

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 19 May 2016

**Question by Mike Harrison to
Gary Cooke, Cabinet Member for Corporate & Democratic Services**

"I have been extremely concerned for some time that the audio-visual equipment in the various public meeting rooms such as the Council Chamber, Darent Room and the Seminar Lecture Theatre is not 'fit for purpose'. We are faced on an almost daily basis of the embarrassing situation of high quality presentations to Members by both our own officers and external guests having to be halted because of equipment failure! Add to this the ongoing problems with Members not being able to hear speeches in this Chamber.

Surely in this day and age of 'high tech' (wi-fi) equipment we can do better and bring KCC HQ into the 21st century.

I am reliably informed that there are no funds currently identified for this kind of work, well just maybe our Cabinet Member for Finance might be able to find a little 'Underspend' from somewhere; perhaps by using just a fraction of the interest from our Iceland adventure.

Has the Cabinet Member for Corporate and Democratic Services got any good news to share with us on this important matter?"

Answer

As time goes by, any service can become a little tired and we have been aware for some time that the current audio-visual system in the Council Chamber would benefit from a degree of upgrading and/or replacement and something does need to be done for the future.

I would stress that upgrading this equipment needs to be looked at in terms of the spending priorities for the Council as a whole. A 'state of the art' Council Chamber costing several thousand pounds would not be appropriate or welcomed by the public in these austere times for local government when front line services are under so much pressure to save money. Having said that, something needs to be done and work is already underway to commission a feasibility study to look at medium and longer term solutions for a suitable standard of audio-visual system in the Chamber.

The current system is in good working order for its age and is regularly tested. However, I recognise there are some weaknesses and it would be good to note that there are one or two things that Members can do to help themselves when speaking in the Chamber; such as holding any papers to one side rather than directly covering the microphone; and avoiding the use of mobile devices during the meeting, which can produce feedback through the sound system and affect other Members being able to listen clearly to the debate, particularly those using the hearing loop system.

I will be reporting to Selection and Members Services Committee the outcome of the feasibility work and the timetable for the improvement work as and when it is available and the necessary budgetary provision has been identified.

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**Question by Mike Eddy to
Roger Gough, Cabinet Member for Education & Health Reform**

“At the full council meeting held on 24 March, the Cabinet Member for Education informed the Council that, over the last three years, conversion to academies had averaged 23 schools per annum. At that rate it would take some 16 to 17 years to convert all Kent's schools to academies. What work has the Cabinet Member undertaken to estimate the level and cost to KCC of the extra capacity required to complete the process within the six years dictated by the current Government?”

Answer

The average of 23 schools per year is somewhat skewed by the fact that this period includes a period of 2015 for the general election and the formation of the new government with several months going by without new Academy Orders being issued by the DfE. However, even looking over a longer period from 2010 to 2015, the total of 183 conversions represents a much slower rate of conversion than that which would have been implied by full compulsory academisation by 2020-22. Officers had begun to undertake work to look at the cost and resource implications across KCC of the forced academisation proposals in the recent White Paper “Education Excellence Everywhere” but this work has now been halted in light of the recent announcement by the Secretary of State that she will not be pursuing this approach in any forthcoming legislation.

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Question by Trudy Dean to Matthew Balfour, Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport

“Over 100 acres of the former Aylesford Newsprint site is currently in receivership and a master plan for its development is being consulted upon. Can the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport confirm that KCC is engaged with this process and in his reply can he confirm that KCC will use its influence to gain much needed infrastructure improvements including

- *better access to the Strood bound platform at New Hythe station*
- *safer pedestrian crossing arrangements to Leybourne Park across Bellingham Way*
- *a cycle route through the site from New Hythe to Station Road, Aylesford*
- *an improved river side towpath between New Hythe and Millhall and a full assessment of the effect of opening up Bellingham Way between Leybourne Way and Station Road, Aylesford on current A20 traffic congestion.”*

Answer

I can confirm that KCC has been involved in discussions over the former Aylesford Newsprint site with Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council and the site developers. I understand that the developers will now be firming up on their proposals and collecting further information in anticipation of submitting a planning application later this year following a second public consultation. This is an important site both for Aylesford and Kent and KCC will be seeking improvements to community services, education and highways necessary to mitigate its impact. I agree with you, highways is a key area and measures to improve access to public transport services, pedestrian crossings and footways and facilities for cyclists as you have set out will be carefully considered as part of the planning process.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 19 May 2016

**Question by Brian MacDowall to Matthew Balfour,
Cabinet Member for Environment & Transport**

“Former PCC Ann Barnes was recently reported to be still pursuing the Home Office for a refund of £576,925 to cover the reasonable additional cost of policing Operation Stack in 2015. I am not sure if there is any realistic hope of this claim ever being met.

Could the Cabinet Member comment on whether Kent’s taxpayers have indeed borne the entire cost of last year’s operations including which budget it has been funded from?”

Answer

Operation Stack was implemented for a total of 29 days between 23 June and 01 August 2015. The true cost of last Summer’s prolonged period of operations spans a number of Kent County Council services and partner agencies.

There is no one single KCC budget for Operation Stack. For Kent County Council, costs have been met by the budget holders for Emergency Planning and Highways and Transportation. Costs included £47,503 for KCC’s Resilience and Emergencies Unit for officer time spent on strategic and tactical co-ordination and £12,500 for Highways and Transportation for diversion of signage and transportation of water and food to the front line of Stack

As well as the multi-agency resources required to maintain operations, officer time was engaged in the command and control of the response during the period that an emergency was declared under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and in managing media and communications to the public.

District Councils – notably Dover, Shepway, Ashford and Maidstone – also incurred further costs from the required clean-up operations.

As has been reported the former PCC sought funding for the management of Operation Stack but without success. The new PCC has had opening discussions with the Home Secretary but without success to date.

Furthermore, there has been no cost recovery or funding from Central Government, for any of the other costs, so the cost of Operation Stack has been borne by each agency and, ultimately, the Kent taxpayer.

The impact on the wider Kent economy was estimated at almost £7.25 million. This year, so far, Operation Stack has not been called and I hope this continues to be the case.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 19 May 2016

**Question by Martin Vye to Matthew Balfour,
Cabinet Member for Environment & Transport**

“Will the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport agree to come to Canterbury with relevant senior Highways officers to meet with representatives of the residents’ associations of urban Canterbury to discuss their concerns about the traffic implications of the major expansion of the built area of Canterbury, and to explain the County Council’s ongoing strategy to mitigate the pressure on the urban highways network that will cause?”

Answer

Mr Vye is aware that Officers have recently held a briefing session for County Members about this development and they have answered a list of detailed questions submitted by Mr Vye himself concerning this issue. As he was unable to attend the original briefing, Mr Vye has been invited to a further personal briefing by officers. If, after that meeting, he still would like assistance in explaining the position, I would be happy to help. However I understand that other County Members have recently attended residents’ association meetings in urban Canterbury both to better understand their concerns and to explain what is planned.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 19 May 2016

**Question by Tom Maddison to
Roger Gough, Cabinet Member for Education & Health Reform**

“Will the Cabinet Member please explain to me and more importantly residents of my division, why with the ongoing expansion of the residential element at the Bridge Development and the growth of new families with young children of primary school age moving into the new community, we keep putting off the priority need to expand the Bridge Community Primary School from the present one form of entry to a modest but much needed two forms of entry?”

Answer

The Dartford Bridge Primary School is already a two form entry primary school.

The Kent Commissioning Plan 2016 – 2020 indicated that additional primary provision would be needed in the North Dartford area for September 2016. This is because of demographic changes as well as continuing house building on both the Dartford Bridge and the Dartford Northern Gateway developments.

Demand for reception places has necessitated officers consider an increase in provision in the North Dartford planning area. Extensive feasibility study work was carried out with the conclusion that an expansion of Dartford Bridge Primary School, was not the most practical or cost effective solution to meeting the additional demand. There were several determining factors, not least of which was the need for availability of space to accommodate 30 year R places for September 2016.

Other factors are more site-focused. The primary school for the Dartford Bridge development was designed from the outset to be a two form entry primary school within the community campus building, co-located with several other valued services, including facilities for youth, library and the social services. The building is unique in Kent in design and use. This uniqueness adds additional challenges to any feasibility studies, which although not insurmountable, do increase the cost inefficiency of such a proposal.

The school site adheres to the size guidelines of the time, with little additional area. Any additional construction would take place within the existing curtilage. This would require careful planning to ensure that hard and soft play space is not compromised. There is no additional land that can be secured from developers.

For these reasons, Temple Hill Primary and Nursery School was identified as the most expedient solution to the increase in demand in North Dartford.

House building continues at pace on both developments and officers will be monitoring forecasts carefully to ensure that when additional primary provision is required, it is available. There is a feasibility study currently underway at the Dartford

Bridge primary School. If forecasts indicate that additional capacity is required in the area, all feasibility studies will again be reviewed to ascertain the most efficient and cost effective solution to meeting that demand. It may be then, that a decision is taken for an expansion of Dartford Bridge Primary School to be the solution.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 19 May 2016

Question by Roger Latchford to Mark Dance, Cabinet Member for Economic Development

"At the Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee meeting on 16th January, 2015 you gave a comprehensive report on Phase 2 of the Broadband Delivery UK project which should ensure 95% coverage. In addition, Government agreed to fund up to £5.6 million subject to match funding from KCC of an equal amount.

Will Mr Dance please give this council an update on his expectations to meet the planned 95% coverage."

Answer

Our BDUK Phase 2 project seeks to extend the reach of superfast broadband services and build upon the achievements of the BDUK Phase 1 project.

The Phase 1 project has brought superfast broadband access to over 121,000 homes and businesses, and, as set out in our original targets, has increased the availability of superfast broadband to 91% of properties. This work has delivered a step-change in broadband availability in areas that would otherwise have been left with no or slow broadband provision.

The infrastructure build of the Phase 2 project started in January this year. This project is aiming to bring superfast broadband services to 95% of homes and businesses by the end of 2017, and 95.7% by September 2018. This is in line with the targets we set out in January 2016 and the Government's objectives for the national Phase 2 programme.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 19 May 2016

**Question by Rob Bird to Matthew Balfour,
Cabinet Member for Environment & Transport**

“According to the Safer Maidstone Partnership there were 709 reported road crashes in the borough for the year ending June 2015, almost 3% up on the previous year. It is recognised that the majority of these ‘accidents’ can be attributed to driver error; KCC’s Road Safety Team continue to have a vital role.

Nonetheless, it should be recognised that factors such as the state of the road and signage can be critical in some instances. At a recent briefing for members the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport expressed concern that KCC’s diminishing Highways maintenance budget could put road safety at risk. Will he please advise on what information he based this statement, including in his answer how close we are to reaching a safety critical situation and what steps he is taking to mitigate this risk?”

Answer

In 2015, in response to a national rise in road casualties, the Highways Department undertook an investigation into the possible causes in Kent. A review of those crashes in Kent identified that 7.5% of all crashes had some highway-related contributory factor. This compares to 14% nationally and includes motorways and trunk roads. The review identified a number of actions for all parts of the highway service and this has been included as a business priority for Kent Highways.

The figures that Mr Bird refers to are from the Community Safety Partnership - but the official figures for Maidstone, and indeed the whole County, have yet to be verified with Kent Police and will be published next month on kent.gov.uk. Historically, Maidstone’s figures are typically higher than average because it is one of the highest populated and most heavily trafficked districts in both the county and the Country.

I do not believe we have yet reached the point where we are only able to react to safety critical problems. The County Council has maintained the budgets available for road safety engineering, education and publicity in the face of sustained cuts from central government; and the Road Safety Team are recognised as national leaders in their field, regularly winning awards. However, budgets are challenging, and all Members will have to make difficult decisions in the coming years about where they prioritise funding to meet our statutory duties. New national guidance released later this year will promote a risk assessment approach, and the Government are offering larger incentives to encourage Local Highway Authorities to work towards a planned “asset managed” approach. This will change the way in which we maintain the Kent Road network in the future.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 19 May 2016

**Question by Gordon Cowan to Matthew Balfour,
Cabinet Member for Environment & Transport**

“Under the 2016/17 budget this council agreed that the Young Person’s Travel Pass (YPTP) would only be increased if the bus company put their prices up.

It was then announced that indeed the bus company had increased the cost of travel and as a consequence families were given an 8% increase from £250.00 to £270.00. Could the Cabinet member for Environment and Transport inform this council what the increase was to the 16 plus travel card, and was it in line with the increase of the Young Person’s Travel Pass increase?”

Answer

There is no proposed increase for the Kent 16+ Travel Card Scheme for 2016/17. The 16+ Travel Card Scheme was introduced in 2012 to support access to further education as part of the Council’s post 16 education policy whereas the Young Person’s Travel Pass was introduced to tackle congestion and incentivise using buses over car journeys.

Moreover, use of the Kent 16+ Travel Card is very different to the Young Persons Travel Pass. With the former there is less take-up; 7,000 pass holders compared to 24,000 Young Persons Travel Passes, fewer journeys are made and a higher number of these are at off-peak times. This means that the majority of the charge made for the Kent 16+ Travel Pass is met by parents and it is therefore more affordable for KCC to support. For this reason, there is not the same imperative for the cost to be increased, but as with the Young Person’s Travel Pass, this will be reviewed in advance of the 2017/18 scheme year.

It is worth noting that KCC continues to heavily subsidise the cost of the Young Person’s Travel Pass and has committed over £8m to support the scheme in 2016/17.