

WRITTEN QUESTIONS PURSUANT TO STANDING ORDER 44

1. Question by Councillor Lambert to the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

The recent surge in Covid cases amongst school-aged children is now worryingly spreading into households and the wider community. Education staff are more likely to test positive for Covid than staff in other sectors, and 53,000 children were already suffering Long Covid symptoms according to the Office of National Statistics as of September. As a result, many local public health officials and NHS leaders are calling for additional measures in light of the huge pressures on the NHS and in a bid to avoid another winter lockdown.

A growing number of councils are now using the freedoms they have under the Department for Education guidance to bring in additional mitigations in schools including:

- Stopping whole-school assemblies
- Bringing back classroom bubbles and face coverings
- All close contacts of confirmed cases to get a PCR test
- Reintroduction of staggered start and finish and lunch times

Will East Sussex County Council join other councils across the country in encouraging all schools in the country to reintroduce measures to protect children, staff and the wider community as a matter of urgency?

Answer by the Lead Member for Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

The Director of Public Health for the county has written to all schools, together with the Director of Children's Services, asking that face coverings should be worn in communal areas by children in Year 7 and above. He has also emphasised the importance of everyone who tests positive using a Lateral Flow Test also getting a PCR test and being part of the official test and trace system. A letter to parents has been provided for schools to send out, underlining this message. Copies of both letters are attached.

At this stage we think it right to leave decisions about assemblies, the use of bubbles and staggered start and finish times to the judgement of individual head teachers but will of course keep this under review. Many schools have retained measures adopted during previous stages of the pandemic, for a range of reasons. We have regular dialogue with head teachers and Multi Academy Trust leaders about these issues. Co-producing our guidance and communications throughout the pandemic has ensured trusted decision making and localised solutions that fit both infection prevention good practice and the need of each school to continue to provide education to all its pupils.

2. Question by Councillor Georgia Taylor to the Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change

All councillors received a letter from the CEE Bill campaign, detailing the errors and incorrect information in Members statements and the replacement motion put forward by Councillor Bennett in the Full Council meeting on the 12 October 2021. The letter details how councillors made statements that appeared to suggest they were against their own government's policy and practice – both from the NetZero strategy and from the government's commitment to the Paris Agreement and the government's work with citizen's assemblies. They also quoted from the wrong CE Bill version, and demonstrated a lack of concern for residents of East Sussex and the risks that we face if global heating goes above 1.5 degrees.

Given that Members have misunderstood or are not aware of government policy and action, do you think we should receive additional training for Members, which could include carbon literacy, full understanding of the netzero strategy (and the gaps in ambition), implications of the Glasgow Climate Pact (and its limitations) for local government and the CE Bill?

Are you concerned that a council decision has been taken that is based on so much erroneous information, and what the impact of this might be on democracy and good governance?

Answer by the Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change

I note your view of Members' understanding and knowledge, this is not a view I share. I do however believe we all need to be as informed as we can be on this very important issue, which is why the Cabinet agreed additional funding for corporate climate change work on 9 November which includes £26,500 for delivering carbon literacy training for Members, senior managers and staff. This will begin to be delivered in the new year.

The current corporate climate emergency plan covers 2020-22. As discussed at the Place Scrutiny Committee meeting on 26 November, the Committee may decide to be involved in the update to the corporate climate emergency plan that will need to be completed in 2022. This would provide a cross-party opportunity to discuss the County Council's corporate approach to getting to net zero, ideally following carbon literacy training.

The debate on the Motion at the last Council meeting followed the Lead Member meeting where information, including the CEE Bill, relating to the motion was available. The debate that followed at County Council allows all members to express views or opinions prior to a vote on the Motion before them. Members can decide for themselves whether or not they are persuaded by the contributions put forward by their fellow Councillors during the debate as they decide how to vote. This process is part of the democratic process.

3. Question by Councillor Georgia Taylor to the Leader and Lead Member for Strategic Management and Economic Development

Please can you tell us whether Members will be shown the response that has been submitted to the Gatwick Expansion consultation last week, and why this was not made available earlier for Members to review, or at least submitted to Cabinet as has been done in other councils.

Answer by the Leader and Lead Member for Strategic Management and Economic Development

The proposed Northern Runway Proposal plans are considered a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) and the Airport needs to apply for a Development Consent Order (DCO) to build and operate the scheme. The DCO process is very different to a normal planning application and Gatwick's recent consultation on their proposals are still at the 'pre-application' stage of the process where local authorities are beginning to evaluate the local impacts of the proposed scheme.

The application for the DCO has not yet been submitted to or accepted by the Planning Inspectorate - expected summer 2022. It is not until later in the DCO process, usually near the start of the examination - expected late 2022/early 2023 - that a written representation setting out the local authority's view on the application i.e., whether or not it supports the application and its reasons, is required.

The key role of the local authorities at this early stage in the process is to provide technical feedback and a critical analysis of the proposals, the impacts, the assessments and mitigation, so that the applicant can refine their application as much as possible before it is to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate. Since the technical information included in the consultation is provided by Gatwick Airport it is important to ensure that we, as an authority, are content with how this evidence and modelling work has been collated and assessed.

Officers have been working with the other local planning and transport authorities around the airport to gain a better understanding of the proposal with officer topic working groups, hosted by Gatwick Airport, being held to increase awareness and understanding of key issues related to the Northern Runway proposals. For East Sussex, the topics of most interest are carbon and climate change, transport and surface access, noise, health and wellbeing, economics, employment and housing. In addition, we have sought to combine resources with other local authorities to appoint consultants to provide expert advice to us collectively and separately on the appropriateness of Gatwick's assessments around these topics.

All of this collaborative work with our local authority partners over the last couple of months has helped officers to pull together a robust response providing that technical feedback and critical analysis of the evidence presented by Gatwick Airport, so that the applicant can refine this as much as possible ahead of submission to the Planning Inspectorate. A copy of our response has been made available to Members.

When we get to the stage of drafting the County Council's written response to the Development Control Order, which as I said earlier, we expect will be towards the end of 2022, Members will have a key role in determining the Council's position of the northern runway proposals.