

MIKE OLLEY



While Cotton's away, the city council mandarins will play!

In advance of a new column starting next week, **MIKE OLLEY** delivers his views on how officials at Birmingham City Council mishandled the Section 114 controversy.

WHAT on earth prompted mandarins at Birmingham City Council to announce a Section 114 notice on Tuesday, September 5? My sources assure me it was no coincidence that the date coincided with the start of city leader Councillor John Cotton's holiday.

Just for the record, a Section 114 notice effectively strips councillors of financial control, sending a message to the world that: "We are bankrupt!" In short, it's a pretty crucial decision.

Cllr Cotton knew a Section 114 was in the offing, and they - council officers - knew all about his long-planned 50th birthday trip to New York. But why did they time the announcement for the first day of his journey? To me, it's like turning a ship around mid-Atlantic while the captain's off the bridge having lunch.

Cllr Cotton has since been pilloried by some for being abroad at the time of the city's biggest financial crisis ever. That's a convenient result for the mandarins, isn't it? Cllr Cotton's new leadership team only took over in May. Surely they deserved



Councillor John Cotton

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more time to develop a recovery plan?

Now any such plans, as well as his special birthday, have been ruined.

As always, there are multiple truths, half-truths and rumours, but my view is that serving a Section 114 on September 5 was wrong. Cllr Cotton has shown how he can serve the city while on holiday, sending out the right messages from New York.

More time would have enabled him to speak with Michael Gove, the government minister responsible for councils. Gove is a receptive, bright-

as-a-button fellow, and the last thing he wants is to run the headache that Birmingham has become.

Another week or maybe two should have been given.

■ NOW I know that this won't be a hot slot for most people's viewing pleasure, but Birmingham City Council's most recent cabinet meeting is well worth watching.

The ever bright and nicely blooming Cllr Sharon Thompson was present and ably chairing the meeting. Conversely, the council's finance

director Fiona Greenway joined the meeting online. The problem was, her sound wasn't working.

At least five long and uncomfortable minutes were wasted because of this defective technology. Ms Greenway can be seen but not heard explaining the Section 114 notice.

You can watch the excruciating meeting here: www.birmingham.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/799363.

Watch from five to twelve minutes and I think you'll agree... what a catastrophic car crash! You can almost

relish the agonised expression on the face of Ms Greenway's deputy at just past six minutes.

What's going on? Why can't the council be bothered to install a fit-for-purpose broadband and all the other necessary bits?

I would wager every senior officer can stream Netflix at home without a problem. Yet you attend a meeting to discuss hugely important matters and you are confronted with the land of weak connections and pathetic requests to help the fragile broadband limp by.

What can only be called third world broadband, all adds up to fearful levels of technical incompetence.

■ The ever-buoyant Rolling Stone Mick Jagger is now in his eighties, as is the clean living but fast fading US Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. And while wild Mick and the Stones are back making music, the solemn and sober Mitch is sadly suffering from a strange freezing medical condition.

Is this an argument FOR sex, drugs, rock and roll?

■ How pleased I am to return as a columnist with the Birmingham Mail. It's been a few years, and much has changed. Yet as ever, we live in interesting times. And I plan to capture a few gems to inform and entertain you.

■ Mike Olley served on Birmingham City Council from 1991 to 2005, when he was made an Alderman. His new weekly column starts next Wednesday.

Woman sought after burglary

CCTV images have been issued of a woman police would like to speak to in connection with a callous distraction burglary in Birmingham.

West Midlands Police released three images of a woman.

A force spokesman said: "Do you know who this woman is? We want to speak to her in connection with a burglary off Wake Green

Road in Moseley in July.

"Shortly after 12.30pm on Saturday, July 29, a woman entered a house and began a conversation with the occupant before taking cash from his wallet.

"She then left the house and walked towards Wake Green Road.

"Think you can help? If so, call 101 or use Live Chat on our website."



Police in anti-social behaviour crackdown

A NIGHT of trouble in one part of Walsall has led to police seeking and being granted emergency powers to crackdown on those responsible.

Large groups of youths causing anti-social behaviour, some riding off-road bikes 'dangerously' in the Blakenall area of the borough on Thursday night led to special powers being put in place.

West Midlands Police immediately introduced an emergency dispersal order - giving officers extra powers to

break up groups and to ban them from coming back to the area throughout the weekend.

A force spokesman said: "We're taking tough action on antisocial behaviour and crime in Blakenall."

He added: "We are working with the council and other partners to try and prevent this kind of thing happening again.

"This may include evicting people from their homes if they persistently cause antisocial behaviour."