

CABINET – 29 APRIL 2020

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS PURSUANT TO
REVISED CABINET PROCEDURE RULE 11.1**

**AGENDA ITEM 7 – OFFICER DECISIONS TAKEN DURING THE CORONAVIRUS
PANDEMIC**

**Q1 Councillor Edwards to the Cabinet Member for Technical Services,
Councillor Stanley**

Q1 I understand that pest control is, in the current pandemic situation, deemed to be a non-urgent activity with no site visits currently being undertaken unless there is an imminent risk (words used by Christine Melgar). Could you define what criteria are used to determine an imminent risk, and what elements of our resident's daily life and their health, particularly mental health, might be taken into consideration when determining whether the risk is high enough for action to be taken. Could you also confirm what funding, if any, has been diverted from this service to other areas and whether financial availability is a factor being taken account of when determining imminent risk.

A1 Thank you for your question Cllr Edwards and I do hope yourself and your family are keeping well and staying safe.

The decision to not provide the usual pest control service at this time is to protect the health and safety of our residents as well as that of Arun officers, alongside reducing the overall risk of spreading Covid-19.

Currently visits are only considered if there is an imminent risk and for this, we follow the guidance provided by the British Pest Control Association, their criteria are:

- Is there a critical imminent threat to public health if a site visit was not carried out?
- Is there a risk of food contamination and therefore disease?
- Is the client distressed to the point their mental health is affected?

I would like to thank-you again, now for raising the issue of mental health. A passion for raising awareness of mental health issues is one I am sure we share. I can assure you the combined impact of what current social restrictions and suffering from a pest infestation could have on a resident's mental health is taken into consideration when assessing whether a visit for treatment should be made.

Our Contact Centre staff are very experienced in dealing with Pest Control enquiries and if at all concerned about a situation would refer this to an officer for further advice.

Finally, no funding has been diverted from this service and cost is not taken into account when determining imminent risk.

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Q2 Councillor Dendle to each Member of the Cabinet but to be responded to by the Leader of the Council, Councillor Dr Walsh

Q2 Over the last few months we've received a monthly report from the Cabinet member Pauline Gregory which have been excellent, I must commend her for the detail and information supplied. But other Cabinet Members have not made those reports, could I therefore ask to each of the above why you haven't made a report to all Members and would you start making them from now on please?

A2 I am responding to this question on behalf of Cabinet Members and as most of the of the actions taken in the last couple of months have been mainly around the economy, homelessness and housing and business support so largely covering my area of portfolio and that of Councillor Mrs Gregory's, it has been us that have been in most frequent discussion. Councillor Mrs Gregory decided to provide her update report herself and this was a wise decision, the remainder of the Cabinet actions and involvement is recorded in the weekly updates provided by myself and the Chief Executive to all Councillors and that is where this information is held and I feel this is more than sufficient for Councillors to know what is and has been going on. It has been made plain by the Chief Executive that all decisions taken in an emergency by Officers, principally the Chief Executive and Corporate Management Team and Directors - they are the decision makers and Cabinet Members and Group Leaders are consulted on all of these matters.

Supp

Q I have to challenge this response as we do not live in an autocracy we live in a democracy – Cabinet Members have responsibilities and have portfolios to run and should consult with Officers – so why are we not getting these individual Cabinet Member reports.

Supp

A I have answered this already – most of the decisions required to be made did not need a report to come out to Committees or Scrutiny Committees or other decision-making Committees. When these are necessary they will be made by the relevant portfolio holder and this is when these reports will come out – the current actions of Cabinet Members are reported are through the weekly summary in a lengthy format that takes a lot of putting together and is sufficient in my view.

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Q3 From Councillor Dendle to the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Purchase

Q3 Arun Direct must have a huge uplift in demand, certain departments in Arun due to CV19 must have less demand, (planning, technical services, car parking etc) so my question is have staff been relocated to work from home to answer Arun Direct calls? Could you give me the numbers relocated?

A3 Thank you for your question and if you require anything in far more specific detail, I can give this to you afterwards. Call numbers overall when compared to 2019 are slightly down during the crisis period – specifically 12,459 calls in 2019 compared to 11,935 spec in a 4-week period late March into April. I will get you the exact dates. Some Service areas are experiencing large call number increases some are reduced. More calls are being made in relation to Council Tax and less calls in areas such as car parks for example. Some areas are experiencing more calls. Most call handlers within the Arun Direct (AD) team are trained to process calls for all services areas, and due to the receptions being closed to all but those presenting as homeless, all resources are being used to deal with call handling. A maximum number of 17 ADC staff are all working from home to deal with these calls.

Q4 From Councillor Dendle to the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Purchase

Q4 I note the decision regarding the suspension of car parking charges made on 1 April which in principle I support, but in the papers its says regarding alternative options to keep the car parks open were rejected in consultation with the Leader and not the Cabinet Member, why was the Cabinet Member not involved? Also, it says please see attached and there are no papers attached. So could the Leader please explain why he took the decision and not his Cabinet member? And what was the detail and reasoning in that discussion, and did the Director of Services consult with Councillor Purchase as the Cabinet Member responsible as the papers do not reflect this

A4 In relation to your statement that the attachments that you refer to are not available, I will have to refer to Officers on this and come back to you. In terms of this decision and other decisions, the decision to suspend parking charges was delegated to the Director of Services in this emergency situation, however, the Chief Executive did refer this to the Leader of the Council, who gave support to the proposal and I am hugely supportive too. I will now hand back to the Leader of the Council to provide further explanation. This is not a normal situation where there was a normal consultation period and I am hugely supportive.

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Councillor Dr Walsh – this was a very fast moving situation and on the first day of Covid 19, the Chief Executive and I consulted very quickly as part of a pack of measures that I referred to earlier such as a commercial holiday for Arun tenants, car parking and the homelessness situation and we decided to take this action immediately and as soon as the Chief Executive had consulted with me consultation then took place with Councillor Purchase who agreed with the decision which was a fast moving situation.

Supp

Q When I was a Cabinet Member and urgent decisions needed to be taken, the Director would talk and run this past me before making the decision to check that I was in agreement. I do not understand why a five minute telephone call with the Cabinet Member responsible was not made and I raise the same issue with you. What this comes down to is the actual governance that is going on – it seems Cabinet Members are being cut loose from decision making and Officers are making decisions and you are deferring from Officers. We are in a democracy – it does not take much to make a telephone call to get a steer on decisions that need to be made – I am worried we are not giving any real agenda to governance in the Council.

Supp

A Councillor Dr Walsh – there was Member consultation and it took place with myself as Leader of the Council and as the decision was principally based on finances and lost income to the Council as a result of car parks being closed. I was involved in that from the start. The Chief Executive took the right decision to consult with me – the decision was made within 20-30 minutes it was an immediate and necessary decision.

The Chief Executive then made a statement explaining the decision-making process during this emergency period.

Nigel Lynn – Let me make it clear about the splitting of duties of Officers during this emergency. The Director of Services was dealing with managing the Emergency Planning Team and there were a wide range of issues emerging that she was having to deal with. I took the decision to split duties as these arose – car parking being one of them and took the decision to consult with the Leader of the Council and then reported back to the Cabinet Member. This was because I had quick timeframe in which to make such decisions and this allowed the Director of Services to then continue to deal with other emergencies.

Councillor Purchase – I can add that Cabinet Members were in regular touch and I have had numerous calls with the Director of Services during this pandemic and have been kept in the loop on all sorts of issues. This was not a decision made in isolation, nor taken in a day but a matter of minutes - it had been made quickly as part of a wider set of issues and I thank the Director of Services for keeping me in the loop and other Group Heads too.

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Q5 From Councillor Mrs Pendleton to the Cabinet Member for Residential Services, Councillor Mrs Gregory

Q5 On the installation of portable showers at Flaxmean Sheltered Housing Scheme - I gather that in 2015, this archaic facility offered only one shower on each floor for approximately 30 residents. Can you please explain how the expenditure of £20,000 has been used, how many additional shower, wash hand basin and toilet facilities have been installed and what the current ratio of residents to each ablution facility is.

If the ratio is not on a 1 facility to one individual basis, can you also explain what steps have been put in place to ensure the Government dictate associated with social distancing of keeping individuals 2 metres apart has been enabled and how this is working in practice.

Could you also please tell us the number of inhabitants at this facility who have succumbed to Covid 19, either at the facility or currently in hospital or subsequently died since the start of the pandemic outbreak.

A5 Flaxmean House has 21 flats. All flats have a their own wcs and wash hand basin. 5 of the flats have their own bathroom. Prior to Covid-19 of the 21 flats 18 were occupied, 5 of which have their own bathrooms. The remaining 13 households share 4 communal shower/bathing facilities, 2 on each floor.

In order to ensure social distancing and to minimise the risk of infection we installed 9 portable showers, so each resident now has their own personal facility. The total cost of these is £20k until end of June

To date, no reports of coronavirus for residents of Flaxmean House have been received.

Q6 From Councillor Mrs Pendleton to the Cabinet Member for Residential Services, Councillor Mrs Gregory

Q6 It is indicated that the contract with Butlins is for 50 self-contained units and that it ran from 27 March to 17 April at a cost of £52,500 in order to follow the Government Directive and minimise endangerment to the lives of vulnerable rough sleepers. This appears to equate to approximately £1,050 per unit for a 22-day period.

As I understand it, there were 24 rough sleepers identified prior to the Covid 19 outbreak. 16 have been accommodated so far, 4 are refusing offers and 4 are unable to be located. Could you please explain:

- Why 50 self-contained units were contracted when only 24 rough sleepers had been identified

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- How many additional rough sleepers have been identified and are being accommodated
- How many units have been used and therefore how many units have remained vacant?
- What the cost of providing this accommodation is per week per individual, splitting the cost across occupied units only
- Whether or not the contract has been extended to take account of the extension of lockdown until early May
- How much the contract will cost going forward
- What the plan is for rough sleepers post the lifting of lockdown

A6 The accommodation secured at Butlins was to provide shelter for rough sleepers known to services that was pre Covid 19 and to cater for new approaches in the lockdown period where it is assessed that households may be at risk of rough sleeping. The accommodation is block booked on a 3 weekly cycle and costs are fixed at £52,500 per block booking, the unit cost of a chalet being £350 per week. There is provision to extend each block blocking in accordance with any extension of the lockdown period. We are just about to extend the next block booking now.

Currently 39 of the 50 chalets are occupied. We are working with partner agencies such as Stone Pillow and Turning Tides formulating more support plans for individuals for readiness post the lockdown restrictions.

Q7 **From Councillor Mrs Pendleton to the Cabinet Member for Residential Services, Councillor Mrs Gregory**

Q7 £945K was received from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government from the Covid 19 Hardship fund for distribution to working age claimants of the LCTS. This new grant was provided to be used to provide council tax relief alongside existing local council tax support schemes to offset potential fluctuations in household incomes and recognising that individuals may struggle to meet council tax payments. Billing authorities are required to use the grant to reduce the council tax liability of individuals in their area.

Could you please answer the following questions in relation to this?

- Given that prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, Government expected councils to have already established a local council tax support scheme for 2020-21, how much funding was allocated by ADC for LCTS prior to the outbreak of Covid 19 pandemic
- How many council tax payers were receiving LCTS prior to the Covid 19 pandemic?
- How many of these council tax payers have received additional support from the Covid 19 Hardship fund.

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- How many additional council tax payers (new burdens) have become eligible for LCTS post the start of the Covid 19 Pandemic and are now in receipt of support from the Covid 19 Hardship fund.
- How much of the funding made available before the Covid 19 pandemic and how much of the Covid 19 Hardship fund 2020 has been allocated to date and therefore how much is still awaiting allocation.
- How quickly were eligible council tax payers notified of the increased support that they would be receiving and are there still any outstanding notifications to be sent out.

A7 At the start of this financial year 20/21 £9.3m had been awarded in Council Tax Support. In addition to £100k discretionary hardship fund that had been set aside.

Prior to Covid 19 - 4,382 households were in receipt of Council Tax Support; this now stands at 4,637 an increase of 255.

A software update is awaited in order to apply the Covid 19 Hardship Fund. In total for new and existing claims, it is estimated approximately 4,600 households will be eligible for the additional £150 hardship payment, equating to £690,000

Supp

Q How quickly were people notified that they were going to get help, is there a condition that people should be informed as soon as possible.

Supp

A We are awaiting new software that will be allot the money to each of the accounts – I will find out more for you.

Q8 **From Councillor Mrs Pendleton to the Cabinet Member for Residential Services, Councillor Mrs Gregory**

Q8 On the Waiver of part of Risk Based Verification Policy in relation to the processing of High-risk Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims. Action here was waiving part of the Risk Based Verification Policy procedures where any claim that is deemed high risk requires sight of original documents and instead accept digital documentation for claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, reducing what are considered high risk claims to that of a medium risk claim.

- Can you please identify what risk assessment was made associated with this course of action in relation to potential for financial fraud?
- Can you also please tell me how many new claims have been received involving acceptance based on digital documentation, since this decision was taken.

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- What is the size of the financial commitment of ADC, i.e. the amount of money, which could be at potential risk of having been fraudulently obtained?
- Has any consideration been given to using automated Credit Reference Checking software for high risk verification as this would not require officers to physically visit the individual but give an extra support in assessing the validity of the claim?

A8 The Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) are taking the risk and they have advised that due to the current circumstances it may be difficult to collect the evidence normally required to process claims from vulnerable households. As such Council's should take a pragmatic view when processing claims that fall into the high-risk category. These form approximately 10 per cent of all claims.

In total 636 new housing benefit/council tax reduction claims have been received of which approximately 63 are classed as high risk. There is no financial risk to the Council in respect of fraudulent claims as we receive a grant from central government based on the amount of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Support paid. Any claims subsequently found to be fraudulent will be investigated by the DWP not by us. All payments made are subject to an annual independent audit.

Credit Reference Checking software was being explored prior to the current situation and this will be re-visited once things settle over the coming months.

Q9 **From Councillor Chapman to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Dr Walsh and the Chief Executive**

Q9 My question has largely been covered by Councillor Dendle's supplementary question. Given the assurances made about consultation, why is the evidence not included in the report before Cabinet here today. Councillor Mrs Gregory signed her decision, why are the others not signed by Cabinet Members.

A9 This question is actually a supplementary to what you submitted in writing. Councillor Mrs Gregory was the only Cabinet Member that was required to make a specific executive decision that to be signed off in the normal way and not under the emergency procedures. All of the others were taken not over my signature or over individual portfolio holders' signature but over the signature of the Chief Executive; or a Director or other Member so authorised to do. All will be kept as an audit trail for the required number of years.

The Group Head of Council Advice & Monitoring Officer then made a statement - You are quite right in that there was only one decision out of all the urgent Officer decisions taken that required Cabinet Member authorisation and that was if the decision required anything over a certain level of finance or required some form of procurement. The rough sleeper contract with Butlins did and there was a supplementary report that you have all been provided with

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explaining the further extension of the contract entered. This did require sign-off by the Cabinet Member which has happened with everything else, the Officer had the delegated authority and as explained there was consultation but because this was not a necessity, the reports have been written in a way that shows the Officer decision and the background which was the consultation referred to earlier.

Councillor Dr Walsh asked the Monitoring Officer if the decision had been taken in accordance with statute law and in line with Arun's Constitution. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that it had and outlined her role in ensuring that this happened with all Officer Decisions explaining the support and advice given to the Chief Executive and Group Heads through this process.

Supp

Q Of course I understand the procedure and statute, my final point is may this not be reviewed to be more transparent by amending that procedure as I do not believe it is best practice.

Supp

A I will certainly take this back to the Chief Executive and the Senior Management Team and we will look to see if we can improve it.

Q10 From Councillor Mrs Cooper to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Dr Walsh

Q10 I would firstly like to thank Claire Pritchard for her informative staff updates, and since we have started receiving these, I can certainly see what challenging circumstances the staff have had to endure within such a short space of time. I would like to thank them all for their unceasing hard work.

With that in mind, can I ask the Cabinet Members, how they have been able to personally ensure the wellbeing of the staff in their portfolios and also what percentage have been redeployed to a changed role?

Has the Employee Assistance programme proved successful, and what has the uptake been like?

A10 I will respond on behalf of the Cabinet having consulted with the Chief Executive. I am only aware of one member of staff who has been temporarily assigned to another service and three members of staff who are working with another service area but in addition to their normal role. I am not aware of any other changes although there may be some informal temporary change in duties happening elsewhere in the Council, subject to need. The employee assistance programme is a confidential service so we will not know if there has been an increase in usage until Health Assured issue their statistics. These

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are usually sent quarterly but this may be subject to change if they have reduced staff working.

The Chief Executive made a statement. To assist Councillor Mrs Cooper, staff welfare has been really high on the corporate agenda with CMT during this pandemic and you will have picked up on a number of issues from the updates provided that we are constantly looking at new ways of keeping staff informed and feeling that they can have a social connection with their colleagues. We have worked really hard and made sure that staff welfare is important as we lead into the sixth week of lockdown. A number of staff have worked long hours and over the weekend, especially in revenues and benefits, and welfare is really important, and I thank you for raising it – we are doing everything we can to ensure staff are kept well and happy

Councillor Dr Walsh – I have been in regular conversation and have been regularly updated on any major serious illness or absences of staff.

Supp

Q When you get information back giving this information, I would like to know if the service had a good uptake. It will also be nice to know if staff used this service.

Supp

A We will provide this when we get the report back from Health Assured.

Q11 From Councillor Cooper to the Leader of the Council – Councillor Dr Walsh

Q11 Questions relating to businesses within our District during the lockdown and restrictions.

Due to the nature of the government grants and the severe financial implications the lockdown is having on many of our small independent businesses who still have staff, ongoing invoices and bills to pay, how have this administration ensured that the staff who are in difficult conditions due to working remotely are getting consistent accurate information out to those who have applied?

It has come to my attention that many businesses have not completely understood the process, the main issue is the registering for the online business rates account, and then the completion of the direct debit mandate. The original letter was not clear and appeared confusing, saying you did not need to apply for the grant but then in the next sentence asking you to complete the form to apply. Nowhere in the letter did it mention bank details or completing the direct debit. I suspect many did not bother applying as that is exactly what it said,

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meaning many will fall through the net and miss out on their much needed financial injection.

What are the administration doing to address this confusion, how are we communicating with businesses that have not got the process right due to this misleading letter?

Please also confirm if there is any order or method applied to the processing of grants, ie: in date order from the date the application form was received or alphabetically?

In Arun's communication to towns and parishes dated 16/4 week it was said that the majority of grants would be paid by 27th April, has the administration achieved that goal? How many businesses that applied in the first week are still waiting to receive their grants?

My final question relates to Arun's commercial tenants. The Government have announced new legislation to protect businesses under strain with regard to rent. It asks landlords to work together with businesses to protect them and jobs in our areas. Given that this administration are only offering a rent holiday to our tenants, does the cabinet not feel that we should be offering a rent free period specifically to those business who are significant employers and seasonal? Having owned a seasonal business in Littlehampton in the past I know only too well that the spring and summer months are crucial to ensure survival over the winter. These business's pay rent and rates 12 months of the year and employ people year round that in turn support families that live in Arun, if we are to ensure their continued survival a should we not be more proactive with our outlook in our approach as have many other landlords and small councils throughout our district?

A11 I thank you for representing members of the business community. The Arun Business Partnership Newsletter has been used as a regular method of disseminating advice and information to businesses. Over the past 5 weeks 6 newsletters have been sent informing businesses of the various support available, keeping them up to date and offering a point of contact for issues. As a result, the Business Development Manager has dealt with over 500 calls and emails from local businesses who had a range of questions. Some of these were related to the Government Grant and Arun's processing of that whilst others were related to matters such as business continuity and more recently the recovery process.

The newsletter goes to around 3,000 businesses each time and over the past few weeks and an additional 87 new businesses have been added to the database and will receive these regular updates as well as having that ongoing point of contact. On our own commercial tenants, we were very quick to offer a rent holiday for 3 months for the small/medium business within the retail leisure and hospitality sectors as we are aware of the impact the Government

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restrictions are having including our own tenants and so we are commit to reviewing in May reference to industry practice any further support that might be necessary and how to best target it – I will keep you updated.

Supp

Q I welcome the reassurance that businesses will be looked at. How are the business grants being worked through? Is there a formal process or is it done on a first come first served basis or is it done alphabetically? I ask this as I know of several businesses who were in the first 600 tranche who still do not have the grant. They have ongoing bills and have staff to pay and they need to be reassured that the money is coming through now.

Supp

A Thank you for raising this and I also have personal experience where I know there are businesses who have experienced slowness in getting paid – both of which were resolved as of yesterday and today. I am expecting all outstanding claims to be met by end of this week and they should be clear by Friday. To answer your other question, the payments are dealt with on a first come first paid basis not alphabetically.

The Director of Services confirmed that the Council had paid out £19m of grants which was about 64%, the majority of businesses who have applied and qualified would have their payment processed by 7 May and had been sent a letter last week reminding them to apply if not done so.

Supp

Q Thank you for the reassurance I know staff are working under exceptional circumstances and it is not easy, but let me say this, it will be the small businesses that will suffer and some will not have a business at the end of this. We need to ensure this money goes out early. I know of a business that got their application in on the first 3 days and they are still waiting for their money, so grants are not processed on a first come first served basis. Can I leave this with you to disseminate?

Supp

A I know of one case too in that category as well and so I do not deny it is happening. The volume of applications is enormous, and staff have been working night and day and over the weekends. I am sorry and apologise if anyone has been missed but they should all be paid by the end of this week. Thank you, Councillor Cooper, for pressing the case.

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Q12 From Councillor Roberts to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Dr Walsh

Q12 Why wasn't a Q&A of Cabinet Members by Members included on the Agenda?

A12 The agenda for this meeting has followed the usual Cabinet Procedure Rules. This is not a standard item of business for Cabinet and there was no request made for this additional item to be included on the agenda in advance of your question being received on 28 April. This meeting has been arranged in accordance with Cabinet Procedure Rules in line with the Council's Constitution. You are asking us to vary them and we cannot do that.

Supp

Q There are rules – in this emergency period the crux is to get more information and perhaps there is a perception in that not all Cabinet Members have been as diligent as Councillor Mrs Gregory has been in providing us with these great updates and so it is important that we have some form of scrutiny and some way of guest Members not giving 24 hours' notice if they want to ask questions on things that have come up at a meeting – how can we get these questions and get these answers?

Supp

A We are having a meeting of the Overview Select Committee in the next few weeks which will provide Councillors with the further opportunity to ask questions on the subjects under scrutiny and under Cabinet Member questions and updates. There will be a Covid 19 update on that agenda where there will be further opportunity to ask questions. Remember that we were not allowed to hold virtual meetings for the first few weeks of the pandemic, holding virtual meetings has developed since then and we have had to compile our own rules in accordance with the regulations and in consultation with other Councils and further afield. Other Councils have had bad experiences at operating a virtual meeting as they are different and do not have the same dynamics as a normal meeting. I think that this first meeting has gone well with everyone who wanted to ask questions asking them and they have been able to probe further Cabinet Members and so if there is any suggestion that Cabinet Members have not been involved and in dialogue with Officers this is misplaced. I wish to pay tribute to Officers and all Councillors involved in making these decisions and the opposition who have been diligent in asking questions in writing or email and I urge them to continue through the Group Head of Policy and in writing.

As there were several non-Cabinet Members who wished to ask questions without submitting them in advance in line with the new Meeting Procedure Rule 11.1, the Group Head of Council and Advice & Monitoring Officer was invited to provide further advice. She stated that the Procedure Rules that the Council had had to introduce for operating virtual meetings had been adapted as the meeting was virtual i.e. with attendees not in the same room and had to take into account a different sort of meeting running. In developing the revised rules,

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it had been necessary to think about the bad experiences other Councils had had in terms of controlling access to the meeting. Arun had gone beyond the remit of being just heard and were operating virtual meetings where you could also be seen. In terms of the procedure rules for speaking, the new rules stipulated a notification period for wanting to take part in terms of being present in the virtual Public Gallery and in asking questions with 24 hours' notice having to be given. What happens now in terms of anyone else who wishes to speak it is at the permission of Cabinet as a whole – so if someone wishes to speak after all of these questions the Chairman can ask the Cabinet if they wish to allow additional speakers or move to the next item of business. This is in the existing procedure rule as it is with any Committee.