

Appendix A to Council  
Questions from Members of the Public  
21 January 2008

**1. Question asked by Ms Philippa Stroud of 93B Langley Park Road, Sutton of the Chair of The Executive**

How many Post Offices threatened with closure have the Lib Dem administration saved in the last 5 years?

**Reply by Councillor Ruth Dombey, Executive Member for Community Engagement**

Thank you Madam Mayor and thank you Ms Stroud. It is always good to see new residents taking an interest in the area. Having said that, I must say that I am a little bit perplexed by your question. You may not be aware that just last November, the Liberal Democrats actually brought a motion to this Council opposing the closure of post offices. I'm pleased to say it was not opposed by the Opposition group and was supported by Members of Parliament in the House of Commons shortly afterwards. The short answer to your question is that despite strenuous efforts by Councillors from all parties in the borough, in recent years the Post Office has indeed ignored requests to retain post offices in this borough. I realise you will have a supplementary question. I really sincerely hope that it does not become a political football. I know you will agree with me that Post Offices play a vital role in the community and I'm sure you will be aware that, across the country, Councils are working together to oppose these closures.

**Supplementary Question asked by Ms Philippa Stroud**

Madam Mayor, Councillor Dombey. As the borough's Liberal Democrat MPs and Councillors have, as you just stated, failed to save any of our Post Offices, could you say what the Liberal Democrats would do differently this time round in order to ensure success with keeping our Post Offices?

**Reply by Councillor Ruth Dombey**

Madam Mayor, I can answer that question. It is going to be a very, very long answer though because the Liberal Democrats, the only party to do so, actually have a costed proposal to save Post Offices all across the country. I can either refer you to our website where you can see the detail or I can actually read it out. It's going to take considerably long time though.

**Supplementary Question asked by Councillor Tony Brett Young**

I wonder if the Executive Member could suggest why she thinks so many Post Offices have closed across the country in recent years?

**Reply by Councillor Ruth Dombey**

Thank you Councillor. Between 1992 and 1995, £1 million was taken from the Post Office from the Treasury. Then a further £1 billion over the next two and half years. None of this money was invested in the Post Office network. A commitment by the Tory government in 1994 to modernising benefit payments failed and by late 1997 the ICL Pathway Project was £600 million overspent. More than 4,000 Post Offices closed under Tory government and another 4,000 closed since 1997. Michael Heseltine, the Minister responsible for Post Offices in the Tory government, repeatedly made it clear that his desire was to see a fully privatised Post Office. This desire was frustrated only by the extremely small majority of the Major government. Sometimes history, Madam Mayor, gives you the answer to questions.

**2. Question asked by Carl Brown of 29 East Drive, Carshalton Beeches of the Chair of The Executive**

Public confidence in the ability of certain public bodies to protect personal information entrusted to them is at a low level following a number of well publicised breaches of data protection. Could the Council say whether any such breaches of data protection has occurred in the past 12 months in the Council or any of its agencies, and even if no breaches have occurred, could the Council confirm that it has reviewed its data handling arrangements and has taken appropriate action to guard against some of the basic lapses of security that have occurred in other public bodies such as the HMR&C and the DfT?

**Reply by Councillor Colin Hall, Executive Member for E-government and Environment**

Thank you for the question Mr Brown. This is a very timely question as I am sure you are aware. Des Brown has been apologising, yet again today, for the loss of three government laptops that have got the data of about 600,000 potential recruits to the Navy, I think, gone missing. But, I am pleased to be able to tell you that the Council has not got any records of any such lapses in its own data protection records over the last twelve months at all. The Council doesn't send confidential data through post whenever this is possible. In the last year, the Council has reviewed and improved its information security policies and has set up a new information management security board to oversee future security arrangements. The Council has also introduced a new risk assessment process to review how data is managed and processed, in particular data that goes by email, data that is on memory sticks, those sorts of things, to ensure that that can't go missing as well. Wherever relevant the Council will provide data encryption and decryption tools to ensure that data cannot be stolen.

**Supplementary Question asked by Mr Carl Brown**

Madam Mayor, the loss of personal information exposes you and me to the risk of identity theft and fraud. My question is whether confidential personal information is taken out of the office on laptops by staff or contractors and whether such information is ever transmitted by CDs through the post?

**Reply by Councillor Colin Hall**

Thank you Madam Mayor. Sometimes yes it is but it has to be done in the course of work. For instance, officers visit people at home to help them to do an assessment of benefits, so there are occasions certainly, where data is taken out of the building. There are very clear procedures in the Council about where data is to be taken and how it will be stored, how it has to be protected.

**Supplementary Question asked by Councillor Tony Shields**

Thank you Madam Mayor. We've heard what you have said. We have listened to Mr Brown's question. You've answered the question. Well done. First one tonight. What I would like is an undertaking that if it does happen there won't be a smoke screen, posturing or finger pointing. If it does happen in this Authority, will we tell the truth to the public as soon as possible, as time is valuable when personal data is out and not being controlled?

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### **Reply by Councillor Colin Hall**

I take your point Councillor Shields. It is very important that personal data is protected. I'm sure you have heard the case of Jeremy Clarkson recently, who said what a load of old faff it was that this data went missing and then published details of his own account to find that he had a £500 a month charity donation set up in his name by somebody. He then retracted and said how important it was that personal data was protected. If there was an issue in this Council, I'm absolutely certain that we would come clean. If there was a problem we would tell people about it.

### **3. Question asked by Paul Kelly of 29 Meadow Road, Sutton of the Chair of The Executive**

How high on the Council's list of priorities is the maintenance of our drains?

### **Reply by Councillor Colin Hall, Executive Member for Environment**

Thank you again Madam Mayor. Maintenance of the drains, Mr. Kelly, falls under the Council's Priority "Cleaner and Greener". That means that it is one of the main priorities in the Sutton Plan. One of eight priorities that sit under our major priority of maintaining efficiency and effectiveness. So it is very important to us. It's specifically included in our targets for maintaining customer satisfaction for street cleansing as well.

### **Supplementary Question asked by Paul Kelly**

Councillor Hall I noticed over the past months, every time we have rainfall, flooding is becoming the norm rather than the exception. This indicates that the drainage systems in Sutton and Carshalton have, for some considerable time, been neglected as far as a regular maintenance and cleaning service is concerned. Last week, I noticed a company called Clearaway using tankers, painted in its livery of orange and black, cleaning some of the most blocked drains where the flooding was heaviest. Can the Councillor confirm that this company has been contracted on a permanent basis to properly clean and maintain all of the boroughs drainage system or was this a one off patch up job?

### **Reply by Councillor Colin Hall**

I don't think the Council Mr. Kelly can take responsibility for the changes in the weather, and the changes in the weather, I think we'd all agree, are quite significant. I was reading today the report of the London Assembly into the floods and was quite interested to see some of the proposals that were in there about looking at drainage as a whole across London, looking at the risk of flooding as a whole across London. I have to say they were saying some sensible things in there about making sure that the Environment Agency gets involved in mapping all drainage in the whole of London. To get to your particular point about Clearaway, Cleanaway, I don't know them. I am aware that there is a company going around the borough that uses a large white vehicle to clean drains but I don't know if it is a company called Clearaway. We do have a regular contract to clean out major drains, as do other people like Thames Water.

### **Supplementary Question asked by Councillor Tim Crowley**

Thank you Councillor Hall. You say you are not responsible for the weather but I notice we do have a Climate Change Officer in the Council, so maybe they can do something about it. You say you are not sure if we have appointed these contractors, so you must mean that you are keeping with the one man and one

machine and attempting to carry out the cleaning and maintenance in-house. There are approximately 26,000 drains in the borough. I'm told that to clean a drain properly including travel, loading and unloading tools, would take half an hour. One man or two and one machine working an eight-hour day less lunch breaks working flat out, can clean 14 drains a day. That's a maximum of 70 drains a week, 3,360 drains a year. Therefore, to clean 26,000 drains would take just over eight years and then he could start again. Do you think eight years between cleanings is an appropriate maintenance period for a drain to work efficiently? And is it because of this inadequate maintenance programme that the borough of Sutton is beginning to resemble Venice?

#### **Reply by Councillor Colin Hall**

Thank you for the question Councillor Crowley, I don't know whether our Climate Change Officer can change the climate but we could have a go I suppose. I think you have been given duff information about how many drains can be cleaned in a day. I know that in a period of three days, a hundred drains were done, so half an hour a drain, fourteen drains in a day I think you said doesn't sound to be right. You can substantially do more than that. Some drains are more complex than others to deal with. So the point being made by your colleague, Councillor Scully, is that if there are a hundred difficult ones you can do them in three days. That can't be too bad. The real point here is that drains are maintained adequately in Sutton. If there are problems with them, as your side of the Chamber knows, they get dealt with and if you report them as Ward Councillors, as I'm sure you are keen to do, they will get dealt with. Councillor Whitham has raised one with me. I hope its been done; now you're telling me it hasn't, ok. Madam Mayor if people tell the Council about blocked drains the Council will deal with them.

#### **4. Question by Brian G Davies of 39 Kingsmead Avenue, Worcester Park of the Chair of The Executive**

In the matter of Councillor David Theobald, would the Leader of the Council define

- who reported this Councillor to the Standards Board for England
- on what grounds, Sutton Guardian reporting 'bribery' and 'conduct likely to bring the Council into disrepute' etc, etc...and
- whether the Standards Board for England dismissed the application
- because it only has the capacity to investigate 15% of applications to it, or
- because it did not consider the matter worthy of its consideration.
- whether Councillor Theobald is regarded as 'Not Guilty' or held in character-assassination of the Scots verdict of 'Nor Proven', such verdict being outwith English legal ethos?

#### **Reply by Councillor Sean Brennan, Chair of The Executive**

Thank you Madam Mayor. Councillor Theobald's conduct was reported to the Standards Board for England by the Monitoring Officer, Fiona Ledden, who is under a duty to report all matters that might have breached the Councillor's Code of Conduct. An Ethical Standards Officer from the Standards Board for England carried out a thorough investigation into the allegations and found no evidence of any failure to comply with the Councillor's Code of Conduct.

#### **Supplementary Question asked by Brian G Davies**

That is perfectly true and I believe that the standards that apply to Councillor Theobald should also apply to Right Honourable, the Noble Lord Tope, Baron Tope of Sutton in the borough of Sutton. What applies to the most minor

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Members, applies to everyone. None is above the law. However, Lord Tope may be.

My supplementary question refers to the fact that the Lord Tope's CV is bent. That when questioned about his CV by Councillor Brennan, he lied concerning the details of the question. My question is related to the fact that the Lord Tope is not elected to any of the public bodies to which he serves. And my question is related to the fact that the Lord Tope has been placed above the law....

**Reply by Councillor Sean Brennan**

Madam Mayor, I'll answer the final part of Dr Davies supplementary question, which I believe will qualify as a question. I agree that there is no Councillor above the law. Dr Davies has, on many occasions, attempted to pose this question about a particular Member of this Chamber and he has received the appropriate reply. I know he has also contacted the Standards Board for England on a number of occasions with similar allegations and they have found these not to have any foundation whatsoever.

**5. Question asked by Brian G Davies of 39 Kingsmead Avenue, Worcester Park of the Chair of The Executive**

More than one year ago, His (then) Worshipful the Mayor expelled me from the Council Chamber for endeavouring to ask a question regarding the control of finances in the Borough. Does this ban continue, and how does this specific ban sit with the Council's protestations of its desire to receive comment from all the people of the Borough, my interests being of general importance?

**Reply by Councillor Sean Brennan, Chair of The Executive**

Thank you Madam Mayor. Madam Mayor having checked back on the Minutes, Dr Davies was asked to leave the Council meeting as he refused to alter the terms of a supplementary question that appeared to be critical of an officer. He has not been banned from asking questions, and tonight is a demonstration of that. Indeed, he has asked several since that time. I would remind Dr Davies of the answer that I gave to him at the October 2006 Council meeting. It is a question about the behaviour and not about the question.

**Supplementary question asked by Brian G Davies**

Am I being criticised for my lack of knowledge of the Council rules or for my personal character and behaviour? On the occasion on which I was ejected from the chamber, I quite specifically tailored my question so it did not apply to a Council officer.

**Reply by Councillor Sean Brennan**

Neither really. As far I remember Councillor Richard Bailey who was the Mayor at that particular time, asked you to leave the Extraordinary Council meeting when you appeared to be asking a question of a personal nature about one of our officers and that was evident to everybody who was in the chamber, Dr Davies.

**Supplementary Question asked by Councillor Tony Shields**

Perhaps it would help everyone in the Chamber to receive written clarification of this situation within due course, Madam Mayor?

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