



Winchester
City Council

COUNCIL MEETING – 21 April 2010

Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 1

From: Councillor Evans

To: The Leader

“Following the Cabinet decision to no longer put City Council public notices in the Hampshire Chronicle but use the Mid Hants Observer instead, could the Portfolio Holder please inform me where this newspaper is available/delivered in Wickham and Knowle?”

Reply

“The Mid Hants Observer is not delivered to households in the Wickham/Knowle area but is available from the newsagent Pages of Wickham.”



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QUESTION 2

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Leader

“Could the Leader explain the current position regarding the potential provision of a play area in close proximity to Erskine Road, Winchester and also confirm which Councillor has requested that this area be included in the Open Space Strategy. It would be useful to know the history of any discussions that Councillors have had with officer in respect of this issue. It would also be helpful if the Leader could confirm what was said by the Corporate Director (Operations) at Cabinet on 7 April 2010 when the Open Space Strategy and Funding System paper (CAB2001) was considered, particularly the point that should land be given to the Council for nil consideration then the Council may under certain circumstances forego the usual requirement for a commuted payment to cover the ongoing cost of maintenance.

Is the potential play area in North Hill Close similar to that of Erskine Road?”

Reply

“The land at Erskine Road referred to in the question is owned by Defence Estates who believe that it has development potential. It is also a possible location for a new children’s play area to serve an area of Winchester which is currently not well provided for. Cllr Tait has been pursuing the possibility of the site being obtained as the location for a new play area with officers for some time.

At present there is no prospect of the land being given to the City Council although if it were it would be possible to reconsider whether a commuted sum is asked for, as indicated by the Corporate Director (Operations) at the Cabinet meeting. The cost of maintenance would then be a cost to the Winchester Town Account.

The land at North Hill Close is owned by Swaythling Housing and the position is similar. If the housing association is willing to transfer the necessary land the Council could take a view that a commuted sum is not required provided that the Town Forum is willing to agree to the cost of maintenance being charged to the Town Account.”



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QUESTION 3

From: Councillor Thompson

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing

“Can the Portfolio Holder for Housing tell us the current number of voids both in general needs accommodation and in sheltered accommodation and also what is the average length of time between a property becoming vacant and a new tenant moving in, in both categories?”

Reply

“On 12 April 2010 there were 42 void properties.

The properties were split 20 Sheltered and 22 General Needs.

With regard to the general needs properties 8 are at the “expression of interest” stage and the remaining 14 have had formal offers and “Tenancy Commencement Dates” agreed.

For the 2009/10 financial year, the average relet time for General Needs properties was 34 days.

Of the 20 sheltered vacancies, 7 all have “Tenancy Commencement Dates” agreed. 11 have been advertised on several Choice Based Lettings cycles without success and we have arranged open days which are being held this week (Tuesday 20/4 to Thursday 22/4).

We also have 2 vacancies at category 2.5 sheltered schemes. We currently have only one assessed applicant in a position to be bid for these properties, although a number of further assessments have been arranged.

For the 2009/10 financial year, the average relet time for Sheltered properties was 51 days. The average combined relet time for 2009/10 was 43.5 days.

This performance is reported to each cycle of the Social Issues Scrutiny Panel.”



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QUESTION 4

From: Councillor Worrall

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Access

“Could the Portfolio Holder give an update on the closure of Andover Road whilst construction work on the railway bridge is taking place?”

Reply

“The closure of Andover Road started on 12 April 2010. The diversion routes and associated signing are all in place. The diversion routes have been safety audited and agreements have been reached over changes to bus services.

The situation is being monitored and if unforeseen problems arise or conditions are worse than anticipated then additional traffic control measures can be deployed.

The City Council has been working closely with Network Rail and Hampshire County Council to ensure that as much is done as possible to minimise disruptions and to communicate the closure and diversions as widely as possible to residents, businesses and commuters. This has included holding meetings with affected groups, a letter drop to residents in the area of the closure, erecting posters in the City Centre and in car parks, plus press and radio bulletins.

Discussions have taken place with Peter Symonds College to enable them to plan ahead and to agree arrangements for bus pickups and set downs.

Andover Road is due to reopen to traffic on 12 July 2010.”



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QUESTION 5

From: Councillor Jackson

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Access

“What are the average, maximum and target times for the time taken between the submission of a Planning Application and a representation on a Planning Application and its appearance on the website - by both electronic and traditional media?”

Reply

“Once an application is registered it is publicised by means of a site notice, neighbour letters and sometimes a press notice. The overall publicity expiry period is usually 28 days. Officers receive representations throughout the publicity period. Furthermore they will accept representations received after the period has expired as long as they reach the case officer before the decision is made.

We do not keep records of the time between a planning application being made valid and the time taken for representations to be received. There is no reason for this to be done since it is not relevant to any performance target for a planning authority. The date for representations to be received is published and it is up to the individual to decide how quickly they will respond within this period.

There is always a delay between the receipt of a representation and its appearance on the website whatever form the representation takes (letter, email and on-line comments). This is because representations need to be recorded on our systems, acknowledged and then read by the case officer before they are displayed on the website. They are checked by the officer before they are put on the web to ensure that they do not include any inappropriate material.

This process inevitably takes time and, as some planning officers work part time, it can take up to a week or so for representations to be published on the website. However, in most cases, representations can be viewed on-line

within a few working days of receipt. It should be noted that whilst the availability of material on our website is an integral part of our customer service, the legal requirement is that the paper copy of a representation is available for inspection. The “late” posting of an item on the website does not have any impact on the decision making process.

At the start of the year we did have a backlog of representations in the system, which delayed their publication to the website, but this has now been cleared and we are currently up-to-date.”



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QUESTION 6

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Portfolio Holder for Performance and Organisational Development

“Could I be advised of what is covered by the burial fee of £787 for the re-opening of a grave for a coffin to single depth of 4 feet 6 inches for those residing in the old Town Boundaries and why it costs 100% more for those residing outside the old Town Boundaries. It would be helpful to have a breakdown of the individual elements that make up the £787 and £1574 figures.”

Reply

“Burial fees are fixed by the City Council to offset the total costs incurred in maintaining the cemeteries. These include grounds maintenance and administration costs, as well as the specific costs of opening a grave, etc.

In accordance with Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, “Special Expenses” are levied by the City Council to cover the costs of local services (such as provision of cemeteries) in the Winchester Town area which elsewhere would be dealt with by parish councils, as there is no parish council for the Town area of Winchester.

Council Tax Payers in the six town wards therefore pay a contribution to the Town Account (including a contribution towards cemetery costs), which is not levied in other areas in the District. A double fee is therefore charged to residents outside the Town area, in view of the fact that they are not contributing to the Town Account in the same way as Council Tax Payers in the Town area.”



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QUESTION 7

From: Councillor Jackson

To: The Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture and Sport

“At Council of 21st February 2008 I asked a Question about the ineffective floodlighting of the King Alfred Statue in The Broadway. The reply I received concluded with these words: "I have therefore asked officers to determine the estimated cost for replacing the current scheme, and asked that a paper be brought to Cabinet detailing these costs in order to seek a formal decision on any capital allocation to a new lighting scheme.”

Would the Portfolio Holder explain why 2 years have now elapsed and no paper (to my knowledge) has been forthcoming? Would the Portfolio Holder agree that in this spring season of Hyde 900 Celebrations it is yet another lost opportunity to rectify the situation?

Reply

“Officers did make preliminary enquiries about floodlighting options for the King Alfred statue. However, it became clear that any improvements would require the design and installation of a completely new lighting scheme because the current provision was inadequate. Costs in the order of £10,000 were estimated by colleagues in the Council’s Property Services team, to take into account aesthetic considerations as well as the Council’s commitment to reducing energy usage.

The figure was presented informally to me in May 2008, and shared with Cabinet colleagues. At that time – and since that time – we have not felt able to prioritise such expenditure for inclusion on budget papers brought forward to Cabinet. Officers were asked to explore opportunities for sponsorship by local businesses, but based on the response to other initiatives at the time this was not considered to be a realistic option.

Our focus for the Hyde900 celebrations this year has been the restoration and improvement of Hyde Gate, which is the last surviving element of Hyde Abbey – the subject of the current exhibition at Winchester Discovery Centre. In

2009/10 we spent around £4,000 from revenue budgets on repairing damage caused by vandalism and safeguarding the gate against future abuse. Drawing on the work done for the *Treasures of Hyde Abbey* exhibition, we are also spending around £2,500 this year to replace the existing, rather tired interpretation panels and relocate them to the outer gate. This means that passers-by will be able to enjoy them more easily and share the history of the area. The inner gate is currently being used for a site specific art installation by local artist Stephen Cooper as part of the celebrations. It may continue to be used to display art work or stone artifacts in the future, now that improvements have been made to security.

Officers will continue to explore possibilities for improving the lighting on the King Alfred statue, but in the meantime I hope you will be pleased to note the very positive developments at this other important monument in the city.”



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QUESTION 8

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Access

“Could the Portfolio Holder advise me under what exceptional circumstances would he ever envisage that a planning application could be considered by a working party and also at what point in the consideration of an application would it be appropriate for the working party to be established?”

Reply

“The circumstances under which I envisage a planning application being ‘considered’ by a working party of the type Councillor Tait has in mind are now very limited. There is now a requirement for community involvement and consultation before significant planning applications are submitted – this ‘front loading’ is integral to the planning process. The role of the Planning Development Control Committee itself in promoting consultation – which was often what working parties were for – has therefore changed fundamentally.

Once an application is submitted the Council has a fixed period in which it must be determined. If a working party were established it would be after the application is submitted and it would have to work to the same timetable. There is no additional process that the applicant can be required to comply with or additional time allowed.

Such a working party established solely to consider a particular application would, by definition, involve fewer decision making Members and would either take a decision itself, which seems less democratic rather than more democratic, or would make a recommendation to the full committee – on which the working party members possibly could not vote. Neither seems to add value or improve the position for applicant or objectors.

Large, complex or controversial applications are not best dealt with by a working party because they need the merits of the arguments to be heard by the whole of the Planning Development Control Committee – which has a Membership considered appropriate to the task by the Council.

Certain matters, where the arguments are familiar and the timetables are short, are already dealt with by a smaller group of Members. This ensures that public views are heard and responses made within statutory time periods.

I would draw a distinction between working parties to deal with planning applications, for which I can see little role, and those which might examine the future of a particular site that requires clear guidance on how it might be acceptably developed. Developers and landowners do welcome clarity and are often willing to be involved in discussions with the City Council, parish councils and the local community to reach general conclusions about the form of acceptable development for a site – usually through the adoption of a planning brief. There is clearly a role for a working party in such circumstances.”



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QUESTION 9

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Leader

“Could the Portfolio Holder report how effective he feels the changes have been from switching the Public Notices contract from Newsquest to the Observer and what has been the feedback from the public?”

Reply

“The changes to the Public Notice advertising contract have been in place from mid February. We have had one letter and two emails from members of the public asking for information on why the changes were made. Once people realise that they can still obtain the paper nearby or can see the notices online they are happier. Some people wanted to see a notice in the Hampshire Chronicle stating that these changes were happening, but clearly this was not possible. We are monitoring the new arrangements and will continue to do so to make sure that the financial benefits do not come at a cost to widely available information.”