

COUNTY COUNCIL

26 OCTOBER 2016

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

QUESTION FROM MR MIKE CUNNINGHAM

Can the Council confirm that it is instituting a review of the Department, and the actions of the people working within that Department, which concerns itself with the conducting of 'Due Diligence' in County Council legal matters; matters which concern the use of public money and property, as well as the sale of publicly-owned buildings, such as the sale of Windlestone Hall: that same property which was, quite recently, within the public's gaze from a perspective of Teesside Crown Court?

RESPONSE

I'd like to thank Mr Cunningham for his question relating to the actions of those parts of the Council concerned with legal matters, financial matters and the sale of publicly owned buildings, with particular reference to Windlestone Hall.

Following the sale of Windlestone Hall the Council asked external auditors to carry out a review and identify recommendations. This was concluded in early 2013 and is on our website. The report does identify a number of recommendations to improve the process and this is monitored by the Council's internal audit team and audit committee, it also acknowledges that many of the improvements had already been made following the sale and prior to the review.

The review report concludes that the Council acted reasonably both in entering negotiation with the eventual purchaser, and that given the liabilities associated with the building, accepting the offer for the building. The liabilities at the time, excluding the £3m capital sum required to renovate the building, was £100,000 with emergency works required to maintain the building in excess of £300,000. This meant that the sale of the building has to date saved the Council at least £800,000 of public money.

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QUESTION FROM MR STEVE CASON

What is the local authority doing to curb illegal encampments that are costing council tax payers money? Nearly £26,000 was spent on cleaning up illegal encampments between Jan 2014 to Jan 2015. The recent illegal encampments at Coundon in August 2016 cost over £4,000 to clear up. The costs in both situations is likely to be higher when you take into account staff time. We surely can't afford to sustain such costs when employees, such as teaching assistants are facing wage cuts. A very simple solution to the problem could be to issue fixed penalty notices to vehicles parked up illegally - if the perpetrators do not pay you can tow vehicles away. As representatives of the communities I do not believe you are doing enough to curb this growing problem within the county.

RESPONSE

Thank you for your question regarding the cost relating of unauthorised encampments.

Council policy acknowledges that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers have a long established history as part of our community in County Durham and as a Local Authority we have a duty to encourage race equality, eliminate discrimination and foster good relations as contained in the Public Sector Equality Duty.

The Council manages all unauthorised encampments where they arise on its land. It is important to note that we do resort to enforcement where this is necessary, and whilst the parking fines mentioned would not be appropriate in most locations, we do undertake other forms of enforcement including directions to leave, and injunctions. Local examples include Park Head Recreation ground in Coundon and Binchester earlier this year.

Enforcement alone however, is not the solution as, even if effective, it can move a group on to what may possibly be a less suitable site. In some instances groups have been moved on several times, which of course is at a cost on each occasion, and does not foster cooperation.

The Councils procedures allow each unauthorised encampment to be considered on a case by case basis. When one arises we look at its location, likely impact on others and speak to those encamped so that we know their intentions and welfare issues. If the site is felt unsuitable we do resort to enforcement, or suggest a more suitable site if one is available. In instances where the site might be suitable for a short period of time, then rather than move them on, we tolerate the encampment, on the basis that the site is left clean and basic rules are adhered to.

It is important to put these costs quoted in context. There were 141 unauthorised encampments last year and the vast majority of those left the site in good condition. Furthermore the costs quoted will, for the tolerated sites, include toilets or waste collection which actually reduce clean-up costs. If fly-tipping does occur on the sites, we will always take action where there is sufficient evidence.

In summary whilst the Council does enforce where necessary, it also engages and in so doing not only minimises cost, but it also minimises disruption and fosters good community relations.