

Full Council – 13 January 2016

Councillor questions:

1. By Councillor Frank McKenna of Councillor David Monk, Leader of the Council

Has the Monitoring Officer concluded her report on councillors' inappropriate expenses claims, and when will the report be availed to Council?

ANSWER

This matter is still the subject of an ongoing investigation which is being carried out by an independent investigating officer. The investigating officer will produce a final report for the consideration of the Monitoring Officer. The Monitoring Officer has yet to be issued with the final report. Once issued, the Monitoring Officer will report this matter to Audit and Standards Committee. As for timing, I hope it will be shortly.

2. By Councillor Mary Lawes of Councillor Alan Ewart-James, Cabinet Member for Housing

Under the 'No Use Empty' loan scheme, what are the criteria for people wishing to bring an old property back into use as a home or employment and who would be eligible for this?

ANSWER

May I extend a Happy New Year to you Cllr Lawes and thank you for the first question in the year 2016.

I am very pleased that you have taken an interest in the No Use Empty scheme which has just celebrated its 10th anniversary and last month as part of the celebration of this event, I was privileged to be able to give a presentation in County Hall Maidstone to the various Councils and developers who have participated in the No Use Empty Scheme.

In fact yesterday I made an inspection of one of the small local one man band type of developer who had partaken of this scheme whereby by availing himself to the loans he had been able convert empty offices above the NatWest bank in the middle of the High Street in Hythe into a number of flats. He told me that had it not been for the loans of the No Use Empty scheme, he would not have been able to undertake this development.

The 'No Use Empty Scheme' loan scheme is open to the owners of long Term empty homes in the district. Long-term empty homes are residential

properties which have been empty for 6 months or more. To be eligible, the owners are required to pass a financial viability test and also evidence that they are unable to access the necessary funding for the works through other lenders, such as banks. In some circumstances the owners of former commercial properties may be able to access the loan funding in order to bring their property back into use for residential purposes.

Supplementary question

I have a question about eligibility for this scheme because some people do not seem to be able to access it?

ANSWER

Anyone can apply if they meet the criteria. The really good thing about this scheme is that it is a rolling fund – ie any repayments made are recycled for somebody else to benefit.

3. By Councillor Carol Sacre of Councillor David Monk, Leader of the Council

Whilst I appreciate the need for a new swimming pool in Hythe, I feel that the proposal to site it on the Green does not take into account the needs of the people of New Romney, Dymchurch and Lydd. The Marsh communities, including the villages, have long since been deprived of proper sport and leisure facilities, in particular a swimming pool. Surely the Nickolls Quarry site would be in a far better position to serve them, particularly as the developer, Martello Lakes, has already committed land and finance?

ANSWER

The proposed Recreation Centre is intended to help meet the leisure needs of the communities across Shepway including Hythe and Romney Marsh.

The Nickolls Quarry site is one of a number of sites that were recently assessed as part of an options appraisal reported to Cabinet in November 2015. It is accepted that there are merits in the Nickolls Quarry option but unfortunately the site is not available for development until at least 2020 and it may well be longer. Its availability is dependent on matters beyond the Council's control including the development programme of that site as a whole. In order to maintain a swimming pool facility in Hythe for the community it is considered important to construct one ahead of that timescale.

4. By Councillor Carol Sacre of Councillor Malcolm Dearden, Cabinet Member for Transport and Commercial

Rather than losing more agricultural land with the construction of further amenities for heavy goods vehicles would the Council support the pursuance of an intelligence fleet management system which would enable heavy goods vehicles to be called forward from dispersed locations, in order to prevent the compound queuing and parking on our Kent highways, and which would be a flexible solution used only when needed?

ANSWER

The Cabinet will be considering its formal response to Highways England's consultation on a proposed lorry area at its special meeting on 19 January.

One of the recommendations to Cabinet states that Highways England should consult as soon as practical on new information technology communications that would be deployed alongside the introduction of a new lorry area to efficiently manage HGV and local traffic on the M20 and the local road network throughout Kent. The recommendation also says that improved information technology should also be introduced on the national strategic road network to more effectively manage HGV movements and avoid bottlenecks occurring in Kent (recommendation (i) in report C/15/70).

While information technology clearly has a significant role in HGV management it is not considered that this alone would be a workable alternative to the current Operation Stack when an incident occurs, sometimes at short notice, at the channel ports or channel tunnel rail terminus. In these circumstances there needs to be a lorry holding area with direct access from the M20, which is located as close to the channel tunnel terminal as possible and which can be opened quickly when required. Lorry parks further afield in dispersed locations are unlikely to prevent a repetition of the misery experienced by local businesses and local residents last year when the M20 was closed for a significant time. In addition the most effective means of tackling indiscriminate HGVs parking on local roads is a substantial expansion in the capacity of the overnight lorry area at STOP24 which could be delivered as part of the Stanford West lorry area option.

Supplementary question

Could Ebbsfleet be used as a backup?

ANSWER

We need to recognise that upwards of 15,000 lorries come through the M20 as a preferred option to the M2. The Government and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have earmarked £250 million to resolve the issue. The three COBR meetings, especially the one chaired by the Prime Minister, have indicated that they wish to "move ahead with pace". The preferred option

would be to keep the issue north of the Thames, but that won't happen because lorry drivers want to be as close to the Channel. This proposal seeks to resolve this problem of 20 years' standing. We should recognise pragmatically that Ebbsfleet is not the right place. Unfortunately the solution has to local and the £250 million allocated to it is important.

5. By Councillor Carol Sacre of Councillor Alan Ewart-James, Cabinet Member for Housing

I wish to refer to the Council's scheme to end the blight of empty residential dwellings and ask what plans are in abeyance for the high rise flats in Pilgrim Spring, Folkestone East, as tenants were required to vacate homes to be rehoused, some at a considerable distance from the immediate area and I understand these flats remain empty after many months?

ANSWER

Pilgrims Spring is not owned by the Council. Moat Housing Association is the landlord. They have recently written to all the residents in the accommodation to advise them about their future plans for the estate area. Due the serious disrepair problems in the property, Moat Housing Association has concluded that the only way forward is to help the residents move to alternative homes so that the property can be demolished and the site made available for redevelopment. Moat Housing Association has arranged an open meeting for all residents on 20 January to allow them to discuss how the process will work. Moat Housing Association will be working closely with the housing department of the Council to identify suitable homes for the remaining 21 households.

Supplementary question

Moat Housing Association also own the residential home for 35 senior citizens who have also been given notice. Is there anything we can do to help as a Council?

ANSWER

We work closely with Moat Housing Association to ensure as little disruption to people's live as possible.