

Council Meeting – 10 September 2014

Questions:-

The Leader of the Council

1. Councillor Walker

Can the Leader give us information about the tendering process for the provision of catering facilities for members of the public visiting the Bury Art Gallery - this question having been put to me by members of the public who have expressed concerns both anonymously in writing and face to face in the street?

A. The inclusion of a café in the Art Gallery has always been seen as an important additional attraction for visitors. However the lack of kitchen facilities had made that difficult to organize. An opportunity arose in April 2013 to set up a café on a pilot basis with a private business running the operation and providing the necessary capital equipment investment to make it possible. A tendering process was undertaken to award the work which was overseen by the then Assistant Director in the Environment and Development Services Department, with the final decision being made by the Executive Director under delegated powers. Advice was sought from our procurement team to ensure the process was fairly and properly conducted. The activity was subject to Council Audit in June 2014 and no significant issues were identified.

I am satisfied that this decision was made properly and know that Barnie's enhances the offer from the Art Gallery to the people of Bury.

2. Councillor Rothwell

Does the Council's Policy on Shared Spaces conform with the provisions of the document "Access for Blind People to Towns" prepared by the National Federation of the Blind of the United Kingdom and distributed recently to Local Authorities by the Department of Transport as Guidance on Good Practice on such provision and will the Council agree that the views of the Bury Coalition for Independent Living will be sought as a matter of course whenever a proposal involving an element of shared spaces is involved?

A. The policy aims to assist planners, highway engineers and designers to meet the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty and to help ensure that all streetscape layouts are fully inclusive.

It seeks to expand and fill in gaps in previously published guidance, and specifically indicates that it should be read in conjunction with the DfT guidance documents "Manual for Streets" and Local Transport Note 1/11 "Shared Space". Shared spaces are relatively unusual, and each would be designed on an individual basis.

However, the published guidance is clear in emphasising the pivotal role that stakeholder engagement has to play in the development and design process. The views of local access groups are especially important in this, and Councillor Rothwell can be assured that the views of relevant interest groups will be considered as a matter of course in the preparation of any future Shared Space schemes in Bury.

3. Councillor Wright

The CEO of Rotherham Council has stated that, "Grooming" of young girls is happening in every town. Barnados says this is the tip of the iceberg. What is the truth of this shocking issue of abuse to vulnerable young girls in Bury?

A. I would like to thank Cllr Wright for her question and I hope she is reassured about the very positive and proactive work being undertaken in this important area of Child protection.

The reality is that all communities are affected by these issues and here in Bury as the Leader has indicated we have some children at risk. Whilst we can't change society we can remain focused and diligent on sustaining our caring culture for these vulnerable children. We are also determined to go after the perpetrators to get the message across that this behaviour is unacceptable and they will pay a heavy price in continuing with this abhorrent behaviour. Since the creation of the CSE team four months ago, there has been one prosecution and a further prosecution is going to court.

4. Councillor Adams

The main aim of moving to a 3 weekly residual bin collection is to improve recycling rates and save money, but one of the main concerns is the possibility of an increase in flies and vermin attracted to rotting waste food in the grey bin.

What measures are being taken to improve and extend the use of brown bins, and to encourage people to use them more consistently?

A. Food waste should not be placed in the grey bin. It should go into the brown bin which will continue to be emptied every 2 weeks.

Residents are able to request a new brown bin, whether it be a 240 or 140 litre wheeled bin or a 23 litre street caddy free of charge. Residents who currently have a brown street caddy are able to upsize to a free brown wheeled bin if they prefer if, for example they generate small amounts of garden waste. At the same time black kitchen caddies are available free of charge on request. When requesting all such containers residents are also able to ask for a roll of compostable liners which are also free to residents.

5. Councillor Bevan

Can the Leader of the Council join me in expressing his disappointment at the decision by Peel and Tamar Energy to appeal to the Planning Inspector the recent decision of this Council to refuse the Anaerobic Digestion Plant in Ramsbottom?

A. I am sure that Councillor Bevan agrees that this Labour administration is committed to protecting both the Green Belt and the amenity of local residents. The Council recently refused permission for the Anaerobic Digestion Plant at Fletcher Bank and although not unexpected it is nonetheless disappointing that Peel and Tamar have decided to appeal to the Secretary of State against this decision. We can only hope that a decision is now made by a Government appointed Inspector that places as much importance on Green Belts and protecting amenity as this administration clearly does.

6. Councillor Fitzwalter

Peel Holdings and Tamar have launched an appeal against the Planning Committee's decision to reject the application for an AD Plant in Ramsbottom. Can the Leader outline what we can expect to happen next, with possible timescales?

A. Peel and Tamar Energy have lodged an appeal with the Planning Inspectorate against the Planning Committee's decision to reject the application for an AD Plant in Ramsbottom. At this stage, the Inspectorate needs to validate the appeal, appoint an inspector and confirm the timetable. The appeal is then formally publicised in accordance with regulations. Until the Planning Inspectorate have validated the appeal and appointed an inspector, we will not know what the actual dates for the inquiry will be. The applicant has indicated in their submission documents, it is likely to be spring 2015.

7. Councillor Gunther

Is the leader aware that the Computer System serving Ramsbottom Library and possibly other Libraries was out of operation for over one week? This forced the reduced staffing numbers to resort to a manual system and that in week beginning 4th August 6 of Bury's Libraries had to be closed for one day due to lack of staff. Would the leader agree with me that these factors suggest the lack of importance placed on the Library Service in this Borough by your Group?

A. The Library Service management system, Millennium, was out of operation from August 11th until August 18th. The breakdown required the building, configuration and programming of 4 new discs by our external supplier. The server has now been repaired and prices/options are being explored to replace it. During this period self issue machines were able to provide a reduced service to the public and staff used either a manual or PC based system to record returns and loans. Millennium is used in 15 of our 17 libraries.

In regard to the week beginning August 4th the closures that week were as follows:

New Kershaw Centre closed Monday 1.30-5.30

Coronation Road and Dumers Lane closed Saturday 10-1pm

In addition Castle Library was self-issue only on Thursday and Friday. It should be noted that this library is designed to be primarily self-service with a member of staff normally only available for 4 hours each day.

8. Councillor Tariq

What positive news for Local Government is the Leader hoping for in the forthcoming Autumn Statement due to be delivered by the Chancellor in December?

A. After 4 years of the swingeing and unfair cuts imposed on local government, and on Bury Council in particular, I'm afraid I'm not actually holding out much hope for any positive news.

The coalition's deficit reduction programme for the coming years goes far beyond what is economically sensible and there is no doubt that not only are the cuts an excuse for a politically motivated attack on public services they are also being used to make room for tax bribes before the General Election. What I really want to hear in the Autumn Statement is that local government is no longer being targeted for the highest level of cuts and also that the formula for distributing central grant is being changed so that at long last we see a Fair Deal for Bury. I want to hear that the Chancellor at long last recognises that taking the most from those that have least is unfair and unjustifiable.

I also want to hear that there will be more devolution of money and power to local government and to local areas in England; I want to hear that local government will be able to keep 100% of the business rates; I want to hear that there will be a move towards a single commissioning budget across all of health and social care so that we can take the money and staff we have and put them to work together to provide better care; I want to hear that there will be multi-year settlements so that local government can plan for the future; and I want to hear that there will be a new deal for England.

Madam Mayor I know that I probably won't get my wish but in fact these are the very things that a Labour Government will deliver and so the most important thing I want to hear is that this will be the last Autumn Statement delivered by this Government.

9. Councillor Gartside

Can the Leader / Cabinet Member responsible please explain why the newly formed Resources & Regulation Department is projected to overspend by 1.334 million pounds, which is almost a third of its net budget of 4.554 million in 2014/15?

A. All of the overspending is due to income not meeting historic budget targets and the main reason for this is the effect that the coalition's economic policies have had on the country's economy. For instance, even if the whole of the Council's non-operation property portfolio was let, rent levels are now so depressed that we still wouldn't achieve the income target.

Cllr Gartside can be assured that in this Department, as in all Departments, budgets are managed very carefully and he will be able to see from the recent Cabinet report that staffing and running costs within Resources and Regulation are actually underspent by £99,000.

He can also be assured that despite the Government's best efforts we are working hard to recover the income position. For instance, at the last meeting of the Cabinet we approved a new Strategy to deal with our Let Estate and also a Strategy designed to increase income from property investments.

Finally I must remind him that this is also the Department that has delivered many millions of pounds of income from successful Treasury management activities and this work has helped support vital front-line services from the ravages of the cuts. The forecast for 2014/15 is that Treasury Management will deliver another £500,000 underspending.

10. Councillor Southworth

Can the Leader give an update on how many children have been taken into care in Bury in the last twelve months and how our local Fostering Services are coping with this?

A. In the 12 months up to the end of August 2014, 122 children became looked after by Bury council most of whom needed foster care placements or their relatives needed to be approved as temporary foster carers so that the children could live with them during Court proceedings. In addition to this the Fostering Service received referrals to find long term placements for children who needed to remain in the care system, either by arrangement with their parents or as a result of a Court order.

In total in this 12 month period the Fostering Service placed 92 children either in temporary or long term placements. with an additional 24 children placed with relatives approved as short term carers and a further 7 children with relatives approved as long term care. In total 124 new in-house foster placements. In the same period 34 new placements were made with Independent Fostering providers.

As well as providing an excellent standard of care for our children, the use of in-house foster carers is much more cost effective than using independent placements, saving several hundred pounds per placement per week. The work of the team in increasing the number of in-house foster carers has contributed significantly to the reduction of spend on our agency budget of £1.1million between the 2012/13 financial year and 2013/14 financial year. The service continues to perform well in response to the demands placed upon it but it is essential to recruit more carers particularly for teenagers and sibling groups. As members may know there is a high profile recruitment campaign due to run in the Autumn and I invite all members to give it maximum support.

11. Councillor Walker

Is the Leader prepared to apologise to the member of the public who posed a question at the last Council Meeting with regard to the numbers visiting the new Sculpture Centre and was misinformed? Could he also apologise to Councillors for the misleading figures which were based on a system of counting which was inaccurate and could be open to abuse?

A. I understand that the figure I presented at the last Council meeting was a miscalculation – the figure should have been nearer 7000 rather than 8000. Apparently a new member of staff collated the figures and made a miscalculation. While it's an unfortunate and honest mistake that I have no problem acknowledging, it's gratifying that our systems were able to correct it. I am grateful to the councillor for raising the question of inaccuracy and abuse, because we are equally concerned that the visitor figure is being distorted.

As he is probably aware we currently don't have a counter recording visitors who enter the Sculpture Centre from the Library – so, as you suspect, there are visitors who we are missing. I'm pleased to say that there are people who use the library and enjoy art, so there is a flow between the two services. A more worrying phenomenon comes from individuals who have taken to turning off the electronic counter on the front door. We are investigating to find the culprits and will be making technical changes so sabotage is not possible in future.

In addition, we've had examples of members of the protest campaign trying to get in to the Sculpture Centre without being counted – presumably trying to prove inaccuracy by not being counted. So the councillor is right, there are inaccuracies in the current way of counting, but these are as much to do with individuals trying to undermine a service that brings great value to the people of Bury, and I am sure that Councillor Walker will join me in condemning such behaviour.

12. Councillor Stella Smith

One of the public's main concerns about the move to 3 weekly bin collections is that it might lead to an increase in fly tipping across the Borough. What measures are being put in place to deal with this?

A. The area based Street Cleaning teams are in place to deal with any reports of fly tipping received. The Waste Enforcement team will be out on the ground in back streets where excess waste left next to bins could potentially be found. Where this is the case Officers will knock on doors and speak to residents and provide helpful advice on recycling and the correct use of bins. Excess waste is often a product of insufficient recycling. Environmental Health will be working alongside the Waste Enforcement team and the Street Cleaning service in dealing with fly tipping of waste.

13. Councillor Daly

Having been approached by one of the volunteer rangers, can the leader or cabinet member responsible please confirm if there is any truth in the rumours that the two remaining park rangers posts in the council will shortly be removed?

A. At this point, no decisions have been taken regarding any of the future cuts within the Council or within Parks & Countryside. We are committed to sustaining our green spaces within available resource and working closely with the volunteer rangers.

14. Councillor O'Brien

Can the Leader please tell me if there are any plans to introduce improvements to Bury Council's website so that residents will be able to access more Council Services online?

A. We recognise the importance of the traditional ways many residents access Council services and information about services. But we also accept that many people want a choice, and that the 'high street' experience of 'self service' using smart technology is becoming more mainstream.

So Bury Council has been looking at ways to widen access options for the public.

Whilst there have been developments with the Council's website to move to become a 24/7 Council, many people still contact us primarily face to face and by phone. People can and do email, but we could do much more to develop more online transactions, and to promote their usage.

We aim that this would save peoples' time and be more convenient, but we also face the reality of shrinking resources, which means that traditional access options will have to steadily reduce over time.

The Council is in the process of redesigning our website to make it easier to use and more transactional. We want to improve the customer experience, whilst at the same time looking to deliver efficiency savings by not only making services available digitally but also by redesigning services.

This work aims to improve three things:

- the way the web-site looks and feels to users;**
- the way we manage the content of the website; and**
- improvements to the digital delivery of services.**

The quality of the customer experience will remain paramount, and we will be working hard to make sure that this work leads to better contact with the council and improved satisfaction.

15. Councillor Gunther

A growing number of Bury residents are becoming disturbed about the increasing number of banners and other notices often advertising private businesses and functions which are attached to railings and other street furniture including traffic bollards. This type of advertising is rarely sympathetic to their surroundings and an look unprofessional. Does the Council have any policy and is there a charging mechanism?

A. In terms of Highways, the Council does not allow advertising banners on highway barriers. The highway inspectors or enforcement officers will remove banners from highway railings and where necessary follow up with the relevant businesses.

We do support banners on parks and open space railings for community projects and initiatives that are managed and controlled by the Council.

Businesses are encouraged to use formal sponsored signs such as the township hoop signs or signs on roundabouts where there is a negotiated charge made to the business.

16. Councillor Tariq

I understand that the Council has achieved very good results from the recent data matching exercise undertaken as part of the Individual Electoral Registration. However, given the importance of the Council's engagement with specific groups, particularly young people, would the Leader advise us what steps are being taken to carry out such crucial engagement?

A. I am very happy to confirm that the results from the data matching exercise were extremely good and we achieved an 82% match which equates to 124,000 electors.

We have already taken steps to engage with young people through the Council's "Offer to Schools" menu. Our "Local Democracy in Bury" package has been taken up by Tottington High School and six sessions will be delivered there between now and June 2015. We will be asking Councillors and LEA representatives on the governing bodies of other secondary schools to encourage their schools to follow Tottington's lead.

We are looking to work in partnership with the People's History Museum in Manchester who are launching an exhibition in February next year called "Election", and we will be working with them on a range of engagement and events programmes.

Finally, a member of the Election Team, who also happens to be a young person, will be drawing up a targeted strategy towards engaging young people and other marginalised groups in the build up to the next General Election.

17. Councillor Noel Bayley

Is the current cost of processing residual waste likely to rise in future years?

A. The cost of disposing of waste from the grey residual waste bin has more than doubled in the last 5 years, partly as a result of increases in landfill tax, from £124.69 per tonne in 2010/11 to the current year's cost of £283.72 per tonne.

Estimates from GMWDA are that costs will rise further, reaching over £300 per tonne by 2016/17.

18. Councillor Simpson

Can the Leader tell this Council what the financial impact has been to the Council of offering free school meals to all four to seven year olds under the Universal Infant Free School Meals Policy and if there have been any schools who have struggled to provide this within the school?

A. The provision of Universal Infant Free School Meals has been successfully implemented in Bury Schools and all infant children have had access to a hot free meal from the start of this term.

Bury schools were given a capital allocation £524958 from the DfE which has been prioritised across the schools to pay for items of equipment and other kitchen upgrades.

Voluntary Aided schools were required to contribute 10% towards their allocated spend however, for or the majority of schools the sums involved are quite small.

The Council has not had to allocate any of its own capital resources to meet the duty to provide the additional free school meals.

19. Councillor Kerrison

Weed spraying was completed very late this year; the resulting tall weeds looked unsightly and formed trip hazards. What steps are in place to ensure that the autumn spraying happens on target and that the 2015 programme is completed on time?

A. The external contractor responsible for undertaking the weed spraying programme is to carryout the Autumn weed spraying programme from 22 September with completion around mid to late October.

The weed spraying contract is carried out twice a year in spring and autumn. The contract has to have a degree of flexibility built into the contract given the reduced potency of the weed spraying material to meet strict environmental requirements. To secure maximum effectiveness the contractor will seek to spray on relatively dry days, which can result, extended spraying period.

20. Councillor James

Could the Leader confirm the number of car parking spaces provided in Bury Town Centre by the Council and by private providers and if any of them are provided with a free period?

A. Bury Council Town Centre car parks have 1,582 spaces over 13 car parks. The Millgate car park has 560 spaces, the Rock has 1250 and Q parks has 406. In addition there are other privately operated car parks such as Argos, Asda, Tesco etc. for which we don't have details.

Council car parks are free between the hours of 6pm and 8am as is the Rock car park. Millgate charge 24 hours a day and the Argos retail park offers the first hour free with a rolling charge after that.

21. Councillor Cummings

Now that Radcliffe Riverside is no longer being used as a Secondary School, can the Leader explain what the building will be used for in the future?

A. Radcliffe Riverside School closed for the final time at the end of the summer term. The Council has developed plans to retain part of the building for use by its Pupil Referral Unit that currently operates out of a number of locations across the borough. Additionally, the sports hall will be retained for ongoing community use and will be available to community groups in the same way as when the school was open. The Council is still exploring potential uses for the balance of the building and site.

22. Councillor Mallon

Over recent years the residents of Nuttall Avenue in Whitefield have suffered with car parking problems caused by the customers of the businesses in Whitefield parking in their road, often preventing residents being able to access their own driveways. The previous attempts to curtail customers and visitors to Whitefield parking in Nuttall Avenue are not proving to be effective.

In support of local businesses and residents, can Council please consider the introduction of a residents parking scheme in Nuttall Avenue?

A. Nuttall Avenue has previously been assessed for residents parking in June 2013. At the time it did not meet the criteria due to the fact that the majority of properties have their own off street parking. If there is an issue with access to that off street parking (in particular vehicles blocking dropped crossings) then NSL can issue PCN's if the property owners contact them.

23. Councillor Simpson

Following the recent news of the shocking increase in benefits sanctions, will the Leader join with me to demand that Iain Duncan Smith stop using sanctions as part of the Government's Welfare Policy. This Government again shows its complete disregard for the most vulnerable in society.

A. I would be absolutely delighted to join Councillor Simpson in asking the Government to stop using sanctions.

The sanctions regime should be scrapped entirely, it serves no purpose other than to demonise and punish people for being out of work. It also punishes those most in need of the welfare system and it discriminates against those least able to navigate through the system.

In 2013 nearly 60% of ESA claimants who were hit by sanctions were vulnerable people with a mental health condition or learning difficulties which is morally reprehensible and little short of disgusting.

Even worse, there is clear evidence that sanctions are being used as a way of saving money despite the devastating social implications. A recent survey of Job Centre staff found that almost two-thirds said they had experienced pressure to refer claimants for a sanction inappropriately.

This regime leaves people in distress and simply passes the buck, and the cost, back onto other agencies such as Councils and police forces who are left to pick up the pieces.

I'm just very pleased Madam Mayor to see that last week Labour MPs were able to vote through a bill that will begin the process of scrapping the Bedroom Tax, another vicious and vindictive element of the Government's welfare policy.

24. Councillor Pickstone

Could the Leader inform members how many households have opted to take smaller 'grey' bins? What has been the cost to the Authority to purchase these bins?

A. Between 01 January 2013 and the end of the promotional offer in August 2014, x5320 FOC grey 140 litre bins were issued to residents. The initiative was aimed at encouraging residents to think about and support recycling.

Each 140 litre bin costs £13.95 (as opposed to £17.84 for a 240 litre bin).

Some residents have requested that the 140 litre bin they acquired through the above promotion be exchanged for a standard 240 litre. In such a case the 140 litre bin retrieved is washed out and then re-issued, usually as an authorised second bin issued to a larger family.

25. Councillor Pickstone

Could the Leader inform members what specific actions the Council is taking to support the voluntary sector in picking up demand from its proposed mass closure of Children's Centres?

A. Councillor Pickstone is running ahead of the consultation.

As he is well aware, the savings we are proposing in Children's Centres are directly a result of the cuts being imposed on the Borough by the government his party is currently a member of. The Deputy Prime Minister's vanity scheme for universal free school meals is costing about £2M a year in Bury. If we had that we could increase spending on children's centres by 40% rather than cutting it by 30%.

We will of course consult very closely with the voluntary sector as part of our exercise to see what gaps they might be able to fill and what support we might offer them to do it, particularly in terms of universal activities. It is, however, very unlikely that they will be able to replace everything we have offered historically and there will, inevitably, be some reduction in provision.