

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL
15 DECEMBER 2022
APPENDIX I

OPEN QUESTIONS

Question from Councillor Sinclair

To the Leader

On 24th November, in relation to the Administration Policy Paper presented, the Leader told full council “once we’ve set the policy direction, and this is the policy direction, then we can start saying this is what we want to do in year one, year two, year three, etc.” We are now more than seven months into the first year of the council term. When will the Administration set out what they intend to deliver in year one, how those aspirations will be delivered and funded, and how their success will be measured?

Response from Councillor Jardine

Thank you for your Question Councillor Sinclair and thank you also to Councillor Anderson for submitting a question on the same topic. Council Sinclair’s question is framed in a slightly wider manner than Councillor Anderson’s, so I will provide this one response to both questions to avoid repeating myself and taking up time on the Council agenda.

The Administration’s high level policy priorities were, as you note, approved by Council on the 24th November 2022. These priorities cover the 5 year term of this Administration. The priority outcomes for delivery in 2023/24 will be set out with SMART targets in the updated Council Plan. It is intended that these will be resourced as part of the Council budget process for 2023/24 which will be agreed in February 2023 along-side the updated Council Plan. This will align the policy objectives of the Administration with the Budget process and the Council Plan, thereby ensuring the priorities set out by the Administration are fully costed and deliverable within the resources agreed by Council each year. It is my intention to bring annual updates to Council at the end of each financial year from 2023/24 setting out the successes that have been achieved.

Question from Councillor Ramage

To the Executive Member for Community and Business Development

It was disappointing to be told last month that after 7 years the proposed Borders Railway Extension Feasibility Study had not commenced. In fact Council was advised that there is no detailed plan for the study or when it will be delivered and no information about what the study will entail and how long it will all take. Can the Executive Member provide more reassurance that this Administration will do everything possible to get the feasibility study under way.

Response from Councillor S. Hamilton

In general terms we have made good progress recently in relation to the initiation of the feasibility work for the proposed extension of the Borders Railway from Tweedbank through Hawick to Carlisle.

A positive meeting between Borderlands Partners and the Scottish Government was held in October where Council Leaders had the opportunity to present the case for the extension work to key Scottish Government politicians. From this discussion and subsequent correspondence, we believe the Scottish Government has now accepted our position that the strategic case for the railway feasibility work has been achieved and we now await the same confirmation from UK Government that they also agree with this position.

We have contacted the relevant department in UK Government and we are currently pressing them for a response.

Once this agreement has been received, we will be able to initiate and develop the business case for the feasibility study through the Borderlands Growth Deal process.

In addition, it was agreed in discussions with Scottish Government that we can start to recruit a Senior Programme Manager which will be delivered from the allocated funding contained within the Borderlands Growth Deal to help drive forward the feasibility study. It is likely that Scottish Borders Council would be the proposed employer for this post and once recruited they would report to the Borderlands Partnership.

We have initiated the development of a job description for this position and we would hope to be able to advertise for this position by the end of the current financial year.

There is also an action to develop a working group with suitable partners and politicians, including the Campaign for Borders Rail and we are presently giving some consideration as to how we develop this group going forward.

Question from Councillor Smart

To the Leader

Due to the Elections Act 2022, whereby photographic ID will be required in Scotland for any UK wide election after May 2023, can the Executive Member advise what preparations Scottish Borders Council has made and continues to make in order for us as an Authority to be ready for this significant change.

In particular, what are the plans for the SBC version of the Voter Card, how will SBC identify those in need of this, and how will people be able to apply for one?

Response from Councillor Jardine

The Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is responsible for the issue of a Voter Authority Certificate (Voter ID) to electors who make an identity document application in terms of The Voter Identification Regulations 2022.

Preparation

Both the ERO and Depute ERO continue to working with the UK Government (Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities), the Electoral Commission, the Scottish Assessors Association Electoral Registration Committee and the ERO's Electoral Management Software Supplier in preparation for the application system going live on 16 January 2023.

Senior ERO staff have also attended various seminars/briefings held by UK Government, Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission.

ERO staff will be receiving training on 14 December in respect of the processing of Voter Authority Certificate applications through the ERO Portal which has been designed and developed by UK Government at no cost to the ERO.

The Voter Authority Certificate

For those who need this document it will be an A4 paper-based document, with inherent security features including patterning and watermarks, displaying:

- The elector's name
- Photograph
- Date of issue
- The issuing Electoral Registration Officer
- An 'identifier' (i.e. a reference number)
- Recommended renewal date

UK Government has contracted with a Print Supplier for production and dispatch of Voter Authority Certificates on behalf of the ERO.

Awareness

The Electoral Commission is conducting an awareness campaign from 8 January 2023 and materials will be supplied to the ERO.

The Commission has carried out a study that suggests up to 6% of the electorate do not have photographic ID. This equates to c 5500 electors in the Scottish Borders.

The ERO is developing an engagement strategy for those less likely to hold an accepted form of ID on how to obtain a Voter Authority Certificate.

The ERO's Engagement Officer will work with SBC Communications and various stakeholders to raise awareness locally.

How to apply

Voters without one of the prescribed accepted forms of ID are able to obtain a Voter Authority Certificate from the ERO to enable them to cast their vote in person.

Examples of accepted forms of ID are:

- A United Kingdom passport or issued by an EEA state or Commonwealth country
- A driving licence (including a provisional driving licence)
- A biometric immigration document
- Young Scot Card
- National Entitlement Card

Electors will be able to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate either through:

- GOV.UK 'Get ready to vote in person' digital service – an online application service on the GOV.UK website; or by
- Paper application to the ERO (Scanned or emailed applications will not be permitted)

Applicants will need to provide their name, address, date of birth, photograph and National Insurance Number (NINo).

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact the Electoral Registration Officer, Brian Rout.

Question from Councillor Parker

To the Leader

Can the Leader confirm that a four court indoor tennis centre will be provided at the new Galashiels Academy Community Campus?

Response from Councillor Jardine

Council Officers and colleagues at Live Borders have been working with SportScotland to progress the tennis centre. This is currently planned to be delivered as part of the Campus project. However, there is no specific funding for this and a funding bid is being prepared which will be submitted to SportScotland in early 2023. SportScotland are extremely supportive of the proposal and Council officers will continue to work with the partners to secure funding to deliver an indoor tennis centre.

On conclusion, a further update will be provided to relevant Ward and Executive Members, we expect clarification in the first half of 2023.

Questions from Councillor Anderson

1. To the Executive Member for Community Engagement

The Community Council scheme review still hasn't been published, when will this happen?

Response from Councillor Cochrane

The Community Council Scheme is currently still under review. A meeting of the Working Group is planned for early 2023 to go through the proposed changes and then it will go out for informal consultation with the Community Councils to allow them to submit comments for consideration by

the Working Group. Thereafter the Working Group will present a report to a special meeting of full Council on the proposed changes and seek agreement for this to go out to public consultation for 12 weeks. The Working Group will consider any comments received in that consultation and then bring a final Scheme to a special meeting of Council for approval.

2, To the Leader

At last month's Council meeting, Members received the Administration's Policy Plan the night before the meeting. This Plan had no timescales, no prioritisation of the commitments, no financial information or costings for the various commitments, and no clear idea of when any of the Plan will be delivered. Can the Leader inform Council when they can expect to see an Administration Policy Plan with timescales, prioritisation, costings and will Members get it 10 days in advance instead of the night before.

Response from Councillor Jardine

See response to question from Councillor Sinclair above.

Question from Councillor M. Douglas

To the Executive Member for Environment and Transport

The recent changes to the 362 Peebles High School bus service and its rebranding to the general service bus X62 has resulted in a great deal of concern amongst pupils and parents concerning the transport of pupils between Innerleithen and Peebles. There have been some reported instances of pupils being refused travel and thereby arriving late for lessons, as well as some instances of pupils arriving home later than usual due to delays with the X62 from Edinburgh. Parents are also concerned that the updated service now allows members of the public to travel with pupils which can cause further overcrowding.

Officials have advised that much of the current situation arises from pupils not using the correct bus service to which they have been allocated, and travelling on the X62 with travel cards. Could the Executive Member please advise what steps are being taken to engage with and update pupils and parents about the correct use of this and other school bus services, in order to allay fears over the safety of children travelling to and from school?

Response from Councillor Linehan

Following the recent challenges with transport arrangements which relate specifically to a small number of Peebles High School contracts, the Councils Transport Team are working closely with the school, Peebles Parent Council and the respective Transport operators to resolve this situation quickly.

All pupils in Peebles are allocated to a specific contract in order to ensure that there are no issues with capacity and that there is sufficient space for members of the public who may wish to travel.

The current challenges arise primarily from pupils who are choosing to use other buses which in turn causes some problems with capacity. This is a direct result of some of the behavioural issues in some contracts which has been confirmed through monitoring the operators CCTV. We believe that pupils are choosing to travel on different vehicles due to the behaviour of individuals on others. There is also an element of pupils believing that they can use any bus as they have an under 22 free travel card.

In order to resolve the issues, Officers are actively working with the school and parents to resolve issues and refine service provision and they will continue to monitor the situation collectively.

The Bus Operator has made us aware that there have been no issues with over boarding of any contracts but has highlighted that not all pupils are making use of the available seats.

This may be because some pupils' feel uncomfortable sitting next to others but it does give the impression that there is insufficient seats available.

We have had similar challenges in Earlston earlier in the term but working together with the school and the Operators we have managed to resolve them. I am confident that if we follow the steps outlined above, we should be able to resolve the challenges we currently face in Peebles.

We have kept Cllr Douglas fully informed throughout and will continue to provide updates as and when we have further information to share.

Question from Councillor Robson

To the Executive Member for Developing Our Children and Young People

Can the Executive Member advise when the pages related to fostering and adoption on the Council's website were last reviewed?

Response from Councillor C. Hamilton

The Fostering and Adoption pages on the SBC Internet were last reviewed in June 2022 and the fees and allowances page was updated.

The majority of the Fostering policies, procedures and guidance on the Intranet were last formally reviewed in 2017 and require updating (though the content is still relevant). The Adoption and Permanence policies, procedures and guidance are up to date. There are also a number of other procedural and guidance documents which are only held within the Family Placement Team as they relate to some of the functions exclusive to the team.