

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 24 MAY 2023

a) Question from Sue Owen, on behalf of the Derbyshire Pensioners Action Group to Councillor S Spencer, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Budget

“The government is intending to bring in legislation that would force Local Councils and Local Authority Pension Funds to make decisions about investments and procurement that must be in line with central government foreign policies. This means that Local Authority Pension Fund Committees would no longer be able to make their own ethical and responsible investment decisions.

This seems to totally undermine local democracy and the power of local authorities to make their own decisions on behalf of their local populations. Does Derbyshire County Council support this policy and if not, what actions are you taking to defend local democracy and the democratic rights of local people?”

Response:

“Mrs Owen, thank you for the question. I will do my best to cover it in my response.

The Government published a Green Paper transforming public procurement in December 2020 which set out proposed changes to the legal and operational framework for public procurement, with the aim of simplifying procurement processes putting value for money at their heart and unleashing opportunities for small businesses, charities, social enterprises that innovate public service delivery. When the Green Paper was issued, the implied increase in Central Government involvement in public procurement processes was noted, together with the importance of local decision making with democratically elected Councils.

The subsequent Procurement Bill 2022-23 is currently making its way through Parliament. In advance of any assurance of the updated investment guidance or directions for the Local Government Pension Scheme following the introduction of the proposed boycotts, this Investment and Sanctions Bill, the Government has committed to engage extensively with Local Government Pension Schemes over a twelve week period of consultation. As the administering Authority for the Derbyshire Pension Fund, the Authority would consider the Government’s proposals in respect of a Local Government Pension Scheme and, when they are published we will respond to the consultation in the appropriate way.”

Supplementary question:

“You may be aware that 60 civil society organisations have signed a document opposing these Government proposals to outlaw boycotts on any issues of justice, human rights or environmental concerns, including a number of religious, human rights, anti-poverty, international legal and environmental organisations. Some of our most progressive advances such as the abolition of slavery, the abolition of apartheid, women’s right to vote, issues which no one would disagree with now have come about partly as a result of peaceful boycotts.

Derbyshire’s responsible investment framework very clearly states that investment decisions must take environmental, social and government’s issues into account. Derbyshire Pension Fund has a climate strategy which however weak does aim to be in line with the Paris Agreement. Central Government foreign policy continues to support high levels of investment in fossil fuels which will make it impossible to achieve their commitment set out in the Paris Agreement.

If this legislation is passed how will Derbyshire Council and the Pension Fund react when Government foreign policy is in direct contradiction to Derbyshire’s own climate strategy and responsible investment framework?”

Response:

“Thank you, Mrs Owen. It is impossible for me to really answer that question until we have been through the consultation process and we know what those consultation questions are going to be and as I have said earlier in my response today we will respond accordingly to the questions that are tabled and obviously await with interest the outcome of that consultation process and the legislation that is drawn up off the back of it. Thank you.”

b) Question from Wendy Bullar to Councillor B Lewis, Cabinet Member for Strategic Leadership, Culture, Tourism and Climate Change

“In response to a previous public question, the Leader talked about the impacts of lithium and cobalt extraction, stating these may be as bad as the impacts caused by fossil fuels. I assume he was referring to batteries for electric cars. While experts agree there are impacts, these are nowhere near as catastrophic for climate and biodiversity as those caused by fossil fuels. The solution is to reduce car use, through car or lift sharing, more public transport and active travel and more tele-working.

We must however reduce energy demand – full stop. We must also generate more renewable energy across the UK and Derbyshire. Does the Leader accept

the need to reduce demand for fossil fuels for transportation, residential and commercial energy use and what is the council doing to support this?"

Response:

"Thank you very much indeed, Ms Bullar, for your question. Of course the Council recognises that action to tackle climate change is needed on an unprecedented scale and that we as local authorities have a crucial role to play in this. Reducing energy demand is the focus of the Derbyshire County Council's Climate Change strategy achieving net zero which is over the period 2021-2025 which the previous questioner described as "weak", which I would wholly refute it is. Actually it is one of the best that you will find out there I believe in the world of local authorities what we have set out in terms of our ambition in particular. It sets out how the Council will play its part in reducing energy demand in transport, in housing and in commercial industrial sectors across the county to enable us to be a net zero county by 2050 or sooner.

Regarding that aspect of transport the Council is taking action to ensure the county has a sustainable and integrated system that enables everyone to make their journeys, to have that ability to make their working journeys through Active Travel, walking, cycling, public transport or decarbonised vehicles, whether that be individuals or for businesses. The Local Transport Plan that is under development will include climate change consideration as its central plank of that plan setting out the requirements for quantifiable carbon reduction assessment and a plan for Derbyshire's transport sector as well.

The Council is working in partnership with other Councils across the region to adopt a D2N2 local cycling and walking infrastructure plan which contains strategic proposals for improving and expanding Derbyshire's Cycle Network, including the White Peak Loop which is a key ambition of this administration as well I might add. The Council has also been successful in securing funding from Active Travel England's Capability Fund to build capacity and develop business cases for Active Travel schemes in market towns. We will also get to hear more about that later I dare say as well.

The Council has secured £47m from the Department of Transport to deliver its BSIP Improvement Plan, Bus and Services Improvement Plan, which will help improve bus services and infrastructure right across the county through means such as fair discounts for young people and unemployed people and the introduction of new ticketing arrangements, improvement to service information, the development of transport hubs and the introduction of some new and enhanced bus services. I am sure you have probably seen the headlines about that relatively recently as well.

In relation to housing the Derbyshire Healthy Homes Programme continues to replace inefficient carbon intensive domestic systems with modern gas boilers

and provide insulation for eligible households. You have probably heard in this Chamber before we have spoken about some of the great work that has been done across Derbyshire by my colleagues like Councillor Dale over there when he was Leader of North East Derbyshire District Council. A very efficient well run programme there.

We have been working with our District and Borough colleagues and communities to understand how Councils and communities can work together to improve energy efficiency of their homes to make them fit for the future and following extensive consultation exercises across the county a draft action plan has been developed which has undergone consultation with interested community groups and individuals and is now in the process of being finalised. The action plan sets out a series of key actions that can be co-delivered with residents and other stakeholders and includes proposals around an advice service to support homeowners to decarbonise their own homes and reduce energy consumption.

We also continue to support the decarbonisation of the industrial and commercial sectors as well through the Green Energy Entrepreneur's Fund. The Council is helping businesses to reduce their environmental impact to drive innovation and to create sustainable growth opportunities. We are also working in partnership with energy intensive industries to decarbonise their operations and you will hear more about that over the coming weeks and months in this Chamber. I do encourage you to do that. This includes a recent establishment of a memorandum of understanding between the Council and the minerals and quarrying sector to explore opportunities for decarbonisation, low carbon skills, employment development and renewable energy generation.

The Council is committed to supporting the appropriate growth in renewable energy generation across the county in appropriate support in this context and as such we have supported the Derbyshire Spatial Energy Study which was completed in 2022 and is now on the Council's website. That identifies opportunities for increased renewable and low carbon energy generation across the county. Climate change, planning guidance and associated assessments have all now been developed by the Council and is also published on the website. Those resources provide the Council with the evidence and the opportunities to influence local plan reviews and updates and the wider low carbon planning and development landscape across Derbyshire, so a huge amount of work has gone into that. That has been driven by this administration because that is something we wholly and strongly believe in that is key to driving down carbon emissions.

The strategic framework for Council action to deliver net zero energy in Derbyshire is also in development, a focus of which is close working with the National Grid and other partners including Community Energy Groups to understand and address the issues around grid constraints and future demand

modelling scenarios; to expand the capacity and connection and with the move to a more decentralised energy system that growth and renewable energy's generation and growth and viable community energy projects will be enabled.

Finally on this particular point, in developing sustainable planning policy the Council always aims to deliver places where people can work, play and live in close proximity to those solutions. This will help to decarbonise transport, promote Active Travel, support public transport and reduce air pollution in neighbourhoods across the county.

To return to your original point in your question, if I may, that is an important point you raise in there. I did raise it in the last full Council meeting because it is an issue. It is something I actually feel quite passionate about. We do challenge hydrocarbon companies on their emissions and their business model and Climate Action Groups etc do that with quite a high degree of intensity, even to the point where they just don't see the investment that hydrocarbon companies are making into greening their own operations but also leading that green technological revolution. There is investment. They are some of the biggest investors out there in green technology. We must work with that not against it. I think that is something that is important for us and yet at the same time these same groups are quite incredulous at some of the issues that surround some of the global mining transnationals and some of their activities when it comes to mining lithium, cobalt and various other rarer minerals around the world and the exploitation of workforces in that industry. We can't be blind to both, we have to make sure that we are looking at the bigger picture with regard to hydrocarbon industries as well as the renewable energy industries. I think that makes for a better society in the end."

Supplementary question:

"Thank you, councillor, for that response. I sincerely hope that this county can reach net zero long before 2050. That is a good while off, isn't it? But, going back to the impact on extracting minerals for batteries versus damage done by mining of fossil fuels can I recommend a book called "No Miracles Needed. How Today's Technology Can Save Our Climate and Clean our Air." It is by Prof Mark Jacobson at Stanford University. It is published this year. In particular I would suggest you look at pages 314 and 315 as it comprehensively describes the impact that the extraction of special minerals will have. I would like to present you with this as a gift from the Derbyshire Climate Coalition." (*Book handed to Cllr Lewis*)

Response:

"Yes, thank you very much indeed. I thank Ms Bullar for the book. I shall indeed read it. I am always ready to learn and I hope Ms Bullar is the same."