

Full Council 21st October 2021 – Questions from Councillors under Standing Order 30 and responses from relevant Committee Chairs / Leader

1. Question from Councillor Cooper

At a recent meeting with Lord Callanan, Permanent Under Secretary of State at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who mentioned that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government had offered grants to local councils to support conversion to green energy. Please could I know whether TDC applied for such a grant, how much was requested and what it was for?

Response from Councillor Bourne (as Chair of the Strategy & Resources Committee)

The Council participated in a consortium bid, with 9 other Surrey Districts and Boroughs, for two phases of the government's green homes grant. The total awarded was close to £10m and included a significant top-up contribution from Surrey County Council. The scheme is being delivered by our partner, Action Surrey. New applications have now closed.

Eligible owner-occupied households could use the funding to install energy efficiency improvements, including loft, solid wall, cavity wall and park home insulation, to keep their home warm. Air source heat pumps and solar hot water systems could also be funded in addition to insulation works, to further help save on energy bills and reduce carbon emissions.

We are expecting the installation of 60 measures to be completed in the District. Average savings across Surrey are:

- *bill savings per household of approximately £249 per year*
- *energy savings per household of approximately 4,981 kWh per year*
- *carbon savings per household of approximately 1.7 tonnes CO2 equivalent per year (equating to over 530 tonnes in total).*

The Council also applied for, and was granted, local enterprise partnership funding to install retrofit measures at one of our key commercial properties – Quadrant House in Caterham.

Supplementary question from Councillor Cooper

I'm pleased to hear we're doing something in this area, but I'm still waiting for the document that was going to outline the issues and opportunities for this Council. We seem to have addressed some of them in relation to Housing, but not S&R ... when is the document going to be produced?

Response from Councillor Bourne

I don't know the answer to that ... we can ask the Climate Change Working Group and will come back to you.

2. Question from Councillor Cooper

I was recently informed by a local developer that three TDC planning staff had tendered their resignations. This seems to have been confirmed in discussions since. As a TDC councillor, I felt very uncomfortable that I had not been informed of these changes by TDC itself rather than second hand by a developer. It is understood that the TDC Planning Department is under pressure, so could I know how many planning officers have left TDC over the past six months? (i.e. since the elections on the 6 May.) Also, how many TDC planning officers have left in the past twelve months?

Response from Councillor Sayer (as Leader of the Council):

Two planning officers on the Planning Department's permanent establishment have left the Council over the past 12 months. It is correct that 3 development management officers who deal with planning applications resigned in September and will be leaving the Council's employment at various dates in November. Today, the Council placed adverts for replacement permanent development management planning officers to fill these 3 posts with an expectation that the vacancies will be filled by the end of January 2022.

In the interim, efforts have been made to employ temporary staff to replace the 3 officers who will be leaving. To date, no suitable candidates have been found. Extension of the contracts of 3 temporary planning officers already employed to assist in reducing the backlog of planning applications is being actively pursued as an alternative until permanent staff can be employed.

More recently, the head of the Local Plans team has resigned. This officer was already on maternity leave and expected to return to work in January. The deputy head of the Local Plans team will continue to act up as head of the team, which she was already doing, while a decision on a replacement lead officer is made.

I felt very uncomfortable to see comments about the resignations on a post by a developer on a Caterham Life Facebook page several weeks ago. This was before I was officially aware of the resignations, although I has heard unofficially. Do you know how the developer came by that information?

Supplementary question from Councillor Cooper

I can't answer that question he's a developer, so I guess he speaks to Planning officers. I assume, as a conscientious employer, TDC are offering all resigning staff exit interviews. Given the numbers who have left, I expect we've learned a great deal about the reasons being given and are looking to address the issues raised. As a TDC Councillor, I'm concerned about this exodus of staff and, to enable me to understand and offer support to officers, I would like to know what the majority of reasons given are, and what the Council is doing to address this to attempt to stem the numbers of planning officers leaving.

Response from Councillor Sayer

I'm not an HR expert but I believe exit interviews are offered to all leavers. I've explained as best I can what we're doing to attract new staff ... adverts were placed today. I'm sure it will become clear what the reasons were for the three planning officers leaving.

2nd supplementary question from Councillor Cooper

Councillor Cooper referred to information supplied by the aforementioned developer regarding a complaint against Councillor Sayer, as Leader, from an ex member of staff. He questioned whether it was appropriate for Councillor Sayer to remain as Chair of the Planning Policy Committee while the complaint was being investigated. The Chair invited the Chief Executive to respond who advised that the question was outside of the remit of the meeting. Councillor Sayer stated that the matter had been resolved and that no substance had been found in the complaint.

3. Question from Councillor Ridge

As the Council declared a climate emergency in February 2020, does this mean that the Council now has emergency powers to deal with climate issues?

Response from Councillor Sayer (as Leader of the Council)

No, as far as I'm aware, the Council has no such emergency powers.

Supplementary question from Councillor Ridge

With reference to Minute 131 of the 28th September 2021 Housing Committee ("Gas and electricity contracts – confirmation of decision taken under urgency powers") I can't believe this Council has used urgency powers to bulldoze through a decision to dump brown gas on the community. Will you, as Leader of the Council, use all your influence, and any emergency powers necessary, to bring this item back to committee, where it can be given the due democratic process it deserves?

Response from Councillor Sayer

I'll have to take advice on that. There are no such emergency powers I know of.

2nd supplementary question from Councillor Ridge

If, in the future, this matter comes up, would you use urgency powers to pass it through without it being debated properly a committee?

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Pursehouse will answer the question with his answer in Question 4. I'd like to take this opportunity to draw attention to the presentation to Members scheduled for Monday, 15th November at 7.00pm by the Head of Environment at Surrey County Council on their climate change delivery plan. The County Council is adopting the plan this month and launching it next month. There's been general agreement among the Leaders of Surrey's eleven District and Borough Councils, that it would be useful to join forces and resources across the County, because, of course, this is an issue that has no borders. Working together looks like giving us the best chance of a successful outcome.

4. Question from Councillor Ridge

At its last meeting, when considering the report about future energy contracts, the Housing Committee noted that the new gas contract with Gazprom was based on the use of the cheaper brown gas, as opposed to the more environmentally friendly, but more expensive, green gas. Under this Administration, is the Council going to continue to treat these climate issues as budgetary fiscal matters, or are they going to treat them as a chance to invest in the planet and our children's future in accordance with our climate emergency declaration?

Response from Councillor Pursehouse (as Chair of the Housing Committee)

To answer the question before last, the urgency powers were needed because the way the gas market works. The decisions had to be made quickly, almost on the day sometimes on the day. Officers now accept that the Housing Committee should have considered the policy for buying gas at an earlier meeting. That will be done in future. There was a debate on the subject at the [28th September 2021] Housing Committee and the Committee endorsed the actions undertaken by the Officers.

The gas market is currently extremely volatile. The market is experiencing a 17-year high due to a number of reasons including:

- *a period of rapidly rising wholesale process during the summer*
- *a dramatically under supplied storage system following a cold spring season*
- *delays to the Nordstream2 project which is the new gas pipeline from Russia to the continent.*

For the renewal of the gas and electricity contracts, we used a procurement framework offering 100% renewable only suppliers and also brown mix suppliers that offer green contracts. We asked for both brown and green prices for a comparison. Seven companies were asked to quote, with only 2 suppliers choosing to quote due to the volatility of the market. We received 2 quotes for brown gas and 1 quote for green gas. The green gas option represented a 42% increase on current spend compared with an increase of 18% for the brown gas. To accommodate the increased expenditure, further growth will be needed to add to the budgets for 2022/23 and it was felt that a 42% increase, given the Council's current financial situation, was too risky. 25% of that increase would have to come from the General Fund.

The other consideration was that 75% of the gas spend comes from the Housing Revenue Account for landlord supplies. The HRA costs incurred are recharged as part of the annual service charge review and we felt that it wasn't appropriate to make a decision that would pass a considerable increase onto our tenants who are currently facing other challenges. Most of the gas supply for the HRA from this contract is used to heat communal areas in multi-occupancy buildings. That's the bottom end of the economic scale and we didn't think that hitting those residents with such an increase in charges is something that we would wish to do.

Supplementary question from Councillor Ridge

This is a benevolent Council. The lowest paid in our community do not pay [Council Tax] – we subsidise that by £500,000. This would be a good example of helping our residents by saving the environment and we could have subsidised it for them. If these urgency powers came to the Housing Committee again, would you let them pass in your position as Chairman, or would you come to Committee first?

Response from Councillor Pursehouse

It depends where we are on the cycle. These things have to be done extremely quickly. I would like to see us take a principled policy decision on how we're going to handle the negotiations before the officers do it. But, at the end of the day, it may well be that Officers have to do it under delegated powers for themselves. We are a Council that does what it can. I don't have an electric car or photo-voltaic cells or a ground source heat pump for my house because I can't afford them. But I do what I can [to be a good environmentalist]. Every financial issue is an environmental issue, and every environmental issue is a financial issue. The housing department has the ambition to go to green gas because it's being reviewed all the time. We have the ambition to make sure that our homes are as well insulated as possible. We have the ambition to give our tenants the best service, and the environment the best service, but at the moment we have to balance those two things.

5. Question from Councillor Ridge

The Council knew that this decision on which type of gas to use was going to be reported to committee, so could you enlighten us on the views of the Climate Change Working Group and forward a copy of their report?

Response from Councillor Bourne (as Chair of the Strategy & Resources Committee)

The decision was taken under emergency powers due to the rapid nature of the decision required. Supplier quotes were received at lunchtime, and decisions and signatures required by the afternoon – all within the context of a very volatile market.

Switching to green energy supplies was included in our climate change action plan from the outset. Switching to 'green' was always our first choice. For this reason, and the necessity to make rapid decisions, the climate change group were not consulted. Unfortunately, green gas is, at this time, too expensive given the risk of recharging to our tenants.

Supplementary question from Councillor Ridge

Emergency (as in 'climate change emergency') means urgent action is required. It seems that the Council only takes urgent action when it suits. The climate emergency group has been formed since February 2020. We haven't had a report yet. Could we possibly have an interim report to see how what progress they've made.

Response from Councillor Bourne

I would refer you to Councillors Duck and Bloore, who are your Group's representatives on the Climate Change Working Group.

6. Question from Councillor O'Driscoll

The railings between Soper Drive and Coulsdon Road in the Westway Ward, which used to mark the boundary of St Lawrence's Hospital are in an abysmal state, which is a real shame as it is a lovely bit of history within the ward. Residents have raised repeatedly, over the last 10 years, with the Council that the railings need to be fixed and they still haven't been repaired. **What steps can this Council take to help the local community restore the railings to their former glory?**

Response from Councillor Wren (as Chair of the Community Services Committee):

Following your question, I've inspected these railings and spoken to Officers. I'm advised that the railings have been on the Council's forward plan of amenity works for some time, together with iron gates in open spaces such as Whyteleafe Recreation Ground. We intend to obtain quotes from specialist firms for renovating these community assets. This will form part of future options to be considered as part of the budget setting process for 2022/23 and beyond.

7. Question from Councillor O'Driscoll

Residents are getting increasingly concerned about anti-social behaviour in Westway, with instances taking place in the Village and in Hambledon Linear Park over recent weeks. I've also heard about ASB happening in Caterham Valley, Oxted and Whyteleafe as well. **What steps are this Council taking to tackle this and how is this Council aiming to assist residents who want to start local Neighbourhood Watch schemes in their community?**

Response from Councillor Langton (as Chair of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee):

I'll respond to the question in three parts, beginning with information from Amanda Bird, our Community Safety & Partnerships Officer, followed by an update on steps being taken in Oxted and Hurst Green as examples of what could be done elsewhere.

The statement from Amanda Bird is:

"Antisocial Behaviour is defined by the Antisocial Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 and there are approximately 13 different types including rowdy/inconsiderate behaviour, rowdy or nuisance neighbours, littering and nuisance noise.

Tandridge Council and Surrey police work closely on a wide range of aspects of ASB. If the behaviour is in a public space, it should be reported to the police. It is vitally important for the police to receive the intelligence from residents so they can respond accordingly. Equally, if the ASB is associated with Tandridge tenants, the issues should be reported to Tandridge Council. The Council works closely with the police and other agencies to address ASB issues in the community and seek the involvement of other organisations depending on the case.

Also, there is the Tandridge Community Safety Partnership Board, which is a multi-agency group chaired by the Tandridge Community Safety Officer. It is a statutory requirement for local responsible organisations to work together to tackle local crime and disorder, including ASB.

If residents are interested in setting up a new Neighbourhood Watch Scheme in Tandridge, they should e-mail Andy Buchan at tandridge.nhw@gmail.com. The Tandridge community safety team works closely with the co-ordinators of the schemes across the district and supports their work in the community."

Councillor Sayer has been working on a CCTV project for Oxted and Hurst Green, with a trial in central Oxted having been recently completed. Demonstration cameras were installed; 2 outside the station in Station Road West and 2 outside Boots in Station Road East. They were trialled with a view to installing permanent CCTV as a deterrent to crime and anti-social behaviour and crime & disorder. In June of this year, the Police had to use Dispersal Orders in Oxted town centre to combat ASB and crime & disorder. This project is backed by Oxted Parish Council which is considering providing the bulk of funding, alongside TDC, the Oxted BID and the Master Park trustees. If the trial works out, CCTV will first be installed in Station Road East and Station Road West, with Hurst Green and Master Park following in separate phases.

Regarding other issues in Hurst Green, many residents have been expressing concerns about anti-social behaviour, including drug related crimes. As a result of a conference call presentation from the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey [Lisa Townsend] about two months ago, she [the PCC] offered to visit Hurst Green and will now be attending the Community Centre on 4th November at 7.00pm. I've invited residents from Hurst Green and Oxted ... the police will also be in attendance ... it will be a good opportunity for the police to hear, at first hand, the sort of issues people have been facing. In the conference call, the PCC requested that residents report incidences, but some are frightened of retributions, while others don't believe anything will happen so don't bother. When the PCC / Police have listened to residents on the 4th November, they will respond to say how they intend to deal with the issues.

Finally, just to remind everyone that the prevention of crime falls within the terms of reference of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee. We asked for a police report for the 30th September 2021 meeting which was duly given. Arising from that, we've also asked for a series of metrics to be presented to the 27th January 2022 meeting which will help to demonstrate how the police are performing.

Supplementary question from Councillor O'Driscoll

Thank you for your detailed answer. I'd like the approach taken in Hurst Green to be replicated in Caterham. Would you be happy to meet later to have a more in-depth discussion about this?

Response from Councillor Langton

Yes, I'd be happy to share what I've picked up. If we pool our resources, we can gain some real traction on this issue.

8. Question from Councillor Jones

ID19 was received on 13th September. The letter requested that we provide a date by which we will have been able to consider a response and reply fully to the Inspector. The email from David Ford to the Planning Policy committee members suggested this would be considered w/c 20th September. **Can we have an update on the date which we have communicated to the Inspector that we will go back to him? Can we also have an update on the work completed since that letter and now?**

Response from Councillor Sayer (as Chair of the Planning Policy Committee):

The Inspector has been contacted through the usual channel, that is the Programme Officer for the Local Plan examination. It has been explained that his ID19 raises some very important questions for the Council which it needs to reflect on and discuss. It would most likely to be late this year, or early in 2022, before the Council could give a considered response.

The most important ongoing piece of work relating to the Local Plan has been the assessment of the peak hour capacity of Junction 6 of M25 and its ability, with or without improvement, to accommodate some or all of the forecast traffic growth arising from implementation of the Spatial Strategy of the submitted Local Plan. This work will be concluding in early November. A virtual meeting for Members has been arranged for the 11th November at 7.00pm for the Council's transport consultants (DHA) to provide a briefing on the outcome of their assessment work.

Supplementary question from Councillor Jones

Have we completed an assessment of what the risks might be to the plan by pushing it back even further? Are there any risks associated with the traffic modelling given that DHA's work also keeps moving back?

Response from Councillor Sayer

As far as I'm aware, we haven't completed a risk assessment, but I haven't been the one speaking to the Programme Officer. In terms of the modelling, I haven't seen anything since details were circulated to Planning Policy Committee members over two months ago. I'm not sure whether there are any risks, but it's one of those things we need to pursue with DHA when they come to do their presentation. There are quite a few questions to ask, i.e. in respect of the whole plan, the allocated sites, and associated risks. Until DHA have finished their modelling, we probably can't ask them for those judgements.