



Winchester
City Council

COUNCIL MEETING – 8 January 2014

Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 1

From: Councillor McLean

To: The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Environment

“Is the Portfolio Holder happy with the distribution arrangements for the Biffa calendar this year?”

From: Councillor Henry

To: The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Environment

“There has been much confusion and annoyance in many areas of the Council over lack of information relating to changed dates for refuse collection over the Christmas and New year period. Could the Portfolio Holder please explain the lack of council wide consistency in the provision of this information in a timely and relevant manner?”

Reply

“I agree that there have been significant problems with the distribution of information regarding refuse and recycling collection dates to residents this year and I have asked the Joint Client Team to carry out a detailed review of the problems experienced and confirm what lessons can be learnt for the future.

Under the terms of the contract, Biffa are responsible for notifying residents of collection date changes which is accepted to be a complicated process because of the existence of 24 different calendars cross the Winchester and East Hampshire districts.

Initial investigations indicate that the root cause of the problems was that the distribution company chosen by Biffa failed to adequately deliver the information produced and they under estimated the challenges that exist in rural parts of the District. Biffa have apologised for this failure and agreed to carry out a fresh delivery of information which this time will be in a calendar

format on card as used in previous years rather than the day change summary leaflet format tried this year which did lead to some confusion.

The new calendars will be distributed by the Biffa crews who carry out the collections in order to improve reliability of delivery and it is planned to begin distribution within the City Council's area on the 15th January with an anticipated completion date of 4th February.

The detailed review described above will be considered at future meeting of the Joint Environmental Services Committee where I will be seeking reassurances that lessons have been learnt from the problems experienced this year and that these can be avoided in the future."



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QUESTION 2

From: Councillor Mason

To: The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Environment

“The leaves are all down and no sign of a road sweeper other than the week before Christmas when they visited Brickmakers Road, Colden Common and 40 yards of Piping Road and then left. They came back again on the 22nd December, did very little and went away again. So many areas not touched, the drains are blocked and there are floods everywhere. How can this happen again this year, as it did last year?”

Reply

“Brickmaker’s Road is included within the priority leaf clearance schedule along with Church Road and Upper Moors Road and therefore should receive 3 scheduled visits during the leaf fall season.

The Joint Client Team have advised me that the leaf clearance programme this year was more successful than last year and additional monitoring was undertaken in order to check compliance.

It is difficult to retrospectively comment on the situation on particular days in an area but I can confirm that a Contract Monitoring Officer did inspect the Colden Common area on the 23rd December and was satisfied that the roads were within specification.

There will be an evaluation of the success of the 2013 leaf clearing programme and any Members with concerns about performance in their area this year should send their comments to Brian Turner the Joint Client Team Manager for inclusion in that review.”



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QUESTION 3

From: Councillor Gemmell

To: The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Organisational Development

"Could the Portfolio Holder explain how the changes in the Council Tax Reduction Scheme are impacting the Parish Precepts across our District this year?"

Reply

"Parish Council's received a grant in respect of the new Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme which was introduced in 2013/14. The full amount of grant provided by the government, to the Council (a little over £150,000), was allocated to parishes in proportion to the level of CTR expenditure in each parish.

The Minister has announced that the level of grant provided for parishes in respect of CTR will not be reduced in 2014/15; however, the precise figure has not been made available as the Council Tax Support Grant no longer exists and therefore the grant has effectively been cut in line with other funding. The Council has discretion over the amount of grant, if any, that is allocated to the parishes. Given the Minister's announcement, the Council will apply the same principle in allocating grant to the parishes for 2014/15 despite the fact that the Council's overall level of formula grant funding has reduced by approximately 14%."



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QUESTION 4

From: Councillor Clear

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing

“Would the Portfolio Holder please enlighten me as to the procedure Property Services follow when contacted by tenants regarding damp and mould to the inside of a property? Do Property Services have their own policies?”

Reply

“Housing teams follow the Council’s Condensation & Dampness Policy, originally written in 2009 and updated in April 2012 following a review by the Cabinet (Housing) Committee (CAB2324(HSG) and 2388(HSG) refers).

When a tenant reports a problem regarding condensation or damp/mould, an initial letter is sent accompanied by a Building Research Establishment DVD detailing the preventative methods of dealing with condensation, a leaflet with further details and a Humidity Meter to allow moisture levels to be monitored. The letter requests tenants follow the advice given and asks that if the problem persists after 2 months, tenants contact the Council to arrange a visit by the Area Property Surveyor.

Where appropriate, the Area Property Surveyor will organise repairs/improvements to any identified building defects and will commission the installation of kitchen and bathroom extract fans. An additional £300,000 per annum was included in the capital programme from 2012 to fund the installation of extract fans and this has been fully committed in the last two years.

In cases where it is clear tenants have not taken reasonable steps to control moisture levels in their property, a second letter is sent which confirms that there are no building defects contributing to the problem and requests tenants continue to follow the advice given. The letter quotes Clause 29 of the Tenancy Conditions “The tenant has a duty to minimise levels of condensation within the property”.



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QUESTION 5

From: Councillor Sanders

To: The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Organisational Development

“Can you provide a summary of the main elements of the Government’s Local Government Finance Settlement for 2014/15 insofar as they affect Winchester City Council?”

Reply

“The Provisional Settlement Funding for Winchester City Council in 2014/15 now totals £4.315m which is £6k higher than previous indications (this is made up from additional Efficiency Support for Sparse Areas of £5k, plus returned funding of £5k, less a reduction in Homelessness Prevention funding of £3k and £1k lower than forecast Council Tax Freeze Funding).

New & Affordable Homes Bonus funding for 2014/15 has been confirmed at £2.098m which is £77k less than the forecast of £2.175m. A consultation paper had proposed that a proportion (c35%) of this funding be top sliced from 2015/16 and handed to Local Enterprise Partnerships. However, the LEPs are now to be funded using region growth funding and by giving LEPs control of a £300m extension of the cap on local authority borrowing for housing.”

	2013/14 Working Budget £000	October Projections £000	2014/15 Provisional Settlement £000	Variance / (-) £000	+	October Projections £000	2015/16 Updated Projections £000	Variance / (-) £000	+
RSG & BASELINE	3,847	3,836	3,846		10	3,250	3,215	(35)	
Council Tax Support	627								
Council Tax Freeze 2011/12	173	173	172	(1)		173	172	(1)	
Homelessness Prevention	229	229	226	(3)		190	226	36	
TOTAL FORMULA FUNDING	4,876	4,238	4,244		6	3,613	3,613	0	
New Burdens	100								
Council Tax Freeze 2013/14	71	71	71	(0)		71	71	(0)	
Settlement Funding	5,047	4,309	4,315		6	3,684	3,684	0	



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QUESTION 6

From: Councillor Byrnes

To: The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Environment

“Can the Portfolio Holder confirm that, notwithstanding the Parking Strategy Consultation, there will be no increase to parking charges this year?”

Reply

“Car parking charges are usually considered and agreed in November for implementation early the following Year. However, Cabinet has decided that in view of our solid financial planning, there is no need to increase the charges this year. This will help to reduce our residents’ living costs and continue to promote the Local Economy which is one of our main policy targets.

We will continue to support the three zone approach to parking with differential charges depending upon the car park and its proximity to the town centre.

An action plan to deliver the recently published car parking strategy is currently being developed and will be brought to Cabinet shortly. During the development of the action plan, car parking charges are being carefully considered in relation to how they can help sustain the economic well-being of the town as well as the other key principles of the strategy.”



COUNCIL MEETING – 8 January 2014

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QUESTION 7

From: Councillor Rutter

To: The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Environment.

“Given the importance to the City of giving a good impression to the thousands of visitors attracted to Winchester over the Christmas period, does the Portfolio Holder consider that street cleaning and bin emptying around the Christmas Market and the centre of Winchester over the very busy Christmas period were adequate? On the two occasions when I visited the Market bins were overflowing and litter was considerable; a shameful situation.”

Reply

“The success and growth of the Christmas Market in recent years does put additional strain on the street cleaning and litter bin emptying services within the City because of the increasing number of additional visitors that attend the event each year.

Contract Monitoring Officers do carry out checks and respond to complaints regarding any deterioration in standards over this period but the Head of Service is not aware of any significant problems within the town that were not dealt with promptly.

Members should be aware that the Cathedral retain responsibility for street cleaning and litter bin emptying within the Inner Close and provide additional bins whilst the market is taking place. Contract Monitoring Officers do not therefore check this area as it is not included within the Joint Client Team responsibilities. However, each year there is a review of the Christmas Market and I have asked that street cleansing and litter clearance issues are discussed at this years' meeting in order to ensure that the City Council's Services are fully integrated with those provided by the Cathedral.”



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QUESTION 8

From: Councillor Ruffell

To: The Portfolio Holder for Business Services

“Does the Portfolio Holder think that the service given to Winchester District by Scottish and Southern Energy over the Christmas period was up to the standard expected of a National power supplier?”

Reply

“The storms over the Christmas period with heavy rain and high winds have been particularly challenging for electricity providers and have resulted in a number of power outages in our area lasting from a few hours to a number of days.

Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE) is one of a number of electricity providers and is also the local electricity distributor for the District.

The outages have been of inconvenience to those affected and SSE has since been engaging with partners of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Resilience Forum, on the effectiveness of their response over the Christmas period.

Issues over service provision were exacerbated by staff absence at SSE over the Christmas holiday period and The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Resilience Forum have opened dialogue with SSE Power Distribution with a view to establishing closer contact to respond to incidents, particularly those where the vulnerable are affected and to ensure that robust plans are in place in the future.”



COUNCIL MEETING – 8 January 2014

Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 9

From: Councillor Hutchison

To: The Leader

“Would the Leader agree that to reduce the number of 'known unknowns' in relation to the need to replace River Park Leisure Centre; to draw on backbench expertise on the planning and management of leisure facilities; and to take steps to re-establish public trust on this issue, a cross-party group of members should be established to:

- a) assess the research and consultation done to date, and list the additional research and analysis needed to enable members to come to a well-informed decision in the near future;
- b) provide an opportunity for public examination of the proposals and arguments put forward by the main interest groups and potential stakeholders; and
- c) recommend a decision-making process and timetable?”

Reply

“I have always made clear that the decision on whether to replace the Leisure Centre, and if so in what form, is one that must eventually be taken by the whole Council with cross party support.

That is why I have already established a reference group of senior members from the Cabinet as well as the leaders of the Lib Dems and Labour. The reference group is not a decision making body but it does consider the information on our options provided by officers and gives me guidance on what further work to have carried out. The results of that work will be considered by both Cabinet and full Council in reaching a decision about the project.

The recent consultation exercise has been useful and consideration of the results will be part of a report that will be on the Cabinet agenda in February. That report will also include details of timescales and decision-making processes.

I do not think that setting up another working group of Members at this stage will help us to move forward more quickly.”



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COUNCIL MEETING – 8 January 2014

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QUESTION 10

From: Councillor J Berry

To: The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development

“Has the Council, as part of its commitment to support the local economy, considered the impact of welfare reform, as identified in the report ‘The Impact of Welfare Reform by the Bill Sargent Trust’? This indicates that there will be a financial loss to Winchester of £19 million a year, once all the welfare reforms are fully implemented, which could have knock on effects for local spending and local employment, as well as a direct impact on many households.”

Reply

“As an Administration we have anticipated the potential effects of Welfare Reform and took early steps to support our most vulnerable residents even before these take effect. A range of measures have already been put in place by our teams, ranging from enhanced money advice and support for Council tenants wishing to downsize to an employer engagement initiative designed to increase the number of workplace opportunities on offer across our District. And, as the report points out, this Council chose not to pass the impact of Council Tax Reforms on to local benefit claimants. We are learning from experience and continue to build on this work, as the Portfolio Plans for 2014/15 demonstrate. The one-to-one mentoring commission outlined in my Portfolio, for example, is typical of the practical steps we are seeking to take to support jobseekers.

We need to mitigate against the kind of loss signalled by the Bill Sargent Trust, of course. I believe this is possible by ensuring that we have a vibrant economy which provides a diverse range of employment opportunities today, along with a culture of entrepreneurship to ensure a supply of new opportunities for the future.

To this end, we continue to work with a wide range of partners to develop some really exciting projects. These range from large developments – such as the Whiteley Shopping Centre where we saw 1,000 jobs created last spring

– to the smaller scale, such as Forest Holidays at Blackwood which brought 26 new jobs to Micheldever. Silver Hill will generate new employment in the heart of our city, as will a revitalised Station Approach. Meanwhile, there is significant construction work ongoing at West of Waterlooville, and in the pipeline for both North of Whiteley and North of Winchester, which will see hundreds of additional training and employment contracts for local people. These are just a handful of examples and you, as Members, will be aware of many more schemes across the District.

Every day, our officer teams are providing grants, advice, permissions, licences, premises and support to a wide cross section of individuals, organisations and businesses who hold the key to ensuring that everyone who wants to work is able to do so. I am committed to ensuring that we take a joined up approach to this work, as a Council, so that this District not only weathers the impacts of Welfare Reform but builds a stronger and more sustainable economy in the process.”



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QUESTION 11

From: Councillor Gottlieb

To: The Portfolio Holder for Business Services

“The letting of Avalon House is good news. Given the depth and severity of the recession and its impact on the commercial property market it should not have been a surprise to anyone that it has taken some time to achieve. There are still matters to be dealt with, but will the Portfolio Holder please find time to commend the Estates Department for their hard work and resolve in bringing about this achievement?”

Reply

“Cllr Gottlieb is right to say this is good news. Not only does Avalon now have a new tenant, but we will be retaining a range of important health services which the Southern Health Trust provide within the centre of Town.

The Estates Team have done a great job in securing this letting. It will earn a significant rental income for the Council, which we will use to protect services to the public. I’m sure all Members will want to join me in thanking Mr Warren and his Team, and encouraging them to keep up the good work.”



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QUESTION 12

From: Councillor Learney

To: The Portfolio Holder for Built Environment

“What percentage of residential planning applications since March 2013 have provided the full amount of affordable housing required by our Local Plan on-site?”

What percentage of residential planning applications since March 2013 have paid a full financial contribution towards off site provision of affordable housing?

What is the shortfall since March 2013 between the affordable housing provision aimed at by our policies and what has actually been achieved?”

Reply

“Our policies are more robust than they have been in the past, and we are able to secure affordable housing contributions from smaller sites, which in the past would have made no contribution. However, we have to recognize that we must balance our demands with considerations of the viability of development, and our policies are designed to achieve that.

But it is wrong to speak of a “shortfall”. Whilst viability often reduces the level of affordable housing provision that can be achieved, the Council has still managed to secure financial contributions or on site provision for a number of schemes which would previously have made no contribution at all.

2 out of 8 applications where on site provision was sought under the new Local Plan Policy provided the full amount of affordable housing as part of the development. A total of 18 affordable dwellings have been permitted since the introduction of the new policy in March 2013. If viability had allowed for the full provision of affordable dwellings it would have been possible for 40 units to be provided.

2 out of 28 applications (7%) will make a full financial contribution towards the provision of off-site affordable housing with a further 15 making a reduced contribution based on their viability. The difference between the full amounts sought under the Policy of approximately £3.15 million, and what has actually been achieved once the viability of schemes has been considered, is approximately £2.51 million.

Policy CP.3 allows viability to be considered when assessing residential applications as required by national planning policy. If the Council had tried to introduce a policy which sought to exclude financial viability as a consideration this would have been found unsound.

Members will be aware that the Government has announced in the Autumn Statement that it intends to consult on an amendment to national policy which would provide a blanket exemption from affordable housing contributions for developments of 10 dwellings or fewer.”



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QUESTION 13

From: Councillor Southgate

To: The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development

“There has been press comment about the success or not of the Winchester Christmas Markets. Could the Portfolio Holder provide any specific data about footfall and reactions from local traders?”

Reply

“On Monday this week, *The Guardian* newspaper ran an article stating that the major supermarkets are doubling the size of their distribution centres as online shopping continues to transform the retail sector. With many shoppers being lured off Britain’s high streets and onto their keyboards, Winchester’s Christmas festivities have played a key role in maintaining the vitality and interest of our city centre.

As a result, many traders have welcomed the Cathedral’s Christmas Market and Ice Rink, which have drawn in thousands of new shoppers and visitors since they began in 2006 – completely transforming what was formerly the quiet season for our local visitor economy.

Although it is still too early for many of the retail figures to have been collated, feedback from Winchester Business Improvement District suggests that pubs and restaurants in particular saw brisk trade.

For the first half of December, the footfall monitors in the High Street showed an increase in the lower high street of around 6% and figures for the upper high street equalling 2012 figures.

The regular market traders in the centre of town were aware of increased footfall, despite the weather which was at times atrocious. They reported that trading in Winchester was more successful than at other city markets they attended in December. By contrast, there was a downturn in spend and footfall at the only Winchester Farmers’ Market in December compared with

previous years, although organisers felt this might be attributable to its timing, early in the month.

Many retailers depend on the Christmas trading period for their survival, so challenges which exist throughout the year can become major concerns in November and December. Location, marketing, range of goods, presentation, opening times, the weather and a host of other factors will shape the fortunes of individual retailers - and what improves business for will almost certainly not suit all.

This is why I have already commissioned a study looking at the performance of independent retailers across the City. The study will identify low-cost actions which can be taken forward by the BID, the Council and the traders themselves to help improve performance throughout the year.

But Winchester's growing reputation as England's Christmas Capital is one that should make us all proud. We are bucking the trend, with our bustling streets, low vacancy rates and coach loads of visitors. These are clear signs of economic success, and I hope you will join me in celebrating the work of the Cathedral in turning Winchester into one of the country's leading winter destinations."



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Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 14

From: Councillor J Berry

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing

“Is Winchester City Council intending to apply for accreditation under the Gold Standard scheme for tackling homelessness?”

Reply

“Yes – the Council has signed the pledge with the National Practitioner Support Service to strive for continuous improvement in front line housing services and is actively working towards applying for the Gold Standard Challenge. We are part of a peer review group with Hart District Council and West Berkshire Council, and are due to be inspected later this month. Providing we satisfy the peer review assessment criteria, we will make an application for Gold Standard accreditation.”