

(6) MEMBER QUESTIONS

Questions have been submitted, and responses provided, as follows:-

(1) From Councillor Jenny Forde to Councillor Mark F Annett, Leader of the Council

'The Conservative administration at this Council made a decision back in 2016 to include child maintenance payments as income when calculating council tax support.

Can the cabinet member not see how grossly unfair this decision was, and that it adversely affects single mothers in particular?

Why did the Conservative administration decide to include child maintenance as 'income' when calculating Council tax support, particularly when many other councils don't do so?'

Response from Councillor Annett

First of all, may I put the record straight. The December 2016 decision in relation to the Council Tax Support Scheme was taken by the Council, **not** the Cabinet. The Minutes of the Meeting show that 27 of the 28 Members present at that Council Meeting voted in favour of the overall scheme, and one Member abstained - none of those present actually voted against. So this was clearly not a decision of the Conservative administration.

I would remind you that, in agreeing the Scheme, Members had regard to the responses received to a bespoke consultation carried out. That consultation included a specific question seeking comments as to whether child maintenance should be included when calculating a person's income, and the majority of responses supported such an approach.

I would also point out that child maintenance is disregarded as income for Universal Credit claims. In addition, when agreeing the scheme back in 2016, it was also agreed to establish a Council Tax Hardship Fund, to provide additional support for those who could demonstrate financial hardship and an inability to meet even the minimum Council Tax payments.

Each council has its own scheme, with local variances to meet local circumstances. I am aware that Cheltenham BC is currently consulting on a new scheme, and that such consultation seeks feedback on whether or not to include child maintenance payments as income.

Looking ahead, our current scheme is also in the process of being reviewed, and a consultation will soon take place on possible elements of a scheme for 2019 onwards. Our consultation will seek current views on the subject of child maintenance payments. A report on a proposed scheme, together with the consultation responses received, will be presented to the Council Meeting in December for consideration and decision.

(2) From Councillor Jenny Forde to Councillor Mark F Annett, Leader of the Council

'How many residents has the Leader spoken to who are affected by these (council tax support) changes?'

Response from Councillor Annett

I cannot recall having spoken to, or indeed having been contacted by, anyone specifically regarding the scheme.

Having made enquiries, I understand that officers are aware of one customer who contacted the Council as a result of difficulties due to child maintenance payments being regarded as income; and the customer was invited to claim a discretionary council tax support payment (via the Hardship Fund) to assist her with her council tax liability.

(3) From Councillor AR Brassington to Councillor Sue Coakley, Cabinet Member for Environment

'Cotswold District Council has a responsibility to carry out street cleaning. All over our roads and pavements grit and detritus have been allowed to build up, particularly on our main roads. In turn, this leads to weeds growing in the kerb channel, blocked drains and danger for cyclists. It also looks unsightly and isn't befitting of the beautiful Cotswolds.'

'What can be done to increase the frequency of street cleaning and extend it to prevent build-up of grit and detritus?'

Response from Councillor Coakley

The budget for street cleansing has been increased in recent years and we continue to make a positive impact across the district supported by volunteer litter picking by groups and individuals. In addition to the regular schedule of street cleansing and litter picking, we respond positively to any issues reported to us. A recent example was the cleaning of the Ring Road in Cirencester, in co-operation with Gloucestershire Highways, and this is now on the regular schedule for maintenance.

That said, the District continues to grow and, as part of our budget setting for 2019/20, we are reviewing areas of the waste and street cleansing service where there is current or anticipated growth in demand. Whilst every effort is made to realign services and maximise efficiency, it is inevitable that growth will be required from time to time in some areas. Street cleansing is an area that our team have already highlighted for a review of resources as part of that budget setting process to ensure we are appropriately resourced.

(4) From Councillor RC Hughes to Councillor Mark Mackenzie-Charrington, Cabinet Member for Planning and Licensing Services and Cirencester Car Parking Project

'It's been over four months now that I raised the issue of vacant properties in Cirencester falling into disrepair.'

The former Bramleys site in Brewery Court, which CDC owns the freehold to, has deteriorated even further, with part of the wooden hoarding panels removed and the window smashed even further. The site is now a magnet for anti-social behaviour in the centre of our Town.

In an email to me you stated that 'you can't see the CDC spending a penny on it' due to the development of the site into a cinema by Wildmoor, but this process is 'stuck in the mud' due to a dispute between the developer and CDC.

Will the cabinet member review his position on this matter and instruct Council officers to undertake an urgent clean-up of the building and secure it, so it looks a little less of an eyesore going into Christmas and the winter months?'

Response from Councillor Mackenzie-Charrington

Officers have already issued a schedule of works that we would expect to see carried out in respect of the Bramleys building. We have also indicated that if such works (or an alternative acceptable scheme) are not completed by the end of September, we will carry out the works ourselves and then recharge the costs to Wildmoor.

I should also like to clarify that the wider development of the area is not being held up by a dispute between the Council and the developer.

(5) From Councillor Juliet Layton to Councillor Mark F Annett, Leader of the Council

'We are aware, as Councillors, that there is an issue in Publica around staff morale and with communication from senior managers about the security and terms of their jobs.

What is the Leader doing to understand and allay employees' concerns about these issues?'

Response from Councillor Annett

Thank you for your question. I accept that there are some issues that have given me cause for concern. I have raised these matters personally with the MD of Publica, as indeed did you and Councillor Joe Harris at the recent Member Liaison Group meeting.

Our staff are our most valuable asset/resource; and we cannot be complacent. I am sure that we are all sorry when we 'lose' experienced and valued members of staff, and we need to understand the reasons why - if it is a case of betterment, then we should be delighted for the individuals, thank them for their service and wish them every success for the future; however, if their departure is due to concerns as to their futures or with what is going on, then we need to learn what we might do better. I know that more robust exit interview arrangements have been put in place.

Insofar as job security and terms of conditions of service are concerned, all staff that transferred into Publica retained their existing terms and conditions of service, including pension rights and continuity of service. Moving forward, it was acknowledged that the Publica terms and conditions would need to be reviewed to ensure fairness and consistency across all of their previous employers - albeit that pensions and service continuity will not change.

The MD has reassured me that clear messages have been given to staff that any future changes in employment levels will continue to be managed sensitively and through natural turnover of employment. Moreover, I have been reassured that the new pay and grading structure outlined in the Member Liaison Group meeting will deliver real flexibility, for the first time, for Publica to respond quickly to market issues that have all too frequently beset us in recent years leading us to losing key senior staff, such as planners to the private sector.

To date, the potential changes have been positively received by staff and union representatives, and a broader consultation with staff is due to take place in October. The need for clarity and certainty is paramount, and I have discussed this with the Publica leadership team.

I will continue to notify the Publica MD of any concerns that I have in any regard, as well as commending positives. I am more than happy for any other Member to feed any comments into me, or to approach Mr Neudegg direct. I will do all that I can to ensure that our staff understand just how valued they are. I will also ensure that Members receive regular updates on Publica matters and issues.

(6) From Councillor JA Harris to Councillor Mark F Annett, Leader of the Council

'How on earth was a council employee allowed to transfer tens of thousands of pounds from Council coffers to an unknown third party?'

Response from Councillor Annett

I would refer you to the report on this issue which is contained within the papers for this meeting.

(7) From Councillor JA Harris to Councillor Mark F Annett, Leader of the Council

'The scale of this fraud was buried in blandness in earlier audit committee papers, which were limited to five Councillors on the committee.'

'Why on earth was this not communicated to the full Council at the earliest possible opportunity?'

Response from Councillor Annett

Again, I would refer you to the report on this issue which is contained within the papers for this meeting.

Notes:

(i) The above questions were submitted by the time by responses are guaranteed to be provided to the questioner at least 24 hours before the Council Meeting (by virtue of the Council's Procedure Rules). As such, written responses will be provided to all Members either in advance of, or at, the Council Meeting.

(ii) If the questioners are present at the Meeting, they will be entitled to ask one supplementary question arising directly out of either the answer given or their original question.

(iii) The Member to whom any supplementary question is addressed will try and answer any supplementary question at the Meeting; but if this is not possible, then the Member will answer as much as possible at the Meeting and then provide a full response within five working days. If, for any reason, a full response cannot be provided within those five days, then a holding response will be sent to the questioner, along with the reason for delay and a likely timescale for the full response.

(END)