

COUNCIL MEETING – 24 SEPTEMBER 2020
QUESTIONS FROM ELECTORS UNDER PROCEDURE RULE 9

1. From Chandra Muvvala to Councillor Anderson

Not many residents are aware of the virtual consultation that Slough Borough Council carried out on the widening of the high street in Langley. Many residents did not have good internet connection and were unable to attend the virtual consultation.

Do you have any other plans to reach all Langley residents to hear their feedback on the proposal to widen Langley high street?

Reply

We are keenly aware that not all residents have access to remote technology, but the opportunities to consult are somewhat limited, given the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions (e.g. no physical public meetings possible).

Our Highways team have been liaising with the SBC Communications team. They continue to host the SBC social media channels, including Twitter and Facebook, as well as the main website. Further information will be provided as and when available.

However, they currently have no plans to provide any other traditional / physical forms of providing information.

In addition to the website updates, further press releases will be considered, for publication in the local press. Beyond this, the next main information channel is expected to be the usual letter to residents, businesses etc directly affected by the highway works. This typically gets prepared by the project team and sent out two to three weeks before work is due to start. We will also provide advance notification to the emergency services and public transport companies, including any information relating to temporary traffic orders.

2. From Meena Sharma to Councillor Swindlehurst

What assurances can be given to Slough's council taxpayers that they will not have to foot the bill, in increased council tax, to pay ongoing costs of the £41,333,500 white elephant SBC new offices, which is likely to be grossly under-occupied due to plans for long term homeworking?

Reply

Thank you for your question.

Staff had been returning to work in increasing numbers over the recent weeks – indeed some never stopped coming in – until the recent change in government advice to again work from home where possible.

And as you can see from my presence in the Council chamber this evening we had begun the process of running hybrid meetings.

This started with arrangements being made for committee chairs and vice-chairs who should by now have all completed individual risk assessments – as many other councils have done.

Now onto your rather timely question about Observatory House. I can offer 100% reassurance that taxpayers won't see any additional impacts from the lockdown restrictions offered by the government.

There are a number of reasons for this – 3 of which relate to new tenants in the building as promised in our plans.

Firstly, we have secured funding for a new skills and innovation hub to be based on the 5th floor of Observatory House. This brings the council a significant rental income, but more importantly help our residents who've had their employment affected by COVID back on their feet.

Secondly we have been instructed by government to set up a wholly owned council company to provide joined up children's services in Slough – this company will to be based in our Observatory House HQ and will contribute rental income to the Council.

Thirdly Slough Urban Renewal will be moving into Observatory House, and although taking up less space, will still provide the council with a further revenue stream.

In terms of return on investment, the building purchase price was £39 million and the building is now valued at over £52 million. This is a profit to the taxpayer of around £13 million.

That represents a return on investment of a staggering 27% to the Slough taxpayer.

Finally our total decant from SMP leads to the ability to redevelop that site to deliver on council housing priorities and cover the initial revenue impact of our move to Windsor Road.

So, although you may not wish to agree, I think the figures in terms of rental income, increased value and return on investment, let alone the social impacts of new housing being created for our residents on our previous site, show this have been and continue to be a wise investment.

3. From Gurcharan Manku to Councillor Anderson

What was your involvement in planning and assessment of bus lanes? What risk assessments if any were conducted for the project?

Reply

You may well recall from your brief time as a Labour Councillor that the role of Councillors is to set policy for officers to implement, We do that through our Manifesto which committed us to providing Slough with a modern and efficient transport system to serve the Town.

Therefore the planning and assessment of the installation of the Bus Lanes would have been carried out by Professional Officers using their expertise to devise a system to deliver on the policy objectives Members have set.

4. From Patrick O'Connor to Councillor Nazir

With the average space of new dwellings within Slough lower than the national average, is Councillor Nazir comfortable with the Labour policy of pursuing the development of low space, low quality dwellings?

Reply

I assume you are referring to the research done by Centre for Cities which shows that Slough has the smallest amount of space per person compared to the average for all other towns and cities.

This is a reflection of the level of over crowding in Slough not the size or quality of the housing. A ten bedroom house can still be overcrowded.

The study, while not proving your point does point to the need to build more housing on brownfield sites like Akzo Nobel, TVU and Horlicks to ensure we have enough housing to meet demand and stop overcrowding. And that is what this council is committed to do – building the homes our residents need.

When talking about the size of individual housing units you only have to look to the Conservatives shambolic 'prior approval policy' for office conversions into flats – this gives the council no control over development, no powers to intervene and no powers to do anything about undersized units.

So perhaps you could raise this at a party meeting and ask your party to scrap this scheme which has led to disastrous and dangerous conversions placing thousands of people at risk of financial ruin and even death, and hand control over development back to councils.

5. From Kevin Barry to Councillor Strutton

Could the Leader of the Opposition offer his thoughts on the Prime Minister's cycling and walking plan for England – paying particular attention on the sections which promote “physical segregated bikes tracks” to create “physical separation” between vehicles, cycles and pedestrians to make cycling “mass transit” form of transport and how the Prime Minister wants to treat “cycles as vehicles” and not pedestrians and how this dovetails with the experiential bus and cycle lane in Slough which not only implements the Prime Ministers own strategy but allows for social distancing on our pavements to take place which is now more important than ever given the governments botched handling of track and trace?

Reply

Thank you for your multiple questions Mr Barry, for which I truly do thank you and SBC Officers for allowing me to answer. There appears to be not only one question but multiple with only the slightest link to Slough, as per the rules under which your questions and your supplementary were submitted. Please find below the livestream link and the timestamps for your question :<http://civico.net/slough/streams/10647>

- Start of question- 00:22:49
- Cllr Strutton's response- 00:23:45
- Supplementary question- 00:34:20
- Cllr Strutton's response- 00:35:03

After clarification of my concerns and the rules about my response and the time allowed answering your question, I was given the opportunity to respond in full at the Mayor's discretion. This gave me a full opportunity to raise my concerns regarding the experimental bus and cycle lanes on the Bath Road.

Firstly, Slough Borough Council's Experimental Orders in their current form do not work as the town's Labour Leadership would have us believe. There is no form of physical separation between cyclists and other forms of vehicular users including buses. For the majority of potential new cyclists, this doesn't provide a high enough level of safety to promote and encourage them to take up cycling as an alternative method of mass transport! It will not in any real form help to drastically or even to a really appreciative degree improve air quality for those living and working in Slough, if properly compared to the drastic reductions as COVID-19 has facilitated its self. Furthermore, the month by month statistics presented can be used to demonstrate the scheme is not working and nor has it led to improvements following its implementation. You have to ask why vehicle counts and traffic movements are missing from this report!

With between 10 to 15 % of normal air traffic overhead, this also delivers a great improvement in local noise reduction. There is around a 30 to 40 % reduction on average of commuter vehicle movements due to Covid-19 and working habit changes, as a consequence of home working and increased internet ordering.

We already have a poor bus route and regular service schedules, which are further impacted by having a reduced passenger capacity of about 60% or more! In fact, the statistics provided as just on flow (journey times) rates could be used to prove that they are indeed not working as this Council had hoped for. Why are there no statistics on vehicle movement number for any type of vehicle, from bikes, buses cars, lorries and such? Is this because it would further underline the fact that their scheme is failing to deliver, and especially in the way you suggest along with the Council?

If this Council was really interested in providing protected cycle and an e-scooter route, these would be a real part of its town centre and town wide planning requirement and its spatial planning. We are not really seeing this with sites like the ones for our square mile and SPZ on the trading estate and other sites.

Why has the Council not used the PWLB loans to deliver these, having borrowed some £343,318, 536.23 already? We are so behind on green energy production, surface water collection and reuse for our own buildings both residential and commercial. Again, with the SPZ it's laughable to hear the green credentials they claim.

These schemes were required to deliver green improvements for the majority of residents. Given the request not to use public transport as much due to the need for social distancing, and the lack of data on numbers of residents, shoppers and commuters actually benefiting; the Conservative Association has written to the minister pointing out our concerns and that of the residents, businesses, and other local organisations that it indeed has failed. Hence, all the changes and alterations made already! Myself, the local Conservative Association and the vast majority of those on social media are all of the same mind that the experimental lanes are not working. It has made an improving situation (improved pollution levels, a direct result of the impact of Covid-19) worse!

Because you failed to provide the quotes you state have been made about not only the Government's but in particularly the PM's views on this, I can only talk about what I have heard, understood and found via a good old google search myself in researching these issues.

I could not find any reference to the PM looking to change treating cycles as vehicles and not pedestrians! In fact, the law sees cycles as vehicles and they are treated as such; there are several regulations as to how cycles are classed and legality of who and at what age, some can be ridden on our roads and designated cycle paths, road networks and some only on private land. There are many fines, some in the thousands of pounds. Any e-bike capable of up to a powered speed of 15.5mph, you have to be over 14 to ride on public roads. Any that are capable of a powered speed in excess are unlawful on our public roads or authorised cycle lanes.

I also discovered why it is very unlikely that our PM would try to change a cycle's classification to a vehicle from one of as a pedestrian. This is due to the fact he had been warned for giving his then partner a "twosey" on a cycle with only one seat, as it is classed as a vehicle you are only allowed to ride being a passenger on a cycle with properly designed fixed seats to carry them, this applies to trikes as well. The PM's remarks I have seen and heard, all relate to these orders having a hard physical barrier- unlike Slough's painted line or advisory broken line. So please do explain how you see this Council's experimental bus and cycle lanes deliver on

these stated requirements! So many in the town are saying themselves these experimental orders are and have increased traffic jams all along the A4, and the side roads affecting all aspects of their travel needs. Residents have highlighted that the pollution in their view is being made worse because of their implementation. It also states the need to avoid and reduce traffic gridlocks, to which it is clear that they have failed here as well.

If the Council had provided more routes, increased the number of buses allowed, extended passes to have been used for longer during the day from 07:00 till 22:30, allowed taxis, private hire and fully zero emission vehicles it could be argued, but they refused only allowing Hackney Cabs today as I write this. They would have also used said funds to put in additional hired bikes and bays in residential areas.

I welcome this Council's award by the Government to run an e-scooter hire scheme! These schemes will also help determine that new legislation and a full review of vehicle law is needed, along with requirements for town and transport planning to empower a real modal shift in personal transport.

The final part of your written question refers to track and trace by the Government and how you deem it a failure. Which again, I view as being a separate national issue and not directly associated with Slough. It also only relates to passengers on buses, in regards to the scope behind the point of your one question allowed.

But again, happy for the opportunity to respond. I myself have stated that I am not pleased with aspects of the Government's approach to testing. It needs to have a wider range of tests and equipment in its approved arsenal as it were and put forward to SBC officers one of these units provide by a local (Heathrow based company MedicalForex) AFS1000, which can from a basic blood sample produce two different test results in 1 minute (1) a test to see if you are Covid positive or negative, 2) It can also test at same time if you have any antibodies). It can also be programmed to run other tests separately at another time. See CNN report via <https://www.medicalforex.com/cnn-report-age-1000-flight-Covid-19/> .This system has been discussed on LBC. It is to be used by the Italian Government and I know has been put before the health minister, and is now going though later stages of approval for UK state care providers to use.

Yes, we could be doing better in National Track & Trace but this also requires greater support and take up by all in the UK working actively in participation. If MPs and some civil rights groups looking to oppose this given the unique set of circumstances (re Covid) then this is always going to be difficult. I have already signed up to the NHS Covid App and request others to do so. But I would like to see really effective measures to ensure the data collected is only used in direct needs of Covid tracing, tracking and medical requirements research to protect us and help with any vaccine needs.

6. From Steven Gillingwater to Councillor Swindlehurst

With the working group being established to look at the electoral cycle, will the working group be looking at the benefits of whole elections for disabled people and will the working group look at what Slough can do to be a leader in assisting disabled people stand for elections and be a strong voice for fellow disabled residents?

Reply

With only 10% of councillors having a disability compared to 20% of the country its vital we make becoming a councillor more accessible to those with a disability and increase representation.

Empowering people with disabilities leads to better decisions and more effective outcomes for all of us, unless every one of residents can reach their full potential, our nation never will.

In recent years we have sought to reduce the number of poorly accessible and temporary portakabin polling stations to ensure those with disabilities can better exercise their franchise and have their say on who is elected to represent them.

Without wishing to prejudge the recommendations of the working group into elections it's true to say there is a greater certainty that all-out elections attract fuller financial resources which should further increase and improve accessibility.

So in short the answer is yes, and I will ensure your representation is fed into the terms of reference of the working group.