Essex County Council

23 February 2021 Order Paper

Agenda item 4 Public Questions

The following question will be asked by a member of the public registered to speak in accordance with Standing Order 16.12.8.

Question 1: from Councillor Arabella Brentnall of Boxted Parish Council who is to ask a question concerning Boxted Bridge. Her question is:

'The Historic and Listed Boxted Bridge spans the River Stour in the heart of the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, an area where, as laid down in the National Planning Policy Framework (2019), "Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty" and which has" the highest status of protection in relation to these issues" including cultural heritage.

Having allowed it to fall into disrepair, Essex Highways intends to demolish it and build a much larger structure with widening of the junction, because a desk-study showed that "fire engines cannot safely manoeuvre the junction". In fact they can and have done since the bridge was built in 1897. In flagrant disregard of their own Options Study of 2018, without public consultation, and in unminuted closed meetings, the decision was taken last summer 2020 by Essex Structures to proceed with Option 7(b) of that report, discounted therein because it "would urbanise a section of the AONB and is likely to require planning permission" which would be" unlikely to be granted".

Questions started to be asked by Boxted Parish Council and other interested parties about perceived irregularities in the decision-making process of Essex Structures. It was always the stated intention of Essex Highways to apply for planning permission for this project, but in January 2021 it was declared by Essex Structures that no planning permission would be sought and that they would exercise their "permitted rights" under the TCPO 2015.

Without a formal planning application, there is no opportunity to object to this scheme for those bodies who have already expressed support in saving this bridge,- namely the Dedham Vale Society, Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Association of Industrial Archaeology, SAVEbritains heritage and Boxted Parish Council. Huge numbers of local residents wish to save this bridge and vehemently oppose any widening of the road because of their concerns for increased traffic speed, and needless destruction of this wonderfully tranquil spot.

Today, nearly 4000 people have signed an online petition to Kevin Bentley to Save Boxted Bridge https://www.change.org/p/essex-county-council-save-our-bridge.

Having regard to the above, in deciding to use their "permitted rights" to demolish this historic bridge and build a modern one nearly twice the width, on an enlarged footprint with junction widening, how will Essex County Council demonstrate its compliance with its statutory duty of regard to conserving and enhancing the beauty of the Dedham Vale AONB under section 85 of the CROW Act 2000?"

Councillor Bentley, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Highways and Infrastructure will respond.

Question 2: from Mr Lee Scott, a resident of Chigwell who is to ask a question concerning budget provisions. His question is:

'Given the scale of the Covid crisis, and the diversion of resources in that direction, what budgetary provision has been made for all the other non Covid strategies of the County Council? Given the impact of Covid on the care sector, what is the Council doing to ensure quality and choice are maintained across the County?'

Councillor Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance and Councillor Spence, Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care will respond.

Question 3: from Mr Anthony McQuiggan, a resident of Galleywood who is to ask a question concerning the Summer Camp Initiative. His question is:

'Following on from the successful summer camp initiative that was launched across Essex last year, can the Cabinet Member for Children and Families confirm whether there are plans to deliver the programme again in summer 2021?'

Councillor McKinlay, Cabinet Member for Children and Families will respond.

Question 4: from Councillor Holly Whitbread of Epping Forest District Council who is to ask a question concerning the provision of Health and Adult Social Care. Her question is:

'Essex County Council's provision of Adult Health and Social Care provides vital services for some of the most vulnerable residents in our community.

What work is being done to ensure that the best possible service is delivered while providing good value to the local taxpayer?'

Councillor Spence, Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care will respond.

Question 5: from Mr Andrew Schrader a resident of Basildon who is to ask a question concerning financial savings. His question is:

'Given the financial pressures on local authorities could the Cabinet Member for Finance please explain how the savings for 22/23 will be achieved?'

Councillor Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance will respond.

Question 6: from Mr Ross Playle, a resident of Witham who is to ask a question concerning flooding. His question is:

'Given all the recent rain, can you reassure me that you will continue to invest in flood prevention measures to help protect residents and people's homes across Essex?'

Councillor Walsh, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Action will respond

Agenda item 7 Organisation Plan and Budget 20221/22

Members are being sent an addendum to the budget report produced following the supply of further information from Harlow DC along with copies of amendments to be moved.

Agenda item 10 Written Questions and Answers

1. By Councillor Beavis of the Cabinet Member for Children and Families

'Could the Cabinet Member please provide a summary of the impact that the Coronavirus pandemic is having on our children? What overall effect has there

been on the prevalence of food hunger, child poverty or children's mental health in Essex?

Specifically, can the Cabinet Member tell me:

- 1) How many children are defined as living in poverty or living with food hunger in Essex?
- What provision was made for free school meals in the February half-term in Essex and
- 3) What is the impact of Essex children receiving free school meals?'

Reply

'Thank you for your question. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis has had a huge impact on the lives of families and children and we know that the pandemic has increased the need for help with food across the country, including here in Essex. As would be expected, the government, both national and local, have responded with additional support. A number of financial support packages, such as increases to Universal Credit and the Winter Covid Support Fund, have been made available to help families during this uncertain period.

Here in Essex, we have used this money in a variety of ways. Members will be aware of the detail that has been provided to them. In both the Christmas and February half term holidays, we provided £15 free school meal vouchers per child, per week to around 35,000 young people who were eligible for benefits based free school meals. In addition to this, we have worked with Active Essex and a team of community organisations in order to provide support for around 2800 families most in need across the county, this includes family food boxes, activity packs, family wellbeing packs, food and nutrition education and a week of online activities.

We have also provided three rounds of funding for community food support groups to bid for money to help with the provision of food parcels for people across the county. The feedback to this has been very positive and has allowed the organisations to increase support at crucial times, such as over Christmas and during the cold weather.

Last Summer, we successfully launched our Holiday Camp Activity Scheme, which provided nearly 25,000 places to families across Essex. The young people who attended them, took part in positive and fun activities and were provided with food and where necessary, additional support and supplies.

These schemes have been extremely successful and have had a positive impact on feeding families and supporting them during the global pandemic crisis.

We are already looking at what we can do to ensure the support that continues post-pandemic is appropriate and sustainable and we have some projects already in the pipeline, which include:

- The Holiday Activity Camp Scheme, which were planned before COVID-19 happened and will continue to run again this year, with a greater offer than in 2020. Food will once again be provided.
- Our Working Families programme is currently tackling the issue of affordable childcare and is gathering evidence to pilot a scheme in Basildon, to support parents in their return to work.
- Our "Closing the Digital Divide" laptop scheme has been distributing thousands of laptops to children right across the county and we are working to ensure that this continues post- Covid.
- In Tendring, where we have a disproportionate number of children come in to care, we have set up a new multi-disciplinary team in Children Services to specifically target those families who require our support and work with them to build their resilience. We hope if this is successful to expand this work to Canvey.
- We are currently updating our child poverty strategy to ensure that Essex is at the forefront in tackling some of the key issues.'

2. By Councillor Smith of the Leader of the Council

'When meetings of the Council resume at County Hall, once it is both safe and lawful to do so, will these meetings be recorded and uploaded to You Tube with a person translating the meeting into sign language?

Also, after the next elections to Essex County Council, can all members be offered a basic course in sign language so that all councillors can talk with their constituents that use this language to communicate?'

Reply

'We meet regularly with community representatives as part of our commitment to diversity, as well as considering comments made by our residents. We are not aware of any demand for this service, perhaps because people can use the 'closed captions' if they want to, but we will of course keep under review.

I will however refer your suggestion to the Member Development Steering Group and I am sure they will consider it at their next meeting on 1 March, as they consider all suggestions for development opportunities for members.'

3. By Councillor Smith of the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

'How much did Redrow pay to Essex County Council for the new primary school for the Westley Green Estate? Has this money been spent or is it sitting in a ringfenced reserve? If it has been spent, which school was this spent on?'

Reply

'I can confirm that ECC has received £1,045,729 (including interest) from Redrow with a further estimated sum of £1,615,844 (plus indexation) that is yet to be received.

This money is to be used as a contribution toward the cost of the new school which is currently anticipated to be in the region of £8.5m. The balance is coming from ECC resources.

The school will be required to solve the need for places in 23/24 academic year, as set out in the Essex School Organisation Service's Ten-Year Plan.'

4. By Councillor Kendall of the Leader of the Council

'The charity 'Crohn's and Colitis UK' is encouraging venues providing accessible toilets to install new signage. This is to help stop the stigma and discrimination towards people with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis and other invisible conditions. There have been instances nationally were such individuals using an accessible toilet have been accused by staff members of being ineligible to use them. The charity signs have two standing figures and a wheelchair user with the wording Accessible Toilet and the logo "Not every disability is visible".

Will the Leader please take action to ensure that all accessible toilets on Essex County Council premises bear these signs?'

Reply

'We are committed to ensuring that everyone in Essex is aware of the many forms of disability. We manage over 350 schools, and they along with our offices and buildings have many accessible toilets. We believe, rather than changing a few signs, that it is through education and national awareness raising that this stigma will be broken. We will continue to train and inform to ensure that our staff and schoolchildren are aware of the important message you wish to convey that not every disability is visible.'

5. By Councillor Kendall of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'There are a number of large highway schemes across Essex that have been waiting many years for the necessary funding to become available for them to be delivered. One such scheme is the solid island roundabout that is needed at the Devil's Head crossroad in my County Division with an estimated cost of £1.2 million. The Local Highways Panel budgets would never be large enough to fund these types of schemes so will the Cabinet Member for Highway's consider creating a separate Highways funding pot which members could bid for? This initiative would

help to ensure that there was a realistic prospect of some of these schemes being delivered in the future.'

Reply

'I thank Councillor Kendall for his question. Where schemes are of an order of cost that is greater than can be accommodated by an individual LHP, they are treated as major schemes where initial development work is undertaken and options assessed so that they might be in a position to attract relevant external funding. Examples of these abound in recent years across the County using Local Growth Funding, Pinch Point, Active Travel Funding, and many others. I'm pleased to say in this regard, ECC have one of the best track records in the country for drawing in these external grants, largely due to the commitment we maintain to early scheme development work. It would not however be financially prudent for ECC to borrow more money to fund additional capital schemes in the current financial climate. In the specific example of Devils Head, as Councillor Kendall is aware, these early scheme development works suggested that a solid island roundabout would carry significant cost and not deliver any better outcomes than the scheme we have recently completed in this location. It would also have significantly more impact on the adjacent Common Land.'

6. By Councillor Blackwell of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'In the recent spell of wet weather many roads on Canvey Island were flooded like many other areas of Essex. Many residents are asking why there were no flood warning signs on the roads.

Would the Cabinet Member consider making "road flooded" signs available to the Local Highway Rangers to allow a quicker roll out of these signs.'

Reply

'I thank Councillor Blackwell for his question. The recent wet weather has put great stress on the road network across the county, causing flooding in areas that may not have experienced it to this extend for some time – and we know climate change will make this extreme weather more likely in the future. I would support requests to each of the Local Highways Panels to invest in new flood warning and 'road flooded' signs that can be deployed by the Local Highways Rangers.'

7. By Councillor Harris of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'Would the Portfolio Holder be able to update members with the revised plan for conversion to LED of all street lights, in Essex and in my area of Colchester -

Maypole (Berechurch and Shrub End areas) as I was told two years ago it was the intention to have all lights converted in three years. It may be that COVID or costs have amended the plan and timescales?'

Reply

'I thank Councillor Harris for his question. The LED program has been slightly delayed during the pandemic, but we are on course to start installation early in the new financial year. This is one of the largest programmes of its type across the country with a value in excess of £20m to be delivered over 3 years and has required a great deal of preparation with securing orders of the LED lights and engaging the necessary levels of resources. Our communications team will work closely with the project delivery team to keep the public informed.'

8. By Councillor Harris of the Leader of the Council

'Can the Leader of the Council update members with any plans for changes in staffing numbers, and any changes in travel arrangements for ECC staff due to working from home.'

Reply

'The Council does not have at present any organisation-wide plans for significant changes to staffing numbers for the coming financial year. Following the inception of the Council's Organisation Design Programme in 2017, the Council has maintained its programme of continuous review of staffing structures, within functions, as part of the annual process of workforce planning to ensure the workforce is the optimum size to deliver Council services.

Whilst the current Government restrictions in relation to the pandemic remain in situ, the Council have implemented a workforce protocol that where employees are able to work remotely they are encouraged to do so and where they are required to have physical presence in a Council building, the social distancing measures are to be adhered to. The Council currently has over 50% of its workforce working at home and therefore they are not travelling to Council offices. All other staff who are required to attend Council offices are asked to adhere to Government guidance in maintaining safe travel.'

9. By Councillor Scordis of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'Can the portfolio holder advise why is there a £986,000 underspend on highway maintenance across Essex?'

Reply

'I thank Councillor Scordis for his question. I can confirm that the £986,000 figure is due to overall costs charged through the year-end closure process being slightly lower than expected due to the impact of COVID-19.

Essex Highways crews are continuing to repair potholes, grit main roads and repair streetlights as usual, to the maximum capability we have. Our crews have had to social distance amongst themselves and avoid close contact with local residents. Another issue crews faced is many more cars parked on roads as people stay at home, which makes arranging clear roads for surfacing difficult for everyone. COVID-19 restrictions caused these issues and we had to postpone some town centre and estate road resurfacing. We will come back to these roads this year to improve them and our workers will continue their hugely-valued work.'

10. By Councillor Scordis of the Leader of the Council

'Can the Leader of the Council confirm the Council's position on Garden Communities, as his Deputy seemed to be opposed to them at Colchester Borough Council?'

Reply

'As you are aware, Essex County Council has been an active supporter of Garden Communities across Essex and partnered with Colchester Borough Council on the North Essex Garden Communities project and continues to do so on the Tendring Colchester Borders project.'

11. By Councillor Young of the Cabinet Member for Customer, Communities, Culture and Corporate

'As we go into the elections, can I ask the Portfolio Holder if the future of Essex libraries will be a safe and secure one?'

Reply

'Yes, Essex County Council has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to deliver a comprehensive and efficient free library service to all who live, work or study in the county and who desire to use it. The Essex Future Library Services Strategy commits to continuing to deliver our core offer, whilst also seeking new ways of working to ensure we achieve the following:

- Place books and reading at the heart of our library service offer
- Provide a modern library service and library spaces, which are fit for both now and the future

- Empower and support communities and groups to shape and manage community-run library services that best meet the needs of the community they serve
- Offer a consistently good customer experience
- Have a comprehensive eLibrary offer and embrace digital technology.

A £3 million investment was made to the Library Service to support the strategy.

The Library Service will be attending Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee on Thursday 25th February to update on the service's success and the investment that has gone into the library service since the commencement of the strategy. This includes investing in a new Library Management System, which will provide access to millions more books. Essex libraries will move to the new system in late spring and it will bring with it a host of innovative and interactive features including:

- a system compatible with all mobile devices
- customers will be able to rate books, post reviews and make recommendations to other customers
- access to a 24/7 renewals line so that items can easily renewed
- an enhanced app with lots of new features, including self service functions
- customer alerts and texts

Other workstream highlights, since the publication of the new library strategy include – working on rebuilding Shenfield library to make it bigger and better for customers, partnership working with Adult Community Learning (ACL) to begin to create a modern, vibrant library in Harlow, new LED lighting in 5 libraries (with up to 20 more to be completed in the next year), upgrade of public computers in all 74 libraries, self-service machines to be upgraded and wifi upgrades in 10 of our busiest libraries.

We are also investing in our people, which has included launching a new apprenticeship scheme and providing them with opportunities to learn new skills, such as how to create engaging online rhyme-time activities.'

12. By Councillor Young of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'West Quay in Wivenhoe has no working street lights, the pavements are falling into disrepair and the safety of the river wall is not known. Essex County Council refused to formally adopt the area five years ago. This leaves residents in Wivenhoe in very unsafe circumstances and at the mercy of an unresponsive developer. This issue of non-adoption causes untold issues to local communities as developers often walk away from their responsibilities, leaving the public at risk as is the case here.

Can I ask the Portfolio Holder if the County's planning officers can work with Districts and Boroughs to collectively seek a solution to areas such as this where adoption has not been possible? We need the collective force of all tiers of Government to get developers to honour their responsibilities to the community.'

Reply

'I thank Councillor Young for her question. Where we are asked to adopt public highway, it does require the developer to have built the infrastructure to the appropriate adoptable standard. Where roads are to remain private the developer will enter into a legal undertaking that the road will remain private in perpetuity and that ECC will not be required to adopt it at a future date. This is in recognition that it is not built to full adoptable standards. It may be that this is the case with the development in Wivenhoe and I would be happy to look into the issue in further detail with Councillor Young.

One solution, if there is an absent developer, is for the community to make good the assets to allow the roads, footpaths, and such to be improved to an adoptable standard which could then be taken on by ECC. Unfortunately, there is no easy solution where you have a private road and the developer has moved on.'

13. By Councillor Henderson of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'Will the Portfolio Holder please advise what is the Council policy with reference to providing bags of salt to Town and Parish Councils, and please clarify who is responsible for gritting the non-priority roads and footpaths across the County.'

Reply

'As noted in the question, ECC runs the Salt Bag Partnership with the parish, town councils and some local county members (in unparished towns). We provide bagged or small quantities of bulk salt to such councils, during the proceeding autumn. These councils develop their own local snow plan, to clear footways and very minor roads during inclement weather.

To support the response to inclement weather we also have a reciprocal arrangement with the district, borough and city councils for snow clearing on busy footways. This was exercised in recent weeks with most district, borough and city councils. Essex County Council also employ the services of local snow clearing contractors to clear snow from some of the minor roads. We also direct them to any roads/areas where drifting occurs and re-occurs, in an attempt to keep our main roads open.

Minor roads are not part of our precautionary salting network and do not receive regular treatment. When inclement weather does occur, we will aim to respond to any emergencies, in coordination with the Emergency services.

There is also a network of over 1000 salt bins around the county that are checked and re-stocked every autumn, for the public to use on local roads and pavements.'

14. By Councillor Abbott of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'The persistently wet weather through the winter of 2020/21 has led to surface flooding in many locations in Essex including in Witham Northern division where a number of sections of road and footway have been repeatedly flooded in recent months. The same places were flooded in the winter of 2019/20.

Does the Cabinet Member agree that Essex County Council needs to do the best it can to keep drainage assets clear and working but also to plan ahead for likely even greater stress on the system given that increasingly wet winters are expected as a result of Climate Change?'

Reply

'I thank Councillor Abbott for his question and concur with him on this issue – we are clearly facing wetter winters and a greater level of flooding in all locations including our highways as a result. In recognition of the recent flooding, ECC has committed to invest a further £326,000 immediately to tackle urgent highways flooding issues and the road repairs necessary because of the damage. More broadly, we are doing a number of things to tackle the issue including investment in additional jetting and gully emptying now across the network to clear drains after the recent flooding and in the longer term through the implementation of SUDS and increases in our enforcement and education activity. Sadly, myths abound when it comes to matters of flooding and drainage and you will have seen our recent Highways Highlights publication majored on increasing some of this basic understanding. We are also increasing seeing badly maintained or lost drainage facilities on private land. Historically these would have dealt with a lot of these flooding issues but development and a growing lack of understanding from landowners mean that more often than not we see the results on our highways, with water and silt pouring off of surrounding land and into our drains and ditch networks compromised. I am committed to tackling this issue, but it will require commitment from everyone to see the improvements we all seek.'

15. By Councillor Abbott of the Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Action

'Bellfield in Witham is a piece of land owned by Essex County Council that many decades ago was used in association with the former Crittall Works, but it is now a

haven for wildlife in an otherwise built-up area.

Local residents living nearby support Bellfield remaining as a green haven. Witham already has a large amount of housing, commercial and other development underway and so instead of trying to build on this land, would Essex County Council consider allowing Witham Town Council to manage it, as they have offered to do?

The site could then be cleaned of litter and the habitat value could be enhanced with more planting. As a further suggestion, Essex County Council could then include this land in the excellent Essex Forest Initiative.'

Reply

'Many thanks for this suggestion. This site unfortunately has some significant challenges in relation to its potential use. Officers are considering the approach by the Town Council, alongside other ways in which the site could provide further value. A portion of the site has been allocated for use by the adjacent school, but the remainder has been declared surplus to ECC's requirements and the priority will be to use the land most effectively. Green solutions, such as the Essex Forest Initiative, will of course be given consideration.'

16. By Councillor Wood of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'With Harwich Port's bid to become a Freeport, and the amount of business this could bring to Tendring, could the Cabinet Member confirm:

- when the A120 will be upgraded to support this development and
- what other assistance Essex County Council will provide to the port in its bid.'

Reply

'I thank Councillor Wood for his question. Freeport East has the potential to become a valuable asset to the local, regional and national economy and a crucial global connection in UK trade. We are confident that the Freeport East vision, centred on the Port of Felixstowe and Harwich International Port, delivers a unique opportunity for local and regional regeneration through the development of a manufacturing, green energy, digital and innovation hub.

We are committed to working with Freeport East, Highways England, Transport East and other local partners to make sure the surface transport investment required to support a successful and sustainable Freeport is developed alongside their wider plans, with a focus on improved strategic connectivity by road and rail. We also wish to ensure that employment opportunities provided by Freeport East are accessible to local people by sustainable forms of transport, supporting our

ambition to level-up coastal communities and decarbonise transport across Essex. We have submitted a letter to the Chancellor and Secretary of State in support of the freeport bid.

With regard to the A120 specifically, Highways England now has a dedicated team in place to progress the upgrade of the A120 from Braintree to the A12, with a preferred route announcement expected later in 2021 or early 2022. We are working closely with Highways England to progress the scheme and unlock an estimated £2.2 billion in gross value through new jobs, businesses, and housing. Upgrading the A120 to a dual carriageway will also dramatically improve journey times and significantly improve road safety for our residents.'

17. By Councillor Mackrory of the Leader of the Council

'The Magistrates Courts Service vacated Shire Hall in 2012 having given at least two years prior notice. The building has therefore remained empty for over eight years. Two years ago, I called in the decision to vary the terms of the lease to exclude community uses but this was unsuccessful. In view of the Essex County Council/Chelmsford City Council discussions on the future uses of this building will the Leader reconsider some community provision within the interior design so that the general public can access and enjoy this iconic landmark building?'

Reply

'The County Council has agreed to extend the contract period under which Aquila must obtain planning consent for an appropriate future use for Shire Hall until August 2021. This continues to represent the best value for money outcome for the taxpayer. If it is not possible to achieve progress in that timescale then other options, such as community use, could be considered and will be discussed with Chelmsford City Council.'

18. By Councillor Mackrory of the Cabinet Member for Customer, Communities, Culture and Corporate

'The Council's Art Collection is currently valued at £4.7m for insurance purposes. I understand the collection is largely in storage and out of public view. What plans are there for a permanent display space so that the people of Essex can view the collection which the Council holds on their behalf?'

Reply

'With regards to the art collection that ECC holds, much of it is stored at the Essex Record Office in controlled conditions. A small number of the best paintings from within the collection, particularly those of the Barrett Lennard family of Belhus, are

hung up on public display at the ERO, in addition to portraits of past Chairmen

which can be viewed at County Hall. We are able to provide access to paintings with notice, and officers have brought paintings down several times for talks in the ERO's lecture theatre, which ensures these get some public visibility. High quality images are also available of many of the paintings on the Art UK website.

There are no plans for a permanent display at present, however, we do have close and productive relations with the education functions of both Chelmsford City Museums and the newly recreated Museums Education Group for Essex, so in the future, once Covid-19 restrictions have passed, there could be the opportunity to mount a display if this was felt at the time to be of interest to Essex residents.'