

Council Meeting

10 November 2020

Questions Submitted by Councillors under Question Time (agenda item 14)

1. Question from Cllr James to Cllr Davies, Leader of the Council

“In a previous executive Q&A, the Executive responded to one of my residents who is profoundly deaf who asked whether executive facebook live sessions, alongside council meetings could invest in live-captioning and BSL interpretation. One of the gifts of lockdown is that it has given us remote meetings, which make the use of BSL interpretations much easier and more financially feasible.

(i) Could North Somerset please look into making our newly live streamed meetings more accessible by providing post-event captioning, live captioning, and or BSL interpretation so that we can commit to being an open and fair council for all?

(ii) And if my resident sent advanced notice, requesting such provisions for all future such meetings, would we be bound by the equality act to do so anyway?”

Response from Cllr Davies

(i) The council is currently reviewing the three possible forms of assistance that provide a greater level of accessibility to online meetings for those who have difficulty hearing:

1. Live transcription of the meeting using a British sign language interpreter
2. Utilising closed captions as provided by Teams or Google
3. Live captions generated in real time by a typist

Live transcription using an interpreter can be achieved either as a direct participant in a Teams meeting, or as a separate video feed mixed into the video stream prior to streaming. Such assistance is extremely effective. The interpreter can either be present in the room in the case of a CEO briefing session or provide services remotely as a participant in a Teams meeting. The council already possesses the technology to deliver both solutions and there are interpreters available to undertake this work who would previously have been booked for face to face meetings.

We have previously experimented using closed captions generated automatically by Microsoft Teams. Whilst this technology makes a brave attempt at producing a transcript of the meeting in real time, there are times when it makes mistakes, particularly in relation to people’s names. This has previously resulted in potential embarrassment to both officers and councillors, and, as a result, the solution has not been explored further. This solution does however offer the advantage of being readily available at no additional cost or overhead.

Live captioning achieved through the use of a typist is more of a challenge for the council to implement given that it does not already have the equipment required

to overlay a feed of captions to a meeting stream. Whilst this is a one-off investment, the ongoing cost of the typist must also be considered and will require budget growth to support.

Closed captions can also be generated by Google through the YouTube web stream. The council does not have sufficient subscribers to its YouTube channel in order to qualify for live streaming however closed captions generated after the meeting represent the current approach adopted by the council whilst other options are considered. The disadvantage of having captions generated post-event however is obviously that it does not allow real-time involvement in the meeting. Council meetings however are streamed as a one-way broadcast; there is no means by which any member of the public can participate in the meeting in terms of making a representation other than by submitting a written disposition in advance.

(ii) The council is obliged by the Equality Act, so far as is reasonably practicable, to approximate the access enjoyed by disabled people to that enjoyed by the rest of the public. The purpose of the duty to make reasonable adjustments is to provide access to a service as close as it is reasonably possible to get to the standard normally offered to the public at large.

In considering what constitute *reasonable adjustments*, the council must consider such questions as

- The extent to which it is practicable for us to implement the adjustment;
- The financial and other costs of making the adjustment;
- The extent of any disruption which taking the steps would cause;
- The extent of the service provider's financial and other resources;
- The amount of any resources already spent on making adjustments; and
- The availability of financial or other assistance.

Collectively the meetings of the Council, its panels and committees consume on average around 15 hours per month over ten months of the year. Calculating on the basis of £150/hour for interpretation or typist services, this would cost the council approximately £23k. It would provide Deaf and hearing-impaired people with the required standard of service set out in the Equality Act and enjoyed by hearing people. This should be judged against the cost previously paid for interpreters etc at face to face meetings with North Somerset customers. A meeting could typically cost around the same.

The council's next steps will be to investigate the practical issues (eg suitability of IT services, availability of interpreters), to determine if the interpretation and captioning services can be delivered and so seen to be reasonable.

2. Question from Cllr James to Cllr Davies, Leader of the Council

"How many of North Somerset Council's employees, and employees contracted by North Somerset Council earn the Real Living Wage (£9.30 per hour), and what would the cost implications be of North Somerset Council tackling inequalities by becoming a Real Living Wage Employer?"

Response from Cllr Davies

In respect of the living wage we only have one spinal point that is less than £9.30, it is £9.25 (excluding apprentices).

There are three people on this spinal point (excluding schools) and all three will be in receipt of increments that will increase their salary above that amount by February 2021.

The three will increase to £9.43 when the increments are applied.

3. Question from Cllr Cronnelly to Cllr Solomon, Executive Member for Communities, Tourism and Leisure

“Hutton Moor Leisure Centre continues to be affected by unlawful encampments on their car park and it’s a very sensitive area as the leisure centre is well used by the community. Over the last 18 months I’m aware of at least 6 occasions when this has happened. On most occasions we’ve started the court process and on one occasion had to use enforcement agents. All of this costs in terms of time, legal fees, resources and lost revenue.

The entrance to Hutton Moor is one of the areas of vulnerability and needs to be seriously looked at to see if improvements can be made. Surely it will cost us less in the long term to make changes - such as a height barrier - than it would be to continue with this cycle of eviction.

When Melrose car park had issues with encampments a better barrier was put in. Why is Hutton Moor being ignored and when will improvements be made? Lockdown would be the optimum time to make any changes to the entrance. Will you commit to making these changes?”

Response from Cllr Solomon

I am aware Hutton Moor is regularly a target for travellers; and this year alone there have been at least 4 unauthorised encampments on site and currently we have travellers on site. This leaves us with a mess to clear and challenges for staff and costs thousands of pounds.

Over the years a number of schemes to prevent the travellers accessing the site have been installed, bunding and posts, but these just stop travellers driving onto the pitches. The car park is now the issue, and again in the past different schemes to prevent access to the carpark have been looked at, but due to the site needing to allow access for delivery vehicles, coaches and work vans (customers), without causing a back up on the road; the scheme is not as straight forward as hoped and has always stopped.

This situation cannot continue, so I have now asked the leisure manager and her team to look at this as a priority (which was already in place), and investigate

different options and obtain some quote for the works, we will then look at moving forward.

4. Question from Cllr Haverson to Cllr Gibbons, Executive Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning

"There has been huge public concern about the failure of central government to provide free school meals during half term, a decision which fortunately has now been revoked for Christmas. Many local councils including NS stepped up to the mark last week, by publishing local businesses who offered free meals and giving out back up phone numbers for families unable to access this support. I understand this back up support from NS was funded by our Welfare Provision Scheme.

However, when I tested this system myself by phoning the call centre numbers published by us, the results were disappointing. The information I got was ill informed and not adequate, the only offer given to me was for food bank vouchers. I was subsequently told by officers that Tesco vouchers or even cash handed out in the Town Hall should also have been offered.

This highlighted that for families in rural locations such as my ward, support via our WPS is very difficult to access, especially currently when travel by public transport is discouraged. Our nearest food bank is either Cheddar or Weston. I have suggested to explore including Coop vouchers in the options on offer, as Coop stores can be found in most villages. Also to ensure that call centre operatives are adequately trained. Please can I be reassured that this will be pursued?"

Oral response from Cllr Gibbons to be provided at the Council meeting.

5. Question from Cllr Codling to Cllr Davies, Leader of the Council

"I would like to know more about the new Assistant Executive member positions and the evidence of need leading to their creation. Councillor Davies, I understand that you were vociferously opposed to the existence of these positions - and derogatory in your criticism of the previous administration - when they were first introduced. With perhaps a better understanding now of the responsibilities and pressures of leading a Council since becoming Leader, the creation of the new positions suggests you have come to agree with the previous administration. Since the appointments did not need the approval of full Council, could you outline the relevant executive decision making - was this by way of an Executive Members' vote (and were all parties of the Rainbow Coalition in agreement?) or is it solely your decision as Council Leader? If it is the latter, are your Rainbow Coalition Executive colleagues all in accord and were they consulted?"

Response from Cllr Davies

Cllr Codling, thank you for your questions. For ease of reading for others I have split them down as follows:

I would like to know more about the new Assistant Executive member positions and the evidence of need leading to their creation.

1. Q = Councillor Davies, I understand that you were vociferously opposed to the existence of these positions - and derogatory in your criticism of the previous administration - when they were first introduced

A = I was vociferously opposed to most of what the previous administration did, in the partisan way in which they led this council, leaving us as one of the most unequal and poorly funded authorities in England. I shall say that my comments on their effectiveness under the previous administration were all made in public meetings. Given that very sadly one of those who so served is no longer with us, any more detailed specific comment would be disrespectful.

2. Q = With perhaps a better understanding now of the responsibilities and pressures of leading a Council since becoming Leader, the creation of the new positions suggests you have come to agree with the previous administration.

A = No! We are faced with four challenges of a global pandemic, an extant crippling recession, public services stripped of capacity by your party's Austerity policies and, more parochially, having to adapt to working and meeting remotely. Those challenges are not going to go away any time soon and the workloads of the executive for the foreseeable future are only going to increase. In these circumstances I had concerns as leader on the capacity of this administration to deliver for the residents of North Somerset and also for the personal wellbeing of my colleagues with the team we have. It was decided for speed to use the mechanisms available to increase that capacity until we can hold an annual meeting. As you will know there is a constitutional review ongoing.

3. Q = Since the appointments did not need the approval of full Council, could you outline the relevant executive decision making - was this by way of an Executive Members' vote (and were all parties of the Rainbow Coalition in agreement?) or is it solely your decision as Council Leader? If it is the latter, are your Rainbow Coalition Executive colleagues all in accord and were they consulted?

A = as the appointments are outside the constitution (which was one of the criticisms I made when they were first created) then formally they need no approval, yet unlike the previous administration, we have prepared detailed role descriptions for the Assistant Executive Members so that there is transparency about their remit and purpose. However this administration makes all decisions in a collegiate manner, the executive met virtually informally, discussed and agreed. Once that proposal had been agreed then the decision was announced at the next available public meeting. And I should like to record my thanks to all my colleagues in the administration for their work during these times of emergency.

6. Question from Cllr Clayton to Cllr Davies, Leader of the Council

“Can the leader tell me if the appointments of the two assisting executive members are temporary and that he will review the appointments in May with the view of removing them and if that’s not to be the case can I ask why?”

Response from Cllr Davies

As I have said in response to a very similar question, we are faced with four challenges of a global pandemic, an extant crippling recession, public services stripped of capacity by Austerity and having to adapt to working and meeting remotely. Those challenges are not going to go away any time soon and the workloads of the executive for the foreseeable future are only going to increase. In these circumstances I had concerns as leader on the capacity of this administration to deliver for the residents of North Somerset and also for the personal wellbeing of my colleagues with the team we have. It was decided for speed to use the mechanisms available to increase that capacity until we can hold an annual meeting when we shall review all executive appointments.

7. Question from Cllr Crockford-Hawley to Cllr Davies, Leader of the Council

“Following the local government election of May 2019 it fell to the Leader of Council to establish an Executive (Cabinet). In our new multi-party council the appointment to executive office and committee chairs needed to satisfy the aspirations, demands and prejudices of (1) co-operating parties (Independent, Liberal Democrat, Labour, Green and Portishead Independent, Conservatives having chosen not to participate in a NSC coalition) and (2) the constituencies, towns and parishes which make up North Somerset. A balanced approach was sought, though the speed with which offices needed to be filled precluded councillors getting to know one another since everything had to be cut and dry at our first meeting of Council. Many of us met for the first time at that opening gathering eighteen months ago and therefore had little understanding of individual interests or skills.

Hopefully, and despite not meeting in person since the March lock-down, we all now have a much better understanding of one another’s abilities, or lack of them.

The Leader’s recent decision to appoint deputy Executive Members has come without any discussion by councillors.

Would the Leader explain the rational for making these appointments and for filling the posts as he has done? Why were ‘ordinary’ councillors not given an opportunity to debate the matter of deputy Executive Members? If these appointments were made to relieve existing Executive Members of their workload then either those workloads were excessive or the office holders were not up to task.

Would the Leader state whether the remuneration of these new office holders is being taken from the existing cost of Executive membership or being financed from other sources? The pandemic has caused Chairman of Council’s duties to become virtually non-existent; perhaps money is being sequestered from the Chairman’s budget to help finance these new appointments?

It is clear that some Executive and Committee office holders’ workloads are hefty. It is equally clear that some are light. Will the Leader agree to investigate this disparity along with a consideration of how the Executive works, in order for appropriate discussion to occur and for changes to be in place at the Annual Meeting in May 2021?”

Response from Cllr Davies

Cllr Crockford-Hawley, thank you for your many questions. For continuity the response is similar to those already given:

1. We are faced with four challenges of a global pandemic, an extant crippling recession, public services stripped of capacity by Austerity and having to adapt to working and meeting remotely, as well as providing 'business as usual'. Those challenges are not going to go away any time soon and the workloads of the executive for the foreseeable future are only going to increase. Additionally we have to produce a new Local Plan and address the very serious implications of the pandemic for our local businesses in key areas of tourism and hospitality.

2. In these circumstances I had concerns as leader on the capacity of this administration to deliver for the residents of North Somerset and also for the personal wellbeing of my colleagues with the team we have. It was decided for speed to use the mechanisms available to increase that capacity until we can hold an annual meeting.

3. As the appointments are outside the constitution then formally they need no approval, yet unlike the previous administration, we have prepared detailed role descriptions for the Assistant Executive Members so that there is transparency about their remit and purpose. And this administration makes all decisions in a collegiate manner.

4. The funding is from underspend on councillors' expense costs.

5. We have already committed to a review of the Executive at the next annual meeting, which will hopefully be in May 2021.

6. It would be impolite of me to comment on the Chairman's business.