

AGENDA ITEM NO. 8

Council 3 April 2019 – Questions submitted by Members

Question No.	Question from:	Question:	Question to:	Service area:
1.	Councillor Mike Baldock	Given that all the Transport Modelling shown to Members at a recent Members Briefing assumed a widening of the M2 in order to provide any feasibility of the local area being able to cope with increased housebuilding in Swale, when does the Leader expect such widening to take place, and how does he expect Swale to cope with the current planned expansion of housing in the absence of such a scheme?	The Leader	James Freeman, Head of Planning Services
<p>Response:</p> <p>Cllr Baldock will be aware that the Transport Modelling work supporting the local plan review is not yet complete. Work currently in hand has yet to be formally reported in full to Local Plan Panel, which will be 6 June. Beyond this, there is further work to do to establish what reasonable options may be available for the local plan review development strategy and further test the transport impacts including the potential for modal shift alongside them. All of this will need to be the subject of discussion with key stakeholders in particular the highway authorities and transport providers, before we are in a position to conclude what development strategies are feasible and deliverable or not.</p>				
2.	Councillor Mike Baldock	Given the recent expose of Quinn Estate's fabrication of evidence for Planning Applications, what steps has the Cabinet Member for Planning taken to ensure that such malpractice was not employed in the Wises Lane planning application, or indeed in other schemes that Quinn Estates have applied to Swale for Planning permission?	Cabinet Member for Planning	James Freeman, Head of Planning Services

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<p>Response:</p> <p>From our understanding of the recent expose, I have asked Planning Services to review all letters of support in relation to Quinn Estate planning applications submitted to this Council in the past two years covering eight planning applications. At this stage I am not aware of any evidence to suggest any malpractice has occurred.</p>				
3.	Councillor Monique Bonney	In recent weeks the Council has been in the national news headlines because of the actions of Council Leader Andrew Bowles and a highly inappropriate post in social media. This lead to his suspension from the Conservative Party. Less than 2 weeks later he was reinstated however the damage to the Council's reputation has been incalculable. Does the Leader agree he has brought this Council into disrepute?	The Leader	
<p>Response:</p> <p>I was of course expecting a question on this matter, in point of fact, I would have taken a bet on which Member would have put it on the agenda. I do not accept that either the post was highly inappropriate or that it has brought this Council into disrepute.</p> <p>Whilst having no sympathy with racism or Islamophobia I do believe strongly in the right to free speech, not only as the inalienable right of a human being but also for the more mundane reason that open debate and discussion are generally the best guarantor a free society has against bigotry and hatred.</p> <p>I think that despite complaints being received both the Monitoring Officer at Swale Borough Council and the Monitoring Officer at Kent County Council have determined that there is no public interest in taking any further action, supports my view that it is not factually damaging to the Council's reputation. I was also, as Cllr Bonney states, reinstated by my political party having issued a full apology to anyone who was unintentionally offended by my decision to retweet a post in support of freedom of speech.</p> <p>I personally believe an argument could be made that the two individuals, not currently members of this authority, who submitted the original complaints to both Conservative Central Office and Kent County Council for what were plainly political purposes could be</p>				

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<p>construed as having brought Swale Borough Council into disrepute.</p> <p>I can state that since my suspension has been lifted, I have been actively canvassing on the doorstep and have to say that my personal approval rating has never been as high!</p>				
4.	Councillor Monique Bonney	This Council held a public consultation on Garden Communities and the overwhelming response from the public was that they were not supported. Why then is this Council ignoring the public consultation on Garden Communities and ploughing on regardless and giving the developers unlimited bites at the cherry to get their schemes advanced?	Cabinet Member for Planning	James Freeman, Head of Planning Services
<p>Response:</p> <p>The current phase of Local Plan work is “evidence gathering and engagement”. During this phase nothing has been ruled in or out, as that decision making takes place during the next phases.</p> <p>Work will shortly begin on composing possible strategic development options leading to a consultation document in autumn 2019. It is during this phase that evidence gathered starts to be used for decision making purposes by the Council prior to it issuing its consultation draft of reasonable alternative options. One significant piece of evidence will be the public consultation responses to “Looking Ahead” that was published last year. This document looked at the many and varied topics involved in Local Plan making of which one section was the concept of Garden Communities.</p> <p>That Garden Communities continue to be researched as a potential option for consideration during the decision making phases was recommended by the Local Panel on 14th March 2019 and agreed by Cabinet on 20th March 2019.</p>				
5.	Councillor Roger	Can you confirm that at the most recent meeting of the Council's Local Plan Panel (LPP) you instructed members to confine themselves to discussing the principle of meeting	Cabinet Member for	

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	Truelove	housing allocation targets through large rural developments (Garden settlements) and not to try to evaluate prematurely the arguments for any of the four promotions, in particular. If you can confirm that, can you explain why you allowed one visiting member to the panel to speak at great length about the four options, dismissing three and strongly supporting the fantasy option in Highsted Valley.	Planning	
<p>Response:</p> <p>In asking Members of the LPP to debate the recommendation [b] of Agenda item 6, I pointed out the wording of the recommendation and then said “that I did not intend [sic the meeting] to do scrutiny of the consultants’ report - but I suspect that some will be minded to draw our attention to it”.</p> <p>The one visiting Member you refer to spoke once on this item for about six minutes of which four minutes were related to the consultant’s report. In all the Member debate time given to this topic was about 46 minutes, from my asking Members to begin the debate until the vote was called. So not an “instruction” but guidance from me and not “at great length” by the visiting Member.</p>				
6.	Councillor Roger Truelove	You may have read the well informed report by the Kent Messenger group on the Elwick Place project in Ashford. The project includes a Travelodge Hotel, a 6 screen cinema and 8 restaurants. It opened in December with capital investment from Council taxpayers and initial amnesties on rent. You may well recognise this off the shelf uninspiring and commercially out of date model of regeneration. It is in trouble and has been accurately described by a Ashford Labour Councillor as "ghost	Cabinet Member for Regeneration	Emma Wiggins, Head of Regeneration

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		<p>town". None of the 8 restaurants are occupied because as the market reports, the kind of companies involved are experiencing difficulties in these sorts of investment plans. Can you help this Council by telling us how many of the Sittingbourne Town centre restaurants are firmly committed by contract, what are the renting arrangements and whether you have a plan B, as Ashford now have, if the Sittingbourne restaurants prove unpopular with big chain companies over a period of time?</p>		
<p>Response:</p> <p>Thank you for confirming that labour policy is to attack growth and job creation. Our development agreement ensures that without the anchor tenants in place then we would not have begun construction. As you can see construction is well underway and we do indeed have not only The Light Cinema and Travelodge as anchor tenants but Nando's, Pizza Express and 2 further restaurants with completed Agreements to lease. This leaves 3 units currently unlet which at this stage of the development is a comfortable place for us and our development partner, Spirit of Sittingbourne have a further marketing campaign timed to go out shortly. We have legal safeguards in place which ensures that Spirit of Sittingbourne have to fund the rent of any vacant units for the first two years. Our plan B is to continue to deliver the promise this Conservative Administration has made</p>				