

Council 21 January 2015 - Questions submitted by Members

Question No.	Question from:	Question:	Question to:	Service area:
1	Cllr Roger Truelove	<p>At a Swale Joint Transportation Board meeting on September 8th I called for stronger support from Swale Borough Council and Kent County Council for completion of the Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road from East Hall to Bapchild.</p> <p>I reported that I was due to meet with KCC Cabinet members, for economic growth and highways, later in the month.</p> <p>You responded by saying that the Chief Executive of this Council, Mr Kara, is "in talks with KCC's cabinet member for transport, David Brazier."</p> <p>This was accurately reported in the local press and online by Lewis Dyson of the Kent Messenger.</p> <p>I can report that I have had meetings with KCC and they weren't very productive.</p> <p>Can you give the Council a report on Mr Kara's meetings with KCC? Can we have sight of notes made at such meetings and is there any good news?</p>	Leader	Regeneration/ Pete Raine
<p>Response: Over the past 12 months our lobbying has concentrated, both at national and local level with the County Council, on the need to improve Junction 5 on the M2, which is undoubtedly the highest infrastructure priority for the Borough. We were therefore very pleased to see that this junction featured in the Autumn Statement, and over the next few months we will be pursuing discussions with the Highways Agency to scope and progress the planned improvements.</p> <p>As far as the Northern Relief Road is concerned, the September JTB report from Kent CC states correctly that funding was pursued from the first round of the Single Local Growth Fund via the Local Enterprise Partnership, but that the NRR did not gain a high enough priority to be successful. Since then the second round of the SLGF has been announced, but it is extremely unlikely to have enough funding to enable the NRR to be included as a priority.</p>				

<p>I can confirm that informal discussions have continued between Mr Kara and Mr Raine with both KCC and the Director of the LEP, but that the NRR is not currently on any funding list.</p> <p>Discussions between our Local Plan team and KCC have also continued, and I can confirm that the NRR does feature in the Swale Transportation Strategy, a document which complements the Submission Draft of the Swale Local Plan.</p>				
2	Cllr Roger Truelove	We all learn from experience. Would he now agree with me that experience has taught us that there might be considerably better ways of achieving representative public and political accountability for the work of Kent Police than through the election, on ridiculously low voter turnouts, of a singular Police and Crime Commissioner?	Leader	Economy and Communities/ Emma Wiggins
<p>Response: We must not let our own or the public's perception of the performance of any currently elected Police and Crime Commissioners overly influence our decisions as to how we take this agenda forward. Instead we need a full and informed debate on the options. It has been obvious since the election of the Police and Crime Commissioners, if it was not beforehand, that the previous system with unelected Police Authorities was totally below the radar with regard to most of our voters.</p> <p>Going forward it will be a delicate balancing act between overtly political control of the Police on one hand, and allowing unelected Chief Constables unfettered and unscrutinised influence over how we conduct our daily lives. I would therefore agree with the questioner that there may be a better way of achieving public and political accountability of the Police.</p> <p>When the PCC role was established, so was the Police and Crime Panel which provides SBC and others with a direct opportunity to scrutinise the work of the PCC, and veto decisions in certain situations. We have been present at the Police and Crime Panel and influenced changes within our remit at this Panel. The PCC also carries out governance meetings in public, and these have been attended by the Cabinet Member for Community Safety. The Commissioner has also made sure that she has been available to meet with the residents of our Borough through her own sessions arranged by her office, and recently by attending a Local Engagement Forum, which provided a direct opportunity for our residents to raise any issues directly with the Commissioner.</p> <p>I would say that the introduction of the PCC has proved beneficial to our Community Safety Partnership, where she has recognised the good local work we undertake in response to community safety matters. This has been evidenced both through regular interaction between her officers and ours to implement effective work on the ground. Locally we have also received funding that the PCC has made available, both directly to the Community Safety Partnership, and also to a number of our voluntary and community sector organisations. This has led to a number of additional services running in the Borough - one such example is the SATEDA Youth Services which is jointly funded by the PCC.</p>				
3	Cllr Anita Walker	As the Cabinet Member for Localism, Sport, Heritage and Culture and others will know, I am a Trustee of the Arden Theatre in Faversham. Does the Cabinet Member agree with	Cabinet Member for Localism Sport, Heritage	Economy and Communities/ Emma Wiggins

		me that culture is an important part of our communities and what is he doing to promote culture and the arts in Swale?	and Culture	
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Response: I thank Cllr Walker for her question and for the work she puts in as a volunteer trustee at the Arden Theatre, and other organisations. I agree with her that culture is a very important part of our life here in Swale and our heritage. Thanks to the efforts of a small army of volunteers, our residents and visitors to the Borough can enjoy museums, theatres, choirs, musical groups, and arts in each of our three main towns and many other parts of the Borough. The Council's role is to encourage and enable where it can, working with others.

4	Cllr Adam Tolhurst	When was the Risk Register on plans to regenerate parts of Sittingbourne Town Centre last updated?	Cabinet Member for Regeneration	Regeneration/ Pete Raine
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Response: The Risk Register for the Spirit of Sittingbourne project was last updates on 1December 2014.

5	Cllr Martin McCusker	Can the Cabinet Member for Localism provide a breakdown of the cost of the Local Engagement Forums held throughout 2014 including the (a) cost of venues; (b) estimated cost of staff salaries for those attending from local public services such as the Council, the police, the Fire & Rescue Service? (c) the number of members of the public attending?	Cabinet Member for Localism	Economy and Communities/ Emma Wiggins
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Response: I am proud that Swale Borough Council (SBC) rightly makes community engagement an absolute priority. I believe that we make better decisions by listening to the public and to our partners, and Local Engagement Forums (LEFs) are part of that valuable community engagement programme.

SBC officers attend LEFs in the course of their normal work. Therefore, LEFs place no specific additional pressure on the salary budget. However, for transparency, the notional value of the time officers spent attending LEFs during 2014 is calculated at £1,367.

Mileage claims made by SBC officers to attend LEFs during the year totalled £360, while similar mileage claims by SBC Members amounted to £148.

Promoting the Local Engagement Forums include production of posters and invites which, across the whole year, totals at £260.

I cannot provide estimates relating to hall-hire, which is organised by KCC, or figures concerning Members and officers of other agencies who may attend LEFs from time to time as I do not have access to those organisations' payrolls and time sheets.

The table below shows the number of attendees at each LEF in 2014, and Members will note a slight, yet welcome increase in all three areas.

LEF	February/March	June/July	September	December
Sittingbourne	26	28	31	48

Sheppey	28	25	26	31	
Faversham	29	25	27	34	
6	Cllr Adam Tolhurst	On a scale of 1-10 how would he rate the likelihood of the Council's draft Local Plan being rejected by the Local Plan Inspector and why?	Cabinet Member for Planning	Planning Services/James Freeman	
<p>Response: There are many complex issues and considerations which the Local Plan Inspector will need to take into account and balance in his decision on whether the Local Plan is found sound. A key concern is that the plan is proposing some 40% less housing than objectively assessed need, in view of this Council's major concerns over viability and deliverability of both the housing itself and the necessary supporting infrastructure at a higher level of development target.</p> <p>On 19 December 2014 the Minister of Housing and Planning wrote to the Planning Inspectorate stating that a Strategic Housing Market Assessment is a starting point for developing a local plan's development target, and councils can take account of constraints which indicate that development can be restricted. This will need to be justified on a case-by-case basis for each local plan, depending on the particular local circumstances within that housing market area.</p> <p>The reasons for the Swale Local Plan's approach to development targets are clearly set out in the topic paper that supports the Plan, which is available on the Council's website.</p> <p>In recent weeks we have also seen the London Plan passed as sound, although it too is proposing significantly less housing than objectively assessed need on the basis that it is better to have a plan in place, even with acknowledged shortcomings, and that there is provision for an immediate review.</p> <p>The Swale Local Plan sets out a development strategy which we believe to be justified; and which is effective and deliverable for at least five years post adoption, which are among the key tests of soundness. The Plan also has strategic policy which sets out triggers for an immediate review should circumstances change in respect of deliverability of higher development targets. National planning policy and advice on its implementation is still subject to constant change, and much will depend on how the Planning Inspectorate is briefed to deal with this at the time of the Swale Examination in Public.</p>					
7	Cllr Martin McCusker	18 months ago two Members of this Council chose to stay on rather than stand down from this Council despite moving more than 150 miles away to Lincolnshire. From that time until the local elections in May they would have collectively claimed in basic allowances alone around £15,000. In the interests of true localism, does he agree it's time legislation was brought forward to ensure local councillors remain 'local' after they are elected?	Cabinet Member for Localism	N/A	

Response: I thank the Member for his question.

I would remind Members that the Willicombes continue to deal with case work in the Ward they were elected to represent, in addition to which more local arrangements have been made available, where needed, with neighbouring Conservative Councillors.

Government sets the legislative framework for Members' qualifications, and the Willicombes are not contravening those rules. Members will be aware that those rules were not changed by recent Parliaments who always had the opportunity to do so.

Members will also be aware that the Leader raised this specific issue with Government last year at the request of the General Purposes Committee, asking for a review of the legislation governing residence for elected councillors.

The Electoral Commission has recently consulted on the same matter and published its recommendation earlier this month in its report "Standing for election in the United Kingdom". The report makes recommendations in a number of areas, including residency, and we await the Government's response.

8	Cllr Tony Winckless	Ten years ago the Council deported homeless families to Margate where they were expected to fend for themselves against insurmountable odds in real hardship. Homelessness and a shortage of rented properties have risen dramatically in the last year. More families with children are being forced into substandard properties and social landlords are now pulling out of private lettings due to the changes in welfare reform. Does he think the Council's response is commensurate with this?	Cabinet Member for Housing	Housing Services/ Amber Christou
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Response: Far from having to fend for themselves, any unintentionally homeless household the Council places within or outside of the Borough has always been regularly visited, supported, and assisted to secure appropriate affordable, housing.

No one likes to have to move these families away from their network, which is why we are really pleased to be able to begin the work of providing local emergency accommodation ourselves. As set out in the Leader's Statement, the Housing Options Team are very successful in preventing homelessness where they are alerted early enough to the issues, and so the large proportion of our resources are targeted at this action. Our social landlord partners also work very closely with us to assist homeless families in social housing stock in response to having to withdraw from their private sector business, and endeavour to increase the number of affordable homes being built each year.

We also have a targeted approach to improving the quality of privately rented accommodation, and where properties are sub-standard we work with landlords and owners to improve the conditions and, if necessary, take enforcement action to ensure national standards are met. We are confident that this approach is commensurate and realistic, and we are flexible in our approach, regularly reviewing the national and local position through our housing and homelessness strategies, and targeting resources as needed to meet challenges head on.

9	Cllr Angela Harrison	How does the Cabinet Member for the Environment square the recent underspend of £300k on the Council's waste contract with our streets being strewn with litter and ground in dirt and public perception of the cleanliness of the Borough - as reported by surveys of residents - being down rather than up?	Cabinet Member for Environmental and Rural Affairs	Commissioning and Customer Contact/ Dave Thomas
<p>Response: Being a partnership-based contract, it was considered prudent to wait until the first full year of operation of the new contract before declaring the full extent of potential savings on previous contract costs.</p> <p>Swale still undertakes regular surveys of street cleanliness based on the National Indicator 195 surveys which were previously undertaken by all authorities on a mandatory basis. The results of tranche 1 and tranche 2 (covering the period April to December 2014) reflected favourably on the general cleanliness of the Borough's streets, with a combined score for litter and detritus of 4.5%, which represents areas that failed, meaning that 95.5% passed the national cleanliness standards.</p> <p>However, it is recognised that there are some areas of concern where members of the public are more prone to drop litter, and these have been highlighted by the NI 195 surveys undertaken by our Contract Monitoring Officers. With the reintroduction of 'deep cleans', CMOs will be targeting these areas, with support from the Environmental Wardens (a deep clean in these circumstances is defined as informing residents and drivers with a request to clear cars so a team can be inserted with a mechanical sweeper to de-litter and sweep the area both manually and mechanically. There is no additional cost as it forms part of the contract).</p> <p>The full effectiveness of the new contract will be reviewed following the third and final NI 195 survey undertaken during January to March 2015. Once a full year's assessment has been undertaken, officers will work with our contractor to redistribute resources to the areas that are highlighted in the survey as needing a higher resource input and possibly higher enforcement measures. This strategy will work in parallel with the newly introduced 'deep cleans'.</p>				
10	Cllr Steve Worrall	We have had our differences on the impact of the Bedroom Tax here in Swale in the past. Will he now agree with me that whatever we call the Bedroom Tax or Spare Room Subsidy all that it has succeeded in doing is making poor people poorer in Swale?	Cabinet Member for Housing	Housing Services/ Amber Christou
<p>Response: I would like to thank the Member for Sheerness West for his question. We provide a great deal of support to social housing tenants impacted by the spare room subsidy, which has led to a reduction from 867 social tenants subject to this subsidy in April 2013, to 657 at the most recent count. We work with those tenants and their families to help secure employment so that they are not reliant on housing benefit to help with their rent; and where this is not possible financial assistance in the form of a Discretionary Housing Payment has been provided to alleviate hardship, with 247 households being award such payments in this financial year alone.</p>				

11	Cllr Ghlin Whelan	At Full Council in September, Cllr Bowles advised Members that an audited account of the crisis which enveloped planning services would be completed in October. What were the main findings of the report?	Leader	Planning Services/ James Freeman
<p>Response: An audit was carried out by the Head of MKIP Audit on behalf of the three partner authorities regarding the implementation of the Planning Support shared service (Mid Kent Planning Services (MKPS)). This report is due to be presented to a joint meeting of the MBC, SBC, and TWBC Overview and Scrutiny Committees to be held in February 2015 at MBC's offices. The full report will be available as usual five working days before the meeting. In these circumstances, I am not in a position to advise on its findings. The Audit had the following objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> § analyse the project plan and assess whether it was appropriately configured to deliver the aims of the project; § review the implementation of the project plan, in particular to establish the timeline and assess whether the delivery stage was completed in a manner sufficient to deliver the aims of the project; and § consider what lessons can be taken from the design and delivery of the project to inform any future actions or continued improvement of the planning support service. 				
12	Cllr Ghlin Whelan	What actions and measures has the Cabinet Member for Performance agreed to ensure that services which are provided jointly by other local authorities are robust and delivering value for money?	Cabinet Member for Performance	Policy and Performance/ David Clifford
<p>Response: There are many benefits to SBC in joining forces with other Kent authorities to provide services, including stronger resilience, improved performance, and better value for money. With regard to the latter, the MKIP partnership alone has resulted in total savings of £113,000 in the base budget since 2011/12, and indeed further partnership working with other authorities has resulted in an additional total saving of £162,500 in the base budget over the same period. Services' performance has benefited from the exchange of best practice and the ability of larger shared teams to recruit specialist officers who would be unaffordable to any of the authorities working alone.</p> <p>We have continued to ensure that sovereignty over the performance of MKIP services rests with individual authorities. This means that while there are some shared performance indicators, performance targets for shared services are set by each council individually. Swale benefits from a robust and mature performance management regime, including target-setting by full Council, monthly reporting to SMT, and quarterly 'balanced scorecards' to Cabinet and the Scrutiny Committee. These processes enable the performance of Swale services delivered jointly with other authorities to be managed in exactly the same way as services delivered wholly in-house.</p>				

13	Cllr Mark Ellen	Nearly a year ago Hull announced that Siemens was to invest more than £300m in Britain's first purpose-built offshore wind turbine blades. Two years ago the Council's economic development plan for Sheppey was to do just this. What is it today?	Cabinet Member for Regeneration	Economy & Communities/ Emma Wiggins
<p>Response: Whilst Vestas was unable to progress its plans at Sheerness, Peels Ports is keen to secure growth in its' core business and has set out its' intentions in the draft Sheerness Port Master Plan. These indicate the opportunity to create another 400 - 500 jobs directly, and many more indirectly, and we are already working with them to achieve this. There is also continued interest and development at Neats Court, with the Aldi proposal for a new Regional Distribution Centre creating a further 400 jobs, in addition to the several hundred jobs that have been generated so far.</p> <p>The planning application under consideration for wind-turbines on Sheppey also provides a potential opportunity to further support local young people to access apprenticeships, should permission be granted.</p>				
14	Cllr Mike Haywood	Until January, this winter has been one of the mildest on record. Does he agree that the crisis in our local A&Es is being driven by rationing of resources within the NHS rather than by patient demand? If so, how should this shape our response as local authority acting on behalf of our residents?	Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Health	Housing Services/ Amber Christou
<p>Response: The crisis in A&E affecting residents is being driven by many things, but patient demand, including patients accessing A&E services inappropriately, is a key driver. It is for this reason that we are working strategically with the Clinical Commissioning Groups, Public Health, and the Voluntary Sector to ensure a range of initiatives are in place to help alleviate the pressures on A&E. This includes a focus on the prevention agenda, with education and awareness raising programmes targeting reductions in cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, and mental ill health, among others. Our own Home Improvement Agency, Staying Put, delivers falls prevention and winter warmth services to prevent elderly and infirm residents having to use A&E services.</p> <p>Along with the CCGs we regularly meet with Medway Foundation Trust to hold them to account regarding their failings, and both challenge and support them to improve their services as a matter of urgency. We are also supporting our health partners to remodel local primary care services to reduce the incidence of A&E use and unplanned admissions, through the development and refining of community services that meet the need of local residents, including extend GP surgery hours to include evenings and weekends, and ambulance services tailoring their response according to patient need.</p>				
15	Cllr Steve Worrall	How many Council owned plots of land has the Council sold, firstly in Sheerness Ward, and secondly in Boughton and Courtney Ward to private companies since the existence of Swale Borough Council?	Leader	Property Services/ Anne Adams

Response: According to the Council's Land Terrier map there are 45 plots shown as previously owned by the Council within the Sheerness Ward (excluding land transferred to Swale Housing Association as part of the housing stock transfer and housing properties sold previously under Right to Buy legislation. The figure also excludes land transferred for highway purposes).

It has not been possible to go back as far as when Swale Borough Council came into existence for information on who the land was sold to. The recorded number of property sales since 1990 is 26, 17 of which were to private companies. Of these sales to private companies 11 were of land only with no buildings.

With regard to Boughton and Courtenay Ward, 15 plots have been identified as previously owned by the Council. The number of sales since 1990 is 9, and of these 4 were sold to private companies. Of these 4 sales to private companies 3 were of land only.

16	Cllr Mike Henderson	Introduction of joint Swale/Maidstone/Tunbridge Wells planning admin has clearly caused major difficulties and delays seriously affecting planning officers, members and the public. Will the cabinet member please explain what he did at the beginning of the process to seek to ensure that the project would be progressed effectively, on time and on budget especially with regard to manpower and IT systems. Will he also tell us what he has done to get the project back on track and inform the council when the whole process will be working fully effectively, when the backlog will be fully removed and what extra cost has been incurred above the planned cost of implementation.	Cabinet Member for Planning	Planning Services/ James Freeman
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Response: The following actions have been taking place with a view to getting the project back on track:

- § the appointment of an experienced Senior Manager (Sandra Fryer) to review and oversee an Implementation and Recovery Plan;
- § prioritising ICT support to significantly reduce the initial planning IT system issues;
- § ensuring the Planning Support Service staffing levels and skills training were reviewed, and remedies are put in place to secure processing and quality control improvements;
- § undertaking culture workshops across all the teams to engender joint working and co-operation towards problem solving and communication; and
- § providing additional resources to Swale's Development Management (DM) Team to handle the 'back log' of cases and to manage a significant increase in the number of planning applications.

Given the actions above, I am pleased to report that significant headway has been made in removing the backlog within the Planning Support Team, and that they are currently working to normal workloads. The focus for further improvement over the next

two to three months will be very much on dealing with the quality control issues, especially regarding the validation processes.

However, as members are aware, given the lead in times for decision making on planning applications, there remains a significant back log within the Council's DM Team. I am assured that we will see significant improvement in performance against the 8 week / 13 week planning application targets by end of March 2015. With performance returning to normal levels, we should also see the backlog reducing to more manageable levels by June 2015. Additional DM officer resources have been made available to enable the team to deal with the 'backlog' and increased caseload to be funded through the increased planning fees secured over the last six months, although I am aware that recruitment is continuing to be challenging under current market conditions.

In terms of the additional costs arising from the shared service and IT issues, these have been met by the increased planning fee income received beyond that originally forecast. The additional costs related to the implementation of the shared service and related IT systems for Swale is estimated to amount to £95,000 by the end of the financial year.

This project has been reported on by me regularly at Informal Cabinet, with presentations from James Freeman and a Q & A session with Sandra Fryer. The message to the Head of Service was that his actions and those at MKIP were supported, although the situation was regrettable. Sandra Fryer in her presentation reported that, although the project was not yet on track, all its objectives would, when fixed, bring significant benefit as originally intended. Regular updates have also been made available to members, town and parish councils, and the Planning Committee, and I have asked the Head of Service and Interim Shared Service Manager to provide a further updates over the coming month.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the officers, both at the shared service and within the DM Team, given that they have had to respond to the difficulties arising from the project's implementation, particularly with regard to dealing sympathetically with often frustrated customers.

17	Cllr Mike Henderson	Will the cabinet member please inform the council how many 1 and 2 bedroom homes have been completed to allow residents of the Borough to move to smaller accommodation to avoid the iniquitous bedroom tax impacting on them.	Cabinet Member for Housing	Housing Services/ Amber Christou
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Response: 63 one and two bed affordable rented homes have been built in the Borough. However I would refer to my response to Question 10 which highlights the fact that new housing provision is not the only solution to securing the appropriately sized affordable accommodation for households in need.