

CABINET
11th December 2013

Public Questions/Statements

1. Question One

Mr Stephen Mulloy of Shrewsbury will ask the following question of the Leader in relation to public question time:

Some consider the process of asking public questions, in the present form, as being a ritualistic process not too dissimilar to PMQ's.

At present, the public may submit a written question at least 2 working days before the committee sits, 3 days for cabinet, and 5 days for Full Council.

It is the way that the written response is supplied that is the problem, as it is only provided just before the respective committee or council sits. There is no time to read and formulate a cogent response, so in order for the average person to benefit from the right of the supplementary question, they need to come with a supplementary question prepared. This makes the initial written question a ritual.

In addition to this, members of the committees are not given an advance copy of the public question and only receive this, along with the officers reply, at the meeting. Therefore they are also ill prepared to discuss or debate what in many cases can be a matter of public interest.

What I propose is that when a written question is submitted, that the written response is supplied at least the day before the committee sits, and that a copy is also given to members. This way there will be more consideration of the question asked. This can be achieved by adding another working day to the submission of the question.

As the Draft Business Plan seeks to move away from artificial debates in the council chamber, would this not be a way of demonstrating this in practice?

The Leader will respond direct at the meeting.

2. Statement

Professor Lalage Bown of Shrewsbury (and former chair, Scottish Museums Council) will make the following statement on proposals for museum entry charges:

Given that the Council is in financial straits and that the Cabinet may be considering free entry only to the Museum's ground floor:

1. Democracy and P.R. Councillors should be aware of the groundswell of public protest, evident in the current petition being gathered against charging. [I will give figures as at 10/12/13]. There is indignation at the lack of consultation of residents/voters and at the ignoring of work done over several years by devoted volunteers, to raise awareness of museums, to help with cataloguing, packing and relocation, and to train to act as guides etc, all without charge. Shrewsbury residents are particularly upset that money for building work passed on from the Borough should be represented as "investment" by Shropshire Council.

2. The Business Case. Expert advisors should have mentioned that all experience shows museums that don't charge attract more footfall and raise more money from the public than those which do. This is true of all kinds and sizes of museum. There are also many examples of new museums bringing in new audiences. Dr Eilean Hooper Greenhill of the University of Leicester has constantly emphasised that "new audiences can be built".

3. Duty to the Community. We are all aware that provision of museums is not mandatory; but when they are provided they are there for the community, for the continuing recreation and education of the public. They are particularly important for the less privileged or well-heeled, but for all they should be objects of more than one visit.

So, on grounds of democracy and PR, for business reasons and on basic principle, the flat imposition of charges is not recommended. You may wish to consult your voters on other ways of raising money (e.g. in cooperation with the Museum Friends) but charging is NOT the answer.