

Questions:-

The Leader of the Council

Question running order:

1st: Labour

2nd: Liberal Democrat

3rd: Conservative

Question 1 – Councillor Ann Audin

Since the government abolished the Comprehensive Area Assessment regime, what changes have been introduced to ensure that Bury Council leads the way in taking responsibility for its own improvement?

A. Thank you for your question. I think most of us here had become very familiar with the Comprehensive Area Assessment and its predecessor, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. These involved inspectors coming into the council and looking very hard at what we do and how we do it. Each council had the same inspection regime and results would be published annually, often in a league table format.

Whilst external inspections and assessments continue in some services, particularly Children's and Adult Care services, the overall corporate inspection regime (the CAA) was abolished last year. We do still have to provide a whole raft of performance information to central government and inspection bodies, but councils are now 'leading the way' in improving their own services.

We have welcomed this change in Bury and have taken the opportunity to pilot a new technique called Lean Management. Over the last eight months 30 members of staff from four teams across the council have undertaken a NVQ in Lean Management. These staff, mainly in front-line services, have taken the lead in their own teams to look at how they work and what could be improved. They have removed duplication, improved customer service and identified new ways of working. Crucially, in these challenging financial times, they have also identified significant levels of potential savings or income which will be realised over the next year.

I was lucky enough to attend a feedback session from one of these teams, and their enthusiasm and engagement in the project was certainly a credit to both themselves and the training provided for them.

As Executive Member for HR and Performance, I am looking to how we can expand this approach across the council. This will enable us to ensure that those people who know our services best, the staff that work in them, take the lead in improving services and driving down costs for all our residents.

Question 2 - Councillor Pickstone

Would the Leader join with me in welcoming the announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister on 25 November 2011 of the Youth Contract, and the significant opportunities for employment of young people that this brings? Given that early indications are that there are no spatial limitations on the takeup of the benefits, what will the Authority do to maximise the takeup of the opportunities in the Contract by employers in Bury?

A. The Youth Contract announced in the Autumn Statement is still largely a work in progress. Many of the operational details are still not clear and therefore the Council and our partner organisations through the Team Bury Employment and Skills Task Group are seeking a greater understanding and a strengthening of the relationship with the Government's appointed prime contractors.

For Bury Council and partners it is crucial to have a coordinated approach and an understanding of the linkages to mainstream provision and other funding streams as they become available.

Strategically alongside our partners we will pull together the different offers and ensure that our local businesses both large and small are aware of the national and local need to help prevent a generation of our young people being isolated from the world of work and training.

Through our well established networks in Bury we will ensure that employers are aware of not only how they can "kick start" a young person's career journey but how they can also make best use of their talents to address their own workforce planning.

Tonight's announcement by the Leader of the Council reinforces our commitment to ensuring that we maximise use of all the initiatives, including the Youth Contract. We will work to help formulate a journey into employment that will meet the needs of all our young people with their myriad of aspirations, barriers and skills needs.

Question 3 – Councillor Walker

While acknowledging the legal right of our employees to vote to go on strike for one day, could the Leader explain whether the presence of the Council's political leadership in the vanguard of the trade union demonstration that day constitutes a conflict of interest between their loyalty to the trade union movement and their obligations to the residents of the Borough, and further can the Leader explain whether his decision to go on the union picket line is compatible with his relationship with those employees who wished to exercise their right to work?

A. My presence at the demonstration was as a result of an invitation to show support for employees against the Government's proposals with regard to pensions and I was honoured to be asked to attend and to address those present.

In terms of my obligation to the residents and service users, I was fully briefed on all contingency plans and satisfied that arrangements had been put in place to ensure that the most vulnerable were protected.

I would also point out that I did not go on a picket line.

Question 4 - Councillor Noel Bayley

Will the Executive member for Housing please confirm the nature and extent of the new affordable housing development to begin in Prestwich next year on the site of the now empty St Mary's Court site?

A. The new housing development to go on the site of St Mary's Court will be for older people. The scheme will consist of ten, two-bedroom bungalows which will be available for Affordable Rent. The scheme will be developed and managed by Great Places Housing Group, who is expected to submit a planning application in the summer of 2012.

Bury Council will retain ownership of the site, which will be leased to Great Places Housing Group. We will have 100% nomination rights to the first letting of these bungalows and 50% nomination rights to future lettings to the scheme.

Question 5 – Councillor O'Hanlon

How much money has the Authority spent on street Christmas decorations (including Christmas trees) in each of our town centres? How much private sector funding has the Authority been able to 'lever-in' for each town centre?

**A. It is not possible to be accurate with this year's expenditure as it has yet not been fully incurred.
In 2010/11 the total spend was £39K.**

**It is difficult to break the cost down per township but we will work on that and provide it separately over the next few days.
Private sector funding varies per township too and again we will need more time to be able to fully respond to this detail.**

Question 6 - Councillor Harris

When will there be a new high school for Radcliffe as promised by the Labour Group?

A. I would like to thank Councillor Harris for her question. I suspect that the Councillor already knows the answer. After all it was her previous Leader's promise that simply could not be delivered. As a result, we are still looking for the promised money; I guess we all know that it was never really there.

In addition, the scrapping of BSF funding by the Coalition represented the last opportunity to secure external funding and the best chance to secure a school. This means for a new High school to go ahead, we will be required to find in excess of £20 million. We all know in this Chamber that there is no meaningful capital programme and so the process in identifying funding is ongoing.

Nevertheless, we remain committed to seeing the next new high school being built in Radcliffe.

Question 7 – Councillor Boden

What future uses are currently being considered for the Shuttle Centre?

A. Following the review of Youth Services carried out during the Summer of 2011, the Shuttle Centre was identified as being surplus to requirements and has been taken out of use. The Children's Services Department is currently investigating an option that will see an existing pupil referral unit located at Whitefield Community Primary School, relocated into the Shuttle Centre. Such a move would provide much improved facilities for the small number of pupils attending the unit.

Subject to planning permission, the unit could be relocated in Spring 2012. If we cannot get agreement for the planning application the Shuttle Centre will be surplus to requirements and I will make it available for disposal. There is no prospect of it being a self standing community facility as no-one has the money to pay the running costs.

Question 8 - Councillor Mary D'Albert

Given the financial restrictions which limit the provision of new "Grit Bins", will the Council consider any new ways of providing grit, for example through allowing a street to 'club together' and pay for a grit bin, or to purchase a supply of grit from the Authority?

A. Any group of residents can buy a grit bin and a supply of grit for themselves. They do not need permission of the Council.

The Council does not have the resources to commit to fill on an ongoing basis a grit bin purchased by residents.

We do not have the capacity or infrastructure to sell grit to members of the public. It would not be a simple add on to any existing function and availability is already in place through retail outlets.

Question 9 – Councillor Hankey

Can the Leader confirm when the current review of the future of the Borough's Civic Halls will be completed?

Can he also confirm that:

1. The final report of PWC Consultants will be made available to the public.
2. He will accept the findings of the report as definitive and binding whatever those findings may be

A. I am pleased to inform you that the brief with the Consultants has now been agreed and they have commenced work. I cannot be specific on when the work will be completed because I am keen to ensure opportunities are provided for the relevant interest groups to have face to face meetings with Consultants. It is important these are given time to take place to ensure everyone is able to attend.

The findings will be made public although the report itself MAY be commercially sensitive. I cannot pre-judge the review and say I will accept the findings until I know what they are – risks, costs, impact on communities, etc.

Question 10 – Vic D'Albert How much money does the Authority expect to receive via the NHS to support older people's care services during the three year period of the "Plan for Change". Could the Leader assure members that all of this money will be spent on older people's care services and give detail of what this expenditure will be?

A. The funding allocated to Bury under 'NHS Support for Social Care' totals £4.345m during the period of the plan for change, from 2011/12 onwards. The guidance issued by the Department of Health (Gateway number 15434) indicates that this funding, which has been allocated to PCTs, will be transferred to local authorities to "invest in social care services which also benefit health". It is not ring-fenced to older people, but is to be used in respect of any group of people needing social care support, including people with a learning disability, people with mental health conditions. Locally, plans have been agreed in principle between Adult Care Services and NHS Bury, and detailed business cases are in the process of being prepared.

Question 11 – Councillor Pickstone

What level of Council tax rise is assumed in the three years covered by the “Plan for Change”? What cost of living pay rise is assumed in the Plan for employees in 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15?

A. The points that Cllr Pickstone has asked were all explained in the presentation that the Leader and I have made as part of our wide ranging consultation on the Plan for Change budget options.

The budget forecasts underpinning the Plan for Change figures assumed Council Tax rises of 3.5% per annum, based on the coalition Government's own expectations that were built into grant calculations contained in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

We are very aware that the coalition has now proposed a Council Tax freeze for the coming year and we are even more aware that instead of fully funding the freeze the Chancellor is instead expecting the on-going costs to be met from further cuts in Councils' budgets. We are in the process of consulting the public on their views on this matter.

As far as inflation is concerned, the Plan for Change assumes zero pay inflation, again in line with Government announcements at the time the forecast was prepared.

Members will know that, once again, things have changed now that the Chancellor has proposed with a 1% cap on public sector pay in future years. What is not yet clear is whether future grant settlements will reflect this cap or whether any increases will have to be met by increasing the level of savings that Councils' have to make.

Question 12 – Councillor O’Hanlon

What is the sickness rate of employees in the Authority so far in 2011-12? How does this compare with previous years and with our AGMA colleagues? What is being done and what is planned to reduce this level?

A. I would like to thank Councillor O’Hanlon for his question and in particular for giving me the opportunity to report to Council that under this Labour Administration employee absence due to sickness has reduced by 7.7% in the first two quarters of 2011. I am pleased to report that the Quarter 1 figures (April to June) for 2011/12 showed a reduction in the average number of days lost per employee due to sickness from 10.2 days to 9.6 days. This figure reduced further in Quarter 2 (July to the end of September) from 9.6 days to 9.47 days.

Over the last 3 years sickness absence figures have decreased from 11.56 days per employee to 10.20 days.

In comparison with the other AGMA Authorities information for the first two quarters of 2011 has not been published, however the year-end figures (2010/2011) placed Bury at 7th place in rank order.

A number of initiatives have been developed to further reduce employee absence due to sickness.

As part of the commitment to Health and wellbeing a group has been set up to provide direction, identify priorities, review progress and work with partner organisations to ensure the delivery of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. The group has agreed targets for 2012/12 including:

- To reduce the number of days sickness absence in 2012/13**
- To reduce the number of workplace accidents by 15%**

A post of Health & Wellbeing Co-ordinator within Occupational Health & Safety has been established using existing resources.

Their role is to develop and co-ordinate the employee referral process for counselling, physiotherapy and other psychotherapies and also act as the corporate lead officer for health & wellbeing. A stress awareness event was held at Bury Town Hall in November, which was attended by 120 employees. There is a further commitment to hold 4 health and wellbeing events in the coming 12 months. The next will be in February 2012 and links in with the National Healthy Heart month campaign. Future events identified and to be progressed in 2012 include:

- Finance related topics i.e. money advice/eating healthily on a budget/energy bills/discounts/trading standards advice etc**
- Cancer Awareness**
- Men’s Health**

Question 13 – Councillor Vic D’Albert

Could the Leader please outline what steps are being taken to ensure that Pupil Premium funding due to Bury Schools for pupils who live in other authorities are being received? Are there any monies due that have currently not been received?

A. Currently there are 197 Looked After Children from 49 other local authorities, which is approx a third of the number of local education authorities in England.

The department for Education are distributing the £488 Pupil Premium on a termly basis to child's 'home' authority, which has created an administrative nightmare. Officers from Bury's Children's Services have pointed out the collection issues to the DfE, but they are not prepared to amend their arrangements.

Some other LA's are sending the monthly/termly cheque payments to the appropriate individual school where the child is being educated, while others are asking for the school's bank details so that the payments can be made directly. This is causing difficulties as most Bury schools do not have their own bank account.

Children's Services Financial Services are endeavouring to contact each appropriate LA to collect the money so that the £488 per pupil can be passed on to the school where the child is being educated. We are confident that by the end of the financial year Bury schools will receive the right amount of the Pupil Premium that they are entitled to.

For information, the DfE have announced this afternoon (12/12/11) that the Pupil Premium will increase from £488 to £600 in 2012/13 for every eligible child including Looked After Children. Children of service personnel who are eligible for the Pupil Premium will see this increase from £160 to £250, of which Bury has 11.

The eligibility criteria has been widened to include every eligible child (i.e. eligible for a free school meal) from the school census dating back to 2007. This increases the total numbers from 4,120 to 6,140 pupils and the grant funding from £2,005,000 to £3,682,000, which means an increase in funding of almost £1.7 million for Bury schools. At the moment it is unclear how these monies will be distributed down to each school, as we are unsure is it the current school or where the pupil was educated since 2007. Please note that these new arrangements do not appear to include Looked After Children.

Question 14 - Councillor Mary D'Albert

Could the Leader please provide a breakdown on the visits to each Township by the Authorities Dog Warden service, since the start of 2011?

A. The Council does not operate a Dog Warden Service any more. We access a greater Manchester Dog Warden Service which is operated by a Contractor on behalf of a number of local authorities.

1. Visits by the Councils' Contractor (Animal Wardens) Wardens from 1/1/11 to 30/11/11

Stray dogs – either picked up, taken to holding kennels or returned directly to owners, and patrols in the borough in response to calls from members of the public in respect of strays seen on the streets:

Prestwich	72
Whitefield	64
Radcliffe	121
Bury	340
Tottington	25
Ramsbottom	30

Patrols and visits to identified 'fouling hot-spots', carried out by the Council's Contractors Wardens in relation to complaints about dog fouling:

Prestwich	50
Whitefield	51
Radcliffe	48
Bury	99
Tottington	54
Ramsbottom	20

2. Visits by Council officers from 1/1/11 to 12/12/11

Dealing with dog fouling complaints, requests for No-Fouling signage, and dangerous dog complaints:

Prestwich	17
Whitefield	26
Radcliffe	16
Bury	30
Tottington	8
Ramsbottom	16