

Public Questions at EDDC Cabinet, 28 October 2020 – Jeremy Woodward

Thank you.

I'd like to ask a couple of questions about transparency and democracy at the District Council.

1) Easier access to information:

It's been very useful to refer to the Council's press releases over the years – but this has its limitations.

Frustratingly, the news archive only provides items from this year, half from last year - and then stops at 2018.

What's more, any links to news pages over two-years-old become broken, so there's no longer any access to issues which might still be of importance.

I have written several times to the Communications Department about this – but am still awaiting a proper answer.

I appreciate that resources will be limited, but providing access to archives doesn't take up much space on the server, and, besides, this is something central government provides very readily.

My point, though, is not so much that this is frustrating,

or that there are several gaps and ease-of-use issues in the Council's website.

This is actually about transparency.

Democracy is essentially about making informed decisions, and if there is limited access to information, especially official information, then the democratic process is compromised.

I would like to think, then, that the default position at the District Council would be to make information readily available, and easy-to-access.

2) Greater participation:

This evening, we are communicating virtually, something we are quite used to by now.

I would like to ask you how these remote meetings by zoom are working

– whether they are enabling greater participation for both the public and Members in meetings,

and whether you will be looking to bring in a hybrid approach permanently, where there will be a choice to physically attend meetings or appear via video link.

There are all sorts of reasons why virtual technologies should be embraced, not least that it facilitates contact between council and public.

But it goes much deeper than this.

I do appreciate that both Members and Officers have limited time and resources to respond to questions from each other, and from the wider public.

However, my own earlier experiences with the District Council showed me that queries were often not treated seriously – and this was an attitude I felt came from both Councillors and staff.

3) A culture change:

The new administration came to power largely due to an exasperation with this attitude

– whether over the lack of transparency in compiling the Local Plan, or the deliberate obfuscation over the Knowle relocation project, to name but two key examples.

It is clear that the new administration wants to change the culture embedded at the heart of the District Council

– a culture created by many decades of reluctance to engage with the public, to be straight with stakeholders and to provide information where it is needed.

The new administration intends to address these fundamental issues around process at the Council

– which I would hope will have a profound and positive effect on the quality of decision-making and delivery of services – which is actually what these changes are surely all about.

And now that the new administration has signalled its determination to move into clear bright waters with the appointment of a Portfolio holder for Transparency and Democracy,

I would like to conclude by asking you what kind of measures you are looking to introduce to bring about greater transparency and democracy at the District Council.

Thank you.

