

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL
27 APRIL 2023
APPENDIX I

OPEN QUESTIONS

Questions from Councillor Begg

1. To the Executive Member for Environment and Transport

Can the Executive Member advise how much reimbursement is provided to bus operators for the over 60s and under 22s bus passes?

Response from Councillor Jardine in the absence of Councillor Linehan

The reimbursement rates for 2023/24 were laid in Parliament on 27 January 2023 and came into force on 1 April 2023.

The rates are as follows:

- Older & Disabled Persons Free Bus Travel Scheme: reimbursement rate is 55.9%,
The scheme cap is set at £216.2 million

Young Persons Free Bus Travel Scheme: reimbursement rates are:

- 5-15 year olds is 43.6%
- 16-21 year olds is 81.2%

The scheme will not be capped in 2023/24

Feedback from local transport operators on the under 22 scheme is that there are significant numbers of young people in the Borders taking advantage of the scheme and using it to make journeys across the local network for employment and leisure.

Take up of the scheme regionally is good with around 75% of young people between the ages of 12 and 18 having applied for the travel entitlement.

The objective now is to continue to work with operators to grow the under 22 use whilst also trying to encourage use of public transport by Adults. The passenger Transport Team has applied for funding to run a marketing campaign which will run alongside the Scottish Governments forthcoming campaign to encourage people to use public transport.

Supplementary

Councillor Begg asked if Councillor Jardine considered if the rate of reimbursement was suitable for rural services. Councillor Jardine advised he would need to check with Border Buses and other operators. The first step was getting people to use buses and then the funding could be looked at, but at the moment Councillor Jardine could not either agree or disagree.

2 To the Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing

Can the Executive Member advise how much social care funding for people in Scottish Borders has been held on to by Scottish Government to fund the National Care Service so far?

Response from Councillor Parker

I can confirm that there is no funding within the Local Government settlement held back to fund the National Care Service.

3 To the Executive Member for Service Delivery and Transformation

Can the Executive Member advise why businesses received notification of their rates so late this year? Small businesses in particular have been affected badly by the threshold changes. What action is Scottish Borders Council taking to support them?

Response from Councillor Rowley

The Non Domestic Rates bills were posted to customers on 12 April 2023. This mirrored the issue date in 2022 and was slightly earlier than in 2021, allowing for payment to commence on 1 May as determined by legislation.

Due to the impact of the Scottish Government's legislative changes to the Small Business Bonus Relief scheme it has not been possible to accurately calculate the bills for small businesses and therefore all impacted businesses have been contacted directly and given an indication of their estimated liability. The reason for this approach was to maximise the payment term available to businesses to help keep their monthly instalments as low as possible. We anticipate revised bills being issued during May which will detail Small Business Bonus Relief awards and Transitional Relief where applicable.

No action will be taken against any of the affected business that prefer to wait for an accurate bill before making payment however it must be noted that this will have an impact on their remaining instalments.

Advice and guidance on changes to the rules, the next steps, what to apply for and when is available on the Council's website. The Council's Customer Support team can also offer advice to any business that is worried about the increase in their liability and again contact details are available on the website.

Supplementary

Councillor Begg asked if we could give businesses more notice in future so they can plan for their future liabilities. Councillor Rowley agreed that early notice was helpful which was why businesses had been notified directly of their estimated liability. However, the current changes were by the Scottish Government and out-with Council control.

Question from Councillor Scott

To the Executive Member for Estate Management and Planning

Can the Executive Member give me an update/possible time line on when the proposed Skateboard Park, in the "Dip" Jedburgh might commence please?

Response from Councillor Mountford

It is anticipated that work will commence here in Sept / Oct 2023 & expect completion to be early in the New Year, weather permitting.

We are currently awaiting a second price for the electricity cabling before finalising the Tender cost.

Officers intend to prepare a Play Parks Programme information webpage, similar to that recently launched for the Peebles High School Project that sets out the significant investment planned over the next 7-years. This will clarify what the Council intend to achieve through the programme of investment, and provides progress updates and timelines to raise the profile and awareness of the programme.'

Question from Councillor Anderson

To the Executive Member for Service Delivery and Transformation

The SBC HQ remains significantly under occupied during the working week.

Will the Chief Executive look at the situation and bring to Council evidence of the stated improvement in work being done by staff, with a comparison to works completed in the year 2022/23 to works completed in 2018/19 for Elected Members to debate? This report I would request not be just about monetary improvement, but people served, level of services and customer satisfaction.

Response from Councillor Rowley

The Council has, since the commencement of the first COVID 19 lockdown, operated a hybrid staffing model whereby those office based staff who can effectively carry out their duties using online technology such as Microsoft Teams have been encouraged to work either at home, or in a council office where home working is not practicable.

These working arrangements have been enacted under the Council's flexible working policy which is available online and can be accessed using the link below.

<https://scotborders.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/IntranetContent/Flexible%20working%20Policy%20Aug%202022%20published.docx>

The flexible working policy applies to approximately 1,500 people of who approximately 400 were previously based in Council HQ. The remainder of the Council's 4,168 Full Time Equivalent staff work in schools, social work centres, care homes, and other front line functions such as care at homes and roads. On-line, flexible working arrangements are not appropriate to these staff due to the time-critical, face to face client-focussed, or locality specific, nature of the services they provide to the public.

The impact of this policy has meant that the Council Headquarters building has recently been required to accommodate a significantly reduced number of staff when compared to previous arrangements. Occupancy varies throughout the week but checks this week have indicated around 60 - 70 staff signing in to HQ each day.

Providing the option of hybrid working has assisted the Council in meeting a range of recruitment challenges in its central functions. I am informed by our Human Resources Team that this flexibility is one of the key benefits employees are now looking for when looking for a new role and considering which organisations they wish to work for in an increasingly competitive labour market.

It has also provided environmental benefits in reducing journeys to and from a workplace in line with the Council's agreed carbon reduction commitments, as well as lost working time due to travelling to meetings. The beneficial impact of such an approach on staff travel mileage and the Council's overall carbon footprint can be evidenced by from work conducted by the Education Service, which showed the weekly meeting of (one small team) education officers which would have previously happened in person at HQ, now happens via teams saves a collective travel time of 10 hours 40 minutes a week and avoids 400 miles being driven, allowing more time to be spent directly working in and supporting schools.

The current situation, where the majority of previously HQ based staff have worked successfully from home, has also allowed the refurbishment of the building to take place including , toilet refurbishment, re-cabling and an upgrade of wi-fi capability across the building. The purchase of any new furniture has been kept to a minimum as part of these works and where ever possible existing furniture has been reused.

The post-covid operating environment has also allowed the re think of the way in which the HQ building will be used in future. Officers are currently considering whether it would be possible to create a multi-agency civic centre, including staff from the Council, Health, the Integration Joint Board, the Emergency Services, Live Borders and the third sector. Staff from the Joint Learning Disability team are already relocated into the HQ building from Earlston and this building is now on the market. A report on the further works on the future strategy for HQ has also been requested by the Executive Committee and will be provided in May.

Comprehensive data on the performance of the Council is published annually. Information is available online through the Local Government Benchmarking Framework hosted by the Improvement Service along with comparable data for other Scottish Local Authorities.

Comprehensive Information is available comparing Council and showing the performance of each Council including SBC over time and includes a variety of quantitative and qualitative measures including the satisfaction of service users. The link to the most recently published comparative data is provided below.

[For the public | Benchmarking \(improvementservice.org.uk\)](https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/)

Information on the Council's performance during 2022/23 was regularly reported to the Executive Committee and the reports and information are available online through Modern.gov and already readily accessible by Elected members to debate and for scrutiny by the Public.

The most recent performance report for Q3 2022/23 is available using the link provided below and information on the final quarter will be provided and reported to Elected members alongside financial information as part of the outturn process in June 2023 as soon as this is available.

[Scottish Borders Council Council Performance Report Q?? – 2022/23 \(moderngov.co.uk\)](https://www.moderngov.co.uk/)

The Council continues to serve its 115,000 population to the best of its ability with the finite resources at its disposal with no evidence of a diminution in service caused by flexible working. The period both during and post the COVID 19 pandemic has in fact seen a significant increase in the reporting requirements from Government.

The information sought by the question is readily available, pulling this together in the format requested by Councillor Anderson would in my view not be a productive use of officer time and I see no reason to request a further report on this matter from the Chief Executive.

Supplementary

Councillor Anderson advised that a number of elected Members were unhappy with the working from home strategy and requested that in future decisions on where staff should work be brought to Council for discussion and decision. Councillor Rowley advised it was not a working from home strategy but a flexible working policy and staff could chose to work from home if it suited the requirements of the service. He further advised that this option aided the Council in recruitment and made it easier to meet sustainability goals.

Question from Councillor Steel

To the Executive Member for Developing Our Children and Young People

Does the Executive member agree with the objectives of the Wave Trust, whose aim is to reduce the maltreatment of children by 70% by 2030?

Response from Councillor C. Hamilton

The Wave Trust is an international educational charity based in the UK whose objectives are to reduce the root causes of interpersonal violence: child neglect and maltreatment. As the Executive Member, I agree with the fundamental need to deliver effective prevention and early intervention to ensure that we can reduce child abuse and neglect and to engage parents, carers and communities in this process.

The Wave Trusts agenda is consistent with 'The Promise' which aims to deliver a full system shift from across the multi-agency landscape to promote early and effective intervention and prevention for every child in Scotland. Locally, 'The Promise' work is incorporated within the Scottish Borders Children and Young People's Planning Partnership (CYPPP) which had its inaugural meeting last Friday and as Executive Member, I attend this forum and fully support its work.