

COUNCIL MEETING – 16 MARCH 2023

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS RULE OF PROCEDURE 15

AGENDA ITEM NO. 8 (A)

Question from Councillor Peter O'Brien

“Residents of the Derbyshire Dales have voted decisively by 51% to 38% against the proposal for an Elected Mayor (and Combined Authority) for Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. In the light of this, do you agree that this Council should urgently reconsider its unconditional support for this additional layer of bureaucracy as part of the so-called “devolution deal”?”

RESPONSE:

Thanks for your question, Councillor O'Brien. You will recall from previous reports here and in briefings provided that the governance arrangements for the proposed Mayoral Combined County Authority are prescribed by central government. Consultation on the governance arrangements does not constitute a referendum, but I am sure that the Constituent Authorities will have due regard to the consultation outcomes. As far as this Council is concerned, we hope to benefit from the economic dividends promised through devolution and that promise is something that I am sure that all Members in this Chamber will want to be realised.

AGENDA ITEM NO. 8 (B)

Questions from Councillor Clare Gamble

“Q1. Cllr. Garry Purdy has reportedly resigned from the Conservative Party and the Conservative Group rather than face an internal investigation into his conduct over the agreement he and the Chief Executive, Paul Wilson, made with the Heights of Abraham. There can now be little doubt that Cllr. Purdy has accepted that his conduct has fallen below that expected of an elected representative and that he misled the council in answering my questions on 26th January 2023. The Chief Executive, Paul Wilson, made the same written guarantee to Heights of Abraham, which appears to have been subsequently denied by the council in press releases. In your opinion, does the Chief Executive, Paul Wilson, have any responsibility for the agreement signed with Heights of Abraham, and does he have any responsibility to ensure any press releases on the subject are both accurate and truthful?”

RESPONSE:

Thanks for your question, Councillor Gamble. To be absolutely clear, no agreement exists between this Council and the Heights of Abraham. The correspondence you refer to confirms the decision taken in October 2022 by officers on the recommendation of the Gypsy and Traveller Site Provision Working Group to designate land at Matlock Bath Station Yard Car Park as a temporary tolerated site for a specific homeless Traveller family. A decision that this Council confirmed by way of

resolution on the 24th of November. The Chief Executive has acted entirely within the remit of the Head of Paid Service and enjoys not only my full confidence, but that of all other political group leaders on this Council, as confirmed in a public statement issued yesterday.

Q2. As the new leader of the council, in the local press, you have publicly welcomed a "robust and through investigation", by the Conservative Party, into Cllr. Purdy's role in the agreement made with Heights of Abraham, to move a homeless family off a council car park so the Heights of Abraham could use it for coach parking. Will you, as Leader of the Council, now commit to an investigation of the council's role in this sorry affair, with a remit to investigate and identify who in the council knew about the written guarantees being made to Heights of Abraham, who determined the date of 31.01.23, why in emails to the Chairman and political leaders to obtain approval for the urgent decision, was this date credited to the working group, when they had determined 28.02.23 as the end date, who asked for the guarantees to be sent and to whom, who wrote and signed off on press releases sent out by the council, and what steps were taken to ensure they were both accurate and truthful?

RESPONSE:

Thanks for your question, Councillor Gamble. You will have seen the joint statement of the political group leaders of the Council who have reviewed correspondence in relation to this matter and publicly reiterated their confidence in and support for the Chief Executive. All correspondence in relation to this matter will be published on the Council's website tomorrow for anyone to review, along with links to the already published decisions, reports and minutes. As Members we should promote openness and transparency and all political group leaders were unified in calling for the publication of these documents. The ultimate exercise in accountability will take place on 4 May with voters choosing their new district council representatives and they will be able to do so in possession of all factual information.

Q3. The previous leader of the council, Cllr. Purdy, sought to cover up emails sent by himself and Paul Wilson, playing with semantics to try and claim that an agreement is not an agreement. The Heights of Abraham were so reassured by what was written to them they had the "confidence" to instigate a marketing campaign. Clearly an agreement was made. Cllr. Purdy as well as attempting a cover up, has tried to damage a young journalist's career in his response to the article breaking news of the agreement. He has threatened me personally with legal action when I attempted to ask him questions. This is no one-off occasion of such behaviour by Cllr. Purdy. Over 4 years Cllr. Purdy has, both in council meetings and in the press, made insulting/slandering comments about fellow councillors, made remarks, which I found offensively racist, called travellers a "species". He has never appeared to understand that in his role of leader he represented the whole of the council, not just the Conservative Party. How do you intend to deal with this toxic legacy, and specifically, how are you going to deal with the fact that the Heights of Abraham will regard this authority as having breached the agreement made to ensure the travellers vacate the car park by 31.01.23. A deadline that has already passed?

RESPONSE:

Thanks for your question, Councillor Gamble. As Deputy Leader of the Council I believe that Derbyshire Dales District Council should operate with integrity in an open and transparent way, and welcome the scrutiny of other Members and members of the public. I would like to commit to working with my fellow Group Leaders in a consensual way to ensure that any Council business is transacted fairly and openly up until the election of the new Council in May 2023. With regard to the location of the specific Traveller family, a report from the Gypsy and Traveller Site Provision Working Group will be considered by the Community and Environment Committee next week. This report is submitted to provide a position statement at the end of this term of the Council and demonstrates this authority's ongoing commitment to transparency and openness. As ever, it will be a matter for this full Council to determine what future steps are taken.