

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING

Thursday, 17 February 2011

Question by Mike Harrison

To Roger Gough, Cabinet Member for Support Services & Performance Management

Many, many 'Widgets' or Secure Socket Layer (SSL) fobs were handed out to both members and staff over the past 5/6 years? Can the Cabinet Member for Support Services & Performance Management please bring me an up to date with the present situation with regard to just where these gadgets might be?

Technology moves on at an ever increasing pace and as such much of the IT equipment becomes obsolete and I fear that these 'Widgets' are a case in point. Many of the members had them to enable us to log on at any point/PC by using this technology and be online to KCC. I do believe these gadgets are in fact on hire/lease from a company and that we KCC are still paying an annual fee for them!

So my question to you is: "How many of these are still on the books, how much do we (KCC) pay as an annual fee and finally is it not time to recall those which are no longer being used?"

If my information is correct I trust that by recalling many of them it will bring up a huge saving.

Response

There are currently 1221 fobs in use by staff and members. The devices are deployed to provide a secure means of connecting to council computer systems where access is required from outside the council's network, or where the user is in a position to make use of computer equipment not owned by the council. The fobs are owned by the council and not rented. The current annual revenue cost to the council is £21,120. This is a licence cost based on maximum concurrent use, not number of fobs deployed.

This type of security solution is a mandatory requirement of the governments' code of connection, applicable to all public agencies. The accountable budget managers, whose staff make use of this facility, review their requirements on an annual basis to determine if they are still required. Returned fobs are redistributed under the same process used for redeployment of surplus Blackberries and mobile computers.

The current solution is at end of life and there is a new contract to support the replacement service due to be deployed in July 2011. This will reduce annual costs to £16,155.

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Question by Martin Vye to Paul Carter, Leader of the Council

Will the Leader of the Council inform the council what progress has been made since the resolution made July 2010 (see foot note*) with regard to the Group Managing Director's urgent review of the interview, appointment, contract and severance payment procedures and at which 2011 County Council meeting he intends to report back to Members with the proposals to strengthen those procedures so as to minimise the risk of such large payments being made in the future?

*Foot note - Resolved at County Council Thursday 22 July 2010

(1) Given the information in the public domain regarding a significant payment to a senior officer, this Council notes that the Group Managing Director has been asked to carry out an urgent review of the interview, appointment, contract and severance payment procedures, and report back to Members with proposals to strengthen those procedures so as to minimise the risk of such large payments being made in the future.

(2) This Council also agrees to lobby the Coalition Government to amend the Employment Rights Act 1996; in effect to make employment fixed term contracts "fixed term".

Response

A number of steps have been taken as a result of the review by the Group Managing Director which have been reported back to Members at a number of different forums, including the County Council meeting on 16th December 2010.

New leadership behaviours have been defined and will underpin all selection, development and appraisal activity for senior officers at KCC. All internal applicants for vacant posts in the new operating framework have been assessed against these, prior to Member panel interviews. All those "slotted" against new posts were also measured against the competencies at a development centre. The feedback will be used to identify strengths and areas for improvement for each of the attendees and will form part of the target setting and appraisal feedback for 2011/12.

Our selection process for senior staff has been strengthened. Job descriptions include generic responsibilities as well as details of the specific professional responsibilities and these are covered at the Member interviews. Members involved in the current round of interviews attended a refresher day on interview techniques. All shortlisted applicants will attend the assessment centres mentioned above, and references will be rigorously pursued.

The Group Managing Director has made significant changes to the appraisal process for Corporate Management Team members including more rigorous and formal feedback from Members. Further changes for 2011/12 were agreed at the December County Council from the Change to Keep Succeeding report. The move to senior staff being part of the Total Contribution Pay process and the proposed introduction

of 360 degree feedback will further strengthen and clarify the way senior officers are held to account and suitably recognised for their annual performance.

Contractual changes for senior officers posts have been agreed by Personnel Committee. As well as the move to Total Contribution Pay, the notice period for the new KR16 to KR21 senior grades will be reduced from 6 months to 3 months and the importance of performance and assessment during the probation period is emphasised.

All these measures, together with the lobbying of the Coalition Government to amend some aspects of Employment Law, should help minimise the risk of large severance payments being necessary.

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Question by George Koowaree to

Kevin Lynes, Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Economic Development

Will the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Economic Development inform the council how he intends to work with Ashford Borough Council to implement the Audit Commissions recommendations to improve Kent's one-star rating for the management of the growth of Ashford for the benefit of the whole community and in particular how he intends to:

- a) prioritise the proposals for the area, clearly identify impact of development projects and deal with the weak arrangements to manage performance and project risks,
- b) place value for money at the heart of his plans to ensure he knows whether development schemes provide value for money in accordance with the high levels of public investment,
- c) involve local people, community groups and businesses who are frustrated with the pace of improvement and the lack of social and community facilities in the development of Ashford?

Response

Your question presupposes that we agree with the findings of the Audit Commission report, which for the most part we do not.

By working closely alongside the new Leader and Chief Executive of Ashford BC to maintain the momentum of the growth agenda, we have delivered, and are still delivering, a range of significant projects, among them shared space, Victoria Way, and the M20 junction 9 Drivers roundabout. All have come in on time and to budget. These projects will provide the capacity for Ashford to meet its aspirations for 31,000 new homes and 28,000 new jobs.

To be successful in securing funding for these projects we have had to demonstrate value for money and a strong return on investment, neither of which have been recognised by the Audit Commission. Local people have been, and continue to inform planning policy by being involved with Ashford Borough Council in planning exercises, and effective partnership working has seen the delivery of the Singleton Environment Centre, the Stour Centre Extension with a new Ashford Gateway and Art at St Marys currently under construction.

All of which puts Ashford in the enviable position of being able to grow in a controlled and sustainable manner for years to come – something which again the Audit Commission failed to recognise.

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Question by Malcolm Robertson to

Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste

With badly maintained roads costing Kent's 50,000+ small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) an average of £13,600 each per year, will the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste inform the council how he intends to ensure that no Kent postcode area will again feature in the AA 'Streetwatch' survey overall ranking of one of the worst three postcode areas (for potholes, patched repairs, kerb stones, inspection covers, road works, uneven footpaths, blocked drains, road signs and road markings); and advise if he will endeavour to ensure a Kent postcode area features in one of the best three postcode area in the next survey?

Sources:

- UK Business Survey, 2009 - number of small and medium-sized enterprises in Kent
- AIA The economic impact of local road condition survey report, published 26.10.10. – costs to SMEs
- Automobile Association Streetwatch survey 1, published 17 January 2011 - Dartford: overall ranking of one of the worst three postcode areas

Response

The report referenced by Mr Robertson was in fact was carried out by YouGov for the Asphalt Industry Alliance. The report revealed that 55 per cent of small and medium sized enterprises in **England and Wales** are losing on average £13,600 each per year. The report says nothing whatsoever about Kent.

The AA 'Streetwatch' survey also referenced to by Mr Robertson, sought the view of just 11 people across the whole of the DA postcode area - and as Mr Robertson will know the DA postcode area includes most of the London Borough of Bexley, part of the London Borough of Greenwich, as well as Dartford and Gravesham in North Kent.

So Mr Robertson bases his question on a survey covering England and Wales that makes no mention of Kent - and a survey that statistically takes the feedback of possibly 4 or 5 people with a DA postcode that may live in the Gravesend or Dartford area.

Mr Robertson will I hope acknowledge the intensive road maintenance programme carried out last year under the Find and Fix initiative, which improved the overall state of the county's roads to a level not enjoyed for several years. The severe winter weather of December 2010 inevitably led to some further damage to our roads and Kent Highways Services have been able to quickly and successfully mobilise an increased number of maintenance crews to repair the damage caused by the worst weather in nearly 50 years.

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Question by Leslie Christie to Paul Carter, Leader of the Council

Would the Leader of the Council please report the latest position re funding from Government for Asylum Seekers? Has the coalition Government honoured the agreement negotiated with the previous Government? If not, has the Leader considered levying a Special Precept to cover the shortfall?

Response

For many years we have had particular concerns about the costs of those asylum seekers who have reached the point of All Rights of Appeal Exhausted. I have always been clear that it is not acceptable that this issue should be a burden on Kent council tax payers.

On Tuesday evening, I met with Damian Green, Minister for Immigration with senior civil servants and a KCC officer. We have come to an agreement and a way forward which we are happy with however the details are still being worked upon. As soon as I am in a position to give more detail I will, of course, do so but on the basis of the discussion we had I can confirm that there is no need to consider a Special Precept.

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Question by Gordon Cowan to

Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste

Can the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste tell this council how he justifies the removal of the safety barriers within the town of Dover, and how much this is going to cost? And could he inform this council how many other towns are he is looking at doing the same and would he agree that the local JTB boards should be fully aware of any scheme before it goes out to public consultation.

Response

The decision whether or not to remove Pedestrian Guard Rails in Dover will be discussed at the Dover Joint Transportation Board (JTB). The cost of any work will depend on the outcome of this meeting. If the decision is taken not to remove any Pedestrian Guard Rails, then the cost will be nil. Kent Highway Services are having discussions with various districts covering 12 towns. It is important that local decisions should be taken locally and the JTB's have a key role to play in that process.

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Question by Dan Daley to

John Simmonds, Cabinet Member for Finance & Procurement

Even though all KCC employees have access to a corporate healthcare scheme which costs them £1.50 per person per week; Kent County Council spent over quarter of a million pounds* on private health care insurance for only 317 employees in the year 2009/10. Will the Cabinet Member for Finance & Procurement inform the Council how much that figure has increased (or decreased) in the current financial year and if he will consider cancelling this benefit and offer it as part of the £20million staff savings, thereby reducing the number of job losses?

*

- 2009/10 private health insurance cost a total of £237,750
- 2009/10 317 employees - value of public health insurance benefit £190,000 (Difference from 2004/05 £67,000)

Response

Mr Daley is correct in saying that we have made available to all KCC employees the opportunity to have access to the Beneden healthcare scheme at very low cost. He is also correct in saying that some staff also have access to the Senior Officer Medial Insurance scheme which KCC administers on behalf of public sector partners in Kent including both Kent Fire and Rescue and Kent Police. Employees in the scheme are also able to pay for their partners to be covered. The level of membership has slightly decreased since 2009/10 and KCC currently has 251 funded members of the scheme. Current costs to KCC including administration, insurance and other associated expense is approximately £220k.

We have a formidable challenge to meet the target of £500k described in the budget book under "changes to HR policies. Obviously we will be looking at all the commitments we have and staff will be kept advised as the reviews progress. I understand Mr Daley's viewpoint and throughout this process we are keen to ensure that whatever we do is as equitable as possible in these difficult times.

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Question by Tim Prater to

Roger Gough, Cabinet Member for Business Support and Strategy

In the three year period April 2007 to March 2010 Kent County Council paid nearly £5million in payoffs and redundancies. Will the Cabinet Member for Business Support and Strategy inform this Council of:

1. the total gross cost of payoffs and redundancies from April 2010 to 31 January 2011; and
2. the calculated total gross costs to the Council of the loss of 6 of its most senior managers in the current restructure?

Payoffs and redundancy data cover 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10:

- Redundancy payments £3,193.70
- Other End of Contract Payments £1,64781
- Grand total £4,841,181

Response

Since April 2010 195 members of non schools staff have received redundancy payments at a total cost of £2,505,197.63. Much of this reflects the implementation of restructuring proposals agreed in 2009 for Kent Adult Social Services and Children, Families and Education. A further 18 people have received other end of contract payments, including Peter Gilroy, at a total cost of £784,012.58

It is now known that 9 of our most senior managers will leave as a result of changes introduced by the County Council under Change to Keep Succeeding. The total cost of exit payments to these staff is £538,263.53.

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Question by Trudy Dean to Paul Carter, Leader of the Council

Can the Leader of the County Council say what he understands by the Big Society and say how today's budget will use this concept to protect the young, the old and the vulnerable from the effect of cuts?

Response

Today's budget protects vital front line services for the young, older people and the vulnerable in Kent. This is demonstrated through retaining the highly popular and visible Community Wardens scheme, the Freedom Pass and retaining eligibility criteria for social care at 'moderate' when most local authorities have moved to 'substantial' or 'critical'.

The Big Society represents an opportunity for root and branch reform of how the state works. Empowering the front line and moving away from large centralised bureaucracies with expensive monopoly providers, to become a smaller more enabling state. One that commissions services at the right level - including de-scaling provision to commission more locally - from a greater diversity of providers including greater commissioning from the social enterprise, voluntary and community sector.

In Bold Steps for Kent, our new Medium Term Plan, we have set out a range of measures to further support the Big Society in Kent. A new Society of Kent Schools to support schools as they taken on more responsibility from KCC, working to encourage new social enterprises to enter the health economy, moving to locality boards and local place based commissioning with District Councils of local community services and the creation of a Big Society Fund to provide funding for social enterprises and the voluntary and community sector in Kent.

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Question by Elizabeth Green to Paul Carter, Leader of the Council

Could the Leader provide a list of all non salary related benefits paid to staff, the current cost of each of those benefits to the Council, and the planned cost of each in the 20011/12 budget?"

Response

In replying to Mrs Green, I would like to be clear on how I have interpreted her question. She has referred to "non salary benefits", so any payment which is linked to salary such as all overtime and other allowances, including travel, pensions, sick pay, salary protection, maternity pay and cash awards, have been excluded.

She has also specifically asked about benefits "paid" to staff. Many of the benefits employees have access to are paid for by employees themselves but at a reduced rate, such as 10% off adult education courses or discounts at certain Kent based retailers. Additionally there are tax efficient schemes such as child care vouchers or donating to charity where payments are made before tax is applied. Others, such as annual leave, are not paid to staff but available to them.

The answer to the specific question is that the elements which were paid for and the cost in the year 2009/10 were:

- Relocation - £39,386.30
- Park and Ride - £112,236
- Selling leave - £699,735 including on costs. (This cost was offset by the £178,587 generated from staff buying additional annual leave)
- Medical Insurance for senior officers - 257 KCC members at a cost to KCC of £750 each, giving a total of £193k (Current year membership figures have declined slightly)
- Help Fund - KCC's charity for employees in severe financial difficulty. £10,000 is donated to this charity annually, and employees can also make personal donations through payroll for the Trustees to allocate appropriately

The cost of these benefits vary according to staff take up and so do not appear as specific lines in the budget book. However, we are currently considering whether it is possible to continue with these benefits, particularly the medical insurance scheme and the ability to sell annual leave, given the severe financial constraints on the Authority and we will be consulting with staff to deliver the £500,000 saving identified in the Budget under "changes to HR policies" spread across all Directorates.