



Winchester
City Council

COUNCIL MEETING – 18 April 2007

Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 1

From: Councillor Clohosey

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities

“Could the Portfolio Holder please inform me why the decision to increase the rents of council garages to private tenants was such a sharp one and why more notice of such an increase was not given?”

Reply

“Council garages form part of the Council’s social housing stock and income from garages goes towards supporting the Housing Revenue Account, along with dwelling rents and other charges to tenants.

In 2006/07, the HRA operated at a deficit in excess of £100,000. With increasing service demands, balances reducing to £700,000 and housing negative subsidy increasing each year, this clearly could not continue.

The City Council has little flexibility over dwelling rent levels and service charges. A review of charges by other landlords revealed that rents for Council garages were significantly lower than in neighbouring areas and the decision was therefore taken to set rents in line with average charges in Hampshire (CAB 1369 dated 13 December 2006 refers), resulting in a charge to non-Council tenants of £9.99 (£8.50 + VAT).

Tenants and leaseholders were consulted on these proposals through TACT and the decision was covered by local press in January. All garage tenants were formally notified in early March.

Whilst the percentage increase is high, the rent charged for Council garages still represents good value for money when compared with other councils in Hampshire. A private resident renting a garage from Portsmouth City Council would pay £14.51 per week. Most other Council landlords in Hampshire charge approximately £10 per week.”



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QUESTION 2

From: Councillor Cooper

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Safety

“Does the Council still operate (through SERCO) an ‘Anti - Graffiti Hit Squad?’

If so:

- a) How many ‘clean up operations’ were achieved in 2006/07?
- b) What was the total cost of providing this specific service in 2006/07?”

Reply

“The City Council does still use Serco to remove graffiti as part of its overall street cleaning contract and is increasingly supplementing this service using partnerships with the probation service, the Winchester City Centre partnership Graffiti Busters service and through the team of neighbourhood wardens. Officers have also met with the Police to discuss options for identifying and catching offenders within the City Centre.

Removal data has not been previously recorded as the work is included within the overall street cleansing service contract, but it is hoped to do so in future, using mobile working and GIS technology to plot locations and numbers of incidents. The data will include an estimate of the removal costs for each incident.

For the same reasons, it is also not possible to separately identify removal costs for graffiti removal. However the overall cost of the street cleaning contract for 2006/07 was £935,000 although the majority of this cost relates to street sweeping and litter removal.”



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QUESTION 3

From: Councillor Beveridge

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

“It is clear from the comments made by several of the consultees and objectors that the scale, height and massing of most of the buildings proposed for the Silver Hill development are significantly greater than nearly all the other buildings in the centre of Winchester and that this development will therefore be different in character from the rest of the City.

Now that the Planning Development Control Committee has resolved to grant permission for the Silver Hill development, does the Portfolio Holder agree with me that it is important to avoid these characteristics of this development setting a precedent and being replicated elsewhere in the City?

To reduce the risk of this happening, will the Portfolio Holder agree to make arrangements for a study to be undertaken of Winchester's townscape with a view to introducing supplementary planning policies and design guidance which include building heights and massing. This should ensure that the characteristics of Winchester's townscape which have been assessed as worthy of protection in the 1999 Future of Winchester Study and the 2003 Winchester Conservation Area Project are protected or enhanced when future development is undertaken.”

Reply

“Councillor Beveridge is right to draw attention to the importance of ensuring that development in Winchester is of a scale and character which is appropriate to the setting. What is judged correct for Silver Hill would, of course, not necessarily be appropriate elsewhere within the City. The same applies to all forms of development.

However, the amount of work involved in producing the type of study suggested by Cllr Beveridge would be very substantial, as it would amount to judging, in advance, what was appropriate across a large part of the town area. It would undoubtedly provoke substantial argument and objections, the resolution of which would be difficult in isolation from individual applications. No provision has been made within current work programmes or budgets for the production of such guidance, which would also need to be included within the Council's Local Development Scheme.

The policies within the Local Plan Review (particularly HE.4 and HE.5), taken in conjunction with national policy guidance (e.g. PPG15), provide sufficient control and guidance to ensure that the Council can determine any application on its merits and have sufficient justification to resist unsuitable development.

So whilst I will agree with Cllr Beveridge about the importance of getting these matters right, I cannot agree with his proposed course of action.”



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QUESTION 4

From: Councillor Evans

To: The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources

“Could the Portfolio Holder inform me of the current administration’s policy towards drawing on our reserves?”

Reply

“The policy is stated in the Financial Strategy:

‘Reserves will not be used to fund annual, recurring expenditure’.

Further information on reserves is set out in the Budget & Council Tax setting paper for this year:

- The General Fund working balance stands at £2m which is considered to be adequate
- The Major Investment Reserve is available to support specific projects, both revenue and capital, and
- Other Earmarked Reserves exist for specified purposes.



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QUESTION 5

From: Councillor Hiscock

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

"Will the Portfolio Holder tell me of any proposals for developments on any allotment site within Winchester District?"

Reply

"The Council recognises the social importance of allotments and tries to ensure their preservation, particularly where they are well used.

On occasion there will be proposals for development where the social good of the development outweighs the loss of an allotment. Currently where a proposal for development which involves allotment land progresses to the level where consultation becomes necessary, then hopefully the community would become involved. If it was significant, a community planning process might be appropriate. That would be the way the Council and its partners would approach major developments that they were sponsoring.

Currently there are a number of Council and partner development opportunities that are being explored which, if they were appropriate and viable, might involve the loss of allotment land. Given the approach the Council takes, if any such development were to progress, then public consultation would be undertaken and the views of the community used in the decision making process."



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QUESTION 6

From: Councillor Lipscomb

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health & Safety

“Will the Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health & Safety accept my thanks as a local Ward Member for arranging for the A34 South of Bullington Cross to be litter picked on 16 April?”

Will he, in recognition of the fact that this stretch of the A34 has become notorious for truly excessive and unacceptable levels of wayside litter - some of which blows into adjacent communities and all of which creates an unfavourable impression for visitors - please undertake to provide without delay adequate litter bins in the A34 lay bys South of Bullington Cross, coupled with a regular collection regime, noting that such a course would be in line with the practice of Councils responsible for the road to the North? Will he also undertake to urgently explore innovative ways of tackling this problem in conjunction with adjacent local authorities, the County Council and the Highways Agency?”

Reply

“Regrettably, experience reveals that much of the litter affecting the A34 network and surrounding areas is thrown from vehicles using this stretch of road. This makes tackling the problem notoriously difficult.

Staff have worked for sometime in partnership with adjacent local authorities, the Highways Agency, Mott MacDonald and the County Council to address this issue. Recent successes have included night time clearances of litter whilst road works are underway which reduces the cost of this service. A trial programme of providing litter bins in lay-bys is also underway, to evaluate whether this will have an impact on the root cause of the problem. In this respect it may not necessarily be judged as best practice, if it does not reduce the amount of litter thrown from vehicles.

Finally, officers have had recent discussions with the owners of the Sutton Scotney Service Station which has been identified as a hot spot for littering of the local area. They will continue to push for improved clearance of this area, if necessary through enforcement action.

Officers will continue to explore other ways to improve the situation in the hope of securing long term improvements.”



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QUESTION 7

From: Councillor Jackson

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

“In the light of recent local press coverage, is the Portfolio Holder satisfied that the system of Tree Preservation Orders is working effectively?”

Would he agree that inappropriately placed Tree Preservation Orders are having the effect of causing the felling of trees prior to planning applications being submitted for fear of a Tree Preservation Order being imposed?

Is he aware of the apparent inequities of the system which, at the same time, seems to ignore the felling of trees that residents feel should have Tree Preservation Orders because of their high amenity value, but are unprotected?”

Reply

“I am not aware of the press coverage to which Councillor Jackson refers, but our two arboricultural officers always seek early involvement where planning applications are being considered and where there is a potential impact on trees. Working to a recognised British Standard (BS5837:2005 Trees In Relation to Construction) appropriate assessment of the trees is made and recommendations for retention of good quality trees put forward as supplementary documentation with the application. In most cases applicants welcome the input from the arboricultural officers and the application progresses with suitable conditions in place to secure the long term viability of on site trees. Inevitably, a small proportion of cases results in recommendation for refusal and a tree preservation order (TPO) may be served to protect trees which may then be under threat.

The arboricultural team is fully aware of the problems caused by inappropriately placed TPOs and use their experience, government guidance and industry best practice to secure long term tree retention, in the most suitable way in each situation. Our officers are highly regarded and their views are sought at the outset of many applications where trees may be a constraint.

There is no doubt that in a few cases, trees on a potential development site which are not subject to a TPO are removed before any discussion with planning officers is begun, but such cases are fortunately rare and the number of trees which are lost that could actually have been subject to a TPO is small.

Local residents have always been encouraged, through various mechanisms including Parish Councils and the Tree Warden Scheme (now in its 15th year in Winchester), to publicise their important trees in documents such as Parish Plans, Village Design Statements and more recently Local Area Design Statements (LADS). The arboricultural officers regularly receive communications from residents with regard to trees which are considered to be important within their locality. Our arboricultural officers welcome requests for TPOs and have a duty to ensure that the TPO is defensible, meets the recommendations of government guidance and is prudent use of public resources. The officers may ask several questions before deciding whether to progress to a site visit.

A site visit normally involves liaison with the resident who requested the TPO and our officers follow a nationally recognised methodology called TEMPO (Tree Evaluation Method for Preservation Orders) to assess compliance with guidance laid down in the governments publication, Tree Preservation Orders: a guide to management and good practice. If a TPO is not possible the resident is informed of the reasons. If a TPO is to be served the officer continues to gather the required information and draw up the necessary paperwork.

In light of the above, it appears that the system for protecting trees, in accordance with our statutory obligation, is robust, well organised and meets the guidance set out by central government.”



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QUESTION 8

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Safety

“Could the Portfolio Holder give me an idea as to the success of the 101 service and what impact it has had on the resources of this Authority?”

Reply

“When the 101 service was launched last year, the Council initially received a large volume of reports that took a significant time to deal with. Some required direct action but many were for information only; however the majority were additional to previous workloads. More recently, the Customer Service Team has put in place processes that streamline the service, which in turn has reduced the volume of calls to Council Officers. However, it does still require resources from services such as Housing, Community Safety, Neighbourhood Wardens, Environment and Customer Services.

The positive outcomes from the 101 service are around the public's ability to share a worry at any time of the day or night, increasing access to the required services. However, there are negative aspects such as the public's perception that prompt action will be taken about every complaint, which cannot be achieved. The existence of the 101 service has also increased the number of incidents reported, many of which are of a low-level nature, which would not have been reported previously. Some are also related to long-term behaviour and cannot be dealt with quickly, but require a more complex strategy to find a remedy and this is often difficult to explain to complainants.

Nationally, the roll-out of the 101 service has been frozen for a year whilst the Government continues to evaluate the current pilots. This indicates that the Government is unclear as to the impact on the agencies affected and the benefits felt by the public. A clearer picture should emerge late in 2007 as to the future for the 101 service both in Hampshire and nationwide.”



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QUESTION 9

From: Councillor Johnston

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport

“Why was it necessary to send out bus passes by first class mail when the existing pass had several weeks of validity to run? In addition would it not be possible to include passes in the same envelope when sending passes to the same address. How many passes for over sixties are issued?”

Reply

“The bus passes issued in March were sent by first class post, as a result of an unnecessary but well intentioned decision by a member of staff wishing to ensure that all customers received their pass in time for use on 1 April. Passes now being issued are sent second class.

Passes are processed according to a consecutive serial number not in alphabetical order and it would take a time-consuming and therefore expensive manual process to sort through the 13,000 passes that are issued to put those going to the same address in the same envelope.”



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QUESTION 10

From: Councillor Cooper

To: The Leader

“Does the Leader recognise the importance of the continued operation of Portsmouth Naval Base for the socio-economic wellbeing of the Winchester District?

If so, will he follow the example of the Portsmouth, Southampton, Fareham and Gosport authorities by formally endorsing the ‘Save Our Base’ petition organised by the Portsmouth News with a letter (signed by all Cabinet Members) to the Secretary of State for Defence?” (Copy to Portsmouth News)

Reply

“I certainly recognise the importance of the Portsmouth Naval Base, not only to Winchester, but for the wider South Hampshire community. The Leaders of all the Councils which make up the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH), including myself, have written to the Secretary of State for Defence urging the Base’s value be recognised. PUSH have sent the MoD detailed research on the social and economic consequences of a reduction or end to naval operations at Portsmouth.

If colleagues on the Council are content, I am happy to sign the ‘Save Our Base’ petition and am sure I do so with the full support of the whole Council. I will also write as Councillor Cooper suggests, on behalf of all Members.”



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QUESTION 11

From: Councillor Evans

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Safety

“Whilst I understand that Members have no individual rights to make representations at committee under the current Licensing laws, could the Chair please inform me how Members are informed of applications for licensed events in their wards which may attract large numbers of people attending and how they find out about decisions taken if there is a committee hearing?”

Reply

“An email is regularly sent to all Members and Parish Councillors setting out brief details of all Licensing Act applications which have been received. The minutes of the meeting are posted on the web-site as soon as they are available but, at present, there are no separate arrangements in place to notify Members of the results of such applications.

Applications can only be considered by the Licensing Sub-Committee where a relevant representation is received (from the responsible authorities such as the Police or Fire and Rescue Service, or local residents/businesses). The City Secretary and Solicitor has confirmed that in such cases, the internal procedures will be changed to ensure that Ward Members are notified of the result of any applications which are heard by the Sub-Committee.”



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QUESTION 12

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities

“In view of the recent excellent recognition of the work that this Council is undertaking in tackling homelessness, could the Portfolio Holder update me on the number of rough sleepers and homeless people that there are in our district and what further measures are planned to deal with this very serious issue?”

Reply

“At the time of the last official rough sleepers count there was one person identified as sleeping rough. This figure can and does vary and anecdotal evidence suggests the figure is higher at the present time. Strenuous efforts have been made by the Homelessness Team to contact and speak to rough sleepers to offer appropriate advice however there has been limited success. During 06/07 only 6 rough sleepers have been in contact with the team to discuss their housing problems. The District is well served with accommodation for homeless households with the Night Shelter and Westview Housing Project offering direct access to single homeless people. Officers work closely and are in regular contact with these organisations and none report a significant increase in people wanting overnight accommodation.

An increasing focus on preventative work by the Homelessness Team, as recognised by the recent Audit Commission’s recent CPA report, has contributed to reductions in the level of homelessness acceptances. This has also helped the Council to meet and sustain the national target to end the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for families.

Government performance indicators over the past two financial years also confirm a trend of reductions in presentations for assistance through homelessness legislation. For example, during the financial year 04/05, 78 homelessness applications were submitted against 69 applications submitted in 05/06.

839 households threatened with homelessness had their situation resolved through preventive case work during the year 04/05. The amount of households presenting as homeless has continued to decline with 717 cases presenting in 05/06 for assistance and their homelessness was prevented through case work.

Currently a comprehensive review of the District's homelessness and homeless services is taking place as part of the review of the Homelessness Strategy. Key to the success of the review will be the identification of vulnerable groups and their specific needs: for example, young people, rough sleepers, Gypsies and Travellers. Part of this work will include a rough sleeper's count which will be carried out later this year and DCLG will be involved.

The strategy review will also provide a clear profile of homelessness within the district i.e. location, movement of homeless people, areas of origin, age, gender, support needs, ethnicity, housing history, level and types of debt, health/dependency problems etc. and trends in these areas and what each of these might mean in terms of service provision.

The review will engage with all relevant stakeholders including groups representing homeless households to allow a comprehensive analysis of the particular homelessness issues that need to be addressed by the City Council."



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QUESTION 13

From: Councillor Cooper

To: The Leader

“In light of the recent censure of a senior Liberal Democrat Member of Portsmouth City Council for ‘bullying’ a council officer can I be assured that the scope of the Anti – Bullying Policy adopted by this authority adequately covers conduct in all our working relationships including that of Officers and Members?”

Reply

“As stated in the Bullying and Harassment Policy ‘the Council will not tolerate harassment of any sort within the workplace and wants employees to feel confident that they can raise any concerns which will be treated seriously and dealt with promptly and sensitively without fear of reprisals’.

The policy applies to all employees and contractors and suppliers and those people providing services under contract with the Council.

I believe that this policy adequately covers conduct in the areas of Bullying and Harassment.

Further more the Member Code of Conduct as part of the general member obligations also states that members must treat others with respect.

The Employee Code of Conduct and the Whistleblowing Policy both refer to behaviour which could be construed as bullying as being unacceptable. The Disciplinary Procedure under the disciplinary rules dealing with harassment and discrimination reinforce that this behaviour will not be tolerated.”



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QUESTION 14

From: Councillor Cooper

To: The Portfolio Holder for Culture, Heritage and Sport

“Has the Theatre Royal Management reported any detrimental impact on 2007/08 Business Planning as a direct result of the small reduction in the grant they will receive from Winchester City Council?”

Reply

“The reduction of £5,000 in the theatre’s revenue grant has, as anticipated, triggered a ‘matching’ reduction of £2,500 under the informal 2:1 funding arrangement with Hampshire County Council.

The theatre has not reported any detrimental impact but they will, of course, be carefully monitoring the financial situation as the year progresses.

The theatre will continue to take proactive steps to find alternative sources of income, and to build on the strong levels of ticket-buying which are currently generating average seat occupancy of 69%, rising to 83% during the Christmas pantomime.”



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QUESTION 15

From: Councillor Cooper

To: The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Safety

“Data for 2005/06 (the last full year available) from the Food Standards Agency shows that Winchester City Council carried out only 42 sample inspections, which equates to 3.87 per 100 premises. Local comparisons show that, for the same period this was only half the inspection level in Havant, a third of that in Fareham and Chichester and almost 8 times less than the level achieved in Gosport. Why?”

Reply

“The performance figure quoted relates to the number of food samples taken during a year, as part of a voluntary national programme to monitor the quality of food products, which is run locally in conjunction with the Wessex Environmental Microbiological service. It does not relate to food premises inspection figures which are quoted separately.

The number of samples taken is usually a reflection of the resources available within a Local Authority to carry out this work. During 2005/06 resources within the Commercial Safety team were limited, due to maternity leave and other staff absences. The decision was therefore taken to focus on core priority work such as premises inspections and other complaints. During that year 95% of the food safety inspection programme was completed.

The City Council remains committed to participating in the sampling programme but only when resources permit and officers still attend the liaison group meetings to keep abreast of latest developments.”



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QUESTION 16

From: Councillor Cooper

To: The Portfolio Holder for Culture, Heritage and Sport

“With a growing number of applicants for WCC ‘arts funding’ has the time come for a fundamental review of the levels of financial support provided by this Council for all arts related events including major festivals such as the Hat Fair?”

Reply

“The Council received eleven revenue grant applications for 2007/08 from arts organisations and was able to support nine of them. This compares to the seven applications received and supported in 2006/07 and nine applications received and seven supported in 2005/06. The total amount awarded to arts organisations over the last three years, was £66,825 in 2005/06 and £75,325 in 2007/08.

In addition to the figures above, support is given to the Theatre Royal and to a number of small organisations through the Community Chest Grants Scheme.

The trend of increasing demand for grants from arts organisations reflects the increasing demand from community sector organisations generally. The Council has been able to show a small increase in its support for both, but cannot fully meet the demand for grants that exists and is unlikely to ever be able to do so. As with all aspects of the Council’s budget, the award of grants to specific organisations and projects is aligned with corporate priorities and objectives. The total levels of financial support are therefore reviewed on an annual basis and are increased where appropriate in relation to other areas of Council spending.

A review of the funding requirement and process, specifically in relation to the various arts festivals held throughout the District is planned for 2007, as requested by Cabinet in February. This will help to inform the grants process for 2008/09.”