

**WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

The following questions listed on pages 53 – 55 of the agenda have been received from Councillors and will be taken as read along with the written answer detailed below.

**(a) Councillor Kitcat**

“What progress has been made on the purchase and implementation of the transport model?”

**Reply from Councillor G Theobald, Cabinet Member for Environment.**

“Thank you for your two questions about the transport model. I will answer them together as they are connected.

The development of a new transport model, which is a very complex forecasting, computer-based, tool is a key priority of this Administration so that the council can accurately map and design our transport choices across the city. This will help us to look at the transport needs of the city as a whole rather than in isolated areas. The information we will need to collect will help us better understand how and why people move around the city at the moment and will allow us to test the potential effects of schemes such as junction improvements or road closures for special events. We can also use it to predict what will happen in the future more accurately therefore helping us to select the best option and justify any investment we make and enable us to assess the impacts of new developments or policies.

We are currently at one of the most important stages, which involves checking and updating the information which will be used to ‘build’ the model. More surveys will be needed later in the year to ensure that the model is fully up to date, will be robust, and provide us with accurate results. The main computer software has already been purchased.

We expect the model will be completed and available to be used by the end of this financial year.

In response to your second question; the transport model is a priority and the estimated cost of producing it remains in line with the budget allocation.”

**(b) Councillor Kitcat**

“What if any opportunities does the Administration have to reduce the budgeted amounts allocated for spending on the transport model and will they be making use of such opportunities?”

**Reply from Councillor G Theobald, Cabinet Member for Environment.**

“Thank you for your two questions about the transport model. I will answer them together as they are connected.

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**(c) Councillor Kitcat**

“Can the Cabinet Member for Environment provide an update on recycling and composting rates in the city and the rate of change in recycling and composting rates over previous years?”

**Reply from Councillor G Theobald, Cabinet Member for Environment.**

“Between 2005/06 and 2008/09 recycling rates have increased from 24.5% to 29.5%.

However, we are in a position where we will need to adjust our figures in the future because the Environment Agency has decided that re-using soil and hardcore to cap landfill sites is not ‘re-use’ but waste.

This common sense approach had been used across the country for many years.

Unfortunately, this means that ‘virgin’ materials may have to be used instead at landfills as we, with councils in East Sussex will need to find another market for our soil and hardcore - if it exists.”

**(d) Councillor Kitcat**

“Can the Cabinet Member for Environment provide a breakdown of the replacement rate for communal bins due to breakage, damage and maintenance and what this costs?”

**Reply from Councillor G Theobald, Cabinet Member for Environment.**

“We have about 700 communal bins and the original bins have been on site for over 5 years and this includes the communal bins on the seafront.

These seafront bins were looking scruffy due to salt and corrosion and along with some bins in the city centre, which were damaged, they were refurbished last year at a cost of £350 per bin.

The smaller lids on the newer version of the communal bins are being replaced, and this cost is being met by the manufacturer.

Last year approximately £19000 was spent on repairing and refurbishing bins, this is in line with our budget.”

**(e) Councillor Kitcat**

“Can the Cabinet Member for Finance outline when the Administration propose to implement the Government's requirement to publish all council spending, contracts and tender documents over £500 and under what licence the data will be published?”

**Reply from Councillor Young, Cabinet Member for Finance.**

“The Administration has two options available to it with regards to publishing all council spend over £500. The first would be to generate a report from our creditor system which would consist of raw spend data extracted from invoices paid. We are in a position to do this now subject to ensuring that the appropriate data protection issues are addressed (for example – the publication of individual carer details that currently appear on the system). However, raw data is sometimes difficult to interpret into meaningful information and the Administration want to ensure that the public have information that is easy to understand and means something to them. Therefore we are currently in discussions with an existing supplier who can provide an innovative web-based solution which has been designed to improve the accessibility and relevance of data. This solution will present the information in a user friendly way and data will also be categorised, therefore providing the public with information that will be useful to them such as spend per full time employee, spend with small and medium sized enterprises, spend relative to the number of households, working population, persons of pensionable age and number of children that make up the resident population. There is also the facility to make comparison between authorities of differing sizes. This solution would be accessed via the Council's website and will be free to the public. It is being offered to the Council at no

cost. I am discussing the options with officers and hope to start publication shortly.

The publishing of tenders and contracts over £500 is much more complex however. We have a number of contract registers across the council and therefore it is a large resource intensive task to bring these together and identify the full list of documentation over this low level of spend. The need to have a comprehensive central repository of tender and contracts documentation has already been identified and the sourcing of this forms part of the Procurement work stream under the VFM project.”

**(f) Councillor Kitcat**

“Can the Cabinet Member for Central Services provide a progress report on when the council's website will receive its long overdue upgrade, and if it is still intended to be built on Microsoft software?”

**Reply from Councillor Alford, Cabinet Member for Central Services.**

“It is worth noting that the existing website works well given existing demands, is fully and efficiently supported and it is currently being considered alongside other options for future upgrades in terms of functionality.

Decisions around the technology required (including the question raised around Microsoft) will be made after consideration of residents’ needs and service area requirements.

Another consideration is the consolidation of systems to drive down costs. This is currently being driven through the Value for Money programme, which has already put in place governance processes to ensure good return on investment.

The work being undertaken by the Improving Customer Experience programme is essential to the overall website development. Officers working on the project are looking more broadly at how the website is used and how the services it offers can be improved.

Officers have already identified specific needs in a number of demographic groups across the city. These include increasing the number of council services that residents can self serve and delivering information to residents in a way that is personalised to their needs and local area.

Any future development will focus on delivering information and council services in a way that residents want. We know from our research that a large proportion of residents have little contact with the council but when they do, they want it to be fast, efficient and at their convenience. For example, giving residents the option to register on-line for the electoral roll made it easier for many people, increasing the numbers registering and decreasing paperwork and administration. This ultimately had the effect of reducing unnecessary contact, enabling frontline services to focus on answering other queries.

Staff will ask the public what they think of the website experience and test the site to prioritise areas for improvement. It has been decided that improvements will initially be aimed at a core outcome for the urban environment, with services driving the change.

In September we will bring together the business cases for web transactions and all customer feedback. From this a new approach to delivering web services will be formed.”

**(g) Councillor Fryer**

“I have received 3 complaints in as many months from constituents who have felt that the council has acted inappropriately in employing bailiffs and taking legal action without warning to recover council tax which has resulted in both the council and the resident paying large sums of money unnecessarily. In one case this is despite the fact that the resident had not owned or lived at the property in question for over ten years and had contacted the Council tax department to tell them this. In another case the resident was very vulnerable and it was clear from payment history that the resident made a strong effort to meet most payments in time.

1. How many cases are there of residents of Brighton & Hove a) being threatened by bailiffs b) having legal action taken against them?
2. How much money has been spent on legal action and employing bailiffs?
3. In these cases, what efforts were made by the council first to engage with the resident to resolve the situation first?”

**Reply from Councillor Alford, Cabinet Member for Central Services.**

“In December 2009 the Overview & Scrutiny Commission complimented a report on Council Tax Collection Policy, in particular the emphasis on early intervention to prevent arrears and the measures for dealing with vulnerability. Further to this report I am pleased to say that there is further evidence of this approach being effective with a 35% drop in the number of reminders issued compared to the same time last year but with improved collection.

The report also outlined the sequence of recovery steps. No resident of this city receives a visit from a bailiff without first being sent a minimum of four letters. All of these letters encourage customers to contact us so we can offer a range of helpful options, including extended payment plans, advice on claiming council tax benefit and signposting to independent debt advice.

Unfortunately, some either fail to contact us or fail to maintain an agreed payment arrangement. Last year, the Council obtained 13,000 court orders. Approximately 6,000 were passed to bailiffs for further action. In terms of cost, legal action and the use of bailiffs is self-funding, as costs are added to customers accounts when recovery action becomes necessary. If we become aware of exceptional circumstances, or we have made a mistake, the costs will be removed.

I understand that the Revenues & Benefit Service have or will be responding to you regarding the individual cases you mention and I would always encourage any Councillor with a similar query to contact Graham Bourne and his team.”

**(h) Councillor Elgood**

“What progress is being made to implement the requirement by the coalition government to publish all items of spending over £500 and to publish all tender documents in full?”

**Reply from Councillor Young, Cabinet Member for Finance.**

“The Administration has two options available to it with regards to publishing all council spend over £500. The first would be to generate a report from our creditor system which would consist of raw spend data extracted from invoices paid. We are in a position to do this now subject to ensuring that the appropriate data protection issues are addressed (for example – the publication of individual carer details that currently appear on the system). However, raw data is sometimes difficult to interpret into meaningful information and the Administration want to ensure that the public have information that is easy to understand and means something to them. Therefore we are currently in discussions with an existing supplier who can provide an innovative web-based solution which has been designed to improve the accessibility and relevance of data. This solution will present the information in a user friendly way and data will also be categorised, therefore providing the public with information that will be useful to them such as spend per full time employee, spend with small and medium sized enterprises, spend relative to the number of households, working population, persons of pensionable age and number of children that make up the resident population. There is also the facility to make comparison between authorities of differing sizes. This solution would be accessed via the Council’s website and will be free to the public. It is being offered to the Council at no cost. I am discussing the options with officers and hope to start publication shortly.

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**(i) Councillor Duncan**

“Concerns have been raised with me that some associations representing tenants and residents living in some council housing blocks in the Queen’s Park ward have not been publicising forthcoming meetings and publishing agendas

and minutes in accordance with their constitutional requirements. Could the administration explain:

- (a) What steps it takes to ensure that all such associations do so?
- (b) Whether or not any funding from the council is dependant on associations acting in accordance with an agreed constitution?
- (c) Whether or not the council is aware of any problems in this regard, either generally or in relation to any particular association(s)?"

**Reply from Councillor Caulfield, Cabinet Member for Housing.**

“(a) All associations are voluntary organisations, independent of the Council. Each has its own constitution agreed by the members but within the guidelines of a model constitution. This provides the basis for their recognition by the Council. Meetings should be publicised but precise arrangements may differ between associations. Some might put notices through every letterbox in the ‘Area of Benefit’, some might put publicity on a notice board, and others might use a newsletter. There is not a requirement to publish agendas or minutes but it is considered good practice to do so. Community Participation Officers encourage associations to involve as many individuals as possible in their work.

There is an obligation in the constitution of all associations to give notice of the Annual General Meeting (AGM) sufficiently far in advance to enable as many as possible to attend. Notice periods are usually at least 14 days.

- (b) Housing Revenue Account funding of associations is dependent on them providing minutes from their AGM and a set of independently examined accounts that have been approved by vote at their AGM. The Council also requires that grant funding is spent in accordance with the budget applied for.
- (c) In the Kemp Town area, we are aware of a number of conflicts between and within some associations, with some disputes going back twenty years. Records are held of these conflicts, and although efforts to introduce independent mediation have not always been successful we will continue to work with all parties for a resolution.

If Councillor Duncan would like a more specific response regarding a particular association, I am happy to receive details for further investigation.”

