

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

AGENDA ITEM 9

QUESTION 1

MR MILES KENNY will ask the following question:

A lot of time, a lot of effort and a lot of money has been invested in the Museum in Shrewsbury with excellent results, but what a disappointment to find that the café is not serving Fairtrade produce. Shropshire Council reaffirmed the commitment given by Shropshire County Council to support Fairtrade shortly after becoming unitary which met no opposition from members. This commitment was and is an important part in making and keeping Shropshire as a Fairtrade County.

Many towns in Shropshire are Fairtrade towns, including Shrewsbury which was and continues to be supported by Shrewsbury Town Council, businesses, communities and churches in the town, an achievement carried out almost entirely by volunteers.

There are few who do not understand the benefits of Fairtrade to the Fairtrade producer and their communities. These benefits extend to businesses in the developed world who support Fairtrade. Consumers worldwide, not just Europe, UK or Shropshire seek out Fairtrade suppliers in preference to those who do not serve Fairtrade and more and more shops and cafes serve Fairtrade as they know it is good for business.

So, when granting the contract or café rights in the Museum why was it not stipulated that Fairtrade produce would be served?

More to the point what are you going to do about this?

Café staff have said they might serve Fairtrade produce – when are you going to ensure that they do, in accordance with Council Policy?

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

I would like to thank Councillor Kenny for his complementary remarks about the refurbishment of the Music Hall and I would also like to add to this by saying what a wonderful asset it is to both our County town and the County, as both a celebration of our rich history and heritage and a key attraction for our tourism industry.

With regard to the specific question around Fairtrade at the Stop Café at the Music Hall, we will look to review how our Fairtrade commitment is embedded into our wider procurement approach. I understand that in the case of commercial lease arrangements such as the Stop Café we are not currently mandating Fairtrade. That said, detailed below is a statement from the Stop Café regarding their sourcing policy:

Just because something doesn't have the Fairtrade mark, it does not necessarily mean it has not been ethically or fairly traded.

We know that the farmers that grow our beans get a higher price than they would under the Fairtrade scheme due to the superior quality of their product. The coffee bean importer that our supplier uses is well established and does offer blends under the Fairtrade banner. However, they also offer blends that are negotiated directly with the farmers where quality of the bean is matched by a higher price - in the case of our blend, a mix of Brazilian and Indian washed robusta. The importer also takes its social responsibilities seriously and invests in the local community, including helping building schools and developing the local infrastructure. Given this approach, we believe we trade ethically.

We are an independent, family run business. We pride ourselves on sourcing most of our menu locally, we employ local people and we support local initiatives and the community in which we trade. Unlike many of the big 'brands' we feel we are making a positive contribution to the local economy and are proud of this approach.

In light of this statement and as the contract has been let, we do not propose to do anything retrospectively to change the arrangements with Stop Café.

Shropshire Council will however fully commit to ensuring Fairtrade is a clause in any new lease or contractual arrangements.

QUESTION 2

MRS PAM MOSELEY will ask the following question:

Last year, following the demise of the government's community care grants and crisis loans for living, top-tier local authorities were encouraged to set up local welfare assistance schemes to replace them. With its share of the government's Local Welfare Assistance Fund, Shropshire Council responded by developing the Local Support and Prevention Fund.

Could the Portfolio Holder advise, for the financial year 2013/14:

- 1.) How much was allocated to the Council for this provision?
- 2.) How much of this was spent on assisting residents who applied for help?
- 3.) How many requests for help were received, and of these, how many were approved and how many rejected?

Also, what expenditure is planned for 2014/15?

Additionally, it has been announced that the government is to end the Local Welfare Assistance Fund in 2015/16. As such, what measures is Shropshire Council to put in place to help its citizens who are for a variety of reasons suffering financial crisis, and need urgent help in circumstances which can include ill health, the loss of a home or job, leaving care, and the need to flee domestic violence?

MR LEE CHAPMAN and MR MIKE OWEN the Portfolio Holders for Adult Services and Resources, Finance and Support will reply:

The Welfare Reform Act reformed the social fund administered by the DWP because it was believed to be complex, over-centralised, poorly targeted and failing those it was meant to help the most. It was believed by transferring the administration of parts of the fund to us we would be better placed to determine how to deliver this critical service as we are closer to people who need support. We would be able to diagnose the underlying causes of an individual's problems rather than just providing grants or additional loans which may in the past have compounded financial problems by increasing personal debt. The changes would mean the social fund is sustainable in the future and supports the move to Universal Credit.

This scheme transferred to us from 1 April 2013. To differentiate from the old Social Fund the new scheme was renamed 'The Local Support and Prevention Fund'. This new scheme seeks to identify and prioritise those most in need. It targets those within the community who have been identified as the most vulnerable and in need of urgent financial assistance or support. The scheme also considers paying awards under two types of need: to those customers who require immediate support and to customers who require assistance to establish or maintain a home in the community.

Customers most likely to require this form of assistance may include (this list is not exhaustive):

- Families under exceptional pressure;
- Homeless people or rough sleepers;
- Vulnerable older people;
- People fleeing domestic violence;
- Young people leaving care;
- People moving out of institutional or residential care;
- Ex-offenders leaving prison or detention centres;
- Chronically or terminally ill people;
- People with alcohol or drug issues; and
- People with learning difficulties.

From the period April 2013 to February 2014 we received 1,579 applications which resulted in 1,124 applications being granted at a total cost of

£37,382.27. The biggest request by far was for food with 650 parcels provided over the period followed by gas and electricity requests.

The following key figures have been noted over the first year of running the scheme: -

Family Types

Single 1,019 (64.5%)
Lone Parent 238 (15%)
Couple with children 146 (9.2%)
Couple no children 113 (7.1%)
Pensioner 63 (3.9%)

Items provided

Household goods (including food) 948
Other 769
Furniture 565
White Goods 538
Utilities 508
Bedding 84
Travel expenses 155
Clothing 16

It is noted that majority of people are single that claim from the fund. These claims are mainly for food, gas and electricity after losing income through the DWP sanction process. The remaining family types claim due to a particular circumstance for things like furniture, carpets, moving costs or travel expenses. It is also noted that the number of pensioners that claim is extremely low. On investigation to services and organisations that deal predominately with the elderly it has been identified that this is the case for a number of reasons (mainly pride, culture differences and the fact that they are not subject to working age regimes). Of the 1,579 applications received 1,124 or approximately 71% were successful. The main reasons for refusal are that there are alternative methods available to resolve the situation. These alternatives are explored with the customer upon any refusal. It became clear almost immediately that the previous social fund had created somewhat of a 'claim culture'.

We would receive numerous calls from repeat customers who had been granted funds previously but had not remedied the situation that resulted in the claim. The majority of the people who request support have been sanctioned due to non-compliance with a DWP request (seeking work, attending an interview or training). We decided that we did not want to replicate the old social fund as this had clearly created a dependency and claim culture for some. Instead we wanted to create a cash free system that offered a holistic support service.

The worryingly high number of sanction cases we have received has prompted and informed the construction of our new Local Support Framework.

As funding has now ceased for this provision after this year we are using the money to ensure that we can provide support in the future to the most vulnerable. Through the construction of joint working with other support services, third parties, charities and foundations, churches and the community we are forming the new Shropshire Community Support Network to ensure that we can provide support to those most in need. Through a joint approach with all main stakeholders, including housing associations, DWP, CAB etc we have a robust and effective plan in place to ensure that we continue to provide much needed support in the future.

QUESTION 3

MR ROGER EVANS will ask the following question:

Following the quite explicit answer given at the Council meeting held on 27 February 2014 about the erection of signs on the A5 warning drivers of high sided vehicles about the low bridge in Hanwood; it is disappointing to residents that work, as of 16 April, has not yet started.

Can the portfolio holder please confirm again that work is programmed and give an indication of when this is expected to be completed.

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

The signs in question are required to be erected on the A5 Shrewsbury Bypass. The Highways Agency control this trunk road and are responsible for delivery of the signing scheme, through their contractor Amey. Shropshire Council have been advised that their current works programme identifies that these signage works are scheduled to start towards the end of May and will be completed by the end of June 2014.

QUESTION 4

MR ROGER EVANS will ask the following question:

The Court of Appeal (Civil Division) heard a case against Shropshire Council on 4th April 2014 and the result is now published. This concerned the specific closure of Hartleys Daycentre in Shrewsbury. The minutes of a Scrutiny Meeting held on 19th August quite strongly note that it was the contention of every member of the public, in the packed room where many had to stand, that a lawful consultation regarding closure had not taken place. During the whole of the approximate two and a half hours of the meeting no user or member of the public stated they had been asked their views about the closure of their day centres. The court now says that the council did not comply with their duty to consult at common law.

Can the chairman of the appropriate Scrutiny Committee now agree that to restrict the call in of the decision to close daycentres to just looking at whether a commission was needed to be set up was wrong.

MR GERALD DAKIN, the Chairman of the Health & Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee will reply:

Thank you for the question. In reaching the decision I did I was very mindful of the extremely detailed and extensive consultation process that had taken place the previous two years as part of the transformation of adult services generally. Indeed, it was this consultation which the High Court held had, in fact, been lawful. It is true that subsequently the Court of Appeal overturned that decision but if you read the judgement in full you will see that the Court did find a number of positive actions by the Council as well as finding that the Council needed to do one further step which it will do in circumstances such as this in the future. In any event the issues raised in the call-in were much wider than those before the Court and at that point in time my responsibility was to ensure that effective meeting could take place. In my opinion that is exactly what happened with most people having a very good opportunity to raise their concerns.

QUESTION 5

MR KEVIN PARDY will ask the following question:

On the Shropshire Council website's meetings diary, the entry for July 17 reads "PROVISIONAL - Council". Is this because the date is subject to change, or that it may be the third full meeting of this Council to be cancelled since November last year?

MR DAVID LLOYD, Speaker, will reply:

In answer to the first part of your question No. At the moment I am advised that there is business to discuss at the July meeting so it will go ahead.