

47/07 - **MEMBERS' QUESTION TIME:** Pursuant to Standing Order 12, the following questions had been received.

(01) Question to the Cabinet Member for Cultural Services from Councillor Pat Marsh.

Now that the Environment and Noise assessments have been completed on Stonefall Park, can the Cabinet Member let me know when she intends to hold the long awaited, long promised, public meeting on the skateboard park?

The Cabinet Member advised that she was awaiting a summary of the reports received from the consultants from the Officers in relation to the proposed skate park to see if the proposals were viable. However, as she was sure Members would recall, it was not so long ago that the Parks Officers reported that they were submitting a bid to the BIG lottery for Play for a grant of £255,000. That she was pleased to be able to advise, they did on time, but now they were in the evaluation process and as such, were having to deal with various issues being put to them by the BIG lottery assessors.

She had, therefore, asked them to concentrate on this, as there was £255,000 at stake for our young people. Once this was resolved, then the issues regarding the consultation in relation to this project would be addressed.

Assurances had been given that consultation would be undertaken before any works were considered on site, and the Cabinet Member gave her own assurance that that would be the case.

In response to a supplementary question from Councillor Pat Marsh, the Cabinet Member confirmed that consultation would involve a public meeting.

(02) Question to the Cabinet Member for Cultural Services from Councillor Goss.

The Forward Plan indicated that the redevelopment plan for the Valley Gardens was to be discussed at Cabinet on the 22 September. The report was not tabled. Can the Cabinet Member explain to council why the report did not go to Cabinet and can she give a promise that the report can be scrutinised by the Community and Partnership Overview and Scrutiny Commission before any final decisions are taken?

The Cabinet Member confirmed that Councillor Goss was right and that the Forward Plan did originally indicate that a report was due to come to Cabinet in September. However, the latest publication of the Forward Plan indicated that it was coming forward in November. The reasons for this were simple. Firstly, Cabinet wanted to be sure of the details and what was being proposed before any report was tabled, and secondly Scrutiny had requested to see the report before it went to Cabinet so it could feed in its views. If the report had been submitted to the September Cabinet Meeting, it would not have enabled this to happen due to timing. As Councillor Goss was aware, the Cabinet valued the views of Scrutiny with regard to this project and, as such, the Cabinet

Member was keen to give Scrutiny every opportunity to look at the report before it was submitted to Cabinet. As a consequence, this delayed the final decision to the November meeting of the Cabinet, and the report had already been forwarded to the Scrutiny Officer which the Cabinet Member was sure was in the process of circulation for discussion at the next appropriate Scrutiny meeting.

(03) Question to the Cabinet Member for Planning and Transport from Councillor Reg Marsh.

Does the Cabinet Member for Planning and Transport not think that it was wrong to publish details from the survey commissioned by the Traffic Panel before they had completed their work?

And does he not think that it could compromise the work carried out by that Panel, even to the extent of influencing the public on what to expect from the Panel on the completion of their work?

And does he not think it would have been common courtesy to approach members of the Panel, if not the chairman before any use of their material was made public?

The Cabinet Member thanked Councillor Reg Marsh for his questions, and responded by advising that he did not think he was wrong to issue a press release to publish in brief the main findings of the survey carried out by and on behalf of the Scrutiny Commission. These findings were effectively made public during the Car Park Policy Working Group meeting between 5.30 pm and 7.15 pm on Monday 6 August. To suggest, therefore, that the press release was ill-advised was quite wrong.

Likewise, he did not think that the press release would compromise the work carried out by the Working Group, or by the Organisation Improvement and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Commission itself. All it did was inform the public of the survey's findings, some two weeks after the Working Group had met. It seemed an appropriate time to do so, coinciding with increased investment in car parking staff and the announcement of the parking charges review. The press release drew no conclusions, but simply stated facts.

Councillor MacKenzie stated that he needed no reminders about common courtesy, because he believed in it. He was given to understand that the Scrutiny Officer did leave Councillor Marsh a message that a press release would be issued. The press release gave the Working Group full credit for the survey, and stated that there was still much work to do on parking.

Finally, Councillor MacKenzie added that he was chair of the Scrutiny Commission until April of this year, and he fully appreciated the role of Scrutiny in a Cabinet-led Council and would never act to undermine the activities of any Scrutiny Commission. He also understood that conscientious Members of scrutiny valued highly the work they did and he, as a Member of the Cabinet took this opportunity to thank them for it.

In response to a supplementary question from Councillor Marsh regarding the incentive for Members to give up their time and serve on scrutiny in light of the circumstances described in his question to the Cabinet Member, the Cabinet Member reaffirmed his previous answer and emphasised that he had given credit for the work undertaken by the Car Parking Policy Working Group.

(04) Question to the Cabinet Member for Planning and Transport from Councillor Reg Marsh.

Could the Cabinet Member for Planning and Transport please comment on the proposed take-over of the Agency Areas within the County by the North Yorkshire County Council? Does he not agree with me that it flies in the face of everything the Government requested with regard to improved two tier working?

The Cabinet Member thanked Councillor Marsh for his question. He assumed that Councillor Marsh was referring to the report on the Highways Agency agreement, which had been prepared for the Council's Executive meeting on 16 October, and which sought the Executive's authority to determine whether the agreements with Harrogate and Scarborough should be terminated. He had no comment to make on that report at this stage, although he had discussed it briefly with his counterpart at North Yorkshire County Council, the Member for Pateley Bridge. He had confirmed with the Cabinet Member that such a decision rested firmly with Members, not with Officers. As far as he was concerned, the highways and footways within the agency area of Harrogate and Knaresborough were maintained very efficiently and cost effectively, with limited resources – as Councillor Marsh had himself stated in the past – by a dedicated team of officers and employees, who possessed an intimate knowledge of the area.

The report, prepared by a single officer within North Yorkshire County Council, did not appear to advance the cause of enhanced two tier working. At this stage, it remained a report only for consideration by Members, and he awaited their decision.

In responding to a supplementary question from Councillor Reg Marsh regarding a thorough consultation exercise on the issue, the Cabinet Member stated that whilst he agreed in principle with Councillor Marsh, the nature and extent of that consultation would have to be determined and, in any event, it was necessary to await the North Yorkshire County Council's policy decision on this matter.

(05) Question to the Cabinet Member for Planning and Transport from Councillor Geoff Webber?

Will the Cabinet Member for Planning reconsider the draft policy SG1 in the LDF Core Strategy given that one of his own senior members, Councillor Jim Clark, is reported as describing the selection of the west of Harrogate as the only area for Greenfield residential development as "total madness".

Councillor MacKenzie thanked Councillor Webber for his question, and responded by reminding Councillor Webber that he had asked this question on a number of occasions (at District Development Committee, at Council and at a public meeting in the Sun Pavilion) and he would give him the same answer as before, whether or not his colleague, Councillor Jim Clarke, did describe a piece of this policy as he suggested.

The naming of west of Harrogate in the Core Strategy as a preferred area for housing development, in addition to the area east of Knaresborough, was the result of some three years of work and study, and was fully explained to and debated by Members in earlier meetings. He did not intend to reconsider the contents of the Core Strategy, which had already been submitted to the Secretary of State, and was currently the subject of a public consultation. Furthermore, it had been approved by Council on 4 July 2007 and he would not presume to “reconsider” what Council had decided.

As Councillor Webber was aware, the Council would be debating preferred sites in November and December this year before they too went out for public consultation early next year.

In response to a supplementary question from Councillor Webber regarding the absence of appropriate provision of schools and other services etc within west of Harrogate, thereby bringing into question the development of this area, the Cabinet Member stated that there were no residential development proposals at this stage for west of Harrogate and that any extension to Harrogate and Knaresborough would be met by investment in appropriate infrastructure.

(06) Question to the Cabinet Member for Cultural Services from Councillor Philip Broadbank.

Would the Cabinet Member for Cultural Services explain the options facing the Council over the future of Ripon Spa Baths and confirm the issue will be progressed in the same way that Starbeck Baths is being pursued?

The Cabinet Member for Cultural Services advised that as Councillor Broadbank was aware, the Council was carrying out a fundamental ten year review of all cultural services spending needs. An important part of the review was a detailed examination of revenue budgets to identify savings and opportunities for generating additional income which would be applied to those ten year spending needs.

She confirmed that alongside this review, she was looking at options for Ripon Spa Baths to ensure the provision of improved swimming facilities in the future. These options would be made public, local members involved and all Members of the Council informed.

So far as Starbeck Baths was concerned, the Cabinet Member was delighted to announce this evening that based on the work carried out so far, the Council would be making a commitment to spend £760,000 in maintaining and improving swimming

facilities at Starbeck Baths over the next ten years, starting with a scheme of works at an estimated cost of £380,000 next year.

(07) Question to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources from Councillor Granville Ward.

In the Building Management Operational Business Unit reserves recently approved by the Cabinet on 19 September, a figure of £35,756 has been allocated for the "Starbeck Swimming Pool Survival Strategy". Could the Cabinet Member for Resources give more details about this strategy?

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources advised that as had been indicated in the response to question 7 above, the Council's aim to save Starbeck Baths had been achieved, in that a commitment to spend £760,000 in maintaining and improving swimming facilities at the baths over the next ten years had been made, starting with a scheme of works at an estimated cost of £380,000. This had been achieved in part with various efficiencies arising from the fundamental review of cultural services spending needs, and he was pleased to support the work of his colleague, the Cabinet Member for Cultural Services in this regard.

(08) Question to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources from Councillor Bill Hoult.

Knaresborough is in dire need of more football pitches, provision being below the recommended standard.

Some time ago Knaresborough Celtic Football Club received planning permission to provide new football pitches and changing facilities at Thistle Hill, Knaresborough.

Since that time, the Club has raised £140k and secured a grant of £414k from the Football Foundation leaving them about £75k short of the amount needed to carry out the development.

If they do not reach the amount needed to carry out the development by November, I understand that they will lose the £414k Football Foundation grant which will cause the project to fall.

Harrogate Council contributed £5k four years ago, but has so far refused further assistance despite a request being made.

Will the Cabinet Member for Resources explain why, this Council is prepared to allow over £500,000 investment in Knaresborough's leisure facilities to be lost for the sake of a one-off contribution?

Councillor Jones advised that whilst he would have appreciated more than 48 hours notice in order to correctly deal with the detailed question received from Councillor

Hoult, he confirmed that he was very sympathetic with the situation, and that Officers were continuing to support the club in seeking to find additional funding sources in order to fill the relatively small gap which remained, in addition to which specific advice on funding sources was also being given. In relation to the Football Foundation Grant, Officers had already had informal discussions with the Foundation, expressing the local requirement for this project to be delivered, and were in negotiations to extend the grant period in order to give the Club more time to bridge the current funding gap. This had been well received, and a formal approach was planned imminently.

The Cabinet Member gave an undertaking to liaise with his colleague, the Cabinet Member for Cultural Services, in order to ensure that Councillor Hoult received an answer on the remaining points of his very detailed question.