

**SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL
APPENDIX 1**

OPEN QUESTIONS

Questions from Councillor Parker

1. To the Executive Member for Community and Business Development

This September saw the seventh anniversary of the opening of the Borders Railway and to date very little progress has been made of extending the line beyond Tweedbank to Hawick and then on to Carlisle. Can Council please receive an update on the ongoing work to secure the extension specifically can Council be advised of the following:

1. Has the scope of the proposed feasibility study looking at extending the Borders Railway been agreed?
2. When will the feasibility study commence and what is the timetable from start to completion?
3. Whose carrying out the feasibility study?
4. Will there be an engineering study along with an economic benefit study and potentially other elements of work?
5. Will the feasibility study consist of a number of packages of work and what might they be?
6. How will progress of the feasibility work be reported and who to?
7. How will SBC Elected Members be kept up to date with progress on the work to extend the Borders Railway from now on?

Response from Councillor S. Hamilton

1. Has the scope of the proposed feasibility study looking at extending the Borders Railway been agreed? - In general terms we have made good progress recently, following a meeting between the Borderlands Partnership and the Scottish Government. At the meeting and supported by subsequent correspondence, Scottish Government has now accepted that the strategic case to progress the railway feasibility work has been achieved and we now await confirmation from UK Government that they also agree with this position. In essence, this means we are close to being able to progress the work develop the business case for the Borders Railway Extension through the growth deal and initiate the feasibility work.
2. When will the feasibility study commence and what is the timetable from start to completion? - We can't confirm timescales at the moment until we receive agreement to proceed from UK Government.
3. Who is carrying out the feasibility study? - It is too early to say and we would need to go through a tender exercise to appoint appropriate consultants.
4. Will there be an engineering study along with an economic benefit study and potentially other elements of work? - Absolutely, our argument has been that this project is not just a transport study but an economic development project, and the wider benefits need to be captured, especially the potential economic, community and environmental benefits and also other elements such as freight and links to HS2 etc.
5. Will the feasibility study consist of a number of packages of work and what might they be? – As above.
6. How will progress of the feasibility work be reported and who to? - The reporting mechanism will be primarily through the Borderlands Partnership Board, but will also ensure that local elected members are kept up to date with regular briefings etc.
7. How will SBC Elected Members be kept up to date with progress on the work to extend the Borders Railway from now on? - Once we have confirmation to proceed, we will provide elected members with a briefing note and take regular updates on progress through a suitable committee.

To the Executive Member for Service Delivery and Transformation

It is excellent to see that the new CGI offices at Tweedbank are now operational. When the original contract with CGI was signed there were a number of contract commitments to improve IT infrastructure and better connectivity. Could Council please be updated on the progress made against the headline commitments that were agreed when the contract was originally signed?

Response from Councillor Rowley

There are a significant number of contract commitments to improve IT infrastructure and connectivity in the ICT Services Agreement originally signed between Scottish Borders Council and CGI on the 25th March 2016 and revised in 2020 which I am happy to highlight to Council today in response to Councillor Parkers' question.

The March 2016 agreement set out an overarching aim to provide a fixed cost, flexible ICT service, improving capacity and capability and it introduced service levels that were contractually binding and which provided a service credit mechanism against an agreed set of key performance indicators.

As set out in the agreement the Council's back office systems including Finance, HR Payroll and Procurement have been replaced with an ERP solution - Business World.

A new Digital Customer Access Portal has been delivered providing the basis for the transformation of Future customer engagement across the Council and improving the capability of the Council to interact with our Citizens through digital channels by choice. A planned major push for customer sign-up will be linked to the council tax billing cycle for 2023/24.

The 2016 agreement with CGI also introduced 24/7 support through CGI's service desk and extended the full ICT support hours to run from 7am to 7pm, along with 24/7 monitoring and support of the council's priority Server and Network infrastructure under a "four hour fix" Service Level Agreement.

The contract also committed to desktop hardware and software refresh. All of the Council's extensive desktop and laptop hardware has been replaced at least once since 2017.

The upgrade to Windows 10 was completed successfully across the Council, as was the roll-out of the Office 365 application suite, ensuring officers and Members always have access to current digital hardware and tools. This included the roll of MS teams which was crucial to service continuity during the COVID 19 Pandemic.

Further work to complete the migration of Council data to the Office 365 cloud is ongoing.

The migration of the Council's core infrastructure from 'on premise' has been completed and all core systems are now running either out of CGI's fully resilient data centres, or are Cloud hosted. This has improved system availability and resilience, and will support the further transformation of services.

CGI have replaced the Council's network core infrastructure and our IT firewalls and monitor our network against attack from external sources.

Internally, our suite of desktop security applications have been replaced and are continually updated to help protect against cyber-attack. Our software landscape across the Council is complex but it is maintained at current versions and analysed for security vulnerabilities.

CGI has delivered Inspire learning providing Apple Ipads to all teachers, early years practitioners and all pupils in P4 – S6 with shared devices in P1 –P3. This has enabled the Council to deliver the most complete 1 to 1 digital education environment in Europe, placing the Borders at the forefront of the international drive to support and transform education through the use of digital tools.

Aligned with this programme, CGI have delivered enhanced Wide Area Network connections capable of 10 gigabit per second throughput to all 9 of our High Schools, while also increasing

choice of fibre connectivity for Borders businesses on the fibre routes, and we are close to completing the rollout of capacity increases for our primary school network connections.

All of our frontline in-house care staff are now equipped with mobile technology using Total Mobile, enhancing the efficiency of our tasking and scheduling of care visits, providing lone worker protection through an on-line application and allowing staff to submit payroll claims.

As well as the commitments to support and enhance the Council's own infrastructure and security, CGI also made commitments to the delivery of Community infrastructure benefits under the original Agreement in 2016, which were further enhanced and expanded under the extension agreement in 2020.

In terms of infrastructure CGI, through their partnership with Comms world, have 'unbundled' exchanges in many of the towns across the Borders, thereby increasing the options for local Internet Service Providers to purchase backhaul fibre services for internet connectivity.

The CGI new service centre at Tweedbank is now open and the building also houses the Inspire Learning Academy.

Questions from Councillor Robson

1. To the Executive Member for Community and Business Development

Can the Executive Member advise if the Council will contact the Post Office to request assistance for sub postmasters with their energy bills?

Response from Councillor S. Hamilton

This is clearly a hugely challenging time for local businesses and communities. I would urge any business who needs help with their energy bills to check out the Find Business Support website <https://findbusinesssupport.gov.scot/> which is continually being updated. Locally the Business Gateway service, which is delivered by SOSE on the Council's behalf, can also provide advice and support.

I recognise that Post Offices provide a valuable lifeline for many of our residents. As independent businesses they can seek out the same type of support as I've just mentioned. However, given the franchise model I am happy to write to Post Office to better understand what support it intends to provide to its branches.

2. To the Executive Member for Environment and Transport

Can the Executive Member advise whether any progress has been made on the collection and safe disposal of garden chemicals and, if a permanent system cannot be designed on an economic basis, whether a one-off initiative might be taken to remove risks to the environment which they can pose?

Response from Councillor Linehan

This is a matter that I have asked Officers to investigate and report back to Members setting out the logistical implications and costings to introducing such a service.

If introduced a charge would be made for disposal and this is something that I am keen Officers examine as part of the budget process.

Before such an assessment is undertaken we would need to amend our Waste Management Licences, purchase storage containers, train staff in safe storage and handling, put in place safe working procedures and potentially undertake ground works at Community Recycling Centres to protect drains from leakage. In addition we would need to procure a contract for the safe uplift and disposal of the materials.

In the intervening time it is suggested that residents contact specialist waste contractors to arrange for collection and safe disposal. Alternatively utilise the product for the purpose it has been designed in accordance with the manufacturer's guidance.

The Council is strongly of the view that manufacturers of such products must take more responsibility for the safe disposal of the products they produce and sell, including providing take back scheme or further detailed advice on how to safely dispose of products.

Questions from Councillor Begg

1. To the Executive Member for Environment and Transport

The National Trust is asking local councils and others to support plant life by taking part in their campaign by not mowing grass in May. Changing mowing routines and allowing plants to flower can create enough nectar for ten times more bees and other pollinators.

Does Scottish Borders Council plan to take part in this campaign?

Response from Councillor Linehan

SBC has selected areas that were agreed in 2018, where grass is cut between 1 and 3 times a year to promote biodiversity and provide habitat and food sources for pollinators and other wildlife. Work is ongoing to potentially extend this approach to other areas where appropriate.

The majority of grass areas maintained by Scottish Borders Council are classed as General Amenity Areas and these are cut on a cycle of around 20-working days between cuts. This starts in early April each year; the actual start date can vary due to weather conditions each Spring. We also have areas that are deemed High Amenity, such as key civic spaces, that are cut and lifted on a 7-10 day cycle, and our sports pitches are also cut on a 7-10 days cycle.

Scottish Borders Council are aware of No Mow May as a National initiative and recognise the role of delaying this first cut in providing food sources for pollinators early in the season. As outlined there are areas that we are seeking a more naturalised approach where this could and does, work well. There are other areas, such as in our parks, pitches and key civic spaces, where this would be less appropriate due to the high recreational or amenity value. Additionally there are challenges around the impacts if we were to delay the first cut in every general amenity area until June: the scale of operations and the length of grass that is likely to have established means this may take longer to complete all routes from June, so some areas may not see their first cut until July – which could impact negatively in our communities.

As ever it is about striking a balance, we would suggest a proportionate approach may be to trial 'No Mow May' in some General Amenity areas identified in each locality as appropriate. These could be more marginal areas, areas adjacent to our naturalised grass, or areas that communities wish to see trialled.

I will discuss this with Officers and provide a response to Councillor Begg when the areas that may be appropriate for a trial have been identified.

2. To the Executive Member for Community and Business Development

Can the Executive Member advise what plans there are to promote a 'shop local' campaign this Christmas?

Response from Councillor S. Hamilton

In looking at economic recovery post pandemic the Executive Committee agreed to promoting local businesses in the Scottish Borders and a key piece of work that we have been undertaking relates to the promotion of 'The Scotland Loves Local' Gift Card Scheme to local businesses and consumers.

As you will be aware, the gift card has been created to support businesses across the country, following the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by encouraging people to think local and buy local, therefore helping to drive footfall to businesses within the region and helping to keep consumer spending in the local area.

Following recent promotional work, we now have over 70 retailers across the Scottish Borders signed up to the scheme including fashion, beauty and food and drink businesses who are now able to reap the benefits of the gift card.

We anticipate this number will continue to grow as we approach Christmas and businesses are being reminded that they can register to take part in the scheme, for free, at any time.

We are also currently promoting the gift card on Radio Borders and this campaign will run up to Christmas and we hope that this will reach consumers across the Borders.

This will be supplemented with paid-for advertising on Facebook which will allow us to drip feed the Scotland Loves Local messaging to as many people across the Scottish Borders as possible and maximise the impact of the gift card scheme.

I would encourage all local elected members to promote the gift card in their area and help to highlight it as a great gift idea.

Question from Councillor Steel

To the Executive Member for Roads Development and Maintenance

Can the Executive Member advise what measures the Council may take to reduce the amount of dog fouling on sports pitches in the Borders with particular reference to the unacceptable and ongoing situation in Stow Park?

Response from Councillor Greenwell

The Dog Education Officer has visited Stow Park on a number of occasions speaking with and educating dog owners. The Officer has attended Community Council meetings and has provided posters to be erected around areas where fouling is prevalent and also information relating to the Green Dog Walkers scheme which encourages owners to be more responsible.

The Police will issue FPN's, give a formal Police warning or verbal warning when the Council receives a complaint of dog fouling which is forwarded to them when we have a willing witness and identified dog and owner. The process is time limited.

Parks & Environment (P&E) can erect posters and spray footpath stencils highlighting anti-dog fouling at specific locations. They will continue to respond to reports where fouling takes place to clear it up. There are 4 litter bins in and around Stow Park and they are emptied on a regular basis.

Similar action is taken all over the Borders when fouling is reported to the Council.

This problem will only be addressed with the co-operation of communities and through all dog owners taking responsibility and picking up after their dogs and preventing them, wherever possible, from fouling on pitches and recreational areas.

Questions from Councillor Thomson

1. To the Leader

When can we expect to see the output from the engagement sessions that were held over the summer?

Can we also be advised how many questions/comments were received and, if all have been actioned and satisfactorily concluded?

Response from Councillor Jardine

The feedback gathered from the Community Conversations held during the Summer of 2022 in 11 localities has now been collated and analysed.

This feedback has been provided to Group Leaders and will be the subject of a Council report in December 2022 setting out the actions proposed.

Thereafter this information will be shared with Community Councils and Area Forums.

188 comments were received and the Council is working through a process of addressing those issues where a response can be provided and actions identified.

2. To the Executive Member for Communities and Equalities

When the decision was made to release the £1.2m underspend to help constituents with the cost of living crisis, we were told a plan would be drawn up. Can we have sight of that plan, along with an update on progress against the plan?

What resource was set aside to support the additional workload that this will create? Our staff are already working at capacity to meet existing levels of demand and we need to ensure they too have the resources they need.

Response from Councillor Tatler

I can confirm that both the Multi-Agency Strategic and Operational Groups have been established and have met on three occasions. As agreed they are generating agile and rapid response proposals to alleviate some of the impacts of the cost of living crisis and are reporting in to the Anti-Poverty Members Reference Group where decisions are taken about the best use of the funding.

It was also agreed that Members would receive regular briefings and I will speak to officers to get an update out to all members as soon as possible and to programme these on a regular basis.

In terms of resources, it was agreed that £200k of the funding would support additional resources either within the Council or within other organisations such as CAB. This will continued to be reviewed and further funding allocated if needed.