

(6) MEMBER QUESTIONS

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

(1) Question from Councillor Ray Theodoulou to Councillor Joe Harris, Leader of the Council

'The Administration has pledged to look at the CDC decision-making structure and consider the introduction of the committee system to replace the cabinet system which has been in place for some 20 years.

Does the Leader accept that the cabinet system has served this Authority well and can he explain the potential benefits of a committee decision making system as compared with the present governance arrangements?'

Response from Councillor Joe Harris

'This Council will be undertaking a review of governance arrangements in the near future, which will include looking at the pros and cons of both the cabinet system and the committee system. In light of that, I feel it would be unfair to prejudge that process.

I know from my own experience of the cabinet system when I was a back-bencher that it can lock some members out of decision-making, which is something that this administration wants to avoid.'

(2) Question from Councillor Sue Jepson to Councillor Joe Harris, Leader of the Council

'The Leader has indicated his keen-ness to engage and promote transparent decision-making. Could he, therefore, confirm what consultation took place in respect of the timings of full council meetings before they were recently circulated to members as a fait accompli?'

I specifically refer to the proposals that most meetings of full council will start at 6pm.

The finish time for the 26th February 2019 meeting of full council, at which the budget was set, is recorded as 3.55pm. This indicates a meeting length of 5 hours 55 minutes. After deducting say an hour for lunch, the meeting still lasted nearly 5 hours.

Given the proposed start time of 6pm for the corresponding meeting in 2020, did the Leader give any consideration to the fact that there are councillors in this room (including women who may be travelling alone) who will be leaving Cirencester as late as 11pm in the evening in the middle of the winter with an hour's journey ahead of them - often along unlit country lanes?'

Did the Leader also give any consideration to the fact that councillors in such circumstances may also need to employ the services of sitters for the elderly or, indeed babysitters, and that a midnight finish may severely restrict that opportunity? Did the Leader also give any consideration as to the availability of public transport for members who may wish or need to use that method of transport? In that respect would he kindly advise what buses and/or trains would be available to transport me

from Cirencester back to Chipping Campden, given a departure time of 11pm - or later - and also confirm my arrival time back home the following day?

Please can the Leader please give an estimate of the extra costs involved in evening meetings of both full Council and Cabinet for Officer attendance, including any overtime payments and the value of additional time-off-in-lieu?

Finally, will the Leader please reconsider this decision? If not, would he please consider holding every other meeting at Moreton-in-Marsh Area Centre in order that the burden is shared more equally amongst members?'

Response from Councillor Joe Harris

'The decision to move Council meetings into the afternoon (2pm) and the evening (6pm) was something the Liberal Democrats frequently raised whilst in opposition. We've got a comprehensive plan for the Cotswolds which includes looking at how we can improve access to democracy. In the immediate period following the local elections, Lib Dem Councillors felt that meeting times and dates was something we could alter in order to help realise this aim.

We've got a diverse group of Councillors, which includes four mothers whose children are all under the age of 16, working and retired people, as well as young and old people - I felt as though this was an adequate litmus test of overall availability.

As I'm sure you know, many residents who work during the day have complained that District Council meetings held in the morning mean they can't attend, and I can even remember two or three businesses in Cirencester branding the Council 'anti-business' whilst we were discussing parking charges because of morning meetings. By moving some of the meetings to the afternoon and others to the evening, we empower a whole new set of people who will be able to attend.

You have also raised the issue of the next budget meeting starting at 6pm - we had originally intended this meeting to commence at 2pm but owing to the previous administration's decision to share a section 151 officer with West Oxfordshire District Council that officer has to be in Witney for their budget meeting which commences at 2pm. This is something I will review in consultation with Officers and other Members.

I have also previously stated that the arrangement will be trialled during the current year, and then reviewed in the light of experience. If there is a need for greater flexibility during the year, including for meetings where business may run on longer than usual, then this will be considered.

As you will see from the Council agenda, there is a motion from Councillor Jenny Forde that specifically highlights meeting times and dates. I trust that you will give feedback and raise your concerns in a constructive manner as part of this process.

It is worth noting that I don't ever recall being consulted on meeting times whilst you were part of the administration and, having spoken to former Councillor colleagues, they don't ever remember being consulted on this issue whilst you were the Chair of Council.

Insofar as Officer attendance at evening meetings is concerned, the Head of Paid Service has confirmed that he would expect that this will be covered by way of flexible working arrangements, such as a later start time by affected Officers on the morning of a meeting. As such, no additional costs are envisaged.

We will consider holding future Council meetings in Moreton and indeed in other areas of the Cotswolds. I hope the Constitution Working Group will look at the practicalities and cost of doing this.'

(3) Question from Councillor Julian Beale to Councillor Joe Harris, Leader of the Council

'In the light of his responsibilities in leading Cotswold District Council, will Councillor Joe Harris resign his seat on Gloucestershire County Council?'

Response from Councillor Joe Harris

'No. I intend to follow the precedent set by the former Conservative Leader of this Council, Lynden Stowe, who successfully carried out both roles for eight years.'

(4) Question from Councillor Richard Morgan to Councillor Mark Harris, Cabinet Member for Car Parks and Town and Parish Councils

'Could you confirm how many town or parish council meetings you have attended (not including those directly relating to your own ward) since you became Cabinet Member for Car Parks and Town and Parish Councils?'

Response from Councillor Mark Harris

'Thank you for your question Councillor Morgan.

As a town and parish councillor, I know that town and parish council meetings are not the best place for a two-way conversation about how we work with each other. Those meetings are more formal and deal with the business of the council as laid out by their standing orders.

As such, I am meeting with towns and parishes in dedicated meetings to find out what they are up to and how we can help each other make local government and our respective activities better for residents.

I have met three times with Alison Robinson, CEO of the Gloucestershire Association of Parish and Town Councils (GAPTC), and we are designing, with our Head of Paid Service, a survey for local councils to identify how best we can understand their needs and how to communicate better with each other.

I have met with Moreton-in-Marsh Town Council and will be returning on 24th July to discuss parking with them and GCC.

I will be meeting with Northleach with Eastington Town Council in September; I have liaised on a number of local issues in Barnsley with Councillor Spivey and the Chairman of the Parish Meeting; and have responded to enquiries from Shipton Moyne Parish Council via Councillor Ind.

I will be meeting with South Cerney Parish Council to better understand their community composting scheme so I can share best practice, not just across other parishes, but with my colleagues with responsibility for environmental services.

I will be attending the “Community-Led Housing in the Cotswolds” event in Northleach on 4th July, where I look forward to hearing about the work being done in Eastington with a Community Land Trust.

On Saturday 20th July I’ll be attending the AGM of GAPTC, where I hope to have a conversation with Councillor Liz Hodges from Chipping Campden Town Council.

So, the short answer is I am not going to town or parish meetings but I have met, and am meeting, with towns and parishes.’

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)