

COUNCIL – 6 MARCH 2014

QUESTIONS RAISED BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. **Question submitted by Councillor Sir Ron Watson to Leader of the Council (Councillor P. Dowd)**

“I am sure the Leader of the Council has read the recent document from the LGA detailing the specific benefits to Sefton of membership of the organisation, which I hope the Council on an all party basis will continue to support.

- i) Does the Leader agree that in terms of specialist advisors, the Council would benefit from further input from the LGA in respect of the challenges facing Sefton in Adult Social Care?
- ii) In addition, does the Leader agree with me that Sefton benefits from its Councillors having an involvement with the LGA to ensure that the Borough has a greater voice at national level and does he believe that a short seminar with Sefton's LGA principal advisor, Gill Taylor, particularly aimed at advising newer members how to become involved via their Party Groups would be appropriate?”

Response:

- i) “No”
- ii) “Yes, and it is a matter for party groups.”

2. **Question submitted by Councillor Sir Ron Watson to Leader of the Council (Councillor P. Dowd)**

- i) “The Leader of the Council will know that the LGA have set up a City Regions Board which I am sure he supports.
- ii) Would he be good enough to give the Council an update on progress in respect of our Area's City Region with particular reference to:
 - a) the Governance arrangements
 - b) the provision to be made for all Party representation
 - c) the anticipated annual budget for details of any specific national funding streams for Merseyside

- iii) In addition, is the Leader in a position to advise whether or not there will be any direct involvement by the Lord Heseltine CH who as both Conservative Minister and the recent author of a significant report on devolved Local Government particularly in respect of City Regions has made a great contribution to our area.”

Response:

- i) “This is a matter for the LGA.”
- ii) “This information can be obtained from them directly.”
- iii) “No”

3. Question submitted by Councillor Sir Ron Watson to the Cabinet Member - Communities and Environment (Councillor Hardy)

“The Cabinet member is progressing the additional recycling initiative in respect of plastic and cardboard which can be considered a welcomed addition to our programme.

The Cabinet Member will be aware that there are many blocks of flats and apartments of various sizes particularly in Southport that have purpose built bin storage areas. Most of these were built to a specific specification to deal with the current recycling Euro bin provisions plus Green Boxes/Blue Bags for newspapers etc but the vast majority will have no room for a further bin.

Will the Cabinet Member please advise what provisions are going to be made for these developments in this area.”

Response:

“We are aware of the difficulties for some properties across the whole of Sefton. Individual assessments are being undertaken prior to the implementation of the enhanced recycling arrangements to assess capacity and options.”

4. Question submitted by Councillor Sir Ron Watson to the Cabinet Member - Children, Schools, Families and Leisure (Councillor Moncur)

“Will the Cabinet member please advise the number of books lent by the Library section in the Atkinson over the past six months and would he compare that with the same figure for the old Southport Town Centre Library in the Arts Centre for a same period.”

Response:

“Issues from August – January 2012/2013 were 71,273, 2013/14 are 104,467, an increase of 33,374 (a 46% increase).”

5. Question submitted by Councillor Sir Ron Watson to the Cabinet Member - Children, Schools, Families and Leisure (Councillor Moncur)

“Will the Cabinet Member confirm that under current proposals there is the distinct possibility that some 32,000 books from closed libraries particularly Birkdale will end up being "pulped”.

Will he advise me whether or not these books were offered to schools, colleges, charity shops and other voluntary groups that might make some use of them i.e. the Birkdale Civic Society initiative in having books available in the waiting room at Birkdale Station?”

Response:

“I can confirm that following the Library Review the overwhelming majority of books from the libraries which have closed have been retained for further use.”

6. Question submitted by Councillor Sir Ron Watson to the Cabinet Member - Children, Schools, Families and Leisure (Councillor Moncur)

“Would the Cabinet Member advise the Council of the insured value of Sefton's Fine Arts collection and the number of items concerned. Could he advise the number of art works that are currently on display in both the Atkinson and in other public buildings in the Borough.

Would he advise whether or not we have a current value for collections normally referred to as "social history" and do we have a complete record of all items in the possession of the Council?”

Response:

“The council owns approximately 2800 artworks valued at £10.5m. There are approximately 200 artworks on display in both the Atkinson and other public buildings in the borough.”

7. Question submitted by Councillor Sir Ron Watson to the Cabinet Member - Regeneration and Tourism (Councillor Maher)

“The Cabinet Member will have seen the report prepared by the Audit Manager, Corporate Finance and ICT in respect of financial information to members particularly in respect of the Southport Market.

The report outlined 8 very serious issues including the lack of a key appendix in respect of a revised trading budget, financial information provided separately to a Cabinet Member but not included in the Cabinet Member report, the fact that financial management requested and obtained in a briefing paper was not included in a subsequent Cabinet Member report and that the briefing paper did not include any reference to the financial risk to the Council in respect of the rent reduction not resulting in a projected increased occupancy. There were many other issues of a very serious nature contained in the report.

Does the Cabinet Member support the significant series of recommendations to deal with issues of this nature in the future and does he agree with all relevant staff having to attend a decision making training course?”

Response:

“I remain comfortable that the information I received from all relevant staff during this particular decision making process was sufficient enough to enable me, as Cabinet member, to make an informed decision.”

8. Question submitted by Councillor Sir Ron Watson to the Cabinet Member - Regeneration and Tourism (Councillor Maher)

“The Cabinet Member was good enough to provide a comprehensive answer to a range of questions I raised in respect of the Market - he does know however that in respect of certain financial elements in particular there were a great number of blacked out sections over some three pages of the report.

The justification for this has been outlined as commercial sensitivity particularly in respect of Quarterbridge Limited under Section 43 (2) Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The reasons given include "damage to the business reputation or the confidence and the weakening of its position in a competitive environment.

The Cabinet Member would agree that there is always a balance to be struck between the wider public interest and the protection of commercial interests but in view of the very significant losses on an annual basis for the market which will have to be met by Council taxpayers; does he agree that releasing the relevant information to the public should be the over-riding consideration and would he make representations to this effect?”

Response:

“I did provide the information as Councillor Watson recognises, and I provided it to Members on a private and confidential basis. There was no text blacked out or ‘redacted’ in that private and confidential response to Members.

I understand that a Freedom of Information was subsequently made in relation to the information provided to Members.

This request was properly considered by officers on the basis of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the request was refused.

The request was then subject to an internal review and the refusal was upheld.

The requester was advised that if there was dissatisfaction with this decision, application could be made to the Information Commissioner’s Officer.

I agree with Councillor Watson that “there is always a balance to be struck between the wider public interest and the protection of commercial interests.” It can be a difficult balancing act but, as I understand, the response made to the Freedom of Information request, that it has been properly considered in accordance in Section 43(2) of the Act in relation to prejudicial commercial interest.”