

Strategy & Resources Committee – 14.09.21

Agenda item 4 – Standing Order 30 questions

Questions from Councillor Cooper

1. **To deal with a climate change situation it seems that TDC Officers have spent much time in considering the installation of Electric Vehicle charging points in Tandridge. How many of these charging points have TDC actually installed since the declaration of a Climate Change Emergency at the Council Meeting on Thursday 13th February 2020?**

Response from Councillor Bourne:

Zero.

Supplementary question:

Is that correct?

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*At this point in time, yes. As per the report to the Committee in July, the answer was zero and that's still the case. The situation won't change until the Climate Change Working Group meets to access options.*

2. **What is the estimated cost and charging structure which would be adopted by TDC to provide a viable financial return?**

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*Multiple funding options were presented in the report to the Committee in July. The Climate Change Working Group will review these options and make a recommendation to the committee.*

Supplementary question:

So no decisions have been made yet?

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*The Climate Change Working Group will be meeting soon to consider the options.*

3. **In considering the installation of EV charging points in Tandridge, can we be informed of how many charging points have been established in Tandridge by organisations other than TDC? Also, given that EV charging points are available 24/7, can we know what use is made of them as a percentage of the available time i.e. of the 168 hours each week?**

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*According to an on-line chargepoint mapping App, there are eight in the District. They are not ours and we have no information about them.*

Supplementary question:

If we are going to be making decisions, don't we need some information about how the current charging points function?

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*Quite possibly – this will be a matter for the Climate Change Working Group who will be looking at this soon.*

4. **The UK Government is now looking very seriously at the use of hydrogen as a power source for motor vehicles. This being a better/more realistic option for larger vehicles. I understand that there are a very limited number of garages in the UK where one can 'fill' a hydrogen powered car. Do we know how many such garages exist in Tandridge?**

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*Zero*

5. **Have TDC officers identified sites in Tandridge which would enable TDC to support the use of hydrogen powered vehicles? Also, what the cost and financial return might be?**

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*As much as those in the motor industry believe that hydrogen is the better way forward out of the alternatives for green vehicles, the fact remains that it is behind the curve with infrastructure in the UK at this point. In fact, the Government's strategy was only published last month. So not much has happened, even though hydrogen is considered to be the better way forward.*

Supplementary question:

It is disappointing we don't know a bit more. When will we do something about it?

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*This will be up to the Climate Change Working Group to decide. Perhaps you could refer your question to them by e-mail.*

6. **At the last Council meeting on Thursday 22nd July 2021, it was mentioned, in answer to one of my questions, that TDC were looking to convert council properties to use more 'climate friendly' heating systems such as ground source heat pumps. Can you please state the number of TDC owned properties which have been converted to use ground source heat pumps since TDC proclaimed a Climate Change Emergency on Thursday 13th February 2020?**

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*The answer is zero in terms of conversions but new build council properties will be built to a net zero operational standard. The position with existing properties is more complex and I refer you to the [11<sup>th</sup> March 2021] Housing Committee report [scope for replacing gas boilers with low carbon heating systems in Council owned properties] and discussion.*

Supplementary question:

You say net zero – under what circumstances would you make that statement?

Response from Councillor Bourne:

*That was the decision made by the Housing Committee and that is what the building requirements are for all new properties we are in the process of building.*

## Questions from Councillor Sayer

1. **As the Grant Thornton report makes clear, Councillor Bourne correctly flagged up the problems with the 2020/21 Budget on several occasions.**

**At the Strategy & Resources Committee of 3 February 2020, Councillor Bourne questioned why the budget figure for business rate income had increased substantially from the previous year and he set out his worries that the restatement of the Medium Term Financial Strategy had not been correctly carried out.**

**On investigation, it was found that Councillor Bourne was right and the error was corrected, reducing the business rate income by £705,000. That, however, created a funding gap in the budget which was problematic because the budget was being presented to the full Council for approval ten days later on 13 February 2020.**

**A reduction in pension costs of £920,500 was then made in the budget and Members were informed this was due to a reduction in pension strain liabilities which had come to light following a fortuitously timed letter received from Surrey County Council pension fund.**

**At the meeting of 13 February, Councillor Bourne questioned whether this was correct. Grant Thornton has now found that it was not correct and Councillor Bourne was right.**

**My concern is that a Councillor was able to correctly identify the problems with the budget but was not listened to by anyone. The then administration ignored him but carried out no proper scrutiny of their own. No one seemed able to understand the budget sufficiently to know that Councillor Bourne was right all along.**

**My question is how did we get to this place where a perfectly well reasoned and ultimately correct challenge was ignored and how can we make sure this never happens again?**

*Response from Councillor Bourne:*

*There is a legal requirement for us to sign off the budget on time every year and that creates a time pressure. It is often presented to us at the last minute with little time for scrutiny and double checking. People, or groups of people, don't want to be shown up as having made mistakes so they can be tempted to defend the indefensible. This Chamber can be a confrontational place at times - politics is confrontational. That is all true and I don't necessarily see how that's going to change unless we all decide that we're going to change. To me, the biggest problem comes from years and years of Councillors believing that they didn't need to know the detail or understand the depth of the accounts and budgets and it wouldn't matter. But that's not correct. We need better quality Councillors who take the time to learn and understand how these things work so they can question it or, when someone else questions it, they've got enough understanding to say whether that's right or wrong and are willing to say so. Unless we as a group decide to change and be more honest, the same thing may happen again. That's down to us.*

2. **At the 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2020 Strategy & Resources meeting, Councillor Bourne also questioned the financial reserves statement because the opening balance figure for financial reserves was re-stated to be £20.3m when it should have been the same as the closing balance figure from the previous year which was £16.5m.**

**Has this discrepancy ever been investigated, and also how can we be sure that there are no other errors in our budget finance assumptions?**

*Response from the Chief Finance Officer*

*I recognise that we have to do a piece of work around reserves. I need to have comfort that we have a correct, albeit historic, starting position so we know what our ending position is. We're aware of a potential discrepancy that we need to investigate and it's certainly on my list of things to do. In terms of how we ensure this doesn't happen again, you'll also see in my report that what this has thrown to light (due to a number of issues) is that we need to do a root and branch review of the fundamentals of finance to ensure that the transformation programme that we are embarking on is on a strong footing and not built on sand.*