



Date: Thursday, 21 July 2016
Time: 10.00 am
Venue: Council Chamber, Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, SY2 6ND
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COUNCIL

TO FOLLOW REPORT (S)

5 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Pages 1 - 12)

To receive any questions from the public, notice of which has been given in accordance with Procedure Rule 14.

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PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

AGENDA ITEM 5

QUESTION 1

MRS JOYCE BRAND, Ludlow resident, will ask the following question to the Leader of the Council:

Will you give Shropshire Council's reasons for allocating the income from the car parking facilities in Oswestry to the Oswestry Town Council whilst at the same time pocketing the lucrative car parking income from the Ludlow Car Parks; I do not suggest that it is wrong that Oswestry has this income, on the contrary I see that as a fair decision, but I cannot see either the rationale or the fairness for Ludlow being treated differently.

MR M PATE, Leader has replied as follows:

The comparison with Oswestry and Ludlow regarding car parking income is not a direct comparison. Car Parks in Oswestry are all run and owned by the Town Council – the only ones Shropshire Council operate are Oak Street, Beatrice Street, Oswald Road and Festival Square where Shropshire Council retains the income. This principle is applied in all car parks across the county – if Shropshire Council owns them and there is a charge, the income is retained by Shropshire Council

QUESTION 2

MR STEPHEN FROGGATT, Oswestry resident, will ask the following question to the Leader of the Council:

Can the Council explain why it is reducing library services that are much used by those who elected it, whilst refusing to reduce councillors' personal allowances which are higher than those of our neighbouring authorities?

MR M PATE, Leader has replied as follows:

Shropshire Council is continually looking at ways to redesign its services that ensures their long term sustainability within a financial envelope that is affordable. Shropshire Libraries continue to contribute to the wider savings agenda and in the context of changes in library usage particularly at static libraries. Work has focussed on making back office efficiencies, reducing opening hours in response to existing patterns of usage, and the development of different community based delivery models. The introduction of new delivery models has seen some libraries increase their opening hours at no cost to the

council as we and our partners have made better use of the buildings that the service is provided from. Examples include Highley and Craven Arms.

Allowances for Elected Members of the Council are set by an independent panel. This panel has the task of setting these allowances at a level where those motivated to represent and work for their communities can afford to do so. It's really important that allowances are neither a deterrent or the motivation to become a Councillor and that we are able to attract talented and particularly younger people to serve their communities.

QUESTION 3

MR PETER GILBERT, Shrewsbury resident, will ask the following question to the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation:

Shrewsbury bus and coach station is an embarrassment to the town. Not so much from its design but because it appears to be entirely overlooked for routine maintenance. The seat benches at the bus shelters are nearly bare of paint, the shelters themselves have previous paint colours showing through from wear and tear, and mother nature's weeds grow in the bus bays. Assurances have previously been given that the bus station would feature in Highways' work schedules but without a date for when this will happen. Since nothing appears to have changed, what definitive assurance can the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation give about bus station maintenance?

MR S JONES, Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation has replied as follows:

Thank you for your question and I can assure you that quotes are being sought for the painting of the bus shelters

The Raven Meadows Bus Station has been steadily having work undertaken to improve the day to day condition and long term improvements.

There are currently 3 items outstanding issues on the remedials which are

- A) Bus Station Surface, Drainage Repairs which includes the remedials for moss and weed treatment
- B) Internal Bin Replacements
- C) External Bus Shelters and Seating

The most recent improvement this year was the replacement of all open topped external bins to hooded to help reduce littering from the general public

QUESTION 4

MR PETER GILBERT, Shrewsbury resident, will ask the following question

Shrewsbury Guildhall is a very valuable part of the Council's estate. It has been reported that Shropshire Council has provided the University of Chester with free accommodation for its Shrewsbury campus.

When will the Council begin to receive market rents or capital payments for the Guildhall, a building complex which must be worth millions?

MR M PATE, Leader has replied as follows:

The Guildhall is leased to the University Centre Shrewsbury for Educational Use, the rent is however deferred until the University have sufficient students to provide a surplus to pay the rent. The University pays all other fees and charges, including business rates. By reducing the footprint it occupies overall, the Council has saved money through avoiding the running costs of the building it previously occupied and so investment in the University is offset by this, making the costs of investment in the University neutral.

QUESTION 5

MS EMMA BULLARD, Shrewsbury resident, will ask the following question

It's been reported that Shropshire Council has made over 1000 staff redundant in the last 3 years. In addition many experienced staff have left to work elsewhere due to uncertainty over their jobs.

This process has in fact been going on for much longer, since at least 2011 when Shropshire Council sacked all its staff and re-employed them on lower salaries and worse conditions. The drain of experienced officers who decided to move to other employers who valued their skills started from then.

This drastic move was taken "in order to avoid large scale redundancies and protect services to the public". Would the council say that dismissing its entire workforce and re-employing it was successful in those aims? Given the large scale redundancies and the failure to protect public services in the 5 years since 2011.

We're told that this process of reducing staff numbers has made financial savings, and the previous leader of the council said on many occasions that the public had not seen any difference in the quality of services. This claim was untrue. In view of the cuts to youth services, libraries and other services, presumably the council would no longer make this claim.

How many staff have left who provided essential professional knowledge for the council, with the vacancy left unfilled so that the expertise was no longer available in-house?

Has there been any attempt to manage the redundancy programme, or the process of filling vacancies, to make sure that essential professional advice was not lost to the council?

What is the Council doing to make sure it gets best value when letting contracts to external suppliers, given that the expertise to scrutinise contracts is no longer available in-house?

What has been the financial cost, including the waste of officer time, of poorly designed and managed contracts as a result?

Have these costs been taken into account when calculating the claimed financial savings of the redundancy programme?

MR M PATE, Leader has replied as follows:

How many staff have left who provided essential professional knowledge for the council, with the vacancy left unfilled so that the expertise was no longer available in-house?

None - There is a legal definition of redundancy which in brief is 'work of a particular kind must diminished or ceased'. For a redundancy situation to exist is it necessary for this definition to be satisfied. Where a post is redundant it is removed from the establishment and does not exist to be recruited to. In fact it would be unlawful to recruit to a post where the previous post holder has been made redundant.

Has there been any attempt to manage the redundancy programme, or the process of filling vacancies, to make sure that essential professional advice was not lost to the council?

There is a clear approval process for redundancy, each redundancy requires a business case to be approved. The business case will give details of why it is necessary to reduce staff, how this will be managed and the costs and savings to the organisation. Redundancies will not be approved where this would leave service unable to deliver essential services.

What is the council doing to make sure it gets best value when letting contracts to external suppliers, given that the expertise to scrutinise contracts is no longer available in-house?

The Council is continuing to take steps as it has always done to obtain value for money when letting contracts to external suppliers. We believe that there is still adequate expertise within the Council to commission and award contracts in order to obtain such value for money. The steps we are taking include the introduction of new methods of monitoring & managing contracts. For example from an adult social care perspective we use an electronic monitoring system to ensure that domiciliary care is delivered in line with the commissioned care and we are also monitoring the use of pre purchased provision through the brokerage function of Shropshire Choices. Similarly with some of our larger contracts we have regular performance meetings to monitor delivery against the contract e.g. Waste Contract, Highways Contract

What has been the financial cost, including the waste of officer time, of poorly designed and managed contracts as a result?

Shropshire Council is constantly looking at ways to improve all aspects of its activities including contract management. It does not capture or measure the metric suggested here as it is pre-supposing there are such costs.

Have these costs been taken into account when calculating the claimed financial savings of the redundancy programme?

As stated above, Shropshire Council does not capture or measure the metric suggested so is unable to answer this question as worded. Shropshire Council however has had to make efficiency savings across the whole of the organisation and as a result has seen a reduction of staff across many teams, but has managed this by redesigning a number of its service areas to make better use of the remaining resources as well as utilising modern IT to streamline working practice.

QUESTION 6

MS EMMA BULLARD, Shrewsbury resident, will ask the following question

The sports village at Sundorne is an excellent facility and envied by visitors from well beyond Shropshire. But since it opened it has been under-used, poorly managed and poorly promoted. (For instance the cycle facilities, which are good enough to have hosted a National Cyclo Cross event, are not even listed on the website).

Outsourcing the management to a trust who employ Serco has made no difference to this.

The facilities are generally under-used, the cafe is rarely open and is unable to cope when a major event takes place.

What has been the sports village income compared to what was predicted when it opened? Does it make a loss each year? And if so how much?

Just as important as financial underperformance, if not more so, is the missed opportunity to promote active lifestyles and to be a focus for increasing physical activity in the communities closest to the sports village.

Physical inactivity is the biggest risk to our health in this country.

The sports village makes no attempt to encourage people to arrive by bicycle or on foot, even though it is ideally located to encourage active travel and received support to do so in the past from sustainable travel officers within the council.

Instead it promotes the availability of free car parking. Not only does this encourage inactivity but it also increases another health threat namely poor air quality due to traffic emissions.

Now the council is proposing to build a swimming pool at the sports village and increase the number of visitors to the site, what plans are there to encourage active travel? How will visitors be encouraged to arrive by foot, bicycle or public transport?

Will yet more car parking be provided at the site, if the swimming pool development goes ahead, encouraging an increase in car travel and leading to further deterioration in Shrewsbury's air quality?

What proportion of visitors to the sports village currently come from within 1 mile (easy walking distance) or 3 miles (easy cycling distance)?

What plans are there to encourage active travel to the sports village from communities within this radius?

In particular, how does the sports village work with the adjacent large medical practice, many of whose patients could benefit from improved health by becoming more active in their everyday lives?

MR S WEST, Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture has replied as follows:

The Sundorne Sports Village facility was transferred as part of a wider management contract in August 2012 to Shropshire Community Leisure Trust with Serco Leisure as their managing agent. Visits to the centre in that time have increased by 37% (2011/12 – 193,551; 2015/16 – 265,586). However, as has been highlighted, there remain off-peak times when the facility is under-used and the management team are constantly reviewing the activity programme to try and address this issue.

The promotion of the cycle facilities and their lack of prominence on the website was a specific point discussed at the most recent Trust board meeting, raised by trustees. Present at that meeting was the recently recruited Serco Leisure Head of Marketing who is developing a marketing strategy for the contract, a major objective being to revamp the website. Not only will the marketing strategy address specifics but will also improve the holistic approach to promoting facilities, activity programmes and benefits of physical activity.

The increase in throughput has also brought about an increase in income generated. Without currently having access to the original business model for the Sports Village it is not possible to comment on actual income generated to that predicted 11 years ago. However, the most recent information from the operator (2015/16) shows that their income target was exceeded by 4%, and that income compared with 2014/15 has increased by £25,000. 2014/15 audited accounts show a net operating surplus generated by the facility.

The Sports Village remains a facility that is subsidised by the council. The 2015/16 subsidy was £230,874 including management fee paid to the operator and all costs that are the responsibility of the council as landlord, such as repairs and maintenance.

Concerns regarding the mode of travel to the Sports Village are understood, the availability of car parking, be it free or otherwise, enables a great number of people from much further away than the 3 mile threshold for easy cycling allows. The Sports Village is more than a local facility and the easy access to parking has enabled the operator and local clubs to attract competitions of regional and national importance, from school games to national events (cyclo-cross being a case in point).

Officers have asked the operator if they can provide figures showing the proportion of visitors who walk or cycle to the centre. We know that school children from the nearby Sundorne School, part of the Shrewsbury Academy, walk to use the centre on a daily basis during term time. There is also a link on the website to Cycling4All – Shropshire and Travel Shropshire.

Should a swimming pool be built on the site of the Sports Village a detailed travel plan will be produced. This is pre-requisite for all new facilities and a criteria that has to be met in order to attract external funding. This will cover active travel and public transport and a specific action plan will have to be implemented.

Several active lifestyles promotions have been introduced since the commencement of the contract – Superstars Holiday Club, extended fitness provision, ‘This Girl Can.....’ (Sport England initiative), Forever Fit (50+), Virtual Fitness Classes, etc.

A significant initiative has been the introduction of Healthy Life (originally branded as Neighbourhood Life) with the objective of helping ‘more people, become more active, more often’. This is aimed at sedentary people and has attracted 200+ users either new or returning to exercise. This has been promoted through the adjacent medical centre and the operator is hoping to work more closely in partnership to further develop this initiative and others.’

QUESTION 7

MR STEVE BOULDING, Baschurch resident, will ask the following question:

Shropshire is the only large shire county in the UK which refuses to investigate actively the feasibility of railway station re-openings on existing lines where there is a demonstrable suppressed demand due to recent large scale housing, academic and business growth, road traffic congestion, and the increasing public awareness of the need for sustainability in all daily activities. The number of passenger journeys on the national network has more than doubled, and the passenger-miles almost trebled, in recent years. Does the Council acknowledge that by not having a coherent long-term integrated sustainable transport planning strategy with rail given high priority, Shropshire will become an economic backwater with no access to the benefits of the major investments planned by Network Rail, the "Northern Powerhouse" and the West Midlands Combined Transport Authority?

MR S JONES, Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation has replied as follows:

Shropshire Council fully acknowledges the benefits of a high quality rail network, be that for inter town travel within the County, or for longer interurban journeys. It's to note at the outset however that as a Council, Shropshire currently has no statutory role at all in the provision of either rail infrastructure or rail services. It is at most an influencing body, and in order to maximise this, actively engages with a number of current rail industry work streams.

The Council is also fully engaged with the Midlands Connect project, where it is actively lobbying for the acceleration of already planned pipeline infrastructure and service improvements in order to benefit from HS2 (both at Crewe and Birmingham), and the improvement of commuter services to the West Midlands in particular. Electrification of the Wolverhampton line, and the improvement of current station facilities are just a few of the "asks" that the Council is making.

The Council also works closely alongside neighbouring authorities to further the Midlands Engine agenda, and is now a non-constituent Member of the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Furthermore, in terms of service improvements, Shropshire Council now has a formal Director role on the board of West Midlands Rail (WMR), that will in due course take a direct role in managing the new "London Midland franchise" to maximise benefits for passengers and the County.

All of these active partnerships and work streams, including those that look to further the range and quality of rail services within the County will be integrated into the Councils emerging Local Transport Plan 4, a document that will set out the context, challenges and targets for Shropshire's future transport (road and rail) infrastructure developments.

It should be noted that there has been considerable work and debate already on the Baschurch station question, something that Mr Boulding will be aware of, having been actively involved in for many years. He will also therefore be fully aware of the support that the Council has given in the past to exploring the options around Baschurch Station, and the history to the range of reports commissioned.

In summary, The Oscar Faber report of 1998 failed to find justification for any further stations within Shropshire, and the most recent study undertaken by Scott Wilson in 2007 showed unequivocally that a business case to reopen Baschurch station could not be made. This study, costing in the region of £80,000 was part funded by the then County Council was a definitive investigation of the issues. On receipt of this report, the Council accepted that the reopening of a station at Baschurch would not therefore be pursued.

It remains that case the there is no current justification for the Council to unilaterally fund the expense of any further station investigation at this time.

Shropshire Council will however continue to work actively with those statutory bodies charged with the funding and development of rail infrastructure in order to ensure that the benefits of any new developments, taken forward based on a positive industry business case, accrue to the residents of Shropshire as far as possible.

QUESTION 8

MS OLWEN ROSE, Shrewsbury resident, will ask the following question:

With the proposed cuts to youth services how will this affect the already limited provision for LGBT young people?

MR D MINNERY, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People has replied as follows:

This provision will not be affected by any proposed financial savings.

Provision for LGBT currently takes the form of a group meeting in Shrewsbury. We anticipate no change to this at this point in time and as long as the provision confirms it is meeting service user needs through the evaluation process.

QUESTION 9

MR JULIAN DEAN, Shrewsbury resident, will ask the following question:

Shropshire Council has recently reported on actions to bring toxic air pollutants down to safe levels for humans. While taxi companies will be introducing new taxis with low emission engines from 2017 there does not seem to be an equivalent arrangement for buses. Indeed, recent bus contracts let by Shropshire Council seem to have resulted in considerably older and more polluting buses in Shrewsbury town centre. What actions will Shropshire Council take to ensure that every bus operating in Shropshire's towns is equipped with the latest Euro 6 engines, and when will this be achieved?

MR S JONES, Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation has replied as follows:

It should be noted that not all bus services in Shropshire are subsidised by the Council and the decision to allocate vehicles to these services is one for the bus operator.

The fleet of buses used on bus services subsidised by the Council have reduced in their age profile over the past few years, as a result there will be a

subsequent reduction in emissions and of course in the use of fuel as vehicles have become more fuel efficient. The new Park & Ride contract for Shrewsbury will see new vehicles with lower emissions introduced from 2017.

We will continue to seek improvement in the age profile of the contracts that we manage and are mindful of the emissions these vehicles produce, whilst also taking into account the current financial pressures.

QUESTION 10

MS LINDA SENIOR, Shrewsbury resident, will ask the following question:

NHS managers in Shropshire have recently published their Sustainability and Transformation plan. They suggest that the need for expensive hospital interventions and primary, secondary and social care could be reduced by maintaining a healthy population and resilient communities. This would involve Public Health education and measures to reduce obesity and alcohol consumption and encourage exercise - laudable aims but difficult to achieve at any time but more so when the facilities which can help keep the population happy and healthy, such as swimming pools, parks, cycle routes, youth and community centres are under threat, underfunded and already dependent on volunteers. How can you justify cuts to these services?

MRS K CALDER Portfolio Holder for Health has replied as follows:

Shropshire Council is working with partners and communities to encourage healthier and more resilient communities, and actually has a Better Care Fund workstream called Resilient Communities is in place to ensure that there are assets and resources in our communities that can be used to create the best possible outcomes for vulnerable people. Shropshire Council and other public bodies are just part of the provision of local resources, and whilst the things that they do provide are often highly valued, it is voluntary and community activity that is making up the full picture.

Resilient Communities supports services such as Adult Social Care and Children & Young People Services to ensure that when appropriate, local residents can be signposted to existing local community resources for support and activity that they can get involved. Where there is an identified gap in a needed resource or activity, the community can be supported to create the right thing for their locality to fill it.

Libraries, leisure centres, parks and community centres do all play an important role in reducing loneliness and keeping people healthy, but so does all the activity that takes place in communities quite independently of public bodies. That is why we are working hard with community based organisations such as town and parish councils, schools and local groups to try and ensure that local services survive and thrive into the future. We think that working together through initiatives like Resilient Communities is a great way to address the

challenge of supporting potentially vulnerable residents and reducing demand on public services - recognising and building on the existing capacity of the community and that it is underpinned by strong local networks, relationships and a commitment to a common cause.

Shropshire Council commissions and provides a wide range of services to support local people to live healthy lives and avoid preventable illness, including physical activity opportunities, NHS health checks, stop-smoking services, weight loss support, alcohol and substance misuse services, and sexual health services. Shropshire Council also works in close partnership with Shropshire Clinical Commissioning Group through the Better Care Fund on a range of specific programmes, such as falls prevention, aimed at reducing costly hospital and care home admissions. Through its Communities First programme, the Council supports community development and strengthening of local assets, including a wide range of activities to promote physical activity, such as the recently launched Everybody Active Towns initiative which provides funding for local people to develop physical activity opportunities in their community.

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