

QUESTION 1

Question from Councillor Alex Clarke to the Chairman of the Environment Committee, Councillor John Beckett

Has the Council taken the necessary steps to calculate the value of its accrued arboreal verdance (trees, shrubs and other plants that the Council either owns or exercised authority/responsibility for)? If so, what steps are being made to both maximize the value and the return (both in terms of financial and community wellbeing) from its resource?

Reply:

Thank you to Councillor Clarke for raising a very important issue as the green character of our Borough is something that is highly valued by our residents and visitors and therefore by the Council.

It is difficult to succinctly summarize all that the Council does to ensure that our Green infrastructure is afforded due weight in our decision-making. Whilst the science of “eco-system services” is not yet sufficiently well developed to be able to attribute a monetary value to our green assets, we do have systems in place that seek to ensure that appropriate weight is given to our natural environment in what the Council does. Examples of this include planning Policies requiring enhancement to our Green Infrastructure, Management Plans for our parks and open spaces, attributing a monetary value to trees involved in insurance claims, our Local Biodiversity Action Plan, the need to secure sustainable development as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework, the protection afforded by the Green Belt, the need to undertake Sustainability Appraisal for all of our emerging planning policies and the rigour with which those policies are examined through the Local Plan process. Finally, the Borough has a duty, as a public body to have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of your policy or decision making.

Many decisions require a judgement to be made about the balance of factors at play. Nonetheless, I think the Borough Council has proven that, even in a challenging time, both financially and in terms of the pressures for new development, the Boroughs green assets are in better heart now than they were 10 years ago.

QUESTION 2

Question from Councillor Omer Kokou-Tchri to the Chairman of the Strategy and Resources Committee, Councillor Eber Kington

Two years ago, in fact on 12 December 2015 world governments signed the Paris Agreement - pledging to curb emissions and limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees.

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A new report shows that across the UK council-managed pension funds are investing more £16 billion in oil, coal and gas companies. These investments undermine local and national efforts to address climate change, and represent an unacceptable financial risk to pension-holders.

Leading financial experts, including the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, have highlighted the risks of fossil fuels becoming 'stranded assets' and the danger which this poses to funds which continue to invest in them.

Instead, councils could be investing in ways that benefit the local community – like renewable energy infrastructure and green social housing.

Fossil fuel divestment is a practical, legal and responsible way for pension funds to respond to climate change and address financial risk. Over 800 institutions around the world have made divestment commitments, including council pension funds in the UK like Southwark and Waltham Forest.

1. Do you agree that the council should divest its pension fund from fossil fuels and reinvest if any in ways that benefits the community?
2. What percentage of Total Fossil Fuel Investments Vis-à-vis Total Investments do we have?
3. What steps are the council taking to end fossil fuel investments if any and invest responsibly?

Reply:

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council does not manage the Pension Fund. The Pension Fund for past and present employees of all Surrey councils has been managed by Surrey County Council for many years. However, Surrey Pension Fund recently changed the managing arrangements and is a founder member of the Border to Coast Pensions Partnership (BCPP), a collaboration of twelve Local Government Pensions Schemes (LGPS) that will pool together its funds to form a £42bn national investment pool.

SCC has recently issued a statement on the issues raised by Councillor Omer Kokou-Tchri, which reads as follows:

BCPP has recently approved a Responsible Investment policy which, in turn, is due to be considered by the Surrey Pension Fund Committee at its meeting on 10 November 2017. As part of its policy setting, BCPP will actively consider how climate change, the shifting regulatory environment and potential macro-economic impact will affect its investments. There is acceptance that these issues pose significant investment risks and opportunities with the potential to impact the long-term shareholder value of investments across all asset classes. BCPP will therefore look to:

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- Assess its portfolios in relation to climate change risk where practicable;
- Incorporate climate considerations into the investment decision making process;
- Engage with companies in relation to business sustainability and disclosure of climate risk in line with (Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosure (TCFD) recommendations;
- Encourage companies to adapt their business strategy in alignment with a low carbon economy.

In the run-up period (probably a two-year period) to transitioning stocks across to the Border to Coast pool, the Surrey Fund will continue investigating its own strategy with regard to Responsible Investment issues, whilst accepting that such change will have a limited shelf life before the Border to Coast changes are implemented. At its meeting on 10 November 2017, the Pension Fund Committee will consider further the recommendation of the Surrey Local Pension Board to establish the Pension Fund's exposure to climate change and carbon risk through the commissioning of a carbon audit of the Fund's portfolios.

With regard to the possible future prioritisation of taking funds out of oil stocks, as part of its investment strategy, there is currently no negative screening of any stocks imposed by the Fund on its external investment managers. Instead, the Fund engages with a wide range of companies (including oil companies) through its association with the Local Authority Pension Fund Forum (LAPFF) in order to influence climate change policy and actions that will improve future impacts on the environment. There are no current plans to change this policy.

Should Councillor Omer Kokou-Tchri wish to follow up on any of the points above, including the outcome of the Pension Fund Committee Meeting on 10 November 2017, I would ask him to contact SCC Direct. The Chairman of the Surrey Pension Fund Committee is County Councillor Tim Evans.

QUESTION 3

Question from Councillor Tina Mountain to the Chairman of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee, Councillor Graham Dudley

How is the Council helping out planning officers to investigate every possibility for the building of new and affordable homes within Epsom and Ewell but excluding the Green Belt and Conservation Land?

Reply:

The Council is employing a variety of measures, including:

A full range of technical studies and engagement exercises exploring the availability and deliverability of potential sources of housing land supply within the existing urban area.

Regular Local Plan Briefing Sessions allowing all Members to engage with Officers on every aspect of the current Local Plan review

An appropriate level of resource to the Place Development Department ensuring that the Local Plan is supported by a robust and sound evidence base.

Encouraging all members to attend meetings of the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee where they are able to express their views but not vote.

I note the question implies that Green Belt land is excluded as a possible source of future housing land supply. This is not so. The Government has not placed a blanket ban on building on the Green Belt but said only that it should be a measure of last resort.

I am not familiar with the expression Conservation Land but if it is intended as a reference to Conservation Areas there are no blanket restrictions on building in such areas.

QUESTION 4

Question from Councillor Alex Clarke to the Chairman of the Strategy and Resources Committee, Councillor Eber Kington

What is the progress on the BID? Do we have any idea of their priorities?

Reply:

We are anticipating a result from the BID ballot on Thursday 14 December. Assuming the BID is approved, it will principally be for the business community to get it established and to deliver on their business plan. The BID's proposed priorities are set out in their Business Plan, available on the Council's website as an Annexe to the report to the Strategy and Resources Committee on 26 September 2017 and has been available to councilors in the Members' Room for quite some time.

QUESTION 5

Question from Councillor Alex Clarke to the Chairman of the Environment Committee, Councillor John Beckett

Can we have an interim comment as to the success of the CEO camera scheme? Could we also have an explanation of what happens with the video, vis-à-vis storage and whether it would be possible for councilors to view samples in order to get a fuller understanding of the task our representatives face?

Reply:

I thank Councillor Clarke for his preemptive question on this matter.

The CEO camera scheme has not yet been implemented by the Council but a successful trial has just finished. I am happy to report that we are now able to move forward with the roll out of this initiative/technology. It will be an agenda item for the Environment Committee for their consideration.

QUESTION 6

Question from Councillor Alex Clarke to the Chairman of the Environment Committee, Councillor Eber Kingston

In the interests of Open Democracy and considering the usual dearth now of press attendance due to restructuring of the local papers, plus growth of fake news and other phenomena in politics which mean that if the truth is not readily available then its absence will be filled by rumour, innuendo and speculation (if not complete imagination) is it not time to look again at live webcasting of council meetings to provide the public with the necessary information as to the process and thoughts of their local government representatives and officials? Mod.Gov was innovative in terms of allowing the reading of our work as a Council but in an increasingly visually orientated society, it is arguably no longer enough.

Reply:

Councillor Clarke did ask a similar question last year, and finances have not changed since I last replied.

Webcasting is something kept under review and was last revisited when scoping the Modern.Gov project. At that time costs depended on a number of variables such as hardware required, number of meetings to be covered, contract duration, and whether payment was to be up front or annually. Whilst research suggests that viewing statistics might be in excess of usual attendance in the public gallery, there is no indication to suggest that they would be sufficient to justify the investment of at least around £10,000-15,000

per year. In addition, the models that have been looked at require staffing resources that are not currently available at EEBC.

However, the recent introduction of Modern.Gov does provide us with an option for the future should a credible business case be made for the expenditure referenced above. Elmbridge Borough Council uses Public-i to webcast meetings which can be synced with mod.gov and that could be the model to follow.

QUESTION 7

Question from Councillor Alex Clarke to the Chairman of the Community and Wellbeing Committee, Councillor Barry Nash

Would it be possible to have an update as to the operation of new vehicles for meals on wheels/community support and whether this has provided a model for future procurement of its success/failure is role/requirement specific?

Reply:

We have had four accessible, large 14 seat Mercedes Sprinters vehicles in operation since September 2017. These vehicles are deployed to support our Transport from Home customers and have given us a model for future procurement - As these vehicles are factory-built, this makes them easier and more cost-effective to maintain, compared to the previous custom-built buses. Because the maintenance parts are standard, this ensures the vehicles return to service quickly, following any servicing needs.

The changes we have made to the interior of the vehicles has provided additional baggage compartments and a CCTV system to monitor entry points into the vehicles. These have been positive safety benefits and help to ensure a 'best practice' approach by our staff, by helping the clients on and off the vehicles.

These vehicles have been leased for a period of ten years. We are conscious that as technology develops, this will need to be considered with any future procurement projects, to ensure that we are complying with current legislation regarding vehicle technology.

In addition, we also have two smaller multi-purpose vehicles, which are used for community alarm, transport from home and meals at home. These vehicles have been well received by customers and are serving their purpose well. Although they are factory built, we have modified them to ensure they are assessable to our customer base.

The Service also has three Citroen Nemo vans, which support all elements of the service - Since launching the new 'At Home' suite of services in September 2017, we are pleased to report that the configuration of both

vehicles and staff are working well and the streamlined services are operating efficiently.

QUESTION 8

Question from Councillor Tina Mountain to the Chairman of the Strategy and Resources Committee, Councillor Eber Kingston

In view of the clear and very real upset at The Wells Estate regarding the closure of their community centre, will the Council consider reopening the Centre, carry out a full consultation with local residents and investigate how the centre could become self-sufficient?

Reply:

As Councillor Mountain will be aware, in September I set up a meeting in the Wells to set out the Council's position and to hear the views of residents. Whilst I recognise that there is a wish that the current Centre be retained, I confirmed at the meeting that our plans, which include the provision of a new purpose built community facility, will be progressed.

There are very compelling reasons why the scheme will be taken forward.

Firstly, we cannot avoid the very real and difficult financial circumstances and housing pressures this Council is facing, and we are having to make some decisions which in different times and circumstances we might not choose to do.

In 2017/2018 the Government cut its funding to EEBC by over £1 million. We are currently one of a few local authorities which receive no Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and in 2019 we are actually expected to pay the Government £625,000. The Government calls it "negative RSG"; I call it a tax on our residents to pay for services elsewhere in the country. In addition SCC continues to shift their costs on to the Borough Council and to withdraw funding from services we provide on their behalf. For example in recent years funding support of £75K has been withdrawn by SCC from our adult services. We have had to work hard to make compensatory savings for several years but we have so far not cut a service. As part of those necessary savings, the adult services at the Wells have been re-located successfully to the Longmead Centre and we are committed to providing a new community facility at the Wells.

Secondly, we face enormous pressure to provide housing for the future needs of our community. As Councillor Mountain will know, we are currently progressing a new Local Plan which anticipated a housing needs target, assessed by our officers, of 418 housing units a year. Unfortunately, the Government decided to make its own assessment of every planning authorities need and published a figure for Epsom and Ewell of 579 housing units a year. This is an increase of 39% above the figure of 418 new homes

per year. That is also over 8000 new homes required by 2032. The problem we have is that much of our Borough is green space and green belt and, whilst the housing figure produced by the Government is said to be a 'target', we have to produce very good reasons if we say we cannot meet it. And if we don't meet the target, the Government could step in and impose a plan on the Borough leading to inappropriate and uncontrolled developments across Epsom and Ewell, including the Wells. So the housing units on the Wells will assist us in meeting those very tough targets, but will also provide additional privately owned, privately rented and affordable rented housing that meets the different housing needs of residents in the Borough.

Thirdly, those housing needs mentioned above include the problem of homelessness. We have 740 people on our Housing Needs Register unable to save the required deposit to buy their own home. In addition, we have 124 households currently living in Temporary Accommodation waiting for permanent settled accommodation to be made available. About 32 of those households are in 'out of borough' nightly paid B&B, which is very expensive to fund. Currently, the estimated cost of temporary accommodation for 2017/2018 is £782k. There is no quick fix to this but we have to be conscious of the need to increase affordable rented housing in the Borough.

So the plans for the Wells site will go ahead because of those very real financial and housing challenges we face, but plans that include a new community facility in the Wells.