

Written Questions – Council 22 February 2007

From Councillor Bradnack to the Leader

A Liberal Democrat councillor, challenged to justify the practice of supporting proposals or amendments at committees and then voting in a contrary direction, has said: 'It is Party policy to vote through Executive Councillor recommendations unamended'.

Does the Lib Dem leader recognize that any such policy, binding Lib Dem members to support all executive recommendations, if it existed, would be against the spirit of the 2000 Local Government Act ?

Does he accept that such a policy, binding Lib Dem members to support all executive recommendations, if it existed, would render superfluous any scrutiny or voting by a scrutiny committee?

Can he assure the council that no such Lib Dem policy exists or is imposed on its Lib Dem members?

Answer from the Leader, Councillor Nimmo-Smith

As on a previous occasion Cllr Bradnack shows his ignorance of the council's constitution as this question does not relate to any executive function of the council and could be ruled out of order as it does not comply with standing orders covering the Written Questions procedure. I do however intend to answer it.

Verifiability: First, it is impossible to start with an unattributed quotation as a premise for the question. Inexperience, misremembering or misunderstanding may have intervened. So I will deal with it as a proposition or hypothesis rather than as a datum, and try to test it scientifically.

Falsifiability: there have been several occasions since the new constitution was adopted when executive recommendations have been altered following discussion at scrutiny committees. Such changes have been influenced by both Liberal Democrat and Labour members (and even at one time by Conservative input). So taking such decisions to scrutiny is not superfluous.

Model: as with the Labour Party council group, the Liberal Democrat council group operates within its own standing orders which are based on a national model. Policy decisions within the group are taken democratically with all group members having equal votes. Decisions are binding on the executive councillor as well as on the other group members. In this way the whole of the ruling group is involved in the determination of policy that it is intended to take forward to executive decision. Subsequent alterations are possible as the paragraph above witnesses.

2000 Local Government Act: The city council's constitution is entirely conforming with the Local Government Act 2000, and was reviewed and signed off by the then ODPM before it was adopted by the council. Claims of deviations from the spirit of that Act are vacuous unless tested in a court of law.

Safeguards: the principal safeguard within our decision making processes is the pre-scrutiny system we operate. In this, the officers reports setting out issues and options are available to all and can be challenged and discussed. This ensures that the best impartial advice is given to members, including the executive councillor. The final decision is a mediation between the officers' views of what is practical and possible, and the political policy direction that the ruling group wishes to pursue and which has been incorporated in the medium term objectives and annual statement.

From Councillor Stafford to the Executive Councillor for Community Development and Health

What progress is the City Council making on its commitment, set out in the 2006/07 Annual Statement, to find a location for a city centre facility for young people, and when does it expect such a facility to be in place?

Answer from the Executive Councillor for Community Development and Health, Councillor Stuart

The S106 agreement for the Grand Arcade allows for Grosvenor to either provide a suitable unit in the Grand Arcade or, if none can be agreed, to make a £20,000 capital contribution plus a nominal amount for running costs for three years.

Community Development officers have met recently with Grosvenor and planning officers to discuss our desire to situate an approx 70 square meter Youth Facility in a visible and accessible unit in the Grand Arcade. The units so far identified by Grosvenor are not considered suitable.

As the mother of a young teenager, I am aware that shopping malls are magnets for teenagers and I feel it would behoove the Grand Arcade to provide a good facility which provides a place for teenagers to gather and doesn't encourage them to loiter. I have asked officers to arrange a meeting between myself, Grosvenor, Community Development officers and our new City Centre Manager to try to progress this issue. Clearly it is not possible to commit to a date when this might be achieved, as the matter is not entirely within this Council's control, but we are continuing to press the Grand Arcade Project to co-operate in both the spirit and the letter of their S106 agreement.

Meanwhile, I have a Capital budget in my portfolio of £150,000 of S106 money dedicated to fitting out a venue when a suitable one is found. It is worth bearing in mind that any such venue will also require substantial revenue funding (up to three staff every day for 6 hours per day) and there is not, at present, the budget for this although funds could be re-distributed from the Children and Young Peoples' budget in future when it is apparent a site is coming forward. It will very likely be necessary to look for partners to help to run (and fund) the service, and this is being progressed as well.

I note Cllr Stafford's interest in the House Project and would like to note my commitment to work with him, and The House Project, to find a permanent base for this very valuable group.