

COUNTY COUNCIL

26 FEBRUARY 2014

QUESTIONS FROM MR CUNNINGHAM

Question 1

When queried on the costs of stairlift maintenance, certain Outside suppliers are able to offer a warranty for electronically-controlled stairlift equipment, costed at +/- £200.00 per year, on a similar call-out basis as the Council. Presumably, being a free market, a healthy slice of profit is built in to this price.

I refer to the Council's decision to supply, once all warranties are completed, means-tested Stairlift maintenance services to all registered stairlift users, offering an in-house repair and call-out service on a cost basis of £260.00 per year.

Would the Council care to comment on the disparity between the in-house stairlift price, and that from outside suppliers to the tune of some 25% above that offered by their competition?

Response

The price that the Council has provided is relevant to the period after the 5 years warranty is over. At this time the equipment is older and more prone to breakdown. Based on our considerable experience in this work, including a number of competitively won external contracts, we are confident that this provides excellent value for money. The rate includes annual service, battery change, call outs and repair or replacement of parts where economical to do so. Individuals who would be paying for this service can opt for a different provider if they wish. However I am pleased from the feedback received that the majority have indicated that they prefer to remain with a service they know and trust.

Question 2

I refer to the Freedom of Information request submitted and answered on 8th December 2011 under your reference 9585879 regarding Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) authorised investigations. As the reply stated, 225 surveillance actions were undertaken between 2007 to 2009, plus 27 block-recorded requests in 2010 & 2011 which resulted in the grand total of just one successful prosecution. Might we be advised of the total number of individual requests, block recorded or otherwise, authorised from 2011 to the present date under that same Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act, and if the Council is satisfied with the ratio of investigations to successful prosecutions?

Response

Thank you for your question. The Council has carried out the following number of Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act known as 'RIPA' operations.

2011/2012 --- 21 IN TOTAL

2012/2013 ----10 IN TOTAL

2013/14 ---- 9 IN TOTAL

There were four successful prosecutions in the proceedings taken by the council.

Prosecutions are not the only possible outcome of RIPA investigations . Information can and is passed to the police; fixed penalty notices are issued, traders may undergo trading and warnings can be given. All of these outcomes can help reduce and tackle crime.

From 1 November 2012 there was a significant change in procedure and a local authority who wishes to authorise a RIPA application must now have the authorisation approved by a Magistrate before it can take effect. Directed surveillance undertaken by Local Authorities can only be authorised for the purpose of preventing or detecting criminal offences that are punishable by a maximum term of at least 6 months or are related to underage sales of alcohol and tobacco.

Covert surveillance is a useful tool for dealing with crime that affects the health, safety and wellbeing of our residents and the economy of the area, for example the sale of counterfeit and often dangerous goods, sale of alcohol and tobacco to children and sale of illicit tobacco.

As you would expect, the Council has careful and stringent measures in place to ensure that applications under RIPA are properly authorised and that surveillance under RIPA is necessary and proportionate.

The Council is also subject to inspection by the Office of Surveillance Commissioners.

The Council's Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the Council's use of RIPA and set the policy at least once a year. They consider internal reports on the use of RIPA on a quarterly basis to ensure that it is being used consistently with the Council's policy and that the policy remains fit for purpose.

Question 3

When I read that the Council had decided to give Durham County Cricket Club some FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND POUNDS, as noted within the Cabinet meeting held on 13 March 2013 under the title 'Regeneration & Economic Development; I was intrigued. Might we be advised, in as fine a detail as recorded, how the disbursement of this sum of five hundred thousand pounds was supervised, allocated and spent, inclusive of "Supporting local jobs"; so as to show solid proof of the alleged 'Regeneration & Economic Development' which ensued from the strangely quiet gift of Council Taxpayers' money to this Private Sports-related Company?

Response

I would like to thank Mr Cunningham for his question.

My response assumes that the Five Hundred Thousand Pounds you refer to, is the grant given by Durham County Council to Durham County Cricket Club in 2011. The grant was given to Durham County Cricket Club as a contribution to Phase 2 of their ground development, which included an extension to the main pavillion building, with additional spectator seating and an upgrade to the electricity supply to the site. The additional covered spectator seats were a key requirement to satisfy the English Cricket Board conditions for hosting international cricket.

As a key regional economic asset and the North East's only venue for national and international cricket, this grant has contributed to safeguarding local jobs and enabling international cricket to continue in the north east, the hosting of the Ashes Test Match in Durham in August 2013 was an example of this. This gave Durham and the wider North East tremendous exposure nationally and internationally in the run up to the game and during the five days it took place. The economic impact of the Cricket Club on the North East economy was forecasted to be around £20m in 2013 and £14m on average between 2014 and 2016. In 2014-2016 DCCC is scheduled to host further international cricket including two one day internationals against Sri Lanka and New Zealand and a Test Match against Sri Lanka. In terms of direct and indirect employment, the Cricket Club creates over 100 jobs.

The recent announcement that Boyzone are to play a music concert on the 7 June this year is another way of bringing money and recognition to the County.

I hope that this gives you the information required to understand the significant impact on economic development that Durham County Cricket Club contributes to, both directly and indirectly.

QUESTION FROM KIRSTY THOMAS ON BEHALF OF THE FRIENDS OF THE DURHAM GREEN BELT

In December 2013 the Friends of the Durham Green Belt provided a detailed response to the Pre-Submission County Durham Local Plan, as part of the opportunity offered by the County Council for final comments to be made before the Council's Plan is submitted to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for Examination in Public chaired by an independent Inspector.

We would be grateful to know how many responses there have been at this final opportunity for comment?

We would also ask how and when these comments will be reported to Cabinet and/or full Council?

This question is of particular significance for us because our comments and those of other bodies challenged fundamental assumptions in the Draft Plan about how best to achieve a successful economy for County Durham. We firmly believe that Durham City has very special strengths and assets which should be used for the benefit of the whole County. But we do not believe that building 4,000 new houses in the Durham Green Belt assists this in any sustainable way. The fundamental challenge to key aspects of the Draft Plan led us to conclude that it should be withdrawn and more realistic population, housing and employment projections should be made. Thus we are especially interested in learning what the County Council's next steps will be.

Response

I would like to thank the Friends of the Durham Green Belt for their question. Cabinet will be asked to consider the County Durham Plan on the 19th March, prior to it being considered by Full Council on the 2nd April, to seek agreement for it to be formally submitted to the Secretary of State for a full Examination in Public next month.

I am aware of the consultation response submitted by the Friends of the Durham Green Belt in December 2013 to the Pre-Submission Draft version of the County Durham Plan. We understand from the representations that they have an alternative vision for the future of Durham City and indeed the County. The independent Inspector appointed to undertake the Examination in Public will hear the Council's evidence and the policy response to the evidence. The Inspector will also consider the alternative vision proposed by the Friends of Durham Green Belt.

In respect of the number of representations received, as will be reported to Cabinet/Full Council next month, a total of almost 4,000 representations have been received at the consultation stage in addition to three new petitions and a resubmitted petition from the Durham City Green Belt campaign which includes 1,192 signatures.

Specifically in terms of the Quantity of Development policy 293 representations were received – 21 were suggested the policy was sound and 272 suggested this was unsound (194 of these were the press cutting). Less than 15% of the representations submitted at the consultation stage were objecting to the quantity of development.

It is of paramount importance that the County Durham Plan continues to protect Durham's Green Belt by ensuring the Green Belt boundary is fit for purpose and permanent for the next 20 years. Difficult choices have to be made and for this reason we propose that the most appropriate sites are released ensuring that the remaining 96% of the Green Belt is fully protected from inappropriate development.

In addition, the County Durham Plan goes even further to propose an overall increase of protection in the North West of the County by 41%. The risk of not having an up to date Plan, could put the Council in a dangerous position whereby planning applications are allowed at appeal in inappropriate or even unsustainable locations.