

Questions with Notice under Standing Order No. 6 – Full Council 22 February 2023

QUESTION 1:

Councillor Harry Clarke to Councillor Alison Webb, Executive Member for Health & Communities and Councillor Sarah Suggitt, Executive Member for Strategic & Operational Planning

Dereham Memoirs through Murals – Artwork through Dereham

At the Full Council on September 1st, 2022, I submitted a Question on notice, reluctantly asking the Cabinet to postpone or cancel the Artwork work projects, not just in Dereham but other Market Towns.

I understood then that the approximate cost would be £34k in Dereham, and made my request then because of the Cost of Living Crisis” (which has not lessened – but got much worse . My request was not successful.

I have taken no further part as a Dereham Cllr or ward member in this project since then – on any aspect.

My QUESTION is directed to a number of Cabinet Executive members, including but not restricted to: The Executive Member for Health and Communities and Executive Members with responsibilities for Planning.

“In Dereham, in the Market Square specifically a site has been proposed for a mural along and above the modern section of shops.

This is to be situated between and nearby to both Dereham Heritage assets and listed buildings. The mural there will be almost opposite the Cowper Church and be prominent in the Town for residents and visitors.

I suggest that where there are any such changes which affect the setting of heritage and listed assets – as I think this does, they should ENHANCE the setting and not detract from it.

My concern is not around any particular design or colour (others may and have commented).

1. Is Planning permission required for the mural in Dereham on this site in the Market Square?
2. Would the size of the mural normally trigger a need for a Planning consultation to relevant consultees, e.g., Town Council as for shop signs etc?
3. If the relevant Cabinet members have agreed that no Planning permission is required, have they had access to a full report from any specialist officers at the Council, such as the Historic Buildings Officer?
4. Has the impact of this mural on the setting and appearance in the Market Square and in addition on heritage assets and listed buildings been considered?
5. Has the Historic Buildings Officer given an unequivocal view that this mural does not damage or detract from the setting of any listed buildings, and heritage assets, taking into account the mural will be centrally situated near , to name a few examples : Cowper Road Church; a listed shop; The Assembly Rooms ; former Corn exchange and very close to these .
6. As the ward member in which area the proposed mural will sit, I haven't seen any report or advice from the Historic Building Officer giving any view on this “

Members will be aware that there are a number of initiatives to improve and brighten up our Market Towns and make them more attractive . Some is badged under the MTI (Market Town Initiative) , and my town -Dereham including a large part of my ward is no exception.

Such efforts are in normal times to be applauded and welcomed, and I have supported those sites selected in Dereham, together with other Dereham Cllrs at Breckland .

In Dereham the approximate spend will be £34k.

It is an understatement to state we are, and will be in exceptional times economically, which will be very difficult for many -and that is now compounded by the lifting of the energy price cap - every week there is a fresh figure quoted £4k-6k per annum.

Organisations and charities are now talking about "warm hubs ", there are suggestions about how to keep warm, save money-visit your Library, get on a long bus trip and so on to name but two.

The efforts of officers and members is much appreciated in the attempt to refresh Town Centres, but having reflected on the sums involved, I reluctantly am asking the Cabinet to postpone , and indeed cancel these projects given the dire outlook- not just for Dereham , but our other market towns.

Breckland already does support vulnerable people, those in housing need, Mid Norfolk Food Bank , and we've had the mobile low cost food bus.

We know what is coming down the road -we will need to marshal MORE such resources to support and a much wider range of residents than we have supported before.

RESPONSE: From Cllr Paul Claussen, Executive Member for Economic Development and Deputy Leader, Cllr Alison Webb Executive Member for Health & Communities and Cllr Sarah Suggitt Executive Member for Strategic & Operational Planning:

Whilst we appreciate you have addressed this question to a broad selection of the Executive, for simplicity we have responded together in consultation with other colleagues.

We have interpreted this on the basis there are two substantive elements to your question.

Firstly, regarding the 'Memoirs through Murals' Project:

The Executive Member for Economic Development instructed the '*Dereham Memoirs through Mural's*' Project to pause following the Cabinet meeting in Watton. This was to ascertain, amongst other things, how private concept documents are now in the public domain and a significant concern that the project was being hijacked for political reasons. Having observed the debate over social media recently, these concerns remain, and the project has been instructed to remain on pause until after the May elections.

This is a frustrating step to have had to take – not least as the work had been driven by a Cross Party Group of ward Members, has involved engagement with the local steering group made up of About Dereham, business representatives, Northgate School and its students, and Dereham Town Council. The locations, artists and the artwork have all been steered by this group and not by Breckland Council, and content has been focused around local engagement with school children, Dereham Theatre Company and Dereham Meeting Point on what they love about their town. Further, all of the mural design concepts were being developed and finalised - so much of the debate over the last two weeks has been led by half-truths, misinformation, and the drafts which were never intended for completion or publication.

We know this is disappointing for community groups, in particular, who have worked so hard on the project. However, we would like to reassure residents and Members that we remain committed to delivering local priorities and delivering art and culture to Breckland. We will be working with the project team, landowners, and the artists who have been involved to reflect on feedback recently – and will be re-energising the work early in the summer.

As such it does not feel appropriate to talk about any potential sites in specific detail. However, we can assure that the Planning Department, including the Historic Buildings Officer, has been closely involved in the project to date – and will continue to be so as we will work within the planning regulations.

Secondly, regarding the appropriateness of investing in activity which is not solely focussed on vulnerability and the cost-of-living crisis.

We would encourage you to read the response to your previous question in this regard, as the answer remains substantively the same. We would further highlight;

As you will recognise from the Council meeting agenda, the Council continues to make massive steps and investments in supporting the most vulnerable and doing the right thing for our diverse communities. Specifically, a proposed investment of £1.5 million in housing solutions for vulnerable groups, including Ukrainian's who may be displaced.

In addition, our £1million Inspiring Communities Programme continues to support Breckland's most vulnerable residents. To date this programme has:

- supported over 1000 survivors of domestic abuse,
- recruited and trained 60 volunteers to act as Daisy Ambassadors, raising awareness of domestic abuse,
- Helped more than 3000 individuals access low-cost food and provide ongoing support for wider issues through the Breckland Food Bus and Nourishing Norfolk Network,
- 400 residents have signed up and accessed our Silver Social project for socially isolated older people,
- The programme has trained 225 Mental Health First Aiders,
- Helped 55 young people and their families manage their mental health whilst awaiting professional help, through the Cup O-T Wellbeing Therapy Services in partnership with Breckland YAB,
- Supported over 1000 residents struggling with mental health at The Rest in Thetford centre, a Norfolk and Waveney MIND hub based at Breckland House in Thetford,
- 1000 residents have been supported through the Household Support Fund,
- 218 refugees and 88 host families have been supported through the Homes for Ukraine scheme; and
- 500 residents have been supported through Social Prescribing.

We believe this is one of the most substantial contributions made to this agenda in the history of Breckland Council. As such do not accept, and do not believe the facts suggest, that programmes like MTI are progressed at the detriment to our ability to support the vulnerable.

Further, as was pointed out to you in September, we have a responsibility as an authority to invest in the future, to support the places people live and work in – and help the economic vitality of the District in the long-term. It would be short-sighted in the extreme to abandon all our efforts and focus on a single issue.

QUESTION 2:

Councillor Tim Birt to Councillor Paul Hewett, Executive Member for Property, Projects and Procurement

Commercial Property Debt

There is still no timely mechanism to keep members informed about any financial stress within our portfolio. I request an update on our current position.

(a) Within our commercial property portfolio, what is the value of outstanding debt owed to the Council 90 days after the original settlement date?

(b) Within our commercial property portfolio, what is the value of debt written off in the current tax year to date?

RESPONSE: Financial stress is caused by unforeseen events within a portfolio. We actively work with our property tenants to seek to avoid such unforeseen events, and the numbers below reflect a lag recording of prudent financial management rather than a lead indicator of financial stress.

Whilst the following are neither KPIs nor appropriate measures to the questions asked, responses are as follows:

- a. - £326,485.59
- b. – £23,145.61 – provision of £20k made for these debts in 21/22 accounts

QUESTION 3:

Councillor Tim Birt to Councillor Phil Cowen, Executive Member for Finance, Revenue & Benefits

Council Tax Debt

In light of the cost-of-living crisis, please could we regularly report Council Tax debt as this may provide us with an indicator of the financial pressure of Breckland residents;

(a) What is the current value of Council Tax arrears in the form previously reported, ie number of reminders issued and the value of those reminders?

(b) What is the value of Council Tax debt written off in the current year 2022/23 to date?

RESPONSE: Council tax debt is only one element of what may indicate financial pressure to Breckland residents and is regularly reported & monitored at an operational level.

- (a) £6,499,740 & 13,978 reminders/final notices
- (b) £16,435

For comparative purposes, these are the values at the same point in time last year:

- (a) £7,230,548 & 20,762 reminders/final notices
- (b) 6,080

QUESTION 4:

Councillor Tim Birt to the Leader, Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen
Truthfulness

Central Govt has been besieged by lies and I hope we don't want that to filter down to local Government, although it may be too late. At last Council I asked the Leader to define a lie and he declined to do so, but since we are about to update our constitution to include the requirement to be truthful it is vital that we all know the reach of that requirement.

(a) Specifically in terms of statements made by Senior Management and Cabinet Members, please define what is a lie.

(b) If an unintentional error is made what requirements are there to correct the record.

RESPONSE: I refer Cllr Birt to the Localism Act 2011 which contains the current legislative arrangements for elected Member standards of conduct within local authorities. Furthermore, I refer Cllr Birt to the Members' Code of Conduct, both current and proposed, which specifically deal with Member standards of conduct at Breckland Council. Lastly, I refer Cllr Birt to the Officer Code of Conduct which is the common reference document for all employees that defines the standards of conduct that employees are expected to observe.

**QUESTION 5:
Councillor Tim Birt to Councillor Jane James, Executive Member for Customer & Corporate Services (including risk management)**

Air Quality

Air quality is an important measure included in Health and Safety Executive guidance. Elevated CO2 from exhaled air in closed environments is a proxy measurement for infection risk for airborne viruses, such as COVID-19 and influenza. The Council installed CO2 air quality meters and previously it was stated that the data from these is recorded.

- (a) What threshold (in ppm of CO2) does the Council deem the air quality as good?
- (b) What threshold (in ppm of CO2) is the Council's ventilation target?
- (c) How often do we exceed this target?
- (d) At what threshold (in ppm of CO2) would immediate action be required?

RESPONSE: On the basis that this question relates to internal air quality in the Council's HQ facility, this question has been answered by Councillor Paul Hewett, Executive Member for Property, Projects & Procurement.

- a. The optimum air quality is anything below 1000 PPM.
- b. The Council's ventilation target is 1000PPM.
- c. From the period 4/11/21 – 16/2/23. There were only 6 instances where the levels recorded fell into Moderate Air Quality 1001 – 1400 PPM, where ventilation is advised. This equates to 1% when we exceeded this target.
- d. Immediate action is required when levels reach Very Poor Air Quality at levels of greater than 1801 PPM, we have never exceeded this threshold.

**QUESTION 6:
Councillor Tim Birt to the Leader, Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen**

Voting

In the Transforming Breckland magazine in an article entitled: voters urged not to forget their ID in May it says:

"If you are already registered to vote and your detailed or address haven't changed, you don't need to do anything."

Is this accurate and true? I suggest it is misleading because voters will still need valid ID, which may not be obtainable on election day. I suggest an urgent correction is required.

RESPONSE: The article is based on the wording from the Electoral Commission national guidance and is correct, in terms of voter registration, if you are already registered to vote and your details or address haven't changed, you do not need to do anything. The statement that refers to Voter ID is in a separate paragraph to the statement regarding registering to vote, and the article makes it clear that at the elections on May 4 you will need appropriate photo ID to vote at a polling station.

QUESTION 7:

Councillor Roger Atterwill to the Deputy Leader, Councillor Paul Claussen

Painting of Murals in Dereham Town Centre

In relation to the proposed painting of murals in Dereham Town Centre, please confirm how much money is allocated for this Dereham project, has an order for the work been placed yet, was a formal tender process carried out for this and when will the work commence?

RESPONSE: I instructed the *'Dereham Memoirs through Mural's'* Project to pause following the Cabinet meeting In Watton. This was to ascertain, amongst other things, how private concept documents are now in the public domain, and my concern that the project was being hijacked for political reasons.

Having observed the debate over social media recently, my concerns remain, and I have instructed the project to remain on pause until after the May elections. This is a frustrating step to have had to take – not least as the work had involved engagement with the local steering group made up of About Dereham, a business representatives, Northgate School and its students, and Dereham Town Council. The locations, artists and the artwork have all been steered by this group and not by Breckland Council, and content has been focused around local engagement with school children, Dereham Theatre Company and Dereham Meeting Point on what they love about their town. Further, all of the mural design concepts were being developed and finalised - so much of the debate over the last two weeks has been led by half-truths, misinformation, and drafts which were never intended for completion or publication.

However, as we have had disappointment expressed from residents and community groups that this project has been paused, I would like to reassure residents and Members that we remain committed to delivering local priorities and delivering art and culture to Breckland. We will be working with the project team, landowners, and the artists who have been involved to reflect on feedback recently – and will be re-energising the work early in the summer.

As a result, I believe these update supersedes much of your question, particularly relating to when works will start and timescales. However, I am happy to confirm that; cross party Ward Members allocated £34k of their MTI allocation for the project (which included the work to identify sites, consultation, community engagement, design, artist engagement and delivery), and that the works were tendered in February 2022.

QUESTION 8:

Councillor Roger Atterwill to Councillor Jane James, Executive Member for Customer & Corporate Services

Rebranding

This Council seems to have undergone a rebranding exercise which is evident from the latest edition of the Transforming Breckland magazine, social media content and issuing of new lanyards to staff and members etc. Why was this exercise considered necessary and please provide a breakdown of cost including design and implementation.

RESPONSE: The rebranding forms an essential part of our corporate communication strategy, facilitating understanding of our priorities with members, residents, businesses and other partners in our communities. This rebranding reflects the changes that we as a council have undertaken through the Work Smart initiative, de-coupling from our shared arrangement with South Holland and aligns with our Corporate Priorities.

A full tender process was undertaken to ensure that we as a Council achieved best value and the cost was £6,000, awarded to a local design company, further supporting Breckland as a

place where people and businesses thrive. This investment in Breckland District Council's communications delivers templates and guidance on the brand's use to ensure a cohesive approach to our residents' magazine, letters, social media assets, reports amongst others. The implementation of this has been done on a rolling basis with a focus that should printed information still be current, there is no need to replace until it requires refresh. For remaining roll out, most of this has been electronically based so has been able to be managed in-house by our Communications Team.

QUESTION 9:

Councillor Terry Jermy to Councillor Crane, Executive Member for Environmental Health, Licensing & Sustainability

Thetford Town Council already pays for the installation of street furniture across Thetford, including litter bins, dog waste bins, grit bins and benches. This comes at some considerable cost. Now, the Town Council has been informed that should it wish to install any new bins on its land then it must also now pay Serco a monthly charge to empty them - £267.55 per year, per bin. A figure that will inevitably discourage new bins from being installed. This appears to be a change to longstanding policy. Could you confirm how this change has come about, who made the decision and what member consultation there was.

RESPONSE: Breckland Council has responsibility to keep relevant land, as far as practicable, free from litter and refuse. As such the Council gives consideration to the installation of litter and dog waste bins on highway land, and land within ownership of the Council. Town Council land falls outside of this responsibility, and as such the installation and emptying costs would fall to the Town Council. The Town Council can make their own arrangements to have bins installed on their land and emptied, or can request for Serco via Breckland Council, as a supplier, to install or empty bins, and an appropriate cost for this service would be quoted. There has been no change in policy.