

**MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

**AGENDA ITEM 6**

**QUESTION 1**

**MR DEAN CARROLL** will ask the following question:

There are currently extremely controversial plans to open a residential care home for children in the Bagley division. This currently does not require a change of use through the planning process because the size of the proposal is not considered to be a material change of use and so can operate under the current C3(b) residential use.

Is this a policy of Shropshire Council or is it national planning policy?

**MR MALCOLM PRICE**, the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Planning Housing and Commissioning (Central) will reply:

The use Class C3(Dwelling Houses) is divided into three parts and planning permission is not required for a change of use within the Use class between these parts..C3(B) is for up to 6 people living together as a single household and receiving care e.g. supported housing schemes. It is set nationally (not by Shropshire Council) and is set out in the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes)(Amendment)(England) Order 2012).

The application for a Lawful Development Certificate was considered on the basis of the facts submitted by the applicant and the proposed use was considered to fall within Class C2 (residential institutions)rather than C3(B) because the proposal is for the carers to work on rotation rather than living with the children as a single household. It was then necessary to consider whether the use of the property as described by the applicant would be materially different to a dwelling occupied by a family or a group of people as per class C3 (B). Although a change of use from a Use Class C3 dwellinghouse to Use Class C2 residential institution would occur as defined by the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) (Amendment)(England) Order 2010, it does not, in the opinion of the Local Planning Authority, amount to a material change of use and no development requiring planning permission would therefore take place.”

Footnote: If other matters arising from the operation are brought to the Councils attention the Council could, notwithstanding the granting of a certificate, commence enforcement action against a material change of use of the premises. This certificate application has stated what the staffing levels would be, and should staffing levels increase over and above this level then the certificate would no longer be lawful.

## **QUESTION 2**

**MR ROGER EVANS** will ask the following question:

Residents of Great Hanwood have suffered for a number of years with high sided vehicles having to turn round in the centre of the village because of the low bridge near to the centre of the village and local school. This is a dangerous operation as well as causing wide disruption to other road users and local residents. Due to the restricted road space and width the lorries involved whilst reversing have at times damaged residents properties. Other vehicles have either become jammed under the bridge or even hit it. When this occurs train services have to be suspended whilst the bridges structure is checked.

During discussion prior to the "Pinch Point" work, which is at present nearing completion on the A5, agreement was reached with the Highways Agency that extra signs designed by Shropshire Council would be erected to better inform drivers of high sided vehicles about the low bridge in the centre of Hanwood.

Can the Portfolio Holder please confirm when the promised work will be carried out.

**MRS CLAIRE WILD**, the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, will reply:

We can confirm that the works will be completed before the end of March 2014. There will be 4 no. sign assemblies located on the A5 in the area of the Woodcote Roundabout and 5 no. assemblies on the A5 in the vicinity of the Edgebold Roundabout. The works will be jointly funded by both Shropshire Council and the Highways Agency.

## **QUESTION 3**

**MR ALAN MOSELEY** will ask the following question:

Could the Portfolio Holder please give a full report on the current situation regarding our private companies, IP&E and IP&E (Trading). This to include:

- Details of all work being undertaken for external clients.
- Details of Council services currently being undertaken by the Companies.
- The total cost of establishing and operating the companies from inception, so far, including; remuneration paid, consultancy costs, in kind salary costs of SC staff, accommodation costs, loans received, profit/loss, etc.,
- Are details of Board meetings to be made available to members?
- Bearing in mind the original plans for transfer to IP&E, what plans are currently in place?

- What are the expectations for the return of loans made by the Council and the payment of any surplus into the Council's account?

**MR STEVE CHARMLEY**, the Portfolio Holder for Business Growth, ip&e and Commissioning (North) will reply:

**Details of all work being undertaken for external clients.**

At present ip&e Ltd has one active business unit, ThreeSixty Communications. It has a single contract – with Shropshire Council and, and sub-contracts to provide services to other public service organisations. The work undertaken covers the full range of communication functions including; reputation management, public relations, campaign management, press releases, social media support, reactive press management.

**Details of Council services currently being undertaken by the Companies.**

The business unit currently within ip&e is ThreeSixty Communications. It delivers the full range of communication functions to Shropshire Council as defined through a service contract.

**The total cost of establishing and operating the companies from inception, so far, including; remuneration paid, consultancy costs, in kind salary costs of SC staff, accommodation costs, loans received, profit/loss, etc.**

Information regarding the accounts of ip&e Ltd will be reported to Cabinet at the financial year end in compliance with Company law.

**Are details of Board meetings to be made available to members?**

In accordance with the Articles, the Shareholder has the ability to inspect company records; therefore, this would cover individual members. There is an offer from both company boards to meet with any member to discuss details of board meetings on request. It is important to note, however, that commercially sensitive or personal information may not be disclosable.

**Bearing in mind the original plans for transfer to ip&e, what plans are currently in place?**

Cabinet has given outline approval for 'Inspire to Learn' to develop a business plan to assess viability of education/school support services. A detailed business case is being drafted.

A business case is also being prepared that will be sent for consideration to cabinet for the Programme Management Office and Business Design teams as well as a number of Public Health functions.

In addition to this, ip&e businesses are also exploring other opportunities as they arise to assess suitability.

**What are the expectations for the return of loans made by the Council and the payment of any surplus into the Council's account?**

A full financial report will be made at year end (March 2014) in accordance with the strategic contract. Only £90,000 has been drawn down from the loan,

which occurred in the 2012/13 financial year, other costs have been managed within the profit and loss of the company.

As part of the ThreeSixty Communications business plan, a 25% contract saving had been approved over a three year period, current projections show that this target is set to be exceeded in the 2014/15 year. The detail of this will be reported in line with Strategic Contract at year end in March 2015.

#### **QUESTION 4**

**MR ALAN MOSELEY** will ask the following question:

The ill-considered publicity exercise by Shrewsbury's MP, Daniel Kawczynski, regarding the re-location of the Shrewsbury Swimming Baths has caused very significant concern for a large number of residents. As his proposals appear to have been made with little thought, knowledge and entirely without any form of consultation, could the Portfolio Holder please provide some clarification for residents regarding:

- What is the structural and operational state of the current facility in the Quarry?
- What, if any, plans have been discussed over the last 5 years for the refurbishment of the current facility or its closure and relocation of a swimming baths on a new site?
- What, if any, discussions have taken place between SERCO/Shrewsbury Leisure Trust about the future of the Swimming Baths facility?
- Have there been any discussion whatsoever about the sale of land currently occupied by the swimming baths?
- Would the administration consider offers to buy the land currently occupied by the baths
- Is the Administration committed to maintaining a high quality swimming baths in Shrewsbury?

**MR GWILYM BUTLER**, the Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Libraries and Culture will reply:

#### **What is the structural and operational state of the current facility in the Quarry?**

The most recent Condition Survey (Dec 2011) did not identify any major structural problems.

Operationally the building is tired and extensive refurbishment work would be required to bring it up to modern day standards. Major remedial works were undertaken in September 2007 extending it's then lifespan by approximately 5-10 years.

**What, if any, plans have been discussed over the last 5 years for the refurbishment of the current facility or its closure and relocation of a swimming baths on a new site?**

A number of officer discussions alongside the Portfolio Holder have taken place over the years. In 2009 Shropshire Council produced its Leisure Facilities Strategy where the pool alongside other facilities were considered. (Paper is available for members on request). Within it, it recommended that Shropshire Council should review the proposals for the location of replacement swimming pool provision in Shrewsbury.

There have been no discussions on the closure of the facility as it is recognised Shrewsbury needs a swimming pool for the people of Shrewsbury and surrounding areas.

**What, if any, discussions have taken place between SERCO/Shrewsbury Leisure Trust about the future of the Swimming Baths facility?**

Informal discussions have taken place as part of the regular dialogue officers have with colleagues in the Community Leisure Trust.

**Have there been any discussion whatsoever about the sale of land currently occupied by the swimming baths?**

As part of the initiative by Shropshire Council to market our top 10 investment opportunities in Shropshire the proposal for a 5 Star Hotel has been marketed. A range of prospective sites have been identified one of which is the Quarry Swimming Pool site. The Council has marketed this opportunity including the Quarry Swimming Pool site to the UK Trade and Investment team in Whitehall.

**Would the administration consider offers to buy the land currently occupied by the baths?**

Shropshire Council would listen to any offers for the site, as it would any asset or land holding it owns and these would be considered by appropriate officers and the Portfolio Holder.

**Is the Administration committed to maintaining a high quality swimming baths in Shrewsbury?**

Yes – Shropshire Council recognises the need for high quality swimming baths in Shrewsbury.

We can also confirm that the Leader and the Director of Commissioning have recently met with Daniel Kawczynski, MP to discuss this particular topic and are planning to meet with Sport England in the coming weeks.

**QUESTION 5**

**MR ALAN MOSLEY** will ask the following question:

Could the Portfolio Holder please give details of our use of agency staff, including:

The names of all agencies being used by the Council, the number of staff engaged from each agency; the service areas in which they are working; together with the numbers in each service area.

How many agency staff are employed in areas where redundancies have been made or are expected to be declared in the next two years?

A response from **MR MIKE OWEN**, the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Finance and Support will follow.

## **QUESTION 6**

**MR MANSEL WILLIAMS** will ask the following question:

In a previous answer to me Cllr Barrow stated "...if the increasing debt isn't addressed we leave a terrible legacy for future generations. Consequently, austerity is a necessity, rather than being ideologically driven."

If austerity is the answer to a debt crisis, why, after the Second World War was it possible for our post-war Government to have the wisdom and foresight to recognise the benefits of a slower and steadier approach to reducing an even bigger debt?

Is austerity's true purpose to create a diminished state sector and to make tax cuts a reality?

**MR KEITH BARROW**, the Leader of the Council will reply:

The Council's funding position is a direct result of national funding decisions, so from the Council's point of view austerity measures are very much a reality. How we respond to this position is, however, very much in our hands. Unlike some other councils we've not raided reserves or made indiscriminate cuts to services. Instead, we are looking to continue to deliver as many services as possible, but redesigned around our customers to deliver outcomes in a different way, at a lower cost, driving out waste. We are choosing to do this because it's the right thing to do, irrespective of national savings targets. This is not about diminishing the state, or our services, but instead refocusing around what the Council needs to provide in future.

Tax cuts are not something I am able to comment on, but locally, we are recommending that we freeze Council Tax as we have done for several years now; not as a result of austerity, but because we believe it is the right thing to do for Shropshire people.

## **QUESTION 7**

**MR DAVE TREMELLEN** will ask the following question:

Will the Portfolio Holder for Highways admit that they have lost the battle with potholes in South East Shropshire?

In the event that they still cling to the delusion that they are in fact still in control of roads in my part of the county, would they point to the evidence to support that claim.

**MRS CLAIRE WILD**, the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, will reply:

Shropshire Council has not lost the battle with potholes in South East Shropshire.

I question why the Member for Highley has not spoken to myself or the officers concerned and instead chooses to raise this question at full council. I assume that he is asking this for political reasons as opposed to working with myself and the officers for the benefit of his area.

However as he has chosen to raise this question at Full Council pot holes are a challenge for this council, as with any other local authority. Furthermore, the appalling weather over recent weeks and months has exacerbated the issue. In parts of the county that have a mix of urban and rural roads this further adds to the problem, due to the mix of vehicles (and changing nature of vehicles) as well as the historical construction. All the highways staff have worked incredibly hard recently in very poor conditions to ensure the safety of our roads.

In response, additional reactive gangs have been deployed, plus plant and equipment such as road masters to prevent and mitigate the issues caused by potholes. New systems of work such as Hedge to Hedge Gangs –which have been recognised as good practice plus additional resources and revenue has, and are being utilised.

The longer term response is planned and programmed engineering works, and these schedule's and schemes are ongoing. Indeed Shropshire Council has lead on the development of an integrated Programming team with our term contractor and Shropshire Council staff to ensure there is an enhanced, coordinated, efficient planning, management of asset data and utilisation of resources for programmed work, to ensure that the authority's finances are used in the most cost efficient manner.

A programme of works is identified and scheduled to take place and in the South East of Shropshire as follows:

- B4555 Highley to Kinlet
- Silverdale Terrace – resurfacing scheme1`

- B4176 Tinkers Castle area
- A458 Much Wenlock to Shipton
- A464 Victoria Road, Shifnal

Also, project work being designed in 2014 for construction during 2014 /15:

- Highley High Street
- B4555 (two sections) between Highley and Eardington
- A442 Cann Hall Rd, Bridgnorth
- A442 Alveley
- A4169 The Hern Shifnal
- A442 near Dudmaston Hall
- B4378 Brockton to Shifnal
- B4371 Stretton Rd, Much Wenlock
- A464 Holyhead Rd, nr Albrighton

## **QUESTION 8**

**MR CHRIS MELLINGS** will ask the following question:

What is the current state of the Shropshire economy and what are its prospects for the future?

**MR STEVE CHARMLEY**, the Portfolio Holder for Business Growth, ip&e and Commissioning (North) will reply:

Each quarter a performance dashboard is produced to show a combination of Shropshire economic data and performance measures. This is monitored by staff in the economic growth team and forms part of the quarterly performance report to Cabinet. A version of the dashboard is also produced for the Shropshire Business Board to aid with the performance management of the Shropshire Economic Growth Strategy (2012-26).

As new economic data is published the Information and Research team analyse the information and produce reports. These are circulated to relevant staff and are also published on the Council's website. They are then incorporated into a State of the Economy report on a quarterly basis that goes to the Shropshire Business Board. Many of these reports are used for the core of press releases to make sure the public are informed of good economic news.

The majority of economic data is published annually and can often be two years in arrears. This makes it difficult to accurately predict both current and future economic conditions.

National economic indicators show that business conditions are improving with unemployment falling, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increasing at a



stronger rate than had previously been forecast and business confidence improving. In its press release of February 11<sup>th</sup> the CBI, which represents some 240,000 businesses, predicts that business investment growth will rise at its fastest rate since 2007, helped by improving confidence amongst businesses and low borrowing costs.

Not all datasets are available at a local authority level, but in addition to national indicators there are positive signs that the Shropshire economy is recovering, including:

- A decline in unemployment which is now below 2008 levels (JSA claimant count) ahead of national or regional position. Youth unemployment and long term unemployment have also begun to fall (albeit at a relatively slow pace in the case of the latter although again faster than regional or national )
- A net increase in the number of jobs available between 2011 and 2012, although many of these additional jobs were part-time
- A shift in the split between private and public sector jobs in favour of the former (2,100 private sector jobs created in 2012 offsetting the 1,100 public sector jobs which were lost in this year)
- Business survival rates which remain superior to the national average (62% of Shropshire businesses established in 2009 still operating in 2012 compared with 60% of national businesses and 58% of regional businesses)
- An improvement in median average workplace earnings (+8.5% to £444.90 per week gross) which takes the average level of pay for those who work in Shropshire to a higher level than at any point over the last five years (note: some caution with viewing this too positively as it could be as a result of fewer elementary and process and plant operative jobs. In addition, the annual survey sample can result in local data being statistically less robust than regional and national figures)
- Significant improvement in business confidence according to the Shropshire Chamber of Commerce quarterly survey which reflects the rise in business confidence that is being captured by national surveys. However, it will take time to see if this confidence does equate to improvements in business results
- Indications that house price recovery is starting with prices having risen in November and December 2013 (note: this recovery is lagging some way behind the national trend)
- Major investment by local companies such as the recently opened £18M Butter Plant at Muller and a new £9M investment announced by Arla at Oswestry.
- Phase 2 of Shrewsbury Business Park and new industrial units being built at Tern Valley Phase 2 in Market Drayton.
- Also a range of new housing development being built and many planning applications coming forward for new housing.

In contrast to these positive indicators, there are a couple of factors which suggest that the recovery is still fragile:

- Disappointing business start-up figures for 2012 – 45 fewer businesses started up in Shropshire in 2012 than they did in 2011 and this was

compounded by a very slight increase in the number of businesses closing (5 more closing in 2012 compared with 2011) (note, only includes businesses registered for VAT or PAYE so excludes many micro-businesses and obviously we are starting from a very high base of small businesses)

- Sharp rise in the number of part-time jobs since the onset of the recession, which could be (but isn't necessarily) symptomatic of under-employment
- Slight decline in Gross Value Added (GVA) in 2012 compared with 2011, which bucks the regional and national trends (although national and regional growth was only very marginal). GVA growth in Shropshire over the last decade has also lagged behind the region and Great Britain. (note: GVA as an indicator typically suppresses the value of rural economies as they have fewer HQ offices )
- Business recovery may be affected by unexpected events. Recent weather conditions are an example of this and may impact on businesses within certain localities or business sectors.

## **QUESTION 9**

**MR CHRIS MELLINGS** will ask the following question:

How many Food banks are currently in operation across Shropshire? During 2013 how many Shropshire people received assistance from a Food bank?

**MR MALCOLM PRICE**, the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Planning Housing and Commissioning (Central) will reply:

Shropshire Council Benefits team are one of the teams that use this service and, since April 2013, we have provided 650 food parcels at a total cost of £4,978.47. There are the following food banks in Shropshire:

- Barnabas Church Centre, Longden Coleham, Shrewsbury
- Number Seven, West Castle Street, Bridgnorth
- The Centre, St George's Church, Vicarage Road, Clun
- St Andrews Community Church, Market Street, Craven Arms
- The Methodist Church, Trimley Street, Ellesmere, Shropshire
- Hope Church Centre, Grafton Mews, Harlescote, Shrewsbury
- The Baptist Church, Rockspring Centre, Sandford Road, Ludlow
- The Community Centre, Church Street, Market Drayton, Shropshire
- 56 Beatrice Street, Oswestry
- St Laurence's Parish Centre, Church Street, Church Stretton
- Bargates Hall, Church Street, Whitchurch, Shropshire

The Benefits team is just one of a number of services that refer to food banks, so the figures above are not a true reflection of the whole food provision within Shropshire. We have recently initiated a project to coordinate the provision of food to avoid overlap and address root causes.

## **QUESTION 10**

**MR MILES KENNY** will ask the following question:

The present planning process favours the developer. We aren't able to challenge or refuse an application on the grounds of the inappropriateness, design or location of open spaces or play areas, which become bolt-ons instead of features. What happened to the pre planning application process where residents, councillors, businesses, or community organisations negotiate with developers?

How many pre planning applications took place last year as a proportion of all the planning applications?

**MR MALCOLM PRICE**, the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Planning Housing and Commissioning (Central) will reply:

The planning process favours sustainable development, it is the golden thread running through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). In the Ministerial forward to the NPPF Greg Clark MP defines sustainable as ensuring that better lives for ourselves don't mean worse lives for future generations and development as meaning growth.

Pre-application discussions are positively encouraged by Shropshire Council as a means of identifying information requirements to support a planning application and resolving issues at an early stage.

Applicants have choices as to how they obtain this advice. Some is available free of charge by using information and guidance on the planning web pages. This is useful for more straightforward enquiries such as household extensions or other domestic applications and we do not have data on how many potential applicants use this route as a percentage of the total.

In addition the council offers a paid for service for potential applicants where all technical issues are assessed and issues identified. The applicant is also encouraged to consult with the local community, usually through the Parish or Town Council, but this is at their discretion, it is not a mandatory requirement. Furthermore, applicants for larger schemes will also be referred to place plans which set out infrastructure and other requirements identified by the community and others in each of the place plan areas. This is a useful guide to developers who can then also take into account how their scheme might contribute to or deliver against these place plan priorities. Furthermore in Shrewsbury and Ludlow there are also established Stakeholder consultation groups can be convened to consider and comment, at a pre-application stage on proposals.

Approximately 10% of applicants utilise the paid for pre-application advice service.

## **QUESTION 11**

**MRS VIVIENNE PARRY** will ask the following question:

Explain how and where, we can make savings on Theatre Services without this affecting the quality of service.

**MR GWILYM BUTLER**, the Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Libraries and Culture will reply:

Theatre Services includes both the Old Market Hall and Theatre Severn. The savings identified within the Business Plan will come from a combination of improved efficiencies:

- digital projection equipment reduces the need for as many hours needed on site for a projectionist at the Old Market Hall
- renegotiated utility tariffs
- potential saving in cultural VAT savings on film showings (national hearing due later this year)

and increased ticket income at the Box Office. This is supported by increased ticket sales at the pantomime, the single largest contributor of ticket sales, year on year for the last 3 years.

None of the above will affect the high level of service offered through Theatre Services.

## **QUESTION 12**

**MRS PAM MOSELEY** will ask the following question:

In 2009/10 the number of people with learning disabilities in Shropshire, who were in nursing or residential placements, was 220. In 2012/13, this figure had risen to 303, an increase of 83, or 37.7%.

Could the Portfolio Holder explain this increase, in view of the national incidence of learning disability having an increase of no more than 2% per annum?

**MR LEE CHAPMAN**, the Portfolio Holder for Adult Services and Commissioning (South) will reply:

The figures referred to above are the total admissions into residential or nursing care homes for adults with learning disabilities made **throughout** the year, this includes both those people who needed a permanent placement and those who required a short term (respite) admissions.

When considering the number of people in a care setting at a given time, for example as at the 31 March the results are:

2009/10 207 placements

2012/13 204 placements

Shropshire Council is committed to reducing the number of residential placements made for younger adults and we are continuing to develop a range of supported living accommodation across Shropshire and increasing the availability of shared lives placements specifically for adults with learning disabilities as an alternative to a residential care home admission

Currently we have developed 4 new purpose built supported living bungalows funded by capital donations from a national charity, these are in Oswestry, Shifnal and Shrewsbury.

The same charity has also contributed significant funding for a further bungalow and 4 one person flats in addition to other care provision in Market Drayton and is supportive of three other bungalows which are currently in the early stages of project development.

Finally a registered social landlord is building 9 single person flats in Whitchurch with a resource support flat for younger adults with learning disabilities and we are in the early stages of exploring how Kempsfield, an in house provided residential home for adults with learning disabilities, could be developed into supported accommodation.

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