

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL

APPENDIX I

OPEN QUESTIONS

Question from Councillor Sinclair

To the Executive Member for Community and Business Development

What discussions have been held between the council and operators regarding bringing a hotel to Galashiels, and what progress has been made towards this aim to date?

Response from Councillor S. Hamilton

Council officers have met potential investors throughout 2022 to discuss potential hotel development opportunities. Engagement has continued into 2023, with officers exploring possible site options and potential delivery models.

Between December 2021 and today, officers from Economic Development and Infrastructure & Environment have had 8 meetings with potential investors as well as a number of telephone calls and email exchanges.

Officers intend to continue to pursue discussions during 2023. Where appropriate and should a viable site and delivery model be identified, they will work with colleagues from other agencies, such as the South of Scotland Enterprise, with a view to enabling the development of a hotel in or around Galashiels.

These discussions are at an early stage, commercially sensitive and dependent on the economic climate.

Question from Councillor Thornton-Nicol

To Executive Member for Service Delivery and Transformation

What is the current compliance rate for mandatory training across Council and is it being actively managed to achieve 100%?

Response from Councillor Rowley

The current compliance rate for staff mandatory training completed across the Council is 82%, this excludes a new course added in the last few weeks on an Introduction to the Climate emergency.

The completion of mandatory training is being actively managed across all services.

To encourage compliance a quarterly report is sent to the Council Management Team (CMT), showing a monthly summary % of completions on each mandatory module/course by Service and section.

SLT members then use this report to notify their managers on levels of completion rates who in turn work with individual staff to complete any outstanding modules and identify any reasons for non-compliance.

The staff appraisal system also has a specific section built in asking if all mandatory training has been completed, why not and if not when will it be completed

Going forward, in addition to the above, we plan to put out a quarterly communication to remind staff of the mandatory learning pathway and provide update on any changes to current modules/course where they will be required to undertake the course or any new courses that have become mandatory.

New mandatory courses are also communicated as and when they become available for staff to access.

Question from Councillor Thomson

To the Executive Member for Service Delivery and Transformation

What project management tool does SBC use, and is it possible for Councillors to get access to project plans, RAG reports etc. for projects/programmes in which they are involved. This would give a clearer understanding of progress and any issues being faced at key stages of the project/programme.

Response from Councillor Rowley

For major projects, SBC engage with externally appointed project managers who develop project management plans, provide monthly dashboard reports and manage the delivery of the project and all members of the design and delivery team. The approach used is generally in line with the Association of Project Management (APM) Book of Knowledge.

Projects are governed in line with the scheme of delegation, typically through the establishment of a project board with defined terms of reference and with agreed tolerances.

The operational management of projects rests with officer and officers provide updates on individual projects and programmes as required through Members Briefings, Reports to Executive Committee or Council.

If elected members have any concerns with regards to projects that are not addressed by these regular updates, they should contact the Service Director seeking further information and assurance.

Question from Councillor Mackinnon

To the Executive Member for Environment and Transport

What steps are being taken to improve bus services in the region, particularly the lack of late buses from Galashiels to other towns which is impacting the evening economy in the heart of the Borders?

Response from Councillor Linehan

Since the onset of Covid – 19, bus services across the Scottish Borders have been significantly impacted by a reduction in passenger numbers. The most recent figures show that patronage across the regions bus services is currently sitting at 78% of pre Covid levels with only 60% of the over 60 travellers returning to public transport since the pandemic.

This is being compounded by increased operating costs with costs such as fuel up 33% on the same time last year, other items such as tyres and parts are up 18%. This makes it very difficult for transport operators to increase frequencies when the demand is currently very low.

Late evening journeys have been impacted the most as a result of the pandemic with very little demand for people travelling after 7pm. Where there has been feedback from the public for an increase in late evening journeys, some services such as the X62, Galashiels – Peebles – Edinburgh, have had variations to the timetable to enable later journeys.

Over the past 2 and a half years, the council's transport officers have been working closely with local transport operators to assess passenger trends via data derived from ticket machines on bus whilst also listening to public feedback on bus services, the network has then been adjusted to reflect any changes to travel patterns.

In order to try and reverse some of the current trends, Scottish Borders Council in partnership with the workforce mobility project have commissioned Jacobs to carry out a review of the regions bus transport network. Key objectives are to:

- Reduce inequalities;
- Take climate action;
- Maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of publicly subsidised services;
- Help deliver inclusive economic growth and community wealth building by linking people to jobs and customers to businesses; and

- Improve health and wellbeing by connecting people to communities and enabling healthy transport choices.

The review includes and extensive engagement exercise with key stakeholders, partners and local communities as well as looking at data from the existing network and overlaying this with additional data supplied by businesses and employers to establish new travel opportunities for residents across the Borders.

A report will be prepared and brought to Council later in 2023.

Question from Councillor Smart

To the Executive Member for Lifelong Learning

In the Administration Policy Plan 2022-2077, under the section 'Fulfilling our Potential', it states on page 5 that with regards to Neurodiversity 'We will develop an ethos in all our schools that is inclusive, tolerant and open-minded towards individual differences. To ensure this happens we will:

- Encourage staff who identify as neurodivergent to contribute to operational planning'

This is a commendable aim and has my full support.

My question is this, how will we as a Council assess which staff are potentially neurodivergent and encourage them to participate in operational planning?

Response from Councillor L. Douglas

There are a number of opportunities that we are exploring to ensure we encourage staff to contribute to planning.

Our annual staff survey is a key tool which we can use to invite staff to inform us if they would identify as neurodivergent. While this is an anonymous survey, this would allow us to have a picture of staff and we would also provision that staff who were interested in contributing to planning to provide contact details.

While many individuals may prefer not to share this information with us, our planned general awareness raising both internally and externally will provide a level of understanding which could promote staff to come forward. Our elearning offer already had some useful material in this respect and can be added to as we progress this priority.

Further opportunity comes from audit tools which we as an employer can use to assess our own policies, procedures and arrangements for staff to identify areas for potential improvement. This is where we can involve staff meaningfully in operational planning.

Question from Councillor Begg

To the Executive Member for Environment and Transport

When will a report on the Dial a Bus on-demand trial in Berwickshire likely be available, and in the interim, are there any indicative figures to compare the subsidy per passenger mile on the pre-trial bus provision with that during the trial?

Response from Councillor Linehan

There is a Members Briefing planned on 2 February 2023 to provide elected members with an update on the Demand Responsive Transport pilot.

There is an interim report prepared by officers in December. This is available for any members interested and a copy has been sent to Cllr Begg.

A further formal report is currently being prepared, is due to be completed for the beginning of February. This report will evaluate the Berwickshire PINGO pilot against business case objectives and provide an economic assessment.

Question from Councillor Steel

To the Leader

Does the Administration support COSLA's call for a halt to the passage in the Scottish Parliament of the National Care Service Bill?

Response from Councillor Jardine

The Council is a member organisation of Cosla and as such supports the position agreed by COSLA leaders. The Council has significant concerns as to the implementation of the National care Service Bill as currently drafted, its anticipated costs, and as yet unknown implications for local service provision.

The Council has previously set out its position with regards to the National Care Service Bill in evidence submitted to the Scottish Parliament and considered by Council on the 25th August 2022.

As agreed by Council a letter was submitted to the Minister for Mental Health and Social Care setting out a proposal for a locally designed Scottish Borders test of change to be developed in partnership with NHS Borders and the Scottish Borders Health and Social Care Integrated Joint Board. The Minister has responded positively to this approach and work is now progressing led by the Chief Officer of the IJB. This will be reported to Council in due course.

Question from Councillor Parker

To the Executive Member for Community and Business Development

It was enormously disappointing to hear that the Scottish Borders will receive **no funding support** from the UK Levelling Up Fund. Scottish Borders Council submitted a sound bid for funding that would have supported numerous projects across the Scottish Borders. Can the Executive Member provide the following information:

- (a) Why was the bid not successful?
- (b) What is the Executive Members plan B for providing funding support to all of the projects that were part of the failed Levelling Up bid?
- (c) When will Council discuss the projects that will now not receive funding support so that Elected Members can determine how best to take the projects forward?

Response from Councillor S. Hamilton

Scottish Borders Council submitted three ambitious transport, culture and heritage, and town centre regeneration bids involving multiple partners and community organisations which together aimed to level up the whole region. The bids were developed in regular consultation with civil servants and local stakeholders, with support from consultants who helped ensure a robust economic and strategic case for investment was made. As a region identified as a Priority 1 area for Levelling Up investment, we are extremely disappointed by this outcome.

- (a) **Why was the bid not successful?**
The UK Government's Levelling Up Fund is a competitive programme. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities received 525 bids for the current bidding round, and 111 bids were successful, meaning just over 20% of bids were approved. Analysis of the value of bids submitted was in the region of £10 billion. Officers are meeting with senior civil servants for further feedback on the Scottish Borders bids.
- (b) **What is the Executive Members plan B for providing funding support to all of the projects that were part of the failed Levelling Up bid?** – Officers are currently looking at options for alternative funding to progress the projects that were submitted to Round 2 of the Levelling Up Fund. Information has also been requested from UK Government on the timescales and criteria for the next expected Round 3 of Levelling Up Funding.

- (c) **When will Council discuss the projects that will now not receive funding support so that Elected Members can determine how best to take the projects forward?** Once officers have received further feedback from the UK Government on the reasons why the submitted bids were not successful, and the expected timescales for the submission of the next round, Elected members have asked officers to ensure they fully briefed and engaged on the next steps.