

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL
29 SEPTEMBER 2016
APPENDIX I

Questions from Councillor McAteer

1. To the Executive Member for HR & Corporate Improvement

Can the Executive Member advise on the total number of staff who have left Scottish Borders Council since May 2012 as a result of a compromise or similar confidentiality arrangement and at what total cost in terms of termination payments or lump sums.

Reply from Councillor Cook

Since May 2012 eight employees have left the employment of Scottish Borders Council as a result of a compromise, now settlement, agreement.

The total cost paid as settlement sums was £145,833.72.

Settlement Agreements are only entered into when a departure from the Council is necessary for operational reasons. They are a practical tool which protects the individual and the Council.

Had the employees left under the Early Retirement/ Voluntary Severance Scheme, the cost would have been £248,925.90, including pension costs.

Had they left through compulsory redundancy the cost would have been £310,452.23, including pension costs.

Supplementary

Councillor McAteer asked if Councillor Cook was happy that this was dealt with in an open and transparent way. Councillor Cook advised that the agreements were confidential but Members were consulted before they were agreed and he noted no comments from Councillor McAteer. He confirmed he was satisfied with the process.

2. To the Executive Member for Economic Development

Can the Executive Member for Economic Development explain the reasons for rejecting the Future Hawick proposed rates relief pilot scheme designed to help struggling businesses in one area of that town and capable of being extended to other Borders communities. In addition can he explain why he did not consider it appropriate to discuss these reasons with local elected and representative Members before making his decision?

Reply from Councillor Bell

It was not possible to cost the individual proposal in the absence of specific definitions from Future Hawick. However Officers estimate that to allow 100% Rates relief to High Street traders for 6 months during 2016/7 would cost the Council £94,000. It can be strongly argued that all of the existing reliefs and exemptions are already effective in assisting local businesses and limit the potential financial impact that implementing a scheme under the Community Empowerment Act may provide. As the cost needs to be fully met by the Council's own finances, any further reduction will put a strain on other Council services. In view of the open-ended approach suggested in the Future Hawick proposal (which officers cautioned against), and particularly the suggestion of wider provision of relief to all existing businesses, officers consider that the proposal is unaffordable in the short term and unsustainable in the longer term for Hawick.

As regards the second part of your question:

When Future Hawick presented a request to investigate a pilot Non Domestic Rates relief scheme the work was actually commissioned by myself and Cllr Smith, as Executive Members, and SBC officers Mrs Craig & Mr McGrath, when the 4 of us met with Future Hawick. But the first I heard of a final scheme was when I opened an e-mail from yourself with a declaration of support for the proposal. The second e-mail I opened that evening was from another Hawick Councillor with more praise and a declaration of support. It was only when I got to the third e-mail that I actually got a copy of Future Hawick's proposal which was not sent to the Executive Members and Officers who commissioned the work; but to all 6 Hawick & District Councillors and to myself and Cllr Parker.

The actual proposal was from a political and a practical perspective unsupportable, but you and other Hawick Councillors were already declaring unqualified support and I knew the next place I'd read about that would be in the Hawick Press.

I did you a favour by closing the subject down – because I stopped speculation about an impractical and unsupportable scheme. But I did not actually reject it, I said I would not propose it to the Executive.

I also said that I would ask officers to report on how best the Council can support the revitalisation of Hawick High Street, and continue our town centre regeneration efforts across the whole of the Scottish Borders; these reports come before the Executive next week.”

Question from Councillor Marshall

To the Executive Member for Environmental Services

Can the Executive Member provide reassurance that the recent charges imposed for disposal of trade or business waste will not result in increased fly-tipping throughout the Borders.

Reply from Councillor Paterson

It is first worth reminding members as to the reason for introducing the Community Recycling Centre Trade Waste Policy as approved by Council last year.

That is to expand on the existing range of services available for businesses by providing small traders with a cost effective and legislatively compliant means of disposing of their waste and recycling, whilst ensuring the Council recovers its costs. The majority of Scottish Councils already allow traders access to their recycling centres and there is clear evidence of a demand for the service within the borders.

Changes to service provision such as this do not come without risk. However it is important to recognise that fly tipping is an illegal activity, which the Council strongly condemns and if caught could result in fines of up to £40,000 or imprisonment. It is certainly not a justified reason for not introducing this service change.

I can confirm that the issue of fly tipping has been discussed in detail and it is considered that the existing processes are adequate to deal with this matter. However, the situation will be monitored regularly and action taken where necessary.

I am also pleased to report that a member of staff will be engaging with traders over the coming weeks to maximise take up of the trade access scheme.

Supplementary

Councillor Marshall advised that, although this was not a criticism of the Council, he was starting to be approached by businesses with concerns and asking if the charges could be reviewed.

Councillor Paterson advised that the report approved did include the requirement for a review to be carried out after 3 months on how the system was operating.

Questions from Councillor Fullarton

1. To the Executive Members for Planning & Environment

With the suggested amalgamation of SESTRAN and SESPLAN, what are the likely implications for this Council for (a) governance and (b) budget?

Reply from Councillor Smith

The recent independent review of the planning system recommended a new role for Strategic Development Plan teams and closer links with Strategic Transport Authorities. Scottish Ministers are still considering that recommendation.

The Strategic Development Plan Manager for the SESplan area retired at the beginning of September. Until there is clarity about the future of Strategic Development Plans, and in view of the suggested stronger links with SEStran, it is proposed that the SEStran Manager assumes

management responsibility for both teams on an interim basis. This position will be reviewed when Ministers have made a final decision on the future of Strategic Development Plans.

There are no immediate budgetary implications from the interim governance arrangements. In the longer term it is possible that some savings may be achieved if a joint manager is appointed on a permanent basis. Any other budgetary implications will only become clear once Ministers have given clear direction as to how the teams should operate.

Supplementary

Councillor Fullarton asked that the position be monitored and Councillor Smith assured him that this would be done.

2. To the Executive Member for Community Safety

Newspapers have recently reported that some serving police officers of Police Scotland have signed a petition calling for Police Scotland to be scrapped – does the Executive Member agree with this?

Reply from Councillor Moffat

This is a matter for Police Scotland.

Supplementary

Councillor Fullarton asked Councillor Moffat as Chairman of the Police Board if he could ascertain what was behind the unrest. Councillor Moffat advised that he was not the Chairman or a member of the national Police Board so this was not his role.

Question from Councillor Turnbull

To the Executive Member for Roads and Infrastructure

Mobile "smiley face" speed warning signs are very popular with the public in the Borders particularly in our villages. Do you agree that there is a good case to increase the numbers available to meet the demands by the public and in the interest of road safety?

Reply from Councillor Edgar

I would certainly agree that the signs are popular with communities.

At the moment there are 2 of these signs and they are rotated around 17 agreed locations (based on identified need). As research has shown that the signs work most effectively when they are used sparingly this provides a reasonable balance, albeit most communities would like to see the signs "*in their town*" more frequently.

The bigger issue with increasing the number of signs however is the time and staff resource involved in deploying them. The signs have a relatively short battery life (typically 7 days) and need to be brought in for re-charging between each use. For the best part this is undertaken as part of other duties when staff are in an area. It would not be possible to deploy an increased number of signs without impacting significantly on the work of the section.

Supplementary

Councillor Turnbull asked if the sign which he believed was broken would be replaced. Councillor Edgar confirmed that costs would be checked and a replacement purchased if this was cost effective.