

COUNCIL
23 JANUARY 2014
PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Report from: Neil Davies, Chief Executive

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Summary

To set out the public questions received for this meeting.

1. Background

1.1 Section 8.3 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

A David Scott of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Front Line Services, Councillor Filmer, the following question:

I read in the Sunday Times some time ago that in January the Government issued to all Councils a paper advising on the reduction of road sign clutter. My question is what assessment has been made of the potential for reducing clutter in Medway, what measures are currently underway, and what net reduction can we expect to see by, say, the end of 2014?

B Chris Webb of Strood will ask the Leader of the Council, Councillor Rodney Chambers, the following question:

What proactive measures has the Council taken to assess and provide for the necessary additional local services & infrastructure to deal with the impact of an increase in Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants into Medway after 1 January 2014?

C Lindsey Burke of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Economic Growth, Councillor Chitty, the following question:

Will you help protect the independent traders in their campaign to safeguard the historic Rochester High Street from Costa Coffee?

D Odette Buchanan of Strood will ask the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, Councillor Doe, the following question:

Has a comparative costing been done for Strood Library to stay on its present site and the Contact Point to be relocated there instead of moving it to the wrong end of the High Street into an unsuitable building? If so how much cheaper would this be?

E Marion Shoard of Strood will ask the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, Councillor Doe, the following question:

What mandate does Medway Council have to relocate the purpose-built and much-loved Strood Library – one of the last remaining public facilities in Strood – to a warehouse-like space at 133 High Street when it has failed to carry out any public consultation on the pros and cons of taking this step?

(The only aspect that has involved any consultation is the change of use of 133 High Street, but only strictly planning considerations were allowed to be discussed when this application was considered on 4 December 2013, with the result that factors such as the desirability or otherwise of getting rid of the existing Strood Library and the use of housing revenue grant money to fund the work at a time when homelessness in Medway is high and increasing were not addressed).

F James Giller of Maidstone will ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Deputy Leader, Councillor Jarrett, the following question:

My Name is James Giller and I am the Managing Director of Eagle Aero Engineering Ltd. Despite wishing to renew our lease at Rochester Airport, Eagle Aero Engineering Ltd were refused and after 3 years on site were forced to vacate Rochester on the 10th January 2014.

The Medway Council "To let Rochester Airport Kent by Informal Tender" states that bidders offer should include at (vi.) Confirmation that the current sub-occupiers can remain if they wish to.

Please tell us what Rochester Airport Limited stated in their winning bid submission in compliance to (vi) stated above?

G Sandra Busbridge of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Economic Growth, Councillor Chitty, the following question:

Since 2000 when Rochester Airport Limited first leased the airfield there has been an unprecedented expansion of sub occupiers on the site. Helicopters, Gyrocopters and Microlite businesses currently bring higher levels of disturbance to local residents due to the machines operating at low altitude and lower airspeed than typical flying club aircraft.

Can you explain how Medway Council will control the Airport Operator's future conduct with respect to sub occupiers and their operations to protect the community?

H Michael Busbridge of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Economic Growth, Councillor Chitty, the following question:

Most Councillors have been notified by James Giller about the refusal of Rochester Airport Limited to renew Eagle Aero Engineering sub occupancy lease. Whilst this is a business matter it could seriously affect the safety of residents.

The closure of Eagle Aero Engineering at Rochester airfield appears to compromise historical safety figures on which this Council is being asked to base its approval for the Masterplan and Rochester Airport Lease renewal.

This issue highlights the precarious nature of business relationships and operational aspects at Rochester Airport which in a worse case scenario could have fatal consequences for residents and aviators.

Please tell us what assessment has been conducted by Medway Council on the performance and certification of the replacement maintenance company and what credentials have been supplied by Rochester Airport Limited that attest to the continuity of safety for residents.

I Barry Luxton of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Economic Growth, Councillor Chitty, the following question:

It has been well publicised that Tandridge District Council have recently refused planning permission to the operators of Redhill Aerodrome for the installation of a paved runway. MP Sam Gyimah said it would have a

“monumental impact” on residents and their quality of life.

Interestingly the location of Redhill airfield is quite rural in comparison to Rochester. It does not have houses less than 200 metres from the end of the paved runway and there is no financial contribution from the Council.

Please tell us why the Rochester Airport Masterplan will not have a "monumental impact" on residents and their quality of life given you have not yet carried out and published an environmental impact study.

J Leslie Ellison of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Deputy Leader, Councillor Jarrett, the following question:

Medway Council has publicised in leaflets and exhibition material that there will be an opportunity for comment at the planning stage should the Masterplan be approved by Council.

As a home owner living near to the airfield I cannot recall seeing any planning applications for buildings, change of use or the like for the airport previously.

Can you confirm what additional measures beyond normal practice the Council will be taking to notify businesses and thousands of residents living near to the airfield that a planning application for the paved runway has been submitted?

K Gareth Batts of Strood will ask the the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, Councillor Doe, the following question:

Without any public consultation, this Conservative Administration has decided to move Strood Library from its current Bryant Road site to a new high street site. As seen by the petitions being handed in, thousands of residents in Strood are angry about this. By moving the library to a smaller site, not only is it reducing overall capacity in the library but it is also paving the way for the eviction of the current Strood Community Project who are leasing the site. The Strood Community Project is a local charity who are there for disadvantaged people in the area.

I welcome the news that the current hall is to be kept for the community to use, however will the Portfolio Holder look at converting the caretaker's house at the back of the current library site (which I believe is not being lived in at the moment) to be the new contact point for Strood? This will help keep the current library on the same site as well as allowing the Strood Community Project to stay where they are.

L Janet Stephens of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Deputy Leader, Councillor Jarrett, the following question:

The Medway Council document “To let Rochester Airport Kent by Informal Tender” does not include a statement to bidders about their potential liability for property value loss compensation under the Land

Compensation Act 1973 when the airfield is reconfigured.

A modest five percent loss in property values for approximately 2000 homes near the airfield may amount to £25 million or more.

Whether you believe or not that local property values close to the airfield will be affected by Medway Council's Masterplan, as a duty to your electorate I hope you agree that the liability should have been stated in the tender document to protect home owner losses and ensure the successful bidder is able to meet their financial liability should it arise.

Can you guarantee Medway Council have notified Rochester Airport Limited of this potential liability and that the company is sufficiently funded to withstand a multimillion pound compensation payment prior to signing the new lease?

M James Brewood of Chatham will ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Deputy Leader, Councillor Jarrett, the following question:

You are on record as stating that the financial return on ratepayers' £4 million into the airfield paved runway and infrastructure will be better than depositing the money in a Building Society.

Based on an average Building Society fixed term deposit interest rate over the last 10 years, Rochester Airport Limited will need to generate an additional income of £287,000 per annum beyond their current payments to Medway Council for you to be correct.

To avoid any future "unacceptable" financial oversights through unsubstantiated statements and to protect the ratepayers' investment, please confirm this Administration's willingness to have the investment calculations and business projections for the successful bidder independently verified by the Audit Commission Auditor, Robert Grant, who has been alerted to our concerns in this matter.

N Darren Welch of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Economic Growth, Councillor Chitty, the following question:

Medway Councillors ignored the majority of public feedback opposing the Rochester Airport Masterplan, however Medway Council also announced that they intend to place a cap on air movements, restrict hours of operation and weekend flying.

Prior to the closure of the public consultation Medway Council published Rochester Airport Limited's recommended figures for such restrictions. Such figures were clearly not acceptable to residents. The Medway Council post public feedback announcement appears a cynical attempt to mislead based on the fact that no new limitation figures have been published.

Please tell us what new restrictive parameters for air movement cap, daily operational times and weekend flying restrictions Medway Council Conservatives are considering or likely to impose on the new operator which are significantly different from those previously published?

O Michael Fowler of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Deputy Leader, Councillor Jarrett, the following question:

Inspection of Rochester Airport Limited annual accounts deposited at Companies House reveals the company is financially challenged. It appears it will not be able to sustain higher lease costs and business rate payments commensurate with the upgraded infrastructure without a massive increase in commercial air movements or imposing significantly higher landing and parking fees on budget fliers.

This administration has promised to further restrict air movements, times of operation and weekend flying from those already published but such parameters underpin the Airport Operator's business model.

As an example Rochester Airport Limited reported approximately 35,389 air movements in 2006. Their accounts for 2006 evidence a loss of £2,623 when their operating lease was only £15,000 and non domestic rates below £10,000 pa payable.

The 2006 air movement figure is almost double that reported for 2012. Please tell us how your administration can prevent over exploitation of the residential area with commercial flights by the new airport operator as they attempt to remain financially solvent.

P Stuart Taylor of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Deputy Leader, Councillor Jarrett, the following question:

Many people would question the professional and financial capability of a local and unitary authority to award a substantial contract to a commercial company that has net assets of just £19,087 at March 2013 when the tender process closed.

The Medway Council Tender document states:

Subject to all necessary approvals, the Council is prepared to contribute a sum (not exceeding £4million) towards the cost of these works. This contribution will only be made after the operator completes agreed improvements, runway 16-34 is closed and the hatched black land has been handed back to the Council.

Please confirm whether Medway Council will enforce the condition and if not why?

Q Sidney Witham of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Deputy Leader, Councillor Jarrett, the following question:

The TransEuropa debacle which lost Thanet Council millions of pounds alerts us all to how important it is to have strong governance processes and procedures in place.

The contribution of £4 million of ratepayers' money to an airport operator for infrastructure improvements could open up opportunities for inefficient expenditure, misappropriation or fraud etc.

Given the large amount of money Medway ratepayers are contributing to underpin the airport operator's business model, what safeguards have Medway Council already put in place and what additional safeguards are planned to reassure both the public and the Council's external auditors that the public money to be invested in the changes to the airport will be safeguarded?

R William McLennan of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Deputy Leader, Councillor Jarrett, the following question:

You are on record for stating on behalf of Medway Council that no new 25-year lease will be signed by Medway Council with Rochester Airport Limited until Council approval of the Rochester Airport Masterplan.

Can you please confirm that Medway Council have not reneged on your commitment. Please provide an update on the airfield lease arrangements including any proposals or action already taken to extend the current lease.

S Keith Baldock of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Economic Growth, Councillor Chitty, the following question:

The recent distressing helicopter crashes in Glasgow and Cley, Norfolk highlight the danger of having helicopters regularly flying overhead. Not surprisingly the CAA whom you offer as the arbitrator of safety for Rochester Airport were not able to stop these tragic incidents.

Please tell us why you are promoting commercial operations of helicopters, microlites and gyrocopters over residential homes on a regular basis given the possibility of a fatal incident?

T Rita Mew of Rochester will ask the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Economic Growth, Councillor Chitty, the following question:

As a member of the Conservative Party you and many others have recently received an email request from Mark Reckless MP encouraging you to

oppose the extension of Southend Airport airspace control over Hoo Peninsular and St Mary's Island.

This was not about building an estuary airport but simply the control of airspace which may result in lower level flights by aircraft passing over the Medway Towns.

Mark's argument in opposing the airspace control extension featured environmental, noise, pollution, blighting properties and safety, all of which Mark Reckless and Medway Council are happy to impose on many Rochester and North Downs residents in support of the Rochester Airport Masterplan.

Please tell us what the difference is between not subjecting Hoo and Grain residents to aviation activity yet encouraging it for Rochester residents?

U Odette Buchanan of Strood will ask the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, Councillor Doe, the following question:

At 133 High Street, Strood, what will be the exact access facilities for parking, school parties, deliveries, disabled parking and entry/exit thereto as well as arrangements for Tuesdays and Saturdays that do not impinge on the market? How much is all the work entailed going to cost?

V Marion Shoard of Strood will ask the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Services, Councillor Doe, the following question:

Could you explain the Council's conclusions on the feasibility of modifying the existing Strood Library to accommodate a hub facility in the foyer area there, and tell me the difference between the cost of doing that and the cost of relocating the library and community hub to 133 High Street, including the cost of improving the road and path network in the vicinity of 133 High Street to make access safe for able-bodied as well as disabled people?

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Background papers

None