



EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Council Meeting 26th September 2022

1. Question received from Councillor D Florence-Jukes and response by Deputy Leader Councillor Bernard Peters

What assurances can the Deputy Leader give Members that the staffing levels within the Revenue and Benefits Team are currently sufficient to meet any increase in service demand of additional benefit claimants coming forward for assistance as a consequence of the growing cost of living crisis. Added to that is the possibility of staff absences through sickness due to the predicted escalation of COVID-19 cases in the autumn and winter months (World Health Organisation predictions). Will the Deputy Leader please advise Members if there are any contingency plans in place, such as employing temporary staff to address any demands for service increase or staff absences, to thereby ensure all applications are dealt with expeditiously and that residents will not suffer additional hardship because of lack of available staff to deal with claims.

Response

As demonstrated during the last two years the Revenues, Benefits and Customer Contacts teams have been very adaptable to the demands placed on the service from the Covid-19 pandemic and from other national situations. This has been a combination of an unprecedented amount of grants that needed to be administered, the Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme and the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. These have been successfully managed and delivered without an adverse impact on service delivery as can be verified by the quarterly Corporate Plan performance outturn.

With the reference to additional benefit claimants as the Councillor is aware new claimants for Housing Benefits (unless they are pensioners or in supported accommodation) are not administered by the Council but are done through the DWP Universal Credit system. Whilst it is true that we have seen an increase in Council Tax Reduction and Pensioner claimants during the period April-August, I am pleased to report that service delivery has not been impacted.

Finally, as the Councillor is aware, the teams are multi-skilled and so workloads can be moved within the section. To complement this there is also the use of remote working for processing which is utilised when demand is forecast to be high so disruption to front-line service delivery is minimised and furthermore when the need arises temporary staff on short term contracts can be and are utilised.

2. Question received from Councillor R G W Grosvenor and response by Deputy Leader Councillor Ray Faulkner

Could the council advise what contingency plans it has in place as we move into autumn / winter to deal with a spike in covid rates to ensure that services are continued to be provided to residents, especially refuse collection services.

Response

The Council has business continuity plans for all its services and as Councillors are well aware over the last two and a half years, since the onset of the Covid pandemic, there has been limited disruption to service delivery. Updates have been provided in the regular Covid Reports which come through to all the political groups and then Cabinet as well as through the Member Briefings.

As Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change, I have worked closely with the Waste Management team during the last three years. I have also met and spoken with many of the staff who carry out this essential service. I have been impressed in their enthusiasm and the pride they take in their work. Our residents have a team dedicated to ensuring the essential service of waste collection is carried out on schedule for them.

For waste collection, there is a generic contingency plan in place to deal with disruptions to service provision which includes details for prioritising essential services, the allocation of resources, fuel, transition of the workforce to key areas and communication with residents/the media.

As Council is aware where there have been significant staff shortages as a result of Covid then the attention is given to ensuring the statutory waste collections are maintained. This has resulted in the suspension of garden waste collections on a very small number of occasions as listed below:

- 23 March 2020 – 4 weeks – due to Covid absences
- 29 July 2021 – 3 days – due to national driver shortage and Covid absences
- 13 Jan 2022 – 2 days – due to Covid absences

For completeness I have also listed two occurrences which were not Covid related:

- 25 Jan 2022 – 2 days – all services cancelled due to snow/severe weather
- 19 September – state funeral suspended all services, caught up on Sat 24th (except garden waste)

In terms of the Environment workforce and in response to the Covid pandemic and a national shortage in HGV drivers, we introduced a market forces supplement as part of our recruitment and retention package for HGV drivers. We have also added two



further supernumerary positions on the establishment list, bringing the total to four, to create a larger 'pool' of permanent drivers to cover absences.

Of course, management will continue to follow HR policies for dealing with isolation and staff absences relating to Covid and where there are short-term work-force capacity issues, there is a Council-wide contract in place with Comensura for the provision of agency staff. In addition, when any permanent vacancies arise, replacements are proactively sought.

To conclude, I have the utmost confidence in all of our team members and am positive we can continue to operate our statutory services should another Covid spike hit us this Autumn/Winter.

3. Question received from Councillor R G W Grosvenor and response by Deputy Leader Councillor Mrs Bev Ashcroft

I submit the following questions for the next full council meeting on September 26th

1. In the current energy crisis I note that some councils are suspending the installation and operation of Town Centre Christmas lights this year. Has ESBC also considered suspending the operation of town centre Christmas lights?

2. Could you advise what is the additional energy cost to ESBC of operating Christmas lights.

Response

1. The Council considers that the lead up to Christmas is one where visits to the town centre should be encouraged, not only to generate a sense of wellbeing and seasonal 'goodwill' but also to support our retailers as an attraction to the town centre through generating additional footfall and business. Additional lights are being considered for New Street and Union Street and this development has been met with a very positive response from the retail businesses there.

2. The energy cost relating to the Christmas lights has, over the past three years, averaged £645.

4. Question received from Councillor R G W Grosvenor and response by the Leader Councillor G Allen

It has been over a year since the last consultation into the Utttoxeter masterplan ended could the council advise.

1. Did the council receive any input from the MP into that consultation
2. How is it being implemented given it's been a year?
3. Does the council, in its plan, still wish to remove the bus station, consider building on the maltings car park or consider closing public toilets due to lack of use?

Response

1. Yes

2. As per the Corporate Plan, the Council is working to progress the acquisition of land at the Maltings, a key site identified within the Masterplan. We are also working with Staffordshire County Council on understanding car park and bus requirements for the town. The Corporate Plan goes on to say that further consultation will be conducted by March on proposals for the Maltings. The Corporate Plan and MTFs also commit the Council to working with partners to realise the Sports Hub

3. This question is wrong and misleading.

The Masterplan does not propose the closure of the public toilets and since the end of Cllr Grosvenor's administration in May 2019 this Council has never considered doing so.

Neither has the Council ever had any intentions of closing or removing the bus station from the Town Centre, it is my desire to see the bus facilities enhanced and moved closer to the High Street within the Maltings site.

With regards to building on the current malting's car park, it is evident from recent high quality developments in Utttoxeter such as Carters Square that new homes is an important part of town centre regeneration. As stated numerous times both verbally and in formal press releases my intention is to see an appropriate mix of uses brought to the site supported by the aspirations of the residents and of course it is necessary to ensure there will be sufficient parking. This mix of uses will help unlock an important area of the town centre breathing new life into the High Street after such a long period of no action or help from anywhere.

5. Questions received from Councillor D Florence-Jukes and response by the Leader - Councillor George Allen

Question 1

Members of this Council agreed by vote to the sale of land in its possession, situated at the former Bargates site, High Street, Burton upon Trent, DE14 1LJ on the understanding that as soon as planning permission was granted to the developer the Council would receive the agreed sum of monies as set out in the contract. Planning permission pertaining to that land, application number P/2020/01454 - was indeed granted to Jessup at the Planning Committee meeting on 28th September 2021.

Will the Leader of the Council update Members regarding the following;

- a) What was the agreed sum of money to be paid to ESBC on approval of the planning application?
- b) has Jessup paid the Council the agreed sum of money?
- c) If no monies have been paid what action is being taken for potential breach of contract?
- d) a year on from being granted planning permission, the site remains untouched. What is causing the delay in the commencement of building works?

Response

The Planning Committee resolved to grant the permission with a Grampian Condition¹ whereby the applicant was required to enter into a unilateral undertaking with Staffordshire County Council and East Staffordshire Borough Council prior to undertaking development. As such, the permission is not yet "live" and the application is not yet approved. If you check the application number against the Council's online application platform, you will see that it is marked as "Registered" and not "Approved".

With that in mind:

- a) This information remains commercially sensitive
- b) No, because the application is not yet approved
- c) There is no breach of contract
- d) The commencement of a unilateral undertaking by the developer with SCC and ESBC, until this is completed the planning permission has not been granted

¹ A Grampian Condition is a planning condition attached to a decision notice that prevents the start of a development until off-site works have been completed on land not controlled by the applicant.

Question 2

Members of this Council agreed by vote to the purchase of land currently in possession of Molson Coors situated in High Street Burton upon Trent, as part of the Towns Deal funding. It has recently come to light that Molson Coors intend to relocate offices and staff formally housed in those buildings to the National Brewery Centre which will result in the devastating closure of an historic and much loved local and national asset. Members of this Council were not made aware of this information prior to the vote,

Will the Leader of the Council state when he, Members of his Cabinet (past and present), and Officers from ESBC became aware of Molson Coors intention to relocate offices and staff to the National Brewery Centre and further, state if they became aware of the plans during negotiations with Molson Coors.

Response

Members of the Council agreed to the principle of the final decision to purchase the High Street Campus being delegated to the Leader of the Council and Deputy Leader for Finance, in consultation with the Leader of the Opposition, Leader of the Independent Alliance and the Chief Executive. At the time of that decision, nobody at the Council was aware of the possible relocation to the National Brewery Centre and closure of the NBC operation.

Both myself and Senior Officers became aware of the decision to close the National Brewery Centre on Tuesday 6th September, six days before it became public knowledge. At the time, we were asked by Molson Coors to keep the information confidential until such time that Planning Solutions Limited had undertaken meetings with those affected by the decision. For a full timeline breakdown, please refer to the private and confidential informative that was issued in the Member Briefing on Friday 23rd September.

