

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING

Thursday, 16 December 2010

Question by Mr Mike Harrison

To Mr Mike Hill, Cabinet Member for Community Services

Will the Cabinet Member for Community Services please explain to myself and fellow Members the “ask us once” scheme. We heard it mentioned in our last full Council in one of the reports and I have been trying to find out more about it since. From what I can gather it sounds like a really first class idea and I am very concerned that not enough publicity has been given to this project.

Answer

Tell Us Once is a cross-government programme led by the Department for Work and Pensions, aimed at people being able to inform the authorities just once of a birth, death or change of address. KCC was approached in 2008 to be a ‘pathfinder’ partner for the bereavement reporting service and since November 2008 we have been delivering this in conjunction with the Gateway team, the Registrar's service and five of the Kent Districts. The success of the ‘pathfinders’ in Kent and other pilot areas means this service is now being rolled out across the UK. In September of this year KCC extended the bereavement reporting service to all Kent residents, and were the first county area in the country to do this.

Registering a death is a statutory requirement and therefore we can be certain that every person is given access to the ‘Tell us Once’ service’. Customers accessing the service are asked what organisations from a pre set list they would like the DWP to notify and the whole process takes only 10-15 minutes to complete.

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Question by Mr Jim Wedgbury

To Mrs Sarah Hohler, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education

Do you agree with me that the huge number of children outside Kent taking the Kent Test shows we have the best education mix in the country?

Answer

We have an excellent mix of schools in Kent and I am not surprised that we have so many applications for our schools from out-of-county children.

Of the 2,411 applications received this year for out-of-county children, 1837 expressed a preference for a grammar school. Another 260 applications expressed a preference for a High School, 165 applications expressed a preference for a wide-ability and/or faith school and finally 149 applications were received by schools now holding 'academy' status.

These statistics reflect that Kent's secondary schools are a credit to the County Council. Pupils achieve GCSE results above the national average. This year, 56.4% of Kent's students achieved 5A*-C including English and Maths. This compares to 53.1% nationally showing why we have reason to be proud of our schools and the mix that we have.

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Question by Mr Leslie Christie

To Mrs Sarah Hohler, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education

To be answered by Mr Carter, Leader of the Council

Is the Cabinet Member now in a position to tell the people of Kent what is the financial cost and implications for Kent County Council and the taxpayers of Kent of this Government's decision to abandon the Building Schools for the Future Programme?

What steps, if any, is KCC taking to recover this cost and has legal action been considered?

Answer

We played by the rules of the previous government and set-up the vehicles to deliver the Building School for the Future programme in exactly the way we were asked to by senior civil servants, accepting that BSF was an expensive procurement vehicle.

After the Building Schools for the Future programme was stopped by the new government, Kent County Council and the taxpayers of Kent were exposed to claims by the contractors that were going to build the second wave of schools to the tune of potentially £10million of liabilities.

Kent County Council has lodged an application for a Judicial Review and we are still considering our legal position.

Negotiations with the lead contractors, the Secretary of State and the Department for Education, on behalf of those schools in Gravesham and Thanet, are on-going to find a way forward which avoids litigation.

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Thursday, 16 December 2010

Question by Mr Martin Vye

To Mrs Sarah Hohler, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education

In the light of the serious shortcomings in Kent's services which resulted in children being placed at risk, as detailed within the Ofsted Report on Safeguarding of Children in Kent, will the Cabinet Member for Children Families and Education:

- a) explain why the recommendations of the Peter Gilroy report debated at County Council in April 2010 were not implemented, and
- b) will she initiate research into best practice, in terms of effectiveness and cost, in other authorities, for example the Hackney model, and report back to this Council, in its role as corporate parent for children in care in Kent?

Answer

- a) Mr Vye, as Vice-Chairman of the Children's Champions Board, will be aware that the Chief Executive's review and report were discussed and approved at that cross-party Board's meetings on 12th February 2009 and **every** subsequent meeting thereafter. Members were advised at one particular meeting in September 2009 that the Chief Executive's review found 'that child protection practice in Kent was fundamentally safe'. The recommendations were discussed and put in context by the social workers who attended the meetings. After April 2010, the Director of Children's Social Services, the Managing Director and the Cabinet Member all provided updates on the implementation of the recommendations.

Furthermore, on 14th October 2010, I presented to the County Council a report in response to the Chief Executive's 'Safeguarding Children in Kent: Defending and Developing the Service' report, which was debated at the County Council on 1st April 2010. This report fully addresses the progress made against the recommendations and the Chairman of the Kent Safeguarding Children's Board was also there as several of the recommendations were for that Board. Records show Mr Vye attended the October debate. Further monthly updates on progress are provided at each Cabinet meeting; the next taking place on 10th January 2011.

- b) As far as best practice is concerned, Gary Cooke and I visited the Social Services Team in Hackney on 11th March 2010 and invited Helen Davies, Director of the Specialist Children's Services Group, to join us to see what lessons could be learned for Kent. On my instruction, officers from ISG and Children's Social Services have already had a conference call with their counterparts in Lincolnshire to discuss the ICS system and which amendments to our system are advisable. Following these preparatory discussions, I plan to visit Lincolnshire with an ISG Officer and a practising Social Worker.

These are just two examples of actions which I have taken. I have also spoken with my opposite number in other South East authorities, many of whom have been facing similar challenges.

Finally, as part of our improvement plan currently under discussion with government ministers, we will be using outside advisers to help us turn the service around as soon as possible.

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Thursday, 16 December 2010

Question by Mr Malcolm Robertson

To Mr Nick Chard, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste

In order to improve community consultation on the highways budget in future years, will the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste take in hand the development of the role of the Highways Community Liaison Officers, in order to facilitate annual meetings between them, local parish councils and residents' associations, and local county and district members, in order to establish priorities for highways spending in their area?

Answer

Kent Highway Services through its Community Operations team has established positive liaison links with Parish Councils and KCC Members. Many close working relationships have been built over the last year. I am keen to progress these further and to build upon community links.

Currently the formal process is via the Joint Transportation Board which includes County and District members with representation from the Kent Association of Local Councils.

KHS is reshaping its service delivery through the "Future Highways" project. As part of this major initiative we are reviewing the whole area of community engagement, and your request will be considered by this work. I am confident we will be able to progress local involvement with the highway service in future across a wide range of community groups.

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Thursday 16th December 2010

Question by Mr George Koowaree

To Mr Nick Chard, Cabinet Member for Highways, Environment and Waste

Will the Cabinet Member for Highways, Environment and Waste look into the removal of the bus gate in Beaver Road Ashford as the report of the Ashford Transport Forum (held on 26th November 2010) minute on page 8 paragraph 6.5 suggests there is no monitoring or enforcement being done.

Answer

Beaver Road bus gate is an essential part of the Ashford bus route highway infrastructure and the Quality Bus Partnership agreement with the operator Stagecoach. It is served by 7 buses per hour all day on the A-line and B-line in both directions on Mondays to Saturdays (that is, 14 buses per hour in total).

Beaver Road is quite constrained, and the removal of the bus gate would open this road to all traffic wishing to access South Ashford to and from the town centre and station. At present all non-bus traffic is routed via Romney Marsh Road and Norman Road without any apparent problem. The additional traffic resulting from the removal of the bus gate would cause significant congestion as well as adding costs to the bus operation and reducing its reliability.

It is therefore important that the bus gate remains in situ. More effective enforcement is however needed, and we are investigating electronic ways of doing this since it is a low priority for the Police.

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Thursday 16th December 2010

Question by Mrs Elizabeth Green

To Mr Paul Carter, Leader of the County Council

Will the Leader of the Council please explain why the Ofsted Report on the Inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children Services in Kent is not on the agenda for the Council Meeting of 16th December 2010. Does he not accept that all County Councillors as Corporate Parents should have the earliest possible opportunity to comment on and offer constructive suggestions for the way ahead following this damning report?

Answer

I understand the point you are making. As you know, the report has already been to public Cabinet and will also go to the Safeguarding Board, Children's Champion Board and relevant POSCs. I will also be taking a substantive part of my Leader's report to talk about this item today and this gives opposition leaders an opportunity to respond. We are now obviously focusing on the recovery plan and held a very constructive meeting with the DfE on Tuesday of this week.

I particularly want to have an opportunity for all Members to attend a full briefing and discussion session on the OfSTED report, probably as an extended Children's Champion Board on a date in January when the vast majority of Members can attend and our two new senior interim appointments can discuss their initial findings.

On the grounds of consistency, I have also established that previous CPA, JAR, CQC reports, etc, have not been on the agenda of the full county council (other than be mentioned during the Leader's report).