

Recommendation from Scrutiny Panel meeting of 13 February 2024 - Corporate Communications

446. Have Your Say

Ms. Carla Hales addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to ask questions regarding the Castle Park bandstand, and its use by community groups. Speaking as a District Lead Music Tutor and Chair of the Essex Concert Band, Ms. Hales asked what constituted a community group and would therefore not incur a charge for use of the bandstand, for how long the Castle Park café would continue its sponsorship, and whether anyone would take over from them, if sponsorship ended. Many local groups wanted to support the Council's aim at fostering a positive local image, whilst involving local suppliers and groups, and Ms. Hales suggested that charging groups for use of the bandstand could be seen as an insult, and asked that the approach to charging be rethought.

The Chairman committed to ensure that the Panel's discussions would seek to ensure youth and community groups were encouraged and welcomed.

Mr. Robert Johnstone addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to raise previous consideration of the playing of music at the bandstand by Full Council on 19 July 2023. The Portfolio Holder had then said he would consider further the fees and grants involved. Mr Johnstone urged for councillors to be mindful that the bandstand needed bands to play in it. Southend's bandstand hosted 56 performances in the past year, whilst Colchester only proposed six for the year. Mr Johnstone recommended that the Council's policy on events be reviewed, having last been updated four years ago. The work needed to do concerts and events, which were beneficial to the Council, businesses and public, was highlighted.

Ms. Rachel Matthews addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to ask if the Panel had scrutinised the Climate Emergency called by Full Council in the past, and urge the Panel to examine the basis for this. Ms. Matthews accused the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of not publishing accurate data and asked if the Council was discharging its duty to provide land for food growth.

The Chair confirmed that the Council provided and administered allotments, and offered to seek a Scrutiny Panel meeting on the Climate Emergency in the 2024-25 Municipal Year.

Ms. Carinna Cooper addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to allege that she had not had a response from the Council to her questions previously raised about the Deputy Mayor halting a member of the public's speech to Full Council, and the legal guidance regarding searches of

public attendees at meetings. Ms. Cooper then suggested that the City Council be dissolved. Ms. Cooper claimed that officers of the Council were complicit in allegedly fraudulent applications for new 5G telecommunication masts in the name of dissolved companies.

The Chair explained that planning officers did not have a duty to carry out examinations of the financial situation of any planning applicant, and stated that it was his understanding that an answer had been given to the queries raised by Ms. Cooper. Ms. Cooper then admitted that she had indeed received a response from the Council, but did not consider it sufficient.

Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, confirmed that the response had been provided, and underlined the trust in officers working to the law. Regarding trust, members of the public could participate in Scrutiny Panel meetings and seek answers.

Ms. Cheryl Taylor addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to raise a complaint that she had made regarding her dissatisfaction with a search carried out on her prior to the Scrutiny Panel meeting on 6 June 2023 and alleged that she had still not received a response to her complaint. Ms. Taylor explained that she had received a receipt for her complaint made on 16 June 2023, expressed concern that any CCTV footage would no longer be available, and asked whose job it was to follow up on complaints.

The Chair gave his understanding that a response had been made to the complaint, and that the Council had amended its procedure, to ensure that there were always female members of security staff engaged to staff meeting security. The Chair recognised the need for searches to be carried out respectfully and offered to check on the policy regarding retention of CCTV footage.

Councillor Goacher attended and, with permission of the Chairman, addressed the Panel to raise a letter to councillors, sent by the Middlewick Residents' Group, and formally requested that the Scrutiny Panel examine the allegations that a letter from Natural England was withheld from councillors prior to the Local Plan being approved. Councillor Goacher expressed concern that the Middlewick Group had not received a response from the Planning Department regarding the Natural England report, and asked what legal redress there might be to which he would have recourse regarding not having had the letter provided to him prior to the Local Plan being approved. Councillor Goacher asked if the Scrutiny Panel would be scrutinising this matter and, if so, when.

The Chair committed to speak to planning officers regarding the relevant protocols and encourage that the relevant information be provided to all councillors. This matter was not currently on the Scrutiny Panel's work programme and the Chair suggested that, at this stage, it might be more appropriate to discuss this internally with planning officers.

A Panel member raised concern that there had been a number of claims made that responses from the Council had not been provided to questions raised, and asked who was responsible for ensuring answers were provided to members of the public

and councillors. A suggestion was made that a recommendation could be laid down to call for the Council's communications plan to be reviewed and updated. Concern was raised at talk of reducing the Council's capacity to communicate and respond to questions and issues raised by the public in the future. The Chair confirmed that correspondence had been despatched to some of the members of the public in attendance, and that the issue had been that those members of the public were not satisfied with the content of the responses. The Leader of the Council agreed that this was an important matter, and that it was right that the public could challenge councillors and the Council's Administration, but asked that the Panel view any issues in the context of the Council's customer contact service being highly-rated by public feedback.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet reviews the Council's approach to its corporate communications with members of the public.