

Full Council April Public Questions and Answers

Name of person submitting	Questions
<p>Nick Quinn</p>	<p>If any Cabinet or Committee meeting cannot be attended ‘live’, it is currently very difficult, afterwards, to find out what happened. The Council has spent tens of thousands of pounds on a new audio/visual system for Council meetings, but there is a depressing lack of publication of the Audio Recordings of these meetings (and the minutes are quite often delayed as well).</p> <p>Question 1: Since the 5th March 2024 only five meetings have had Audio Recordings published; when will the Audio Recordings of all the other meetings be published?</p> <p>Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): With the new Audio Visual system installed the recording had to be converted to a suitable format in order to publish via sound cloud to become available online. The IT department were currently working through the outstanding recordings, but were currently short staffed.</p> <p>Question 2: The minutes contain a condensed written record of the meeting, which should accurately convey the significant content of the meeting. How can the accuracy of the minutes be confirmed unless the Audio Recording of that meeting has been published?</p> <p>Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): We currently have a delay in uploading the recordings to the website, we can ensure this will be resolved shortly.</p> <p>Question 3: I am sure that every Member is heartily sick of the Public raising the subject of 3 Rivers, but please will every Member of this Council take the time to read the “Grant Thornton Interim Auditor’s Annual Report for 2022/23”, that was presented to the Audit Committee on 26 March 2024?</p>

	<p>Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): The Chairman acknowledged Mr Quinn's reference to the report received by the Audit Committee and thanked him for highlighting it.</p>
<p>Barry Warren</p>	<p>The minutes of the Standards meeting did not become available to the public until some 5 weeks after the meeting and they have only appeared as a supplement to the Council Agenda. They were still not on the website under the Standards Committee at the time of preparing these questions for submission.</p> <p>Question 1: What is the reason for this extended delay please?</p> <p>Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): Although we try to publish the draft minutes to the website quickly as possible, due to other work commitments this was the earliest it was able to be published.</p> <p>On page 7 of the draft Standards minutes as published with the Supplementary Agenda at minute 29 Councillor A Glover is shown as being elected as the Vice Chairman when she was already the Chairman.</p> <p>Question 2: This appears to be an error. When and how will it be corrected?</p> <p>Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): The published draft minutes to the Standards committee at minute 29 had been corrected and those minutes would be agreed at the next Standards Committee meeting in June.</p> <p>Question 3: The questions I asked are shown in the minutes but I can find no public record of the answers I was given. Why is this please?</p> <p>Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): The public questions and answers document had been published alongside the draft minutes of the Committee.</p> <p>Question 4: Is it because I had asked who had recommended committee make a decision which was considered illegal - the Leader told me, in the written response, that this was considered to be irrelevant?</p>

Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): It was stated as irrelevant as proposed changes were put forward.

My other questions related to Scrutiny Committee Meeting of the 18th March 2024. There is no audio published for this meeting yet the minutes have been approved at the meeting held on the 15th April 2024. There is no audio link as yet to that meeting either, nor are there minutes.

Question 5:

Why has the audio link for the Scrutiny meeting of 18th of March still not been made available please?

Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): With the new Audio Visual system installed the recording had to be converted to a suitable format in order to publish via sound cloud to become available online. The IT department were currently working through the outstanding recordings, but were currently short staffed.

Continued from Barry Warren:

Although minutes are not verbatim they should surely be factually correct. The minutes show that the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration advised that the Council were looking to have 2 Planning Enforcement Officers. If the audio recording were publicly available one could hear that when the Chair raised the point that the Council would have 2 Enforcement Officers the Cabinet Member said "There will be three Enforcement Officers". The Chair of Scrutiny responded, "Great. So we can firmly put it on the record – three enforcement officers. Thank you, Scrutiny Committee. The current Conservative MP for Bridgwater can shut up too. Well done, Steve. Thank you very much." But the words of the Chair "Three Enforcement Officers" have not been "Firmly put on Record".

Question 6:

If not verbatim - how is it proposed to properly record the true facts in the public minutes?

Response from the Director of HR, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer): Minutes of meetings were to record the main issues discussed and resolutions made by the Council. The audio recordings were available to provide the full meeting as the minutes were not verbatim.

	<p>Supplementary question: Why do the Scrutiny Committee minute's state 2 enforcement officers and not the 3 as per the recording?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Planning, Economic and Regeneration: At the meeting on the 19th February it was anticipated there would be 2 enforcement officers to be recruited alongside the current Locum Enforcement Officer. There is no establishment commitment to 3 Enforcement Officers. Although it is anticipated that there will be an initial overlap with the locum and the 2 permanent Enforcement Officers.</p>
<p>Paul Elstone</p>	<p>Question 1: At the Audit Committee Meeting of the 26th March, I asked the following question.</p> <p>Why were the full reasons behind 3 Rivers paying nearly twice as much above the land market valuation and for the "pig in the poke" Bampton site not investigated?</p> <p>I received the following written response from the Cabinet Member for Finance</p> <p>"The purchase of the land was a commercial undertaking in the commercial market. The council were not involved in the transaction".</p> <p>"We would welcome and ask you to reflect on how you are choosing to describe this development as it would seem a deliberate attempt to belittle this project and potentially do reputational damage which may undermine future sales revenue".</p> <p>Both these statements warrant a response.</p> <p>Firstly, that during the time of the Bampton land purchase discussions, the Councils S151 Officer was a Director of 3 Rivers, despite an audit report months previously saying he should stand down, That the Councils Chief Executive was the sole functioning Council shareholder representative of 3 Rivers.</p> <p>Comment from the Leader of the Council: I would remind the questioner that from the inception of the company, the Council appointed the Cabinet as the company Shareholder. The Chief Executive was made the Shareholder 'representative', a role required of an officer to deliver instructions from the Council to the company, once formally agreed by the Cabinet.</p> <p>Secondly, it is not a deliberate attempt to belittle this project. It is a further attempt to reveal why I and others consider there has been a Dereliction of Duty by those involved.</p>

Comment from the Leader of the Council: It is very difficult to reach any other conclusion, based on your unfortunate and repetitious way of describing this development project, that it is not deliberate in its offense.

To be clear, I can tell Full Council that Cabinet sent an email, in May 2020, to the Chief Executive stating that they were

Quote - "Unanimous that the Bampton Site should not be purchased. As we have said before, anyone looking at this site would come to the conclusion that it is a pig in a poke ". Unquote. The current Council Leader plus others in the room were party to this email and can confirm its content.

Given this clear instruction from Cabinet, why did these Council Officers allow the Bampton Site planning application and development preparations to continue unconstrained and at significant cost then allow the site to be purchased at well in excess of its land value?

Response from the Leader of the Council: With regard to the Company's progress at Bampton, I can confirm that the Council did put all non-live projects on pause as instructed by the cabinet whilst it commissioned an external review of its company. After the review and subsequent governance changes were implemented, the Cabinet then considered and made a number of decisions continuing support for the company in its trading activities. It is a matter of public record, that at a Cabinet meeting on the 4/3/21 the business case for the Bampton project was approved and funding was included in the company's Business Plan. Both of these decisions were resolved by Full Council.

I can only reflect on why and how you are party to a confidential email sent from a former Leader of this council almost 4 years ago, and would suggest that maybe you have not been given the whole picture before asking such questions. I would urge you to consider why that might be.

Question 2:

Why was this important evidence not presented to the 3 Rivers Working Group as part of their investigation?

Response from the Leader of the Council: I am unclear what important evidence you are referring to.

Question 3:

Given the gravity of the situation and with further and I believe damning evidence available and evidence in which the Council Leader was in some way involved, will he now agree to implement a full investigation into the Bampton site land purchase?

	<p>Response from the Leader of the Council: You have already made a range of allegations over the years relating to 3 Rivers, which have been investigated by an external body who have been unable to corroborate or substantiate them. This report is a matter of public record and the managers of this body interviewed you as part of their process, with you failing to provide anything of validity.</p>
<p>Tim Bridger</p>	<p>The question relates to public question time. The Leader is adamant that the Council was the most open and transparent on record. Yet if the public questions that had been asked over the last six to seven months about 3 Rivers that had been answered, there would have not been the need for the 3 Rivers report by the Scrutiny Committee. Every time a direct question had been asked from members of the public about 3 Rivers the responses had been evasive, non-existent or absolutely nonsense. The amount of public money that had been wasted on the project and well informed, qualified people that had asked direct questions and had not received the answers they should.</p> <p>The Grant Thornton audit had been the closest the Council would get in audit terms to a massive slap in terms of how the project had been handled by the Council and the clear up from the project. We as a Council are going to be saddled with the cost in perpetuity virtually as there will be no way of making the money back.</p> <p>I would like to counter the claim of the Leader of open and transparency because if they were they would start by legitimately openly answering publics question and not seeking to hide behind evasive answers.</p> <p>Response from the Leader of the Council: in reply to this statement I can confirm that the Council has answered all public questions on this subject matter, within the confines of the commercial sensitivity, that would need to be considered.</p> <p>Question 2: Rubbish collections in regards to the 321 project, this had been a disaster in communal areas due to the amount of black sacks that have been left. Statistic illiterate reasons that had been put around to justify, including claims that somehow collection rates had improved and there had not been a long enough time frame. The Council could be thinking about after investing the money in the policy under the previous administration, this administration could commit to the return of two weekly collections, if habits had changed this would not impact the overall recycling rates and reduce the overflow on rubbish sacks in communal areas.</p> <p>Response from the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for the Environment: I can confirm that our new Bin-It 123 collection scheme introduced in October 2022 has seen our recycling rate increase by nearly 5% across the District (which has resulted in the Council receiving additional remuneration for its increase in recycling</p>

and reduction in residual waste during 2023/24). Our improvement in these statistics saw us receive national recognition and we are currently in the top 10% nationally of all Councils for our recycling performance and second in Devon.

In our recent Resident Survey the services satisfaction rate has improved by 3% - now up to 74%. Moving from black sacks to wheelie bins and some use of seagull sacks has significantly reduced the negative impact on our street scene from litter emanating from split bags. All national refuse collection services have issues around communal areas, we are no exception, and it was a problem prior to the roll-out of our new service.

I can confirm that our recycling officers are working hard with residents to come up with solutions to these issues and we hope to see improvement over the coming months. Residents are welcome to request advice or a personal visit from these advisers and we encourage residents to utilise the weekly food collections as well as the fortnightly recycling collections using the appropriate containers.

Please note that Parish and Town Councillors have been invited to tour Carlu on two separate dates in May to learn more about how we deliver Waste and Recycling. Please contact Matthew Page and Darren Beer directly if you want to attend.

I have had lots of positive feedback about our new scheme, which has enabled us to significantly improve our recycling rate (we are now in the top 10% nationally) and it has managed to deliver cost savings at the same time, for one of the most important services we deliver. There is much more to do however and we will be hearing more about our Waste and Recycling departments work and future plans over the coming months.