

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL
31 AUGUST 2023
APPENDIX I

OPEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

Questions from Councillor Anderson

1. To Executive Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

On 11th August elected members, SBC staff, DYW (developing the young workforce) and Borders College heads met about future working together. Many issues were discussed and some fantastic ideas to move forward with. The need for Agricultural training facilities was raised and the lack of facilities in Berwickshire.

Will the Administration agree to look at Gunsgreen Hill farm buildings in Eyemouth and the adjacent SBC owned agricultural land, for a future development with Borders College of an agricultural training facility?

The future employability of our young people is paramount and Berwickshire is in great need of hands on college courses closer to home.

Response from Councillor C. Hamilton in the absence of Councillor L. Douglas

Training and employment in all areas of agriculture are a critical pathway for our young people and working in partnership with for example Borders College and SRUC will be vital for successful delivery.

There are different delivery models available to provide training, including through creating work based learning experiences in partnerships with commercial farmers for example, and there are successful models in similar industries to learn from.

As the partnership planning develops, Officers will consider options including discussions with Borders College about the best way to deliver agricultural training in the region. At this point in time it is not possible to commit to examining the Gunsgreen Hill farm buildings in Eyemouth although this may provide one option for evaluation going forward. Officers will arrange a discussion on this matter with Borders College as soon as possible.

2. To Executive Member for Service Delivery and Transformation

At a meeting of Eyemouth town team on Monday 14th August a presentation was given on the cemetery extension. The plan was not as expected, and no prior information was given to the elected members.

What policy is in place to ensure Elected members are consulted effectively on decisions that affect their constituents? Specifically, is there a policy stating ward members should be consulted and if so what time scale is given if one exists.

Response from Councillor Rowley

Part 15 of the Elected Member Officer protocol which has been approved by Council details the circumstances in which elected Members will be consulted or advised about matters affecting their Ward. Bearing in mind the principle role of elected members is to set strategy and major policy decisions there may from time to time be matters in respect of which Members will not necessarily be engaged prior to an event taking place.

Part 15 says that Members will be consulted on “specific matters of interest to them as local Members.” It goes on to detail that this may include, for example: “Whenever a public meeting is organised by the Council to consider local issues, all Members representing the Ward(s) affected must be invited to attend. Similarly, whenever the Council undertakes any form of consultative exercise on a local issue, the local Members must be notified and, where appropriate, the views of the Members should be requested.

Members must be consulted on all significant new projects or initiatives in their Ward at the planning stage, in order that their views may be taken into account.”

It details that Members must be consulted on issues of substantial or significant interest to their local communities.

In this particular occasion Officers had formed the view that the Town Meeting was an ongoing process and there was no need to pre-meet with the local Members. While this may have been an error on their part, Officers will always do all that they can to ensure local Members are appropriately engaged in those significant matters affecting their Ward.

Question from Councillor Ramage

To Executive Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

How many teachers are currently on temporary contracts across the Scottish Borders?

Response from Councillor C. Hamilton in the absence of Councillor L. Douglas

In total SBC employ 1,120 teachers, of this 982 have permanent contracts. This includes more than 20 newly qualified teachers who have completed their probation and are now employed on permanent contracts. There are currently 138 teachers employed on a temporary basis. Of these 47 are newly qualified teachers now on their probationary year and our obligations to accommodate probationers means that there are a number of positions held for this purpose.

The remaining temporary positions are mostly providing backfill to permanent staff who are on maternity leave, absent due to ill health or on secondment.

While for the reasons given there will always be staff who are employed on a temporary basis, we are committed to ensuring that the number of posts which are temporary is kept at a minimum and that every opportunity to retain staff in permanent positions is taken.

Supplementary

Councillor Ramage asked if more detail could be provided and Councillor Hamilton advised she would ask officers if this could be done.

Questions from Councillor Sinclair

To the Executive Member for Estate Management and Planning

1. In line with the decision taken on 30th March 2023 that Stow would have public toilet provision, what actions have been taken to provide such a facility?

Response from Councillor Mountford

The public toilets in Stow were closed in 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and public safety measures at the time. The building was, and has continued to be, in a state of disrepair. The costs of repair to the toilet block in Stow have been assessed as prohibitive.

Since Council approved the report in March, an officer working group have been progressing the agreed actions. With regards to Stow, officers have been in active discussion with the community regarding opportunities for public toilet provision within community or private venues and these discussions are ongoing.

Supplementary

Councillor Sinclair advised that the matter had been raised at the Community Council as they had not been consulted and asked that assurance be given that that they would be consulted in any future discussions. Councillor Mountford confirmed that this would be done.

2. What was the cost of providing temporary toilets at Bank Street, Galashiels, for the Braw Lad's Gathering in 2023.

Response from Councillor Mountford

The cost of supplying 12 temporary toilets at Bank Street Gardens for the Braw Lads Gathering in 2023 was £1520 ex VAT.

Supplementary

Councillor Sinclair asked who had paid for this and would this be a recurring cost. Councillor Mountford confirmed he would check with officers. Councillor Jardine advised that the cost had been met from pay parking monies with Councillor approval.

To the Executive Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

3. Scottish Borders Council is currently advertising for six head teachers, including at two of our eight high schools.

Is this vacancy level due to natural staff turnover / retirement, or does it point to a wider recruitment / retention issue at Scottish Borders Council?

Response from Councillor C. Hamilton in the absence of Councillor L. Douglas

The current vacancies for 4 primary and 2 secondary head teacher posts are being advertised for the following reasons:

- 3 – postholders retired
- 1 – postholder promoted to more senior role
- 1 – postholder resigned as moving home
- 1 – postholder was successful in securing position in another authority

We have a strong recruitment plan with advertising campaigns and open sessions to ensure the strongest possible candidates are recruited. While we have a good track in attracting new leaders to Scottish Borders, and our success with Inspire Learning and Professional Development makes us an attractive employer, we recognise that there are high numbers of school leaders reaching retirement age nationally and we expect there to be further vacancies. There is no issue with recruitment or retention of teachers at SBC.

Supplementary

Councillor Sinclair asked what was being done to support teachers to move into headship roles. Councillor Hamilton advised that there was lots of support and she would ask officers to provide details.

Questions from Councillor Begg

To the Executive Member for Environment and Transport

1. Can the Executive Member advise whether they receive an annual report of the incidence of sewage overflow in Scottish Borders from Scottish Water as part of the Council's public health duties? If not, does the Executive Member think that it would be prudent to do so going forward?

Response from Councillor Linehan

Whilst a specific annual report for the Scottish Borders is not produced, Scottish Water publish data relating to all monitored overflows in Scotland on their [website](#) as part of their commitment to improving reporting and monitoring of sewage overflows. This report contains details of overflows between 2018 and 2022 and work is underway to include near real time reporting of overflows from the end of 2024.

Scottish Water also report all actual and potential pollution incidents to SEPA via their Environmental Pollution Incident Reporting process, as per licence conditions.

Supplementary

Councillor Begg asked if Councillor Linehan had any worries about the accuracy of reports and she advised that she would need to check with officers.

2. Can the Executive Member advise what plans there are to manage Ash dieback, in particular the issue of diseased trees beside our roads? Can you advise what additional resource, if any, has been allocated to deal with the effects of this devastating tree disease?

Response from Councillor Linehan

If SBC suspect that there may be a case of Ash Dieback, Council Officers report this to Forestry Scotland's regional Area Plant Health Officer. This is also who Officers notify for Sudden Oak Death and other notifiable pathogens like Great Spruce Bark Beetle. As far as we are aware there have been no Ash Dieback cases to date.

Forestry Scotland manage a national database for diseases along with details of restrictions and co-ordinated movement for timber production in this regard.

We continue to run the risk assessment for trees on Council owned and maintained land, and any issues identified are addressed by approved contractors on the procurement framework.

Regarding Ash Dieback, we take advice from Scottish Government guidance and participate in the Scottish Tree Officer Group (STOG) who assess the risks provide regular information and updates including webinars, CPD and best practice. This group has an Ash Dieback working group with Council Officers are involved in and there is also a new knowledge hub set up to advice tree officers.

Supplementary

Councillor Begg noted that there had been no mention of additional resources and asked if the Executive Member would meet with him to discuss further. Councillor Linehan confirmed she would be happy to meet him with appropriate officers. The Chief Executive confirmed that there was no additional budget and it was being managed within existing resources.

Questions from Councillor Thornton-Nicol (asked by Councillor Sinclair in the absence of Councillor Thornton-Nicol)

1. To the Executive Member for Social Work and Community Enhancement
Can family members order TEC items from SBCares Equipment Service without going through the assessment and referral process?

Response from Councillor Weatherson

Members of the public can order TEC items from SBC through the self-referral process.

However, as the TEC team only have a budget to supply equipment with no cost to those clients who have an assessed need, SBC would look to recover the cost of any equipment provided.

Clients can self-refer by calling 01896 758 717 or e-mailing tec@scotborders.gov.uk

Supplementary

Councillor Sinclair comment on the position of foreign nationals who were not entitled to assessments and asked that it was ensured that there was a process where they could pay for equipment without an assessment. Councillor Weatherston confirmed he would raise this with officers.

2. To the Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing
What support is provided to a commissioned service for Adults with Learning Disabilities which receives a weak grading from the Care Inspectorate?

Response from Councillor Parker

In the event that a commissioned service for Adults with Learning Disabilities receives a weak grading, the lead Learning Disabilities commissioner will liaise with the provider to support and seek assurances that there is an effective recovery plan in place to respond to the Care Inspectorate findings. This will include liaison with the Care Inspectorate and the organisation's Board.

The approach is supportive and collaborative, and assists with the formulation of a recovery plan, and the associated implementation process.

Monitoring from the Lead Commissioner will be ongoing until standards have improved to an appropriate level.