

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL
28 JUNE 2018
APPENDIX I

OPEN QUESTIONS

Questions from Councillor Robson

1. To the Leader

Are the Council planning any activities to mark National Democracy Week the dates of which are 2nd – 8th July?

Reply from Councillor Haslam

The Electoral Registration Officer is undertaking a full social media campaign which is also aligned to the annual canvass to encourage people to register to vote online. Posters are currently being printed for circulation next week and a press release is also being issued. Soundbites will also be aired on Radio Borders.

It should be noted that the Scottish Assessors Association and the Scottish Government have lobbied the Cabinet Office regarding the fact that this event is being held after our schools have closed for the summer holidays which removes the opportunity for events to be held in our schools.

Supplementary

Councillor Robson asked if there could be an exhibition regarding women's suffrage in the Council HQ foyer and that a letter be sent to the Cabinet Office asking that the date of the week be changed in future years. Councillor Haslam undertook to arrange this.

To the Executive Member for Children and Young People

2. Can the Executive Member advise what actions are being undertaken to reduce the number of unwanted fire alarm signals from school premises to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service?

Reply from Councillor Hamilton

This matter was raised last week at the Police, Fire and Safer Communities Board for the first time. I believe Councillor Robson that you were in attendance at this meeting. It was concluded that the local Fire Commander would meet with Education Management to undertake an initiative with schools to reduce unwanted fire signals. This meeting will be actioned over the summer holiday period in order for the initiative to begin in school session 2018/19. Please note that school activations can be the result of equipment failure and non-malicious false alarms; equipment failure makes up the greatest proportion and may result from a situation such a system fault caused by moisture. The Education Team will fully analyse the data with the fire officers and organise an appropriate response.

Supplementary

Councillor Robson asked if there could be a report back to the Police etc. Board on the activities over the summer break and Councillor Hamilton agreed to ask officers to provide such a report.

3. Can the Executive Member advise what arrangements have been put in place to assist pupils who wish to secure educational resources via inter library loans in the three High Schools where, on a pilot basis, there are no professional librarians in post?

Reply from Councillor Hamilton

The Council has a commissioned contract with Live Borders to provide professional librarian support to schools. Meetings have started and will continue through the summer to ensure that matters such as "inter library loans" are resourced in advance of the start of term.

It should be noted that discussions are also ongoing with the six librarians in the other high schools as to possible ways in which they could contribute to the developments within the pilot schools.

Supplementary

Councillor Robson asked when and to whom the results of the pilot would be reported. Councillor Hamilton advised that the results would be reported to all Councillors and she would check with officer re timescales.

Question from Councillor Brown

To the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

Now that there has been time to fully appreciate the effects of the changes recently made to the Borders grass cutting regime and given the strength of complaints about the tatty state of our cemeteries being disrespectful to those no longer with us.

Will you now give serious consideration to reversing the decision to cut the grass in our cemeteries on a 20 day cycle?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

Discussions are continuing with our communities and there may well be a case made to manage some cemeteries differently as we move forward, however as our new policy is consistently applied across the Scottish Borders we are ensuring fair treatment to all, and as members already know where our civic pride is at its height during common ridings and festivals our policy is being relaxed to ensure that we present and portray our communities at their best.

Supplementary

Councillor Brown asked if Councillor Aitchison was prepared to apologise for the failed consultation. Councillor Aitchison rejected this and advised that there was consultation and that consultation would continue with both himself and Jason Hedley currently attending Community Council meetings. It was all about lack of funding.

Questions from Councillor Paterson

To the Leader

1. Would the Council Leader please tell the Council if there have been any moves by Admin members to reverse the cuts that were made in this year's budget?

Reply from Councillor Haslam

No, there have been no formal proposals from Admin Members to reverse cuts made in this year's budget

Supplementary

Councillor Paterson asked about the statements made in the Hawick Paper. Councillor Haslam advised not to believe all that was in the press and while the Council had needed to make £12m of cuts she listed the many new things achieved by the Council

- 2 With so much anger and the public lambasting some Councillors with sheer venom and some Admin members now openly critical of the decision that they took to decrease the level of grass cutting from what the previous administration had at every 10 working days and changed it to every 20 working days at the recent Budget meeting. Would the Leader please tell the Council if there is any realistic prospect of this budget saving measure being changed in this financial year?

Reply from Councillor Haslam

The administration is committed to ensuring high standards of service to the public and will do this whilst working within a very challenging financial envelope.

Any communities wishing to make representation on our new policy are being invited to come forward and engage with officers and have been doing so, the outcome of which may see alterations to our approach to help secure and protect locally important priorities

To the Executive Member for Roads and Infrastructure

3. Can the Executive Member please tell me what the take up rate is for food waste collection in all the towns in the Scottish Borders that currently has a food waste collection?

Reply from Councillor Edgar

Participation levels in the 5 Border towns' that receive a food waste collection service ranges between 21.4% in Hawick and 50.4% in Peebles. The average food waste yield is 0.96 kg per household per week, which is comparable with the performance of other Local Authorities providing a similar service.

4. With the residual waste Contract now out to tender and whoever wins the contract will be transporting our waste out of the Borders do you not think that it would be a fantastic opportunity to highlight the fact that food waste collection could be much better in some towns in the Scottish Borders and some kind of publicity campaign or leaflet drop to encourage more people to be doing more to recycle their food waste we could all do our little bit to help save the planet.

Reply from Councillor Edgar

The Council regularly promotes its waste services using a variety of methods including social media, the Council website, SB Connect newspaper and news releases to local media, with the aim of increasing residents understanding and participation.

Most recently the Council has introduced a new household cooking oils recycling service at all seven of the Council's Community Recycling Centres which has been supported by Scottish Water. The new service aims to divert waste from landfill, as well as reduce water pollution, with the waste oils used as biofuel. It has been well received by the public so far, with a social media video produced to promote the new service attracting over 5,200 views.

In relation to the food waste collection service, the most recent concerted campaign took place in February 2017 when we issued reminder leaflets to all households along with a new supply of caddy liners.

The food waste service is promoted at all opportunities by Waste Services staff whilst attending events and carrying out awareness raising activities, and working closely with the Council's Communications team we will continue to encourage residents to make best use of all recycling services available.

To the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

5. Would the Executive Member please explain to the Council about biodiversity and what particular areas this Council intends to leave aside. I am concerned that there could well be confusion when in a reply to a local MSP the Council leader mentioned cemeteries. I and thousands of other Borders Citizens are now left wondering and extremely concerned that this administration intend to have cemeteries as areas for biodiversity. Could you please clarify this for many worried people in the Borders?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

As Members will already know the Council has a duty for further the aims of biodiversity within the Scottish Borders to the greater benefit of others.

The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 placed a duty to further the conservation of biodiversity on all public sector bodies in Scotland. The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act (2011) requires public bodies in Scotland to provide a publicly available report, every three years, on the actions which they have taken to meet this biodiversity duty.

What should not be confused though here is that the management and maintenance of our cemeteries whilst an important environmental asset, is not the main route to helping us deliver on the biodiversity duty that we have.

Where it is appropriate to manage cemeteries for biodiversity for example where no new burials have taken place and where a reduced management and maintenance regime may compliment and achieve more diverse habitats then we as a Council should explore those opportunities. However we will do so whilst balancing the conservation of our natural heritage resource and those activities that may impact on them. Respecting those who have been laid to rest

6. Can the Executive Member give the Council an assurance that all employees that are using the newly purchased grass cutters have been fully trained to use them?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

All staff involved currently undertaking grass cutting operations are certified to operate pedestrian and ride on mowers. Staff have also been inducted in the use of newly acquired machinery as is normal procedure, and an ongoing process for updating and review of skills and knowledge continues.

Question from Councillor S. Scott

To the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

Could the Executive Member tell me when the officers briefed local members in the Jedburgh and District Ward on the proposed savings to the budget with regard to extending the cutting cycle from 10 days to 20 days?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

As part of the 2018/19 budget setting process, a report entitled 'Neighbourhood Services – Grass Cutting & Biodiversity, Floral Gateway Competition' was presented to the Administration Budget Working Group on the 16th January 2018.

The proposals in the report contained savings of £345k, which included £215k of savings from grass cutting service redesign, with the recommendation that general amenity grass areas move from a 10 working day cycle to a 20 working day cycle, with high amenity areas continuing to be cut on a 10 day cycle. Other changes, to slopes and wild flower areas, were also included.

A further meeting with the Administration was undertaken on 23rd January by the Neighbourhoods Manager, who delivered a PowerPoint presentation to Elected Members. This provided further clarity on the proposals, including photographic examples of the grass cutting pilot carried out during 2016/17. The proposals were approved by Council on 20th February as part of the 2018/19 Financial Plan.

A further briefing was held on 20th March which was open to all members to attend. A similar presentation detailing the service changes, including changes to grass maintenance was undertaken at that time.

I am unable to confirm if the Jedburgh and District Members were in attendance at the briefing on 20th March, I can confirm that Councillors Scott and Hamilton were in attendance at the presentation to the administration on 23rd January

Question from Councillor Drum

To the Executive Member for Roads and Infrastructure

Can I ask the Executive member if SBC have carried out a Risk Assessment in relation to the risks introduced to our roads by Nuclear Weapons Convoys, when they pass through the Borders on route to Couplart on Loch Long and have we communicated these risks and associated 'control measures' with local residents and businesses in these communities?

Reply from Councillor Edgar

The responsibility for the transportation of nuclear warheads currently lies with the UK Government's Ministry of Defence and any such transportation event is not made public, with Local Authorities not being made aware of the transportation event.

However, Scottish Government expects any such transportation to be carried out safely, securely and in line with regulatory requirements, and has made this expectation clear to the UK Government.

It is vital that the transport of nuclear weapons in Scotland is rigorously planned, carried out with close co-operation with Police Scotland, and supported by a large number of highly-trained specialists.

I would point out that SBC fully complies with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and, as a Category 1 responder, works closely with its Category 1 and 2 partner agencies to identify risks, create response plans and warn and inform the public of the risks identified where possible.

Supplementary

Councillor Drum commented on the report that there were 8 such convoys per year and asked if the Council would, in line with some others, carry out their own risk assessment for consideration by Council and to warn the public. Councillor Edgar reiterated his original response but advised he would check with officers to see if there was a need for a review.

Question from Councillor Bell

To the Executive Member for Children and Young People

In response to a question from Cllr Ramage last month you specifically alluded to the level of community involvement and good practice in primary school libraries not being followed through into secondaries. There is some annoyance amongst Priorsford parents who think that the exceptional work of volunteers in manning the library in this Peebles primary school is being taken out of context and used to prop up arguments about the very different problem of how to organise secondary school libraries.

Will you now distance yourself from inaccurate statements about parallels between the staffing requirements of Primary and High School libraries?

Reply from Councillor C. Hamilton

In response to the question from Councillor Ramage, no reference was made to Priorsford Primary School. At no point have I publicly made reference to Priorsford Primary School.

As to the response at the previous Council, I was reporting feedback from the Primary Headteachers during a consultation with the Director. The comments do not relate to staffing, but to the very good practice of pupil and community involvement in school libraries.

I have not made any inaccurate statements and can't distance myself from comments I have not made.

If any upset has been caused by mis-representation from sources, then the Director reassures me that this will be discussed with parents in the new term and by letter over the summer holiday period to clarify what has actually been said regarding this matter.

The Council is very proud of pupil and community involvement in library provision within our schools.

Supplementary

Councillor Bell asked that it be acknowledged that the decision process had been carried out in the wrong order with implementation being before the consultation with parents. Councillor Hamilton replied to clarify some of the misinformation that had been in the press over this matter. The issue had been unanimously passed by council on 20 February and the opposition budget had contained exactly the same budget line. This pilot was a result of the feedback that had been received from young people. They were using their library spaces differently and as we want our school estate to be fit for the future we will therefore be investing in these areas over the summer responding to pupil demand. The model of young people sitting quietly at hard desks on hard chairs is outdated. Young people want a comfy sofa to curl up with a good book, they want study pods where they can work quietly and they want a quiet safe place where they can get away from the hustle and bustle.

This was not about leaving libraries unstaffed, it was about staffing them appropriately. If young people were using the space for pastoral support then it should be staffed in that way.

Questions from Councillor H. Anderson

To the Leader

1. Our Council Leader recently announced on BBC Radio Borders that SBC is launching a new initiative to place counsellors in each High School to support health and wellbeing. Could the Leader provide us with the specific details, including costings and timescales for this Initiative?

Reply from Councillor Haslam

In the Council Budget an allocation of £1.2 M innovation funding was allocated to Children's Services to support early intervention and prevention in support services for children and young people. £150k of this funding has been allocated towards Mental and Emotional Health support in secondary schools that will complement the existing work that is taking place within the development of our Mental, Emotional Health and Wellbeing Strategy that has evolved in the Borders in the last 2 years.

This extensive and innovative strategy will be explained in a paper to the Executive in September.

The full time staff have been recruited and have started working with schools. They will continue to work with individual pupils over the Summer.

In this new initiative, staff will be available in a much more flexible way to provide mental and emotional health support to young people and their families at times that suit the family.

Supplementary

Councillor Anderson advised she was still unclear which part of the service was being provided by Quarriers and also asked who was managing the contract. Councillor Haslam advised that the Quarriers contract included the counsellors and was part of changing the way that the Council dealt with mental health. A further initiative was to train all 6th year pupils as mental health first aiders. The contract had been enhanced to allow more flexible support and was a step change in the provision of mental health support for young people.

2. In the Peeblesshire News last week Cllr Haslam sought to reassure people that the roll out of Universal Credit will be a gradual process. Whilst the roll out may be gradual, would the Leader accept that the impact on any individual who is transferred onto Universal Credit is immediate and often traumatic as they immediately lose entitlement to social security payments until the online Universal Credit application has been completed, they have to borrow money for a minimum of 5 weeks until any new entitlement commences and they have to submit to a regime of conditionality of entitlement based on up to 35 hours per week evidence of active employment search. In addition, prior to any claim being processed, every individual must attend an Identity Verification Interview in Galashiels Job Centre Plus. Can the leader inform us of what steps SBC are taking to support individuals in Tweeddale West to travel to Galashiels for this interview?

Reply from Councillor Haslam

The challenges with Universal Credit have been widely publicised and key partners operating within the Borders have been preparing for the rollout and will monitor the impact closely.

It is not all applicants that need to attend an Identity Verification Interview. It is those who cannot verify their identity on-line as they do not have any form of photographic ID. The DWP are aware of the challenges for people having to travel significant distances to attend these types of interviews and are actively looking at options to help with this.

Council Officers are also considering whether other forms of assistance could be available for claimants as well as the advances that they can secure via the DWP.

Supplementary

Councillor Anderson asked if this could be verified as Job Centre Plus had advised that this would apply to everyone. She also asked that no cut be made to the CAB budget. Councillor Haslam agreed to verify with DWP.

3 To the Executive Member for Roads and Infrastructure

As Cllr Edgar is aware, over 3,400 signatures were gathered in Tweeddale West in support of the continuation of the 101/ 102 bus service between Dumfries, West Linton and Edinburgh. This represents over 31% of the population of the ward. Can Cllr Edgar now advise on the outcome of the tender process for this route and, if cuts to the service have been indeed been made, can he honour his earlier promise to undertake a full consultation with people in Tweeddale West about the alternative proposals for the service before 18 August, when any reductions to the service will be implemented.

Reply from Councillor Edgar

The tender process was undertaken by Swestran with five timetable options all of which I am pleased to say were for continuation of a bus service between Dumfries, Biggar and Edinburgh. The options included up to 12 return journeys a day Monday to Saturday and up to 4 journeys return journeys on Sundays on the section of the route between Biggar, West Linton and Edinburgh. Prices were received for all the options specified.

I will be able to advise Councillor Anderson of the outcome of that process after the Swestran Board meet to discuss the options on Friday 29 June.

Supplementary

Councillor Anderson asked if there was a date when the outcome would be made public. Councillor Edgar advised that after the Swestran meeting the following day he would ask Communications to make the decision public.

4. To the Executive Member for Children and Young People

Can Cllr Hamilton advise on the consultation process which is due to be undertaken on the future of Peebles High School? Opposition Tweeddale Councillors were advised by the Service Director for Children and Young People that this consultation would commence in June but as yet we have heard nothing.

Reply from Councillor C. Hamilton

A report to Council 26th April made the following comments in relation to consultation on the future of Peebles High School 'that further consultation within the cluster is carried out and that this consultation will facilitate a platform for all stakeholders to work together to achieve a learning provision to meet the overriding principles of both the school estate review and the Christie Commission'. The recommendation of this report states that "an update report will be brought back to Council in October 2018."

It is my understanding that a meeting has taken place with some Tweeddale Councillors to discuss possible approaches to the consultation.

There has also been further consultation and discussions involving parents, Headteachers and between lead officers of the Council about possible consultation approaches and events which will result in more inclusive engagement of stakeholders in the Tweeddale area regarding the future of Peebles High School.

The overall feedback has been that these approaches/events will work best at the start of the new term .The consultation process will be communicated to local Members when the details are ready e.g. dates, times etc. This will be at the beginning of the new term.

All consultation processes can be affected by a range of matters. The timeline for reporting in October remains on track and there is confidence that consulting with a range of stakeholders in August/September will provide a broader representation and engagement on this important matter.

Supplementary

Councillor Anderson had been told that the consultation would begin in June and now that the summer holidays had begun this shortened the timescale. She therefore asked if the October decision could be delayed. Councillor Hamilton advised that she would check with officers.

Questions from Councillor Chapman

1. To the Executive Member for Transformation and HR

After a second successful year of Project SEARCH, how is Scottish Borders Council supporting its Graduates to employment opportunities within the Council?

Reply from Councillor Mountford

All the graduates continue to be supported by the Councils Employability Service. Graduates are supported in seeking and securing employment and are offered a priority interview for any suitable vacancy within the Council.

One graduate is joining our catering service as a modern apprentice and the others are currently attending interviews.

Supplementary

Councillor Chapman noted that no graduates had been employed last year and only 1 this year and asked what further efforts could be made by the Council. Councillor Mountford did not have the details but offered to arrange a briefing for Members if this was desired.

2. To the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

Given that the Member heard first hand at the recent Consortium Meeting that the funding cuts are already having a significant impact on the services our 3 fantastic CABs are able to offer. Would the Executive Member agree with me that CAB plays a critical role in supporting our most vulnerable in our society, and as such should have their funding reinstated to same level of 2017/2018 financial year?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

I did attend the recent meeting with the Borders Citizens Advice Consortium and agree that they play a critical role in supporting the most vulnerable in society. At that same meeting discussions took place about the requirement to make changes and a further productive meeting was held this week. Although challenging, the parties to these discussions are considering options to deliver the required savings without any detrimental impact to the service. This includes other funding options.

Supplementary

Councillor Chapman advised that he would argue with that statement as there were already impacts in Berwickshire where opening hours had been reduced. Councillor Aitchison advised that discussions had been constructive and amicable and he was confident that the problems would be resolved.

3. To the Executive Member for Adult Social Care

What steps are Scottish Borders Council taking to implement Franks Law within the Local Authority?

Reply from Councillor Weatherston

There is a commitment to deliver free personal care for under 65's from the Scottish Government for April 2019 and we have been party to discussions at COSLA on this matter. We look forward to the guidance and in particular an understanding of the financial support that will be made available to deliver Franks Law and are fully committed to working with service users and their carers to ensure a swift and comprehensive delivery of this policy approach.

Supplementary

Councillor Chapman welcomed the commitment but asked for further details of the funding challenge. Councillor Weatherston advised that he did not wish to give a figure at the moment while discussions between the Scottish Government and COSLA were still underway as to the funding required. However, he expected this to be resolved.

