

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTION 1

MRS VIVIENNE PARRY will ask the following question:

- a) You told the last council meeting that you had written to your Worcestershire counterpart to ask why a new contract had been offered to Diamond Bus Company to run the 2L service between Ludlow and Kidderminster. What was the result of that communication? Will we see any improvement in the quality of service on this route?
- b) Passenger groups have successfully worked with Herefordshire Council to increase the frequency of buses services on the 490 route between Ludlow and Leominster, where there are connections to Hereford. These extended services will end next April. Will Shropshire Council work with Herefordshire Council, including providing a subsidy if necessary, to ensure that the current level of bus service is maintained?

MR SIMON JONES, the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport will reply:

- a) To confirm that the Portfolio Holder in Worcestershire has responded to Councillor Jones sharing his concerns, and has given assurances that his Officers continue to work with the operator in order to continue to monitor service quality under their contract. Following discussions with Officers in Worcestershire regarding the performance of Diamond Bus on their contract, it has been agreed to let this contract initially for a further 12 months only, during which time Diamond Buses performance will be reviewed before any further decision is made regarding any further contract award.
- b) The aforementioned 490 service is not one to which Shropshire Council has contributed a subsidy and is wholly managed and subsidised by Herefordshire Council, it is unlikely that at a time of considerable budget pressures that funding for additional support of a service can be found from within the Public Transport budget.

QUESTION 2

MRS TRACEY HUFFER will ask the following question:

The Clinical Commissioning Group has announced that it no longer considers the option of building a green belt A&E unit between Shrewsbury and Telford viable. It also says that either the A&E at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital or at the Princess Royal in Telford must close

Will Shropshire Council add its voice to the majority of residents of this county and to that of Daniel Kawczynski MP in calling for the single A&E unit to be located at the Royal Shrewsbury?

MRS KAREN CALDER, the Portfolio Holder for Health will reply:

In relation to the current consultation regarding the future configuration of Accident and Emergency (A&E) and Minor Injury treatment services, Shropshire Council's primary interest is ensuring that our communities receive clinical evidence based, and appropriate treatment and care for the wide range of health conditions that occur in our lives.

As we have town and villages spread across most of the county from Woore in the North East, Ellesmere in the North West, Clun in the South West and Alveley in the South East, the location of A&E and Minor Injury services is not a simple East - West question.

Shropshire Council will continue to assess the evidence that emerges from the Future Fit programme, the views expressed by our communities across the length and breadth of Shropshire and the evidence and views of other stakeholders such as our partners in Powys and the West Midlands Ambulance Service before expressing our considered position on the short listed options. Elected Members and Council Officers will continue to play an active role in the Future Fit consultation and working groups in order to influence positively the work being undertaken.

QUESTION 3

MR ROGER EVANS will ask the following question:

For some time there have been a number of delays in the Shropshire Council Planning Process. Many times in answer to questions raised the answer has been it is because of the increased number of applications being received. There not enough staff to do the work required. This even though the actual department income has far exceeded the original budgeted figure. Staff have now all ben transferred to ip&e and it appears to me that in recent months these delays have increased not reduced.

There are a number of examples of these delays. in my division I have several examples, applications taking 24 days from being received to being published. I am sure other councillors will also be able to quote delays. The timescale for Parish Councils to consider and reply is being reduced to the legal minimum of 21 days. Emergency, special meetings are having to be called to enable this short timescale to be met. Full consultations with local residents are having to be curtailed. Request for an extension in time are being turned down.

Delays in the publishing of Planning Appeals are also being incurred. Some published agendas of planning committees have contained wrong information within them and late alterations have had to be made.

Applicants have turned up at the Parish Council meetings to answer questions concerning their application. The Parish Council have had to apologise and inform them they could not discuss it as their applications had not yet been published by Shropshire Council.

Staff in the department are working as hard as they can, delays are due to not enough resources being put in place to meet the workload. This has been occurring for a number of years.

I requested an item concerning these delays to be included on an agenda of a recent Central Planning Committee meeting. That meeting was cancelled. It was missed off the agenda for the following meeting. I asked for an item concerning these delays to be placed on the agenda for the September Performance Scrutiny Meeting. That meeting has now been cancelled. I will be asking again for this item to be placed on the Performance Scrutiny Committee's next agenda meeting, whenever that is. Hopefully an in depth discussion can then take place.

I am being asked what is happening. Today at least, can a public interim answer be given as to why these delays have been occurring and what has been put in place to stop them continuing to happen? Have ip&e put in sufficient resources to meet expected workloads.

MR MALCOLM PRICE, the Portfolio Holder for Regulatory Services, Housing and Commissioning (Central) will reply:

The process of dealing with a planning application from receipt to decision can be complex and the time taken to deal with an application impacted by a number of factors. Some of these rest with the Council, its processes, resources and policies, other factors will be in the hands of the applicant. Consequently planning performance, and by this I mean the time taken to complete the process from initial concept to issuing a decision, is impacted by a number of variables some of which are not within the Councils control.

At the beginning of the planning process is the pre-application advice service. Shropshire provides an optional paid for service in addition to information freely available through the Council's web site. The applicant is advised through this process what information requirements are necessary to support their particular application. If an applicant chooses not to obtain pre-application advice there is a greater risk of the application being held up in either the validation or determination process until the required information is received.

When a planning application is submitted for consideration this is handled by the councils centralised validation team which ensures a consistent approach to validation is taken across the County. If the required information requirements are not included at the point of validation this can slow the process down for the applicant. In addition, over the past 12 months there has been some disruption to the validation team as a result of staff turnover, sickness absence and maternity leave reducing the capacity of the team to process applications within the target of between 3 and 5 working days. This

coupled with the increase in complex and major planning applications meant that validation times increased to 4 weeks at the peak. I am pleased to report the validation team resource is now more stable, validation is currently 15 working days and coming down and we aim to being back within target as soon as possible.

All consultees, including parish & town councils are given 21 days to respond and this is the time all consultees are legally given. In practice , where the planning officer is able to extend this they will if a consultee requires more time. Parish Councils have the option through their own constitutional arrangements to make arrangements to meet the timescales as set.

With reference to the point about planning appeals, if the member would like to provide examples where information is incorrect or not produced in a timely fashion officers will investigate this. It is our practice to include a section on each planning committee agenda to include a summary of appeal decisions received in the previous month. This is an important learning point for officers/members to see how the Council's policies and decisions. Shropshire Council is currently receiving a significant number of planning appeals which is an indication that inappropriate schemes are being refused. Planning appeals do however consume significant resources both in terms of staff time and cost and this can be another factor affecting planning performance.

After a particularly difficult and unprecedented period of additional planning applications, and a doubling of the number of complex or major planning applications additional resource is now being provided to the planning service with 4 full time equivalent experienced planning officers now working on a temporary basis to support the officer establishment. These officers are helping colleagues reduce what have become unsustainable caseloads and already we are seeing performance improving with the number of decisions issued being 16% up on the same month last year.

I would be pleased for there to be a broader discussion about planning performance – it is important to understand that there are many impacts on the time it takes to produce a planning decision, not all within the control of the local planning authority. The important point is that the Council continues to take robust and defensible decisions, which has been the case and is borne out by a high success rate at planning appeal.

QUESTION 4

MRS CHARLOTTE BARNES will ask the following question:

Can the portfolio holder agree to a revision in where it is eligible for travel assistance with their bus pass? I have a number of residents who live in the Bishops Castle Division who are only entitled to travel assistance if they attend Ludlow College. When in reality it is often easier to travel to Shrewsbury College. The distance is on average less than three miles. Whereas the

difference in price is more than £380. Many students have to rely on others even to get near the nearest bus stop which is often three miles away.

MR SIMON JONES, the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport will reply:

The Council has a statutory duty to provide free school transport to those pupils (aged 5-16) who are attending their nearest school & living over the statutory walking distance. Travel for Post 16 students is discretionary and supported by the Council through its Post/16 Contribution Scheme, which offers subsidised help with transport costs where entitled students are attending their designated college.

For those students from Bishops Castle who do not qualify for post 16 transport assistance to Shrewsbury, a bus pass is a more expensive option than travelling to their designated College in Ludlow. Unfortunately, as the Bishops Castle to Shrewsbury service is operated on a commercial basis the Council does not have any regulatory powers in how these fares are set.

Occasionally in a rural county such as Shropshire, there can be examples of where a student's designated college for the purposes of post 16 transport assistance is more distant than an alternative establishment. It is of course for students and parents to decide which establishment they wish to attend, but post 16 transport assistance may not necessarily follow.
