

COUNCIL – 20TH OCTOBER 2022 – STANDING ORDER 30 QUESTIONS**Question from Councillor Jones**

Question to the Leader of the Council (Councillor Sayer)

With the shocking news that NatWest plan to close both branches in Tandridge in the near future, will the Leader of the Council undertake to write to Natwest on behalf the Council requesting that they reconsider their decision? These are vital services for residents in our communities.

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Sayer advised that she had written to Alison Rose, the Chief Executive of NatWest on 18th October, asking the bank to reconsider these planned closures which would leave the c.90,000 Tandridge residents without a NatWest branch in the district. Councillor Sayer referred to the written response from Alison Rose's office which stated that the bank would not be revisiting the decision, but explained the reasons for it, e.g.:

- a reduced demand for physical banks since 2019
- “78% of NatWest Caterham and 74% of NatWest Oxted customers are digitally active...”
- “the NatWest Caterham branch is only being visited by 3 customers on a regular weekly basis, and no customers visit the NatWest Oxted branch on a regular weekly basis...”
- there are other means of supporting customers as alternatives to branch banking.

Councillor Sayer undertook to forward the bank's response to all Members for information.

Question from Councillor Gray

Question to the Leader of the Council (Councillor Sayer)

Will the Leader of the Council write to the Leader of Surrey County Council to raise an objection to the effective discontinuation of our Local Area Committee prior to the publication, discussion and scrutiny of any alternative mechanism for community engagement?

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Sayer undertook to pursue the matter with the Leader of Surrey County Council (Councillor Tim Oliver) as requested. She referred to her previous correspondence with Councillor Oliver on the subject in which he highlighted SCC's “*extensive programme of engagement with residents, including the appointment of community link officers, so I have no concern at all that residents are unable to easily raise issues with their County Councillor or through the SCC website in relation to issues we are responsible for*”. Councillor Oliver had also stated that Local Committees could continue but that SCC officers would not be able to support them. Councillor Sayer confirmed she would be happy to write to Councillor Oliver again, requesting further details about how the Local Committees would be replaced.

Supplementary question from Councillor Gray

Given that SCC could have tried to improve the Local Committee process (as opposed to withdrawing it) through which residents could force minuted, webcast discussions of things that concerned them, is the promise of enhanced public engagement appears to be a nonsense?

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Sayer agreed that the withdrawal of SCC's Local Committees, and the fact that residents would no longer be able to attend a public meeting to express their views and have them recorded, represented a loss of openness and transparency. Despite the ability for residents to speak to a community link officer or a county councillor, there would be no public record of what was said, which is a real disadvantage. Councillor Sayer confirmed she would emphasise those points in her letter to Councillor Oliver.

Question from Councillor Prew

Question to the Chair of the Planning Policy Committee (Councillor Sayer)

In response to a Standing Order 30 Question asked by Councillor O'Driscoll at Planning Policy Committee on the 23rd June; the Interim Chief Planning Officer acknowledged that there was a delay in validating planning applications as a result of *"staff changes in the planning department and the increased number of applications being received"*. The Interim Chief Planning Officer went on to say that steps were being taken to urgently reduce the number of applications awaiting validation including: increasing the number of validation officers from within existing staff numbers; recruiting a new validation officer; retaining an interim validation officer.

I was approached as recently as last week by a resident who had submitted a planning application via the Planning Portal on 12 September and but had still not had an acknowledgement from the Council. When I enquired on his behalf, I was told that it is currently taking 6 to 8 weeks to process an application through to validation.

Can the Council please tell me:

- 1. Has the size of the validation team increased since June and what is the current staffing level in this department?**
- 2. What is the current average time taken to process an application from receipt to validation and how many applications are awaiting validation?**

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Sayer advised that the size of the validation team had not increased since June. It comprised 4 x FTE ... one of those posts was currently occupied by a contractor although a permanent replacement was being sought. She explained that the validation backlog had been caused by IT issues relating to the Civica planning portal, with application documents having to be (temporarily) uploaded manually. Development Management staff had volunteered to work overtime to undertake this time-consuming process, which was considered preferable to engaging contractors. Councillor Sayer confirmed that the "6 to 8 weeks" processing time was correct and understood that 160 to 170 applications were awaiting validation. Councillor Sayer apologised to Members and the public for the delays but gave an assurance that staff were doing all they could to resolve the IT problems.

Supplementary question from Councillor Prew

As residents have been encouraged to use the planning portal, should we be issuing a notice about the delays?

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Sayer explained that information had been provided on the website. The IT problems had been sporadic to date, although the provision of paper plans in libraries etc may need to be considered if the difficulties continued.

2nd Supplementary question from Councillor Prew

Are we risking incurring costs due delays in processing planning applications?

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Sayer advised that there was no immediate risk. However, the problem couldn't be allowed to persist and the contract with Civica may have to be reviewed to assess the Council's options.

Questions from Councillor O'Driscoll

(pre-recorded and replayed at the meeting as Councillor O'Driscoll was not present in the Chamber – Standing Order 30 (1) (iii) refers

Question to the Chair of the Planning Policy Committee (Councillor Sayer)

There are concerns about the level of planning appeals to the Inspector and the associated costs to the Council. With applications in recent years being allowed by appeal in Felbridge, Coulsdon Lodge in Westway and the possibility of another appeal relating to a refused application in Croydon Road, Caterham. The cost to the council for all of the allowed appeals is in the millions of pounds. **What mitigations are being taken to reduce the possibility that local planning applications are decided by Bristol bureaucrats and not by local members and officers?**

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Sayer acknowledged the 'Felbridge appeal' which had resulted in the most substantive costs being awarded against the Council in 2019. She understood that, so far, no appeal had been lodged in respect of the Croydon Road application (Aldi) referred to in the question. She commented that, while planning applications were assessed against relevant national and local planning policies, decisions were often based on finely balanced judgements. Because the current system empowered all applicants to appeal to the Planning Inspectorate who could always arrive at a different conclusion and overturn a decision to refuse planning permission, the situation was out of the Council's control, and it would take a change in government policy for that to alter. Councillor Sayer also referred to the Prime Minister's question time on 19th October, when the PM replied that she wanted decisions about homes and infrastructure to be driven by local people and not by Whitehall. Councillor Sayer concluded that the current planning system failed to respect local wishes or the role of Councils. She hoped that the government was committed to making changes.

Question to the Leader of the Council (Councillor Sayer)

The World Cup is in under a month's time and I want to take the opportunity to celebrate the work of our grassroots football teams in Tandridge, particularly the Caterham Pumas and AFC Whyteleafe. **Will the Leader of the Council join me in congratulating and celebrating the work of all of our grassroots football teams and will she work with me to ensure this Council fully supports the work they do in their communities?**

Response from Councillor Sayer

Councillor Sayer confirmed she would be delighted to join Councilor O'Driscoll in celebrating the work of grassroots football teams throughout the district and to support them wherever she could.

Question to the Chair of the Community Services Committee (Councillor Wren)

Residents are keen to see more TerraCycle stations in local shops in Caterham to recycle contact lenses cases and cheese wrappers among other items you can't usually recycle. **Will this Council provide support to local businesses in Caterham to host Terracycle facilities?**

Response from Councillor Wren

Councillor Wren advised that the TerraCycle business model sought to encourage householders and businesses to set up local pick-up points at their home address or business premise. It would be for a business to decide whether they have sufficient space to host the drop off collection boxes and to make arrangements for the collected material to be posted to TerraCycle.

Councillor Wren stated that the Council had no plans to offer assistance at this stage. However, she suggested that Councillors could take the matter up with business organisations (e.g. Business Improvement Districts) within their Wards.

Councillor Wren also referred to the Panorama programme [BBC1 - June 2022] which challenged TerraCycle's green credentials. She concluded that a lot more work needed to be done before the Council could consider enabling business to host TerraCycle stations.