

Council meeting, Tuesday 19 October 2021

Item 7 – Questions from Members

1. From Councillor Richard Seaborne

“At the Eastern Planning Committee meeting on September 28th a member of the committee justifiably expressed disappointment about the legibility of some of the diagrams in an officer report. The response to this comment was that members can always retrieve the original documents via the Council’s planning website. This observation leads to my question, which is directed to the portfolio holders for Planning Policy and for Business Transformation and IT.

The response time to retrieve planning documents from the Waverley Planning website has been generally poor even for those members who are fortunate enough to have good internet line speeds. Anecdotal evidence suggests that numerous other councils provide planning sites that are much quicker to use. Over the last few months performance has deteriorated due to bots and crawlers bypassing the firewall and accessing the website, to a point where it is common for it take anywhere from one to five minutes to open individual items. On 30th September, Bramley Parish Council was forced to postpone its scheduled planning committee meeting because nobody could open any of the documents on the planning website.

Please can we be told what is being done to address this totally unsatisfactory situation? If councillors can’t access material efficiently then neither can residents and how are our planning team managing to work efficiently or are they all working off paper? I am sure that I am not alone in wanting assurances that something meaningful is being done to improve the situation.”

Reply from Councillor Peter Clark, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Business Transformation and IT

“The Planning Documents website is hosted on Waverley servers at The Burys. It shares the storage environment with our Enterprise Data Management system that is used across the authority for our Line of Business applications. This EDM stores millions of documents.

We engaged with Civica as our software provider to troubleshoot the download speed issues that we have been experiencing over the past few weeks, and their analysis highlighted an issue with malicious traffic flooding our servers. We need to resolve the malicious traffic issues before continuing with any further investigation. Once we have eliminated this traffic Civica will then be able to analyse the average response and download times to determine if they are acceptable.

The current issues with the Planning Documents website are caused by considerable traffic from bad bots and data scrapers. Bad bots, are defined as “software applications that run automated tasks with malicious intent over the

Internet.” We have proved this is the main performance issue by stopping all external traffic to the site and accessing it internally as our Planning department does.

As soon as external traffic was allowed, the performance issues started again. We have purchased a service from Radware, which was activated on the 10 October. This allows more granular blocking of bot and scraper traffic than our current firewall allows.

This service has spent a week in learning mode and is showing significant bad bot traffic to the site. All this unwanted traffic must be processed which means legitimate traffic is throttled. As part of the investigation process, we can allow or deny traffic from certain geographic locations and using our current firewall settings. We have currently restricted all traffic except for UK and Ireland.

Once the learning mode concludes during week commencing 18 October, the system will be able to differentiate between welcome and unwelcome traffic and we can activate blocking of the latter.

Interim reporting shows that in one 24 hours we have had to process hits from 170,000 unwelcome bots many of which are generated in the UK.

We are confident that once blocking is activated, we have already seen a positive impact on download speeds. Clearly, we will need to scrutinise very closely just how positive that impact is over the coming weeks. Activation is not the end of the process, the data that is generated will inform our thinking and actions going forward, in attempting to improve the performance even further.”

2. From Councillor Maxine Gale

“Could the Executive or Council direct, as a matter of Policy, that any applications by developers to change or amend previously agreed tenure splits are automatically referred to the appropriate Planning Committee for decision and not dealt with under delegated powers by Officers.”

Reply from the Leader of the Council

“For those of you that are not aware, the origin of this issue came up at Eastern Planning where a large development attempted to bury the tenure mix. It was required to be called in to address, and I am pleased to say that Eastern Planning threw it out unanimously. It did raise a further point going forward so my reply to Councillor Gale is: Thank you for your question. I agree that if a developer wants to change or amend previously agreed tenure splits then this should come before the relevant planning committee for consideration rather than being dealt with under delegated officer authority. This will require a change to the scheme of delegation in the Council’s Constitution and I have asked officers to draft a report to the next meeting of the Standards Committee for its consideration and recommendation to the next available Council meeting for approval. That way Councillors can discuss the issue and understand it in more depth and hopefully that will be an appropriate response to quite a serious issue, particularly for a Council that cares as much as we do about genuinely affordable social housing.”