004/05 when there were 1,071 incidents.

The method of recording crime incidents has changed recently so these figures are not representative of an increase in violent crime. As explained previously the geographical areas have been altered and also violent incidents can now generate one record per person involved and also include many incidents that were previously reported under other headings, such as domestic abuse.

It is intended that the current recording system will be in operation for some time to come so future crime figures will be comparable and will demonstrate a true trend.'



Winchester
City Council

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QUESTION 2

From: Councillor Rees

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities

'Would the Portfolio Holder agree with me that the level of void housing units currently sustained by this Council is totally unacceptable and would he outline what proposals he has to reduce these and over what period?'

Reply

'Whilst demand for general needs housing is high, the demand for older persons housing in the district is low. Also, refusal rates for older persons accommodation are very high and this only serves to lengthen the time taken to let properties. A number of initiatives have recently been tried to promote the take-up of the harder to let units, including offering a package of improved incentives, and holding of open days at properties to allow prospective tenants to express their interest taking up a tenancy. Some success has been achieved with these approaches, and similar efforts will continue to be made to promote take-up.

The whole process of how the Council allocates and lets property is currently subject to review and re-engineering. From September, the Landlord division will take on much of the process. With more staff able to support the process, it will be possible to achieve an improvement in general performance. The aim of the change will be to reduce average letting times to from the existing 25 days to 15 days.

However, there is currently an oversupply of this accommodation and discussions are underway with housing partners on how best to rationalise provision.'



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QUESTION 3

From: Councillor Rees

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities

'Would the Portfolio Holder agree with me that to have a 3 bedroom flat in sheltered accommodation empty for over 3 years (as is the case in my Ward) is totally unacceptable and can he tell me exactly what proposals he has to remedy this situation to ensure that all Council properties are let as soon as possible when they become vacant?'

Reply

'In areas of high demand for affordable housing, leaving any property empty without good reason is not acceptable and a number of steps are currently being taken to address this issue.

The flat you refer to was previously the scheme manager's accommodation. The Council has been considering the future of the scheme manager role as part of its response to the Supporting People agenda. The Supported Housing Informal Member/Officer Working Group made a number of recommendations to Cabinet last year which included not replacing scheme manager posts at smaller sheltered schemes. This approach has now been reviewed as part of the County Council's review of the Supporting People contract for older person's accommodation and new grant has been agreed on this basis.

Where appropriate, the Council has let similar units to homeless families on a short term licenses. This has resulted in a number of lettings taking place across the district. However, this represents a significant change in the use of the accommodation and is not appropriate in every situation given the potential impact on existing sheltered tenants.

It is now planned for the remaining units to be brought back into use for general needs accommodation or larger units of sheltered housing. However, in some instances conversion works are required to restrict access or separate shared facilities between the accommodation and communal lounges etc.'



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QUESTION 4

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Safety

'Could the Portfolio Holder advise me where occupants of the "Top Site" in Micheldever could go to if they are evicted from the Micheldever site?

Could I also be advised of the responsibility on this Authority to make provision for sites for gypsies and travellers?'

Reply

With regard to the issue of the occupants of the "Top Site", Officers will liaise with Hampshire County Councils Gypsy and Travelers Unit to identify suitable alternative sites for those families that wish to remain within Hampshire. The County owns and manages 5 permanent sites in Hampshire.

Responsibility for Provision

'On 2 February 2006, the ODPM issued a new set of documents concerning the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers.

They include:

- The new planning circular 01/2006 – planning for gypsy and caravan sites – which replaces circular 1/94;
- A practice guide (still draft) on gypsy and traveller accommodation assessments;
- A consultation paper on the definition of gypsies and travellers to be used for Housing Act and accommodation assessment purposes;
- A new guide for local authorities on their responsibilities and powers.'



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QUESTION 5

From: Councillor Hiscock

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

'When can Members expect to see some new guidance relating to developments in Winchester?'

Reply

'The Winchester Local Plan Review was formally adopted on Friday 7 July 2006 and provides the latest guidance on planning and related issues for Winchester and all other parts of the District.

Work is well underway on the production of the Local Development Framework which will in due course replace the Local Plan Review in accordance with the requirements of the new planning system.'



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QUESTION 6

From: Councillor Hiscock

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

'Does the Portfolio Holder think that the Bill proposed by Greg Clark MP, to disallow building houses in back gardens would be of benefit to Winchester District?'

Reply

'The purpose of Mr Clark's Bill is not to prevent or 'disallow' building in or on back gardens. It is to return to local planning authorities a proper degree of control over whether or not an application is acceptable. If brought into law the Bill aims to ensure that back gardens are no longer considered as 'brownfield' land – a situation which the majority of Winchester residents find difficult to understand.

Not all applications for the redevelopment of underused land, including garden land, are unwelcome, but we believe that existing guidance places unreasonable constraints on local planning authorities in determining those applications. This can lead to development which harms the character of an area in pursuit of targets for the use of 'brownfield land' which many people would argue is nothing of the kind. This is precisely the opposite of what we should be seeking to achieve.'



Winchester
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QUESTION 7

From: Councillor Higgins

To: The Leader of the Council

'Can you inform us of what partnership arrangements have been made with Winchester in Bloom about the hanging baskets?'

Reply

'Because of the late timing of the erection of the hanging baskets in Winchester this year, there was insufficient time to agree any formal arrangements with the WIB Group regarding this year's arrangements. The cost of the baskets was therefore met by the City Council including their watering which is already included within the Grounds maintenance contract.'

Insofar as future arrangements are concerned, it is proposed to prepare a paper for Cabinet in the Autumn setting out the options which will include the role of the WIB Group in the running of any In Bloom competition.'



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QUESTION 8

From: Councillor Beveridge

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Safety

'In line with the Corporate Priority of safeguarding our high quality environment the Council has the objective of increasing our residents' pride in the place where we live. In conformity with this objective the Environment Scrutiny Panel has set up a Member/Officer Working Group with a view to improving the street scene. As many of the responsibilities for streets lie with Hampshire County Council, what steps have been taken to engage the County Council in this project?'

Reply

'The involvement of Hampshire County Council in achieving improvements in the overall streetscene management will be an important factor for the Informal Member/Officer Group to consider as many such activities such as footway maintenance, lamp-posts, weed control, street signs etc fall within the remit of their Highways staff.

I have considered an initial position paper on the issue from the Head of Environment which set out the areas to be considered within the overall review. I plan to discuss these in more detail with the appropriate Portfolio Holder at Hampshire County Council in order to seek their assistance with the forthcoming review.

The results of the review are likely to be available in the Spring and the results will be reported to the Environment Scrutiny Panel and then Cabinet for consideration.'



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QUESTION 9

From: Councillor Rees

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities

'Would the Portfolio Holder give an assurance that the Supported People Working Party will continue and the majority party will do everything to sustain its work to enable it eventually to report to the appropriate Committees on its outcomes and conclusions?'

Reply

'The next meeting of the Supported Housing Working Party has been arranged for 1 August 2006.

In recent months, work in this area has concentrated on completing the County Council review of our older persons accommodation and officers have been negotiating and finalising the detail of the new Supporting People contracts.

This process is now nearing completion and in the coming months the Working Party will be concentrating on:

- Options for the future funding of Central Control
- The development of medium term asset management plans for each of the existing schemes
- A general review of sheltered provision by all providers in the district compared to current and potential future demand
- A review of the longer term future of sheltered housing and how it meets the requirements of the Local Strategic Partnerships emerging strategy for Older People.

All findings and recommendations will be reported to Cabinet. A timetable for decision making will be determined at the meeting in August.'



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QUESTION 10

From: Councillor Beveridge

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

'Following complaints from residents in the District about the delay in dealing with requests for investigations and action on planning infringements, the Council decided, about three years ago, to increase the number of officers employed in the Enforcement Team and to finance this from the Planning Delivery Grant. This led to a much improved service.

As this Grant is expected to finish at the end of this year, will the Portfolio Holder either allocate funds from elsewhere in the planning budget to maintain the level of service provided by the Enforcement Team or accept that the number of officers employed in the service will have to reduce when the Grant ends or ask his cabinet colleagues to divert funds from another part of the Council's budget to maintain the size of the Enforcement Team.'

Reply

'The provision of a robust and effective enforcement service is an essential element in the development control process. That is why the Council created additional capacity in the team when Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) first became available, something which had widespread support.

It has always been clear to Members that the provision of the enhanced enforcement service depended on the continued provision of funds through PDG. The PDG scheme comes to an end in 2007/08 and there is no indication at this stage of any further planning related funding stream over and above the Council's normal grant from central Government. This creates considerable uncertainty for all local planning authorities which is very unwelcome but cannot easily be avoided.

It is therefore necessary to consider what arrangements are made for the level and funding of the enforcement service in the future and a report is due to come to Cabinet in the Autumn. It would be wrong to preempt discussion of that report as the details are currently being prepared by officers.

The enforcement team has been temporarily reconfigured following the recent departure of the Enforcement Manager pending the decision about the long term structure and funding of the team.'



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QUESTION 11

From: Councillor Hiscock

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities

‘Does the Portfolio Holder intend to continue assessing the suitability of land held within the HRA to be brought forward for development?’

Reply

‘Yes, the identification of suitable land across the whole of the district (not just HRA land) is an important part of the Councils enabling work and makes a significant contribution towards the provision of new affordable housing.

Building on land owned by the Council is a very cost effective way for Housing Associations to develop new housing as it is the Council’s practice to give the land away for a nominal consideration. Since the abolition of Social Housing Grant it is the principal way the Council subsidises new affordable housing.

During 2005/2006 the Council (through its partner Housing Associations) secured planning permission for 41 affordable housing units (4 sites) on its own land, every effort will continued to be made to secure further suitable sites.’



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QUESTION 12

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Leader of the Council

'Could the Leader advise me of how much notice was given to tenants of the Casson Block when recent work was undertaken by the Council's contractors and why, unlike Southern Gas Networks, the Council has no scheme to compensate traders if they have suffered financially?'

Reply

'A letter setting out the estimated timing of the works to the Casson block was hand delivered to all tenants on 3 May 2006. In the previous weeks a member of staff called in to the shops to forewarn them of the pending works and to make note of any particular concerns at that point.

The shopkeepers were informed that the work involved roof repairs, installing vents and repairing brickwork to the main walls. Scaffolding was to be erected but as many gaps as possible in accordance with health and safety regulations were to be made to allow as much visible access to the shops as possible.

The estimated starting time to erect the scaffolding was 13/14 May 2006 and completion of the work was due in 6/8 weeks. Weather permitting the work would largely be completed by the first week in July.

In the event the scaffolding was not erected to the front of the building until a week later than stated and the scaffolding was removed in time for the weekend of the Hat Fair i.e. Friday 30 June 2006. Therefore the work started later and finished a week earlier than planned.

To meet health and safety requirements coloured netting was installed over the scaffolding. Following complaints this was amended by using wired fencing panels to give better visibility to the shops although some end sections were required to have the safety netting attached. The Council and its contractor did everything practically possible to assist the shopkeepers during the period of the work to keep interruptions to businesses to the minimum.

Under the various leases the Council has a legal obligation to keep the roof and exterior of the property in good repair. For obvious reasons it was judged that the roof works were best carried out over the summer period.

As the repairs are for the benefit of the shops and offices, and undertaken to meet the Council's legal obligations to occupiers, compensation as suggested in the question is not justified.'



Winchester
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QUESTION 13

From: Councillor Rees

To: The Leader of the Council

'Would the Leader agree with me that the current agreed maximum time of 10 working days to answer a question or enquiry put by a Member to an officer is too long and would he consider instituting a shorter time period?'

Reply

'The Council has in the past agreed a ten day target for a response to Member queries in line with our target for responding to letters from members of the public. Where possible, officers will try and respond more quickly, but may on occasion need to pursue detailed information from colleagues. If a reply is likely to be delayed, the Member concerned should be advised that that is the case and told roughly how long a substantive reply will require.

The target was originally set for written material. With e-mail now the commonest form of communication, I understand officers aim to achieve the same maximum turn-around time for e-mails. Whilst we all fall into the trap of expecting instant responses when we click a mouse, an electronic enquiry may still necessitate research before a full response can be given.

I have asked the Portfolio Holder for Performance & Communications to review these targets alongside our overall targets for responses to letters, e-mails and telephone calls to see whether we should enhance the standard of service we offer.'



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QUESTION 14

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

'Does the Portfolio Holder share my concern that at present it is less expensive for residents of Badger Farm to drive to the existing Park and Ride site than it is for them to use the bus service from Badger Farm.

Could the Portfolio Holder advise me as to whether there is any thought of subsidising this service?'

Reply

'There is no current consideration of subsidising the service to which Cllr Tait refers.

However, the proposed South of Winchester Park and Ride which is now the subject of consultation will provide a very considerably enhanced service in the vicinity of Badger Farm and Oliver's Battery whilst primarily serving commuters who will no longer have to drive into Winchester town centre or further up the M3 to the existing Park and Ride sites.

Detailed discussions regarding routes and service costs will be considered by the City Council in due course.'



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QUESTION 15

From: Councillor Higgins

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

'Can the Portfolio Holder inform us of what discussion he has had regarding the reduction of bus services in the area?'

Reply

'I asked officers to seek the views of Members in the wards affected by the latest proposals from the County Council. Further information regarding the justification for the proposals has also been sought from the County Council. The County Council will be advised of the City Council's views by letter in due course.

In terms of my own discussions, I elected to await the views of local Ward members but to date I understand that none has been received. I did however take an opportunity earlier today to informally raise the matter with a relevant Executive Member when at the County Council. While I do not want to prejudice what we may eventually say in our formal response and while I invariably regret the demise of public transport services in these circumstances, I have to say that it appears unlikely that the County Council will be persuaded not to implement further reductions in bus services which are the direct consequence of the rising cost of subsidising lightly used routes and not of "cuts" in the level of subsidy.'