
ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING 16 October 2012

Answers to Questions (Standing Order 16.11.3)

Agenda Item 13(b)

Written Questions (Standing Order 16.11.3)

1. **By Councillor D Kendall of the Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Environment and Culture.**

‘How much has Essex County Council received as a ‘subsidy’ from when they first started using 0845 telephone numbers up to now?’

Reply

Essex County Council does not earn any rebates or credits for 0845 inbound calls received. This also applies to other ECC inbound numbers. Essex County Council is not charged by its suppliers for any inbound 0845 calls. The caller to the 0845 number would usually pay between 3 to 5 pence per minute. However, some residential and mobile packages offer free calls to these numbers.

2. **By Councillor B Aspinell of the Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Environment and Culture.**

‘Following the Government’s requirement to list heritage assets, and recent reports in the press regarding Essex County Council’s ownership of valuable artwork and maps, estimated some years ago at approximately £14.3 million, would the Cabinet Member please advise:

- When the artwork was last valued?
- Is it now prudent to have another valuation?
- Should a cross party committee be convened to discuss the possible exhibiting, storage and, where appropriate, disposal of some works of art?’

Reply

The heritage assets on the register compiled by Finance for the Statement of Accounts comprise the following areas:

- 1) The archive collection at the Essex Record Office which forms the largest part of the £14.3m at £9.3m. This valuation is purely for insurance purposes and has regard to conservation and repair in case of a disaster, as the documents themselves are irreplaceable if lost.
- 2) Paintings in the Barrett-Lennard collection, which are part of the ERO collection but only physically came to us in 2009 although donated by the family in 1974. The valuation for these is as provided by the family to us in 2009.
- 3) Historic paintings in the core collection at County Hall, Shire Hall and Maynetrees. These were last valued in 2010.
- 4) Historic buildings such as mills and Jaywick Martello Tower. As with the archive collection, valuations are for insurance purposes and relate to potential repair costs in the event of damage by storm, fire etc. Evidence from elsewhere suggests that the sale values of these premises could be much lower.

Officers are currently drafting a policy to provide a framework to manage the collection effectively, which includes a periodic review by a cross-party working group. This builds on a piece of work undertaken by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman last year.

3. By Councillor M Fisher of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation

‘Would it be better use of resources if there were fewer inspections to prioritise highways work and more crews going round area by area and actually fixing the potholes properly? It is ludicrous to have two-thirds of the potholes in one street mended and leaving the remainder because they do not (at that point) meet the criterion for being filled.

Would the portfolio holder please tell me how many members of staff are manning Enquiries and how many pothole inspectors there are?’

Reply

Highways inspectors perform a vital function in enabling Essex County Council to fulfill its statutory duty as the Highways Authority. I would be happy for Cllr Fisher to spend a day with them and if she has any subsequent constructive suggestions on how they could more efficiently and effectively deliver their service I would be happy to review them.

With regards to her other questions:

If Councillor Fisher could provide me with examples of where and when potholes have been left when others in the same street have been repaired I will be able to provide her with a response.

If Councillor Fisher could clarify what she means by "Enquiries" I will also be able to give her a response to her question.

4. **By Councillor D Kendall of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation**

'Brentwood's Local Highways Panel budget for potential schemes in 2012 is £449,876, which is the third lowest allocation in Essex. This low figure means it is impossible for us to fund the two major junction improvements that are needed in Brentwood at the Devil's Head crossroads in Warley and at Sandpit Lane / Ongar Road in Pilgrims Hatch, as their projected cost of £1,500,000 is well over our allocation. Brentwood residents have been told that the County has no money available to pay for these road safety schemes, but at the same time they have seen £11 million miraculously appear from nowhere for the emergency pothole repair programme. Would the Cabinet Member tell me:

- (1) How many personal injury accidents have to take place at these dangerous junctions before the County Council allocates the funding to improve them?
- (2) Which budget was used to pay for the £11 million pothole repair programme?
- (3) Did the £11 million found for pothole repairs mean that the budget allocated to local Highway Panels across Essex for locally determined schemes was reduced?'

Reply

1. The prioritisation of local schemes by Members is an important function of Local Highways Panels (LHPs) and where a scheme is too large to deliver in a single year, LHPs have the option of spreading the cost of these over more than one year.
2. The £11m for highways repairs was allocated following unprecedented weather extremes and as a result of ECC listening and responding to residents' genuine concerns. The £11 million was made up of the following:
 - £2m revenue from the highways maintenance reserve
 - £1m from the general reserve
 - £8m capital from unsupported borrowing.
3. No.

5. By Councillor T Higgins of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation

'Whilst fully supporting initiatives for safer driving, would the Cabinet Member agree with me that the positioning of 'No Excuse for Poor Driving' [and similar] signs, should not distract or obstruct drivers' vision?

There seems to me to be a plethora of street clutter – shouldn't signs be consolidated where possible?

Would the Cabinet Member let me know the cost of putting up such a sign?'

Reply

Positioning and numbers of signs in a particular location is governed by the Council's policies and/or DFT guidelines. If Councillor Higgins can provide me with some examples of her concerns I will investigate them and get back to her with a response.

The cost of installing a no excuse sign on two supporting poles is approximately £480.

6. By Councillor J Whitehouse of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation

‘How many times in the past two and a half years [April 2010-April 2011 and April 2011-September 2012] have contractors had to return to redo a highways job because it was not done satisfactorily or correctly the first time? What was the shortest, longest and median time for this second repair to be done? How many of these unsatisfactory repairs were reported? ’

Reply

If Cllr Whitehouse could clarify what she means by a “Highways Job” then I will be happy to respond to her question.

7. By Councillor M Fisher of the Cabinet Member for Education, Lifelong Learning & the 2012 Games.

‘It has come to my attention that a survey on attitudes to the Olympic Legacy was conducted on behalf of ECC after the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games were finished.

The survey was a random one, with no socio-economic questions, i.e. age of resident, any children, working, etc. The questions that were asked were unnecessarily repetitive.

I would like to ask who commissioned this survey and was he/she aware of the sampling method, i.e. random? A better method is to take every 10th name on the electoral register to interview and although this is more expensive than random surveys, the results would have been better. I wonder what effect the cost of this survey will have on the portfolio holder’s budget.

Would that money not have been better spent giving grants to sports clubs, many of which are having to close, or for the hire of sports halls and playing fields?’

Reply

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games were promoted as the greatest and biggest show on earth and the County of Essex was privileged to be named Host County to the Olympic Mountain Bike venue and have 17 communities throughout the County welcome the Olympic Torch Relay.

As we now move into the legacy phase of the Games, we are looking to use the excitement of the games to inspire the next generation of athletes in the County, as well as encourage sports participation across all ages. The survey referred to was essential in assisting us in evaluating the impact the Games and associated activity had on the residents of Essex. The results will allow us to learn from our past efforts and ensure our future activity is based on tried and tested methods.

Firstly to correct inaccuracies in the detail of the question, the survey had 26 questions of which, nine were socio-economic questions including: resident's age, number of dependents, working status and ethnic background. The method suggested by Cllr Fisher would have been both more expensive and less valuable for the purposes required. It would have been possible to use other methods to complete the survey, including a random sampling approach based on the electoral register. However, as phone numbers are not available from the electoral register, this would have required a postal survey. A postal survey would have been a more expensive option and is likely to have under-represented certain demographic groups, particularly younger residents, males and those from BME backgrounds.

The survey was commissioned by Essex County Council's communication team with my approval. A telephone survey was identified as the most appropriate methodology to deliver a representative sample of residents from across the County within the available budget. It meant that we could interview residents from a wide geographical area and the profile of participating respondents could be controlled via the use of quotas set on recruitment for key demographics. Crucially, the use of a quota sample allows all waves of the research to have a similar demographic profile, something which is essential when comparing findings year-on-year. To ensure that respondents were selected at random, Random Digit Dialling was used to provide the sample of contact numbers to call.

The 2012 team are responsible for a wealth of work inspiring people to make sport happen at the local level, embedding the Olympic and Paralympic values in grassroots sport. Some examples include:

- Sport Makers - recruiting, training and deploying the next generation of sports volunteers to organise and lead grassroots sporting activities, building on the legacy of the Essex Ambassadors programme.
- Club Leaders programme - provides free business skills, training and support to individuals running community sport across the County.

- Sportivate - Initiative which provides opportunities for teenagers and young adults to receive six weeks of coaching in the sport of their choice, guiding them into regular participation in clubs and community groups across the County.

They survey was not at the expense of this work but rather to strengthen and direct future efforts.

8. By Councillor J Deakin of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Planning.

‘As highlighted by some of my recent casework, I was astonished to find that the public are unable to access Essex County Council Planning Applications on the Council’s own website in order to view plans in detail, read attached reports, and see comments submitted.

It appears that the majority of other County Councils in England already have this facility. When will this public service be available to the residents of Essex?’

Reply

Thank you for your question.

At present summaries of planning applications are available online; however, we have been working hard to enable full public access to planning applications on-line and we hope to be able to provide this service within the next few months.

9. By Councillor T Higgins of the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services.

‘In view of the fact that from 2013 nursery places are to be available for 2 year olds who meet the “free school meal” criteria, would the Portfolio Holder tell me how Essex is planning to cater for these children? Is further accommodation to be built at current nurseries, many of which already have waiting lists, or are they to be looked after in different / new accommodation?’

The fact that there is an underspend in this budget heading does not, I think, indicate that there is no demand for nursery places, but merely that parents would prefer places in Nursery departments of Infant Schools, not the provision in the private sector, hence the waiting list.

Would the Portfolio Holder please tell me the number of children

currently on the waiting lists of ECC nursery classes?’

Reply

Work is already underway within ECC to meet this target by working with current early years provision or in some cases extending or creating new places. The DfE has commissioned two organisations to support LAs nationally to work on this Achieving Two Year Old Initiative. ECC has been allocated, along with other east region LAs, an advisor working for Mott McDonald to provide support and advice. A bespoke package of support is currently being agreed for ECC. An internal project team has been created who have developed and will lead a structured plan for the implementation of this initiative.

This plan will include:

- working with childminders who have not previously been approved to accept free entitlement funding. There will be a thorough quality assurance process undertaken on the environment and ability of childminder to provide this based on a good or outstanding Ofsted and ‘green’ ECC rating.
- reviewing the current funding rate to ensure it is financially viable for the most outstanding early years provision to provide high quality places for 2 year olds which in turn leads onto quality 3 and 4 year old free entitlement places and therefore contributing to an improved educational outcome at the end of the early years foundation stage
- working with maintained nurseries to look at if there is space that can be developed into an appropriate environment for 2 year olds and that Ofsted requirements can be met
- using the capital that has been identified (final ECC allocation to be confirmed but £100m nationally) to remodel spaces such as additional toilets and small internal works to create separate spaces. The capital allocation will not give scope to allow for new builds.

To clarify the ECC County Childcare Sufficiency Collection gathers data on occupancy levels. Overall the returns for June 2012 do not show maintained nurseries across Essex with having waiting lists for three and four year olds, although a few are shown at 100% occupancy . There will not currently be waiting lists for two year olds as places are approved as referrals are received and only 2 school sites are offering two year old funding. The September 2012 Childcare Sufficiency Collection is currently being finalised.

10. By Councillor M Mackrory of The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Transformation Programme.

'In answer to my question at the October 2011 Council, I was told by the [then] Cabinet Member that proposals were being drawn up for the future use of the Shire Hall.

One year on, will the Cabinet Member update me on what progress has been made, and will he ensure that serious consideration be given for the display of public art?'

Reply

The reply is from The Leader at his request;

The public consultation and expressions of interest will be launched shortly; this consultation will allow proposals to be submitted to us for review.

I wish to make it clear though that all bids will be judged against the following criteria:

- i. Continued ownership of Shire Hall by ECC, who will maintain a role in both setting the strategy for proposed future use, and retaining an interest in the operation of the building;
- ii. Achieving demonstrable value for money and financial sustainability;
- iii. A continuation of public access to the building with a sense of community ownership.

Following my discussions with Cllr Roy Whitehead of Chelmsford City Council, a Reference Group was established to identify future uses for Shire Hall. It has representatives from a number of societal, heritage and community groups, and is chaired by Dick Madden. So far it has met four times.

Later this year we are planning an open day for Shire Hall, and I would encourage all to visit this historic building and see the site for themselves.

Cllr Mackrory's suggestion of Shire Hall becoming an art gallery is of course one proposal for the building but it must however be financially sustainable.

11. By M Mackrory of The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Transformation Programme.

‘Further to the Freedom of Information request, reference ECC 0124611– 12 dated 27 September 2012, would the Cabinet Member state what action has been taken to recover the 90 reported lost or stolen mobile phones during the period March 2011- August 2012?’

Reply

The County Council takes all matters of lost or stolen phones seriously, and we have robust policies in place to manage these situations.

In the event that a device is stolen, the phone holder must inform the police, keep a note of the incident or Crime reference number and notify Information Services via the Essex Service Desk.

Once a phone or device is reported as lost, the telephone numbers are cancelled immediately and no further calls can be made from the device. Where possible the devices are remotely wiped of all information.

Depending on the reason for the loss of the phone, the line manager of the person concerned, Information Services or Risk Management Consultancy Services will investigate and disciplinary action will be taken if there is good reason for it.

The Essex Service Desk, which deals with these incidents, is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

ECC do not claim on the insurance for these devices as the excess is £500 per request.

12. By Councillor J Whitehouse of the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care.

‘The changeover of providers of Meals on Wheels to Sodexo was poor and caused anxiety to many residents, particularly those with diabetic conditions, and their families. It also brought adverse publicity to the County Council.

What sanctions are being applied to Sodexo, and what compensation or refund is being offered to those whose meals were late?’

Are you satisfied with the Meals on Wheels service delivery now? Are all the meals being delivered in the specified time band?’

Reply

Over the course of the last two weeks Essex County Council staff have worked closely with the new Meals on Wheels provider Sodexo to improve delivery times. There has been a significant improvement; 99% of the meals are now being delivered on time and all meals are being delivered by 2.15pm. Sodexo are committed to ensuring this performance improves to 100%.

As part of the Essex County Council meals on wheels contract Sodexo are required to adhere to the terms and conditions of the contract. Due to the late deliveries these requirements have not been met; Essex County Council staff will therefore be working with Sodexo as part of the formal performance monitoring process to ensure that the contractual requirements are met.

Sodexo will be applying a full refund and a further gratuity to the affected service users whose meals were delivered late as an apology for the disruption to their service.

Cllr Aldridge will be visiting the meal delivery sites in due course and will be joining a driver on their round; meal tastings will also be set up to ensure the quality of the meals is being maintained.