

COUNCIL

18 JUNE 2009

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Report from: Neil Davies, Chief Executive

Author: Wayne Hemingway, Cabinet Coordinator

Summary

To set out the public questions received for this meeting.

1. Background

- 1.1 Section 7.3 of the Council Rules, as laid out in the Council's constitution, sets out the rules for the receipt of public questions as follows:
- At any one meeting no person may submit more than two questions and no more than two questions may be asked on behalf of one organisation. Members of the public who have not submitted questions before will be given priority over those who have, and second questions will only be dealt with when all first questions have been dealt with. Any questions that have not been dealt with within the time limits will receive a written reply after the meeting.
- 1.2 The questions received for this meeting are set out in below in the order they were received, allowing for the rules above.

2. Public questions

- 2.1 **Mr C Irvine of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Front Line Services, Councillor Filmer, the following question:**

In January of this year, commuters here in Medway and indeed across the whole of the Southeastern network were hit with above-inflation increases at a time when the economy was entering one of the worst recessions in the country's history. These fare increases have left many hard-working taxpayers who have no option but to commute into London struggling to meet their existing commitments, but we are told by local MPs such as Paul Clark that the increase was fair and justified.

Many commuters here in Medway disagree and over 200 people have now signed a petition calling on Southeastern and the Government to renegotiate the terms of the franchise which allows Southeastern to increase fares at the July retail price index (RPI) plus an additional 3%.

Can the Council please reassure commuters that they are doing all they can to ensure Southeastern will not be allowed to once again impose above-inflation increases in January 2010, which will not only result in further hardship for local taxpayers but will impact negatively on Medway's ability to attract investment into the Towns?

2.2 Mr B Fowler of Chatham will ask the Leader, Councillor Rodney Chambers, the following question:

In 2007 Medway Council consulted about building the new bus station in Central Chatham. The public rejected the Paddock as an option and now English Heritage has stated they do not support this either. As Leader of the Council will you outline your thoughts on this beautiful and highly regarded open space – should the bus station be built there?

2.3 Mr P D Fowler of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Why propose to close Ridge Meadow School when we have more land and better facilities than neighbouring schools?

2.4 Ms K Hayman of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Can you give a valid reason why you have chosen Ridge Meadow above any other school in the area for proposed closure given the fact that we have lower surplus places than neighbouring schools, we do not have a falling roll and our standards are high?

2.5 Mrs K Lehec of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Why is Walderslade school being rebuilt? I understand that the buildings are old and unacceptable, but with a rebuild would it be able to accommodate at least 100 to 150 more children who are losing their places at Ridge Meadow School? None of our children will go to underperforming schools which you are trying to make us do if the proposed closure goes ahead.

2.6 Mr G Lovell of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Why is it a proposed closure for Ridge Meadow? Why not amalgamate Wayfield School with Ridge Meadow on Ridge Meadow's site where there is ample facilities for any sport to take place and room to expand?

2.7 Mrs Arnott of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

What are the council proposing to do with the children from Ridge Meadow? Are we as parents going to be told which school the children will go to or are we going to have a choice?

2.8 K Turrett of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question in relation to Ridge Meadow School:

Why close a school children are happy and doing well in?

2.9 Mr Simmonds of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

What happens to children whose parents will not send them to Oaklands or Wayfield School?

2.10 Miss K Taylor of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

What happens to families with more than one child of primary school age in? Can you guarantee the whole family will be placed into the same school?

2.11 Mrs K Fowler of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

If Ridge Meadow closes, what will happen to children going to a neighbouring school (Wayfield) as it changes the secondary school catchment area they are in? eg: Will children be able to go to Walderslade Girls and Greenacre even though they are out of the catchment area and into Chatham South and Medway Community College area? Can you guarantee this?

2.12 Miss Goodchild of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

What will happen to the children who will be affected by the closure in their year 6 which is an important year? Will there be any allowances for change regarding when they take their 11 plus or SATs or will they be at a disadvantage out of no fault of their own?

2.13 Mrs K Perrin of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

The staff at Ridge Meadow are fantastic. Every child really does matter to them. My child has autism and without the schools support my child would not be included. By making class sizes bigger the children will suffer and will not achieve as well. Why put them through this?

2.14 Mrs S Eascott of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Where is parental choice when you are clearly taking ours away by proposing to close Ridge Meadow School?

2.15 Miss S Fowler of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

What will happen to Ridge Meadow and its land if the proposed closure goes ahead?

2.16 Mrs J Hetterley of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

How do parents go on for home tutoring as some parents will not send children to neighbouring schools? Some children have transferred from neighbouring schools to Ridge Meadow and parents will not allow them to return. What provisions will be made for them if the proposal goes ahead?

2.17 Mrs G Boulding of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Ridge Meadow is clearly expanding with regards to numbers, Ofsted reports have been good. If the council are trying to raise standards, why close a successful school? You should be encouraging more people to join this successful school.

2.18 Mrs D Cass of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Why are so many parents taking their children from neighbouring schools and moving them to Ridge Meadow if it is not a successful school?

2.19 Mr J Boulding of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question in relation to Ridge Meadow School:

If every child matters, why are you not taking this into account with regards to your decision making?

2.20 Mrs R Ottoway of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

As the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks states that none of the proposed school closures are being made for the land, why does he state in the press within days of his first statement that they need the land at Ridge Meadow to create a much larger school for Bradfields? If this takes place, will the council be accountable for altering the road structure to accommodate the additional traffic caused by the mini buses and taxis that bring disabled children to school? Walderslade Road around the school run time is at a standstill now which causes fumes to build up and be breathed in by all children from the neighbouring four schools. With more traffic using this road the fumes will only get worse, what will the council do about this?

2.21 Mrs L Whiting of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

If the proposed closure goes ahead at Ridge Meadow are the council going to guarantee that there will be no break in the special needs programmes that children are in and are they going to guarantee it will be at the same high standard they receive now?

2.22 Mrs W Cole of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

As a resident on the Wayfield Estate and being constantly reminded that I live on one of Medway's socially deprived areas, I note that the proposal to close Ridge Meadow School would leave my estate with only Wayfield School to serve the community coupled with no plans to make any investment into the school. As the local authority has been allocated over £11M to spend on improving all Primary schools, is this another clear indication that not "every child matters" but rather "some children matter more than others" particularly in relation to where they happen to live?

2.23 Mr P Cole (Chair of Governors of Ridge Meadow School) of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Since publication of the Primary Strategy for Change, the Head teacher at Bradfields School has publicly placed on record that he has no desire, or need to use land currently owned by Ridge Meadow for any proposed expansion or re-development of his school. Why therefore does the authority feel the need to include this irrelevant and

misleading information as supportive evidence to justify the proposed closure of Ridge Meadow School in the Primary Strategy for Change documentation?

2.24 Mr S Geering (Governor of Ridge Meadow School) of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

The Assistant Director of Learning and Achievement has clearly stated to the Governors at Ridge Meadow School that the criteria for the closure of a school is currently looked at on three specific points:-

1. Failing standards
2. Unviable due to falling rolls
3. Amalgamation of Junior and Infant Schools

At the same meeting with Governors, the Assistant Director of Learning and Achievement indicated that that the School has satisfactory standards (currently outperforming schools in the immediate area), that we are still a viable school and that we are an all through school. What therefore is the rationale for the closure of Ridge Meadow School?

2.25 Mr I Leicester (Governor of Ridge Meadow School) of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

In the documentation compiled by the Authority it clearly states that Walderslade School is on an unsuitable site and that it is based entirely in temporary accommodation some dating back to 1908. Plans within the Primary Strategy for Change clearly indicate that money is to be made available to completely re-build the School. Whilst acknowledging the fact the school is popular and achieving the standards required, it does not get away from the simple fact that the School is on a totally inadequate site and cannot offer a playing field for the children. Why should council taxpayers fund the re-building of the school just because it is successful, when reasonable argument has been put forward by others Schools targeted for closure, that they are also popular? By simply closing Walderslade School the site could be disposed of relatively easy and would enable better use of funds within the wider Strategy for Change to give greater benefits to the people of Medway

2.26 Mrs C Scott (Headteacher of Ridge Meadow School) will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

The Medway Council Primary Capital Programme Strategy (or Change 2002-2022 produced in January 2009) was authorised by the Head of School Organisation and Student Services but only extracts from this document have been released as the 'Primary Schools Reorganisation

in Medway'? This seems to be a selective and convenient way of disclosing key pieces of Educational Planning with potential limits on the role of overview and scrutiny, so that Councillors may have a limited appreciation of the scope and scale of any changes being proposed. Can this process be explained?

2.27 Dr. C Hodgetts (Governor of St. John's Infant School) of Chatham and Ms S Wilson of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

In view of Medway's increasing birth-rate and planned future housing development as part of Chatham's Regeneration Plan and considering the absence of available places for our current pupils in neighbouring schools, including our nearest other Church of England primary schools, how can the Council justify closing St. John's Infants, which has consistently good OFSTED reports and achieves better than national average SATs and contextual value added scores?

2.28 Ms S Wilson of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

The Council's Diversity Impact Assessment of its Primary Schools Reorganisation proposal states that there are "No concerns that there could be a differential impact due to racial groups." How can you make this claim when closing St John's Infants would have a differential impact on minority groups, who currently comprise 52% of our pupils (compared with 18% average across all schools affected by the proposal) and who make excellent progress, due to the inclusive ethos and the individual attention they receive in this small, church school?

2.29 Miss S Islam of Gillingham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Front Line Services, Councillor Phil Filmer, the following question:

The current parking restrictions on Canterbury Street in Gillingham are crippling local businesses. When and what will the Council do to address issues regarding parking restrictions and stringent enforcement of rules when the consequences of which mean that local businesses are on the brink of closure?

2.30 Mrs V Cole of Chatham will ask the Chairman of the Children and Adults Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Brake the following question:

After witnessing the Children and Adults Overview and Scrutiny Call-in meeting on the Monday 8 June and observing the declaration at the start of the meeting that pre-determination should not have been made by members of the Committee coupled with the statement that no whip should be followed, why was Councillor Ted Baker replaced on the committee when he was both available both at the start and end of the meeting and observed the proceedings throughout. Could it be that a

party whip was actually in place and Councillor Baker had previously expressed that he was considering voting in favour of the proposal from the Labour Group representatives. My question is therefore; Is this practice regarded as transparent and correct to the general public when councillors that are obviously available to attend meetings can simply be replaced even though they would normally sit on the respective Committee?

2.31 Mr L McVeigh of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

What is the environmental impact of the closure of St Peter's Infant School in terms of Medway's travel plan?

2.32 Mr A Bracken of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question in relation to St Peter's Infant School:

Is Medway Council trying to create community cohesion or not?

2.33 Mr P Wright of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

How much money will Medway Council save if it closes St Peter's Infant School?

2.34 Mr A Paterson of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

On what evidence is Medway Council basing its commitment to larger schools?

2.35 Ms L Smith of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question;

What demographic information has Medway Council used to predict how many school places will be needed in the next five years?

2.36 Mrs W Murphy of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

How can Medway Council justify the closure of St Peter's Infant School based on the fact they do not have a school based nursery?

2.37 Mr P Bungay of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

Where are Medway Council intending to send the children of St Peter's?

- 2.38 **Dr D Rees of Faversham (formerly of Rochester) will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:**

How are Medway Council proving that transition impacts on standards?

- 2.39 **Mr S Meadows of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question in relation to St Peter's Infant School:**

How will the closure of a good school raise standards?

- 2.40 **Mrs J Worrall of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:**

How does the closure of St Peter's promote the Every Child Matters agenda?

- 2.41 **Mrs C Newman of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:**

If St Peter's closes, are all staff guaranteed an alternative placement in a Medway school?

- 2.42 **Mrs Williams of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:**

If St Peter's closes what are Medway Council's plans for the school site?

- 2.43 **Mrs J Finch of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question in relation to St Peter's Infant School:**

Is it Medway Council's intention to reorganise all Primary Schools into establishments of at least two forms of entry?

- 2.44 **Mr M Evans of Gillingham will ask the Chairman of the Development Control Committee, Councillor Mrs Diane Chambers, the following question:**

Medway Council Development Control officers are required to make appraisals of Operational need for new telecommunication masts and antennas when applications are submitted by Mobile Phone Operators such as Vodafone, T-Mobile etc.

Does the Development Control department have any procedures in place to independently check there is an operational need in an area when one is identified by a Phone Operator and if so do these procedures distinguish between the coverage needs of Medway

residents on the one hand and transient Phone Company customers such as train passengers on the other?

2.45 Mr J Ward of Chatham will ask the Leader, Councillor Rodney Chambers, the following question:

During the past month or so, the matter of MPs' expenses has become a big issue and the trust between politicians and the public has been seriously damaged. This has not yet reached local politics, but there is talk in the media.

The Conservative Leader, David Cameron, has taken a lead by setting up a real-time record of his MPs' expense claims. Has Medway Council considered taking a similar initiative of real-time publishing of councillors' expenses?

2.46 Miss K Taylor of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

The staff at Ridge Meadow know every child and parent by name. By making larger schools, how are you going to get the same type of relationship between children, parents and teachers?

2.47 Mrs G Boulding of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

There are and have been numerous projects for building new homes in Medway. Obviously this will bring in many new families to the area. Where will the children of these families go to school if you close Ridge Meadow? There will not be adequate places for children to go to school.

2.48 Mr P D Fowler of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question in relation to Ridge Meadow School:

Why is a secondary school involved in a Primary Strategy for Change?

2.49 Dr. C Hodgetts (Governor of St. John's Infant School) of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Councillor Wicks the following question:

How can government policy be used to justify proposals including the closure of St. John's Infant School when these proposals contradict several government policies:

- "To raise standards by investing in good schools" – The schools targeted for closure are good schools.
- "To increase parental choice" – Closing St. John's removes the choices of a small, caring school, an infants-only school and a faith school.

- “To protect the environment” - 2/3 of pupils at St. John’s walk to school. Displacing them to more distant schools will increase car use.
- “To promote the 5 outcomes of the “Every Child Matters” report” – walking to school improves children’s health and road safety awareness. Dispersing them to different schools from their classmates and siblings will have an adverse effect on their emotional wellbeing.

Background papers

None.

Lead officer contact:

Wayne Hemingway

Cabinet Coordinator

Telephone: 01634 332509

Email: wayne.hemingway@medway.gov.uk