

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL
26 JUNE 2019
APPENDIX I

OPEN QUESTIONS

Questions from Councillor Paterson

1. To Executive Member for Roads and Infrastructure

I have had several constituents from Newcastleton asking me about the new recycling lorry that this Administration had promised them that they would provide for not only Newcastleton but also several other rural areas in the Scottish Borders. What is the latest developments with the introduction of this recycling lorry and has it been decided what it will collect yet?

Reply from Councillor Haslam on behalf of Councillor Edgar

Officers were requested by the Administration to consider options for the delivery of a temporary mobile recycling pilot. We do not believe however that any commitment was made at that stage to Newcastleton.

This remains a work in progress and the focus on any short life pilot will be to test demand from one town only at this stage. A members briefing note will be issued in due course with the details of the proposed pilot scheme.

Supplementary

Councillor Paterson asked if communities like Newcastleton and Tweedsmuir would be considered, given they had the longest round trip to a recycling centre. Councillor Haslam advised that this decision would be taken once the outcome of the pilot was known. It was important to ascertain the demand for the service and the type of waste. It was hoped that it would work as there was a need to increase recycling rates. Young people in particular were very engaged and she commented on a recent meeting with pupils from Peebles High School. It would be part of the budget considerations to extend the service to more remote communities.

2. To Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

Can the Executive Member give the Public an assurance that while the Council and other Councils up and down the length and breadth of the UK still use Glyphosate in the use of weed killing that it is safe to still be using in all areas. The Council have to weed kill especially around children's play areas, with this chemical being linked to instances of cancer, can the Portfolio Holder please give me an assurance that it is still safe to use Glyphosate in weed eradication?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

Glyphosate is a pesticide, one of the most widely used pesticides in the world, and the UK has a rigorous approvals process for pesticides which are also subject to the regular EU wide initial approval and review programme for active substances. The review programme makes sure that the data supporting their approvals meets modern safety standards. The main aim of the process is to protect the health of people, creatures and plants and to safeguard the environment. The extensive range of studies undertaken on pesticides is aimed at establishing acceptable safety for people, animals and the wider environment. This process has been applied to glyphosate, and it currently approved for safe and efficacious use as an herbicide (weed killer) in the EU.

Approval was granted in 2002, based on a review of mammalian toxicology, ecotoxicology and other data. This approval ran until 31st December 2017 and has subsequently been extended until 15th December 2022.

Scottish Borders Council does use glyphosate across its services, applied by trained staff, and in accordance with its approved use. As with all such systems, we will continue to monitor the situation on an on-going basis.

Question from Councillor H. Anderson

To the Executive Member for Children and Young People

Can the Executive Member for Education clarify the Council's policy in relation to the protection of rural local primaries?

Reply from Councillor C. Hamilton

Scottish Borders Council's policy for rural education incorporates the recommendations made by the Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education and falls within the ambit of the School Estate Review which was commenced in 2016.

The principles of the review are:

- Increased educational and learning opportunities for all generations within the community
- Improved outcomes for the community
- Sustainability
- A future proofed community learning estate
- Affordability

The School Estate Review has involved proactively working with every school (parents and teachers) with a roll under 50 pupils (this includes many of the smaller rural schools) to create and implement plans to improve the sustainability of those schools. This has resulted in e.g. development of Early Learning and Childcare settings, introduction of breakfast clubs and catchment reviews etc. Work with the "under 50" club continues

Rural schools form a large part of our school estate - with 63% of SBC's primary schools and 22% of secondary schools being classified as rural schools. This is a significant proportion as over Scotland only 34% of schools are classified as being "rural"

There is detailed legislation in place regarding the consultation processes required for permanent changes to schools, which also provides specific protections for rural communities to ensure that a closure proposal for a school is the most appropriate option and requires Council's to fully consider the impact that a closure may have on the community. Any proposal for a permanent change to our schools is considered fully in light of the statutory provision and with extensive consultation with the parents and community.

Supplementary

Councillor Anderson expressed concern regarding the drop in Scotland's population, the roll out of early years' additional hours, and two primary schools with low rolls. She asked if it was possible to get a projection on population in these areas and how many nurseries were, or could be, attached to primary schools. Councillor Hamilton advised that Officers could provide this information.

Question from Councillor Drum

To Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

What actions are Scottish Borders Council going to take to learn from the problems encountered in the latest localities bidding process and the subsequent complaints from Community groups around the voting system?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

There will be a full evaluation undertaken of the second phase of the Localities Bid Fund pilot which will mirror the evaluation of the first phase and include a survey of both the public and the project leads, and the methodologies used in both phases. A report on the overall £500k participatory budgeting pilot, including recommendations, will then be brought back to Council as soon as practical".

Supplementary

Councillor Drum commented on a recent participatory budgeting conference he had attended where John Alexander had spoken about the Dundee experience and asked if he could be invited to speak to the Council about it. Councillor Aitchison advised that he was happy to speak to people

and learn from the experiences in other areas. The aim of Area Partnerships was to identify local priorities and he gave the example of transport which had resulted in the Rural Transport Seminar.

Question from Councillor Marshall

To Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

In May 2018 it was agreed to establish a member's reference group to support the proposed programme to deliver a strategic network of outdoor community spaces across the Borders as approved as part of the Councils 2018/19 financial plan.

Can the Executive Member advise:

1. Who were the Members appointed to the Reference Group?
2. How many times did the reference group meet and what decisions did they make?
3. How and when were the decisions of the reference group including awareness of the proposed strategic network plans, communicated to the five Area Partnerships?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

On 6th November 2018, the Convener issued an email to all Members outlining the current status of the play park investment proposals advising that discussions were continuing between himself, the lead Officer Jason Hedley and various Members regarding specific investment proposals in specific areas which had been outlined in both the original report to Council and the Convener's email.

It was also suggested in that email, that in hindsight, the formation of a Working Group was not strictly necessary and that matters could be dealt with on a more informal basis through regular meetings, reports and updates, which is what has occurred since that time.

Officers however can provide a full update to Council if required.

Supplementary

Councillor Marshall advised that he did not feel his question had been fully answered and asked if the Executive Member supported the removal of playparks which contributed to the wellbeing of the Borders public. Councillor Aitchison advised that consulting with local members had worked better than a set working group and all local Members had been involved. The policy to install new playparks would result in the removal of obsolete play park equipment. Reports to Area Partnerships had been taken following assessment of all playparks and feedback had been received. It was a fact of life that old equipment needed to be removed to pay for the new and there was a need to get to a cost neutral position.

Question from Councillor H. Scott

To the Leader

1. What are the criteria used when considering and deciding which matters are to be discussed at 'private' meetings of the Council, where the public and press are excluded, and where Elected Members are bound by the Code of Conduct not to discuss such matters in public, or with their electorate?
2. Who is consulted during these considerations, e.g. Portfolio Holders or members of the Executive, and who makes the final decision?

Reply from Councillor Haslam

Private papers at any Council committee meetings are determined using Section 7a (Access to Information: Exempt Information) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, as amended. There are 15 paragraphs in that Schedule describing specific exempt information and the reference to the relevant paragraph is made in the heading of each private committee report.

As these are officer reports, no consultation is held with Elected Members, and either the Clerk to the Council or the Chief Executive will provide advice to the relevant Director and make the final decision on which reports are to be considered in private.

Supplementary

Councillor Scott commented on recent items which had been kept confidential only to be released following FOI requests. He asked that the Leader ensure that there would always be a presumption of openness. The Leader confirmed there was a culture of openness and transparency in the Council for all decisions and a motion on each agenda to be agreed by Members before moving into private business.

Questions from Councillor Bell

1. To the Leader

Will you please ask COSLA to initiate an Independent evaluation of the roles & responsibilities of, and the remuneration & support for Scottish Councillors?

Reply from Councillor Haslam

Yes but why.

Supplementary

Councillor Bell advised that this was required to encourage more females to stand for election and reduce the age demographic. Councillor Haslam commented on a recent meeting "Equally Safe at Work" for which the Council was seeking certification. She felt that Councillors should receive the same support as MSPs such as child care costs and agreed that she would raise this with COSLA.

2. To Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

What is the current revenue cost of maintaining the 11 Play parks scheduled for closure in Tweeddale?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

On 31st May 2018, Council agreed to both the significant investment and disinvestment in play areas and outdoor community spaces. The report at that time indicated that a significant reduction in the overall number of play parks (at that time numbering 243) maintained by Neighbourhood Services would be required to ensure that sufficient resources, both financial and manpower, could be redeployed to maintain the planned new facilities and ensure that the overall revenue impact on the service was cost neutral (as no additional revenue resources were being provided at that time, only capital).

While specific financial information is not available on a case by case basis, as it is not captured at such a granular level, the proposed removal of play equipment, is intended to provide that cost neutral impact when balanced across the available resources within the Environmental and Parks service. I would further confirm that no play park will be decommissioned until such times as the new play park investment in that locality is complete, and that no town or village which currently has a play park would be left without one following the rationalisation process.

Supplementary

Councillor Bell advised that Tweeddale Area Partnership had requested that local communities be consulted and queried the interpretation of obsolete when equipment was still well used. He asked for information on the money to be saved. Councillor Aitchison advised that the Area Partnership meetings were the opportunity for issues to be raised but he was happy for people to get in touch. He was unable to provide details of costs at a granular level but would be able to do so at area level.

Question from Councillor Ramage

To Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

If a community can access the advice and funding to renovate a play park, who will be responsible for organising and financing the ongoing maintenance?

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

Officers will be able to advise a community group on the technical requirements of maintaining a play park as safe and fit for use. This model is already used in Pringle Park, Selkirk where a community group undertake the necessary inspections and record keeping.

It would however rest with the community to secure finance and technical capacity to meet the obligations in maintaining a play park. The current play park closure programme relies on the revenue resources currently allocated to those old play parks to be utilised to support the new play park investment as previously agreed by Council so that the overall impact on the service is cost neutral.

Supplementary

Councillor Ramage in supporting the residents who used playparks asked if this was the Council passing their responsibilities to communities. Councillor Aitchison refuted this and advised that officers had collected information from the Area Partnerships and areas would still be available for play once equipment had been removed.

Question from Councillor A. Anderson

To the Executive Member for Children and Young People

We are about a year down the line in the pilot of the librarian-less school libraries. What lessons have been learned from this from the schools taking part and how is this informing the future of our school libraries?

Reply from Councillor C. Hamilton

The pilot in three high schools started in October 2018. An interim evaluation took place in December 2018 with minor changes being implemented in January 2019 to address some minor issues.

A more detailed evaluation was conducted in April 2019 which provided useful feedback from students, staff and parents from all nine high schools. The vast majority of respondents highlighted the importance of having access to a library for reading, digital, research and study. The feedback has been analysed and options for realising the decision of previous Council to identify savings is ongoing. It will also be critical to ensure that future library provision needs to be equitable across the authority.

Supplementary

Councillor Anderson asked, given the poor experiences in Galashiels and Eyemouth, that the pilot be abandoned. Councillor Hamilton advised she had spoken to the Parent Council Chairman at Galashiels Academy and the issues were being addressed. There had been a different experience in each school and a report would be provided if there were to be any changes.

Questions from Councillor Brown

1. To the Executive Member for Roads and Infrastructure

Do you think it is acceptable that we have an adopted road that has 51 potholes varying in size from 18" x 12" to 4ft x 2ft to a depth of 4 to 5 inches?

Reply from Councillor Haslam on behalf of Councillor Edgar

In broad terms, the description of the road surface appears to be less than optimal, however without specific context, an indication of length of affected highway or specific details of the actual location being referred to it is difficult to offer any further substantive response

If the Member wishes to provide further information, Officers will provide a detailed response to him.

Supplementary

Councillor Brown advised that the road concerned served Ramrig Farm near Swinton, affecting 10 properties, and was in urgent need of repair. Councillor Brown expressed disappointment that road condition was not improving and asked what steps were being taken to address this.

Councillor Haslam advised that feedback showed that road conditions were improving, with permanent repairs carried out first time, and encouraged anyone to report potholes on-line as soon as possible to allow repairs to be carried out.

2. To the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Locality Services

The grass cutting timetable of 21 days was agreed by this Administration to save money. Duns and Gavinton Community Councils now see grass which used to take say 2 hours to cut now taking 2 to 3 times longer to do using more fuel. How can this be saving money? More time, more fuel, more mess.

Reply from Councillor Aitchison

As part of the Council budget setting for 2018/19, the Council approved savings resulting in changes to the grass maintenance regime to some amenity areas, including cemeteries, from 10 working days to 20 working days. Member's briefings on the proposals were held at that time, during which it was explained that the savings would be principally met through a reduction in staff numbers, and that these reductions would be delivered by not recruiting into vacant posts.

The Council has an obligation not only financially to deliver services from within a defined budget envelope but also has a requirement to meet the environmental and social challenges in delivering those services, which includes responding to the Biodiversity Duty which the Council holds. The items raised in the question were considered as part of the overall saving and this also included significant investment in new equipment.

There can be operational changes which on the face of it, may appear to be less efficient to the public. Without knowing specific details about the instances to which the Member refers, I would ask he share the information reported from Duns Community Council to officers where they can take a more granular view of the issue and thereafter provide him with a detailed response.

Supplementary

Councillor Brown asked if the Executive Member felt this fell short of satisfactory given the number of complaints. Councillor Aitchison gave examples of reduced grass cutting in other areas and advised that there were mixed views on grass cutting with those supporting biodiversity wanting grass left to grow. His view was that the Council were striking the correct balance.