

Appendix A to the Council Minutes – 23 February 2022

Item 6 – Questions from Public

The Mayor informed the Chamber that Mr Perrin’s question had been resubmitted to June 2022 Council prior to the meeting.

Item 14 – Questions from Members

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO CABINET MEMBERS, COMMITTEE CHAIRS AND MEMBERS APPOINTED TO REPRESENT THE COUNCIL ON A JOINT COMMITTEE

The Mayor informed the Chamber there were no questions to the Leader had been received and 10 questions to Cabinet Members.

1. From Councillor Kerin to Councillor Spillman

Can the Portfolio Holder for Housing please advise what he is doing for residents affected by mould in the six tower blocks of Grays Riverside?

Mayor

As Councillor Spillman had sent his apologies this evening a written response will be provided to Councillor Kerin.

2. From Councillor Little to Councillor Duffin

Councillor Little

Please can you inform Council of the true and accurate timeline regarding the events surrounding the Communications Strategy?

Mayor

Councillor Duffin please respond to the question.

Councillor Duffin

Thank you very much for this question. So on the 7 September it was presented to Corporate O&S and then on the 8 September it was presented to Cabinet. Before the meeting I spoke to a fellow member of Cabinet who attended the meeting and got a rundown of what happened. After this we made the decision as a Cabinet to push it out to local media and get their feedback. On the 16 September an email went to local media, and there’s a really important line in there, “this is an opportunity for you to share any strategic approaches to communications with us, and it is not about day-to-day operations processes or the communications team itself.” And that’s a really important thing to understand. The Communications Strategy is not

about people's personal opinions on different members of the comms team, or anything like that on a day-to-day basis, it's a much broader, big approach. So, on the 4 October, after the deadline, we received a response from the editor of Nub News. It was all about the day-to-day, internal stuff that we'd highlighted in that line, and not about the Comms Strategy itself. So, I was obviously aware of the other concerns because we've heard about those before and I've spoken to Neil personally about those dating back as far as when I was in opposition. But I guessed from the fact that none of the Comms Strategy was mentioned, that he must be okay with what was in the Comms Strategy, it's just the wider issues that he was raising again. On the 12 October we received an email from Newsquest with a letter dated the 24 September, and there's a quote in here saying "I sent the attached a couple of weeks' ago". No reason to doubt the media and it wasn't "I think I sent it", it was in the affirmative "I sent the attached a couple of weeks' ago." So, the following day on the 13 October Cabinet doesn't happen, quite rightly, and I thank the editor of Nub News for raising this. There was an admin error on the report and it wasn't constituted correctly. So, the following day, considering we've had one journalist praise the Comms Strategy and another one raise other concerns about the Comms team, but no concerns about what's in the Comms Strategy, the non-controversial Comms Strategy was passed using delegated decision authority.

Mayor

Councillor Little do you wish to pose a supplementary question.

Councillor Little

Yes that's okay, sorry about that. Well thank you Councillor Duffin for such a factual run through of what happened with the Comms Strategy. But can you explain what happened next? As there has been some questions and some confusion on what happened. Thank you.

Councillor Duffin

Yeah so after the Full Council meeting, the editor of Nub News, quite rightly, goes to work seeking the facts, and this could have been cleared up at Cabinet, but unfortunately the meeting wasn't correctly constituted. So, possibly the 14 December as I haven't been shared an exact date with this, the editor, Chris Hatton, of Newsquest says he didn't submit the stuff on time for the deadline. So Neil, quite rightly annoyed at this point, has heard two completely different stories. So, on the 14 December he does the right thing and reaches out to me and asks for an explanation, well first he asks me to resign, and then asks for an explanation after that. I explained that I was told in mid-December – what he has been told in mid-December, directly contradicts what Chris has told the Council on the 12 October. So, for me I think we've found the crux of the problem. Chris has changed his story two months later on, and for me it seems like this is the end of it. Instead we get an article that my quote is directly taken out of context to fit a personal agenda; calls for a Council officer to resign; and key facts hidden from the

story. How could an editor forget to include a contradiction by a member of the media which is the centrepiece of the entire story, and this is where the role moves from being a journalist into a full blown activist with a personal agenda.

Mayor

Councillor Little do you wish to pose a second supplementary?

Councillor Duffin

Oops – tiny bit more left on that. It reminds me of 2010 -

Mayor

I thought you'd finished.

Councillor Duffin

Where everything was the EU's fault. In Neil's reality it's either the Chief Exec personally or the Council to blame and this is how ridiculous it's gotten.

Mayor

Right, Councillor Little do you wish to pose a second supplementary question.

Councillor Little

Yes so Councillor Duffin, what is the future for the Comms Strategy?

Councillor Duffin

There is so much awesome stuff that's happening in Thurrock and we don't do enough to shout about it. Whether it's the new Freeport or calling time on rough sleepers in Thurrock, and it doesn't just have to be stuff the Council does directly – for football teams that make the first round of the FA cup or Aveley potentially win the league this year – there's no reason a social media post shouldn't be put out congratulating them, and a link to activities in the borough for other people to either take part in or spectate. Let's embrace the Live, Work, Play agenda. So I'm challenging the Comms team to put out 365 different, positive Thurrock stories in the next municipal year. That's not press releases, that can be social media, it can be other ways, but hold me to account on that because I think there's so much more great stuff we should be shouting about it and we need too.

Questions 3 to 10 fell due to the timing of the meeting.

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