

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTION 1

MR DAVE TREMELLEN will ask the following question:

Can the portfolio holder responsible for the overall governance of Shropshire Towns & Rural Housing (ST&RH) assure the Council that this arms length management organisation acknowledges their responsibility for the actions of their tenants?

And can we be further assured that Shropshire Towns & Rural Housing acknowledge that they have a duty of care to the whole community, ensuring that operational managers and staff acknowledge that any action by their tenants that has a deleterious effect on areas neighbouring their properties will be addressed without delay and any tenant failing to comply with any issued notice will be given warning of the risk to their tenancy if they fail to comply?

MR MALCOLM PRICE, the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Commissioning will reply:

Each tenant has a contract with the Council. The contract outlines what the responsibilities of the tenant. ST&RH work to respond to any reports that the contract is not being adhered to. In the most serious cases ST&RH will work with the Council to take the tenant to court to either enforce the contract or to ask the court to evict the tenant. We monitor complaints about ST&RH including complaints that they have failed to take action in cases where the tenant may have breached their contract with the Council.

ST&RH work within communities to ensure that they address issues that affect the whole community. If activity by a tenant is adversely impacting on the community then they will work to address those issues.

If there are any issues that are not being addressed then this needs to be brought to the attention of ST&RH so that they can work to try to resolve those issues.

QUESTION 2

MRS HANNAH FRASER will ask the following question:

How many applications have there been to the Council for voluntary severance, and have enough people come forward for voluntary redundancy to avoid the need for compulsory redundancies? If not, could you confirm whether there will now be a programme of compulsory redundancies and how many positions are at risk?

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

The initial date for submission of applications for Voluntary Redundancy was 6th September. On 4th September we had received approx. 400 applications, by close on 6th, that figure had risen to 700 applications. The details of these applications are currently being considered by respective Management teams pending final decision making by directors on 23rd September.

Until this work is completed we will not be able to make an assessment of the requirement for compulsory redundancies. As we redesign services there will be requirements to change the configuration of the workforce and this may result in further redundancies voluntary or compulsory.

QUESTION 3

MR TED CLARKE will ask the following question:

What efforts are this Authority making to ensure the retention of Shrewsbury Magistrates Court, and avoid its mooted transfer to Telford?

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

We are not aware of any proposed move of the Magistrates court to Telford.

QUESTION 4

MR NIGEL HARTIN will ask the following question:

Would the portfolio holder follow the lead of the 6 Yorkshire Councils who have blocked access to the websites of all payday loan companies on Council run computers, instead diverting attempts to access such sites, for example from a library, to a page of financial advice with information about credit unions & voluntary sector organisations.

Would the portfolio holder further agree to use the coalition governments relaxing of restrictions on the amount of interest credit unions can charge for short term loans from April 2014 and the £36M it has set aside to aid the expansion of credit unions by utilising empty or underused Council Property (such as at the old reference library) to open a credit union outlet where people can see it by walking past every day rather than having to go to the Guildhall offices.

MR MIKE OWEN, the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Finance and Support will reply:

In response to the first part of your question, as part of being a responsible authority, we continue to work with Credit Unions and other organisations in the voluntary sector to promote responsible borrowing in the very way you describe, and the wide variety of services they offer.

There is capacity within all Council owned ICT equipment to restrict and limit access to any website, although there would need debate and policy decisions on whether this would be an appropriate thing for us to do.

The Council currently restricts access for its staff to a number of internet sites to ensure integrity of its ICT infrastructure and protect its employees from inappropriate material. Whether this should be the case for Shropshire residents should be treated as a separate issue, giving local people the freedom of choice.

I would welcome if Cllr Hartin could share the details of the 6 local authorities in Yorkshire, to enable the Council to discuss best practice and maybe share some learning on this. I would finally add that issues such as this do not need to wait until full Council meetings, should anyone have any initiatives they thing would be of benefit to the residents of Shropshire, then they should be shared, where possible, without delay.

The response to the second part of the question about the credit union developing high street premises is not straight forward:

When the credit union was first established it was recognised that our members and potential members were spread over 1300 square miles and that having an office premises in one area would not benefit 90% of our current or potential customers. So instead of setting up a high street premises we took advantage of a back office location supported by Shropshire Council and then looked to develop access points originally called collection points around the County. Mostly run by volunteers.

Due to changes in the way that people pay into the credit union – largely now automated or by payment card, most of these original collection points have now closed and have been replaced by Outreach services provided largely by members of Just Credit Union staff. These no longer accept payments, but are mainly points at which people can apply to join the credit union and apply for a loan. We currently have 8 of these in operation. Some have been in place for many years e.g. Oswestry and Telford. Others open and close depending on demand.

In the last few years the Board of the Credit Union have begun to look more seriously at developing shop front premises. They have concluded that it would significantly benefit the business if we had a presence in a High Street location, but only if it was the right premises in the right location with the right investment.

The main benefit of having a premises in Shrewsbury would be –

- Advertising – a well-placed shop window and well-designed premises would raise the profile of the credit union and help to present a professional image so that we can attract a wider customer base and grow the credit union.
- Where credit unions have opened a high street premises in the right location – footfall has increased massively. (Note – most credit unions provide services in a significantly smaller geographic area with much greater population density)

However, we have not taken the step to open a high street premises as yet because –

- The cost of running a high street premises in the right area with the right facilities is currently prohibitive. The last property we looked at that was the right size and in the right location to make it worthwhile in terms of increased profile had at an annual rent of £26,000.
- Most of our services have developed to be provided by post or e-mail. We are currently putting our limited investment into developing on line and text based services. A recent survey of our members and potential customers in the area carried out by Experian identified that this was the most likely way that current and future customers would access the credit union.
- When our members do need or want to come and see us they usually have to travel from the outskirts of Shrewsbury or the wider Shropshire area. The Guildhall provides the benefit of being near to the bus and train stations as well as having parking adjacent to the building.
- We have a limited number of staff available. The number of staff on duty at any one time varies at different times of the week depending on how busy we are, at quieter times there may only be one or two people working. This would have security implications if we were in a premises on our own .

QUESTION 5

MR NIGEL HARTIN will ask the following question:

Would the portfolio holder agree to carry out an assessment of how Shropshire Council could become an accredited 'Living Wage' Employer, what it would cost, how quickly it could be done and what mechanisms it could use to encourage contractors & other Shropshire employers to also pay a Living Wage.

Would the portfolio holder agree to prepare, based on the above assessment, a fully costed report on moving Shropshire Council to become a Living Wage Employer to be presented to Cabinet & next Council in November.

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

We have already carried out an assessment of the costs of moving Shropshire Council to being an accredited 'Living Wage Employer' by creating a pay structure that would implement the Living Wage.

There are three pay points which fall below the rate for the Living Wage – with 3,400 permanent workers on one of these scales. As part of this current pay settlement the lowest of these Spinal Column points SCP 4 will be removed moving more people nearer to the £7.45 p/h.

The simple approach to paying the Living Wage would see the 3,400 on rates currently below the Living Wage being placed on it. This flat-lining of the lower pay scales at the Living Wage would increase the council wage bill an extra £946,525 per year.

However, a more realistic calculation would keep the different pay scales – which were established to reflect different jobs size and responsibility - but alters the lower pay scales.

After raising the lowest in line with the Living Wage, and the hourly rate each pay scale is valued at is increased by five pence for each scale upwards. This would continue until it crosses with the current structure – affecting the 11 lowest pay scales.

This approach, the more realistic of the two would affect 3,875 employees and increase the council’s wage bill by £1,209,822 per year.

Looking at it myself, I find it hard to justify increasing our spend on wages at a time when we are being forced to reduce our spend across the board to meet the required £80 million savings we have to find. Increasing our wage bill would effectively be taking that money from the services we provide.

In the circumstances we find ourselves in, it’s not something I find feasible at this time based on the figures we have. Should the circumstances change, then of course we will be more than willing to look into the matter again.

QUESTION 6

MR ROGER EVANS will ask the following question:

Battlefield Energy Recovery Facility (ERF) Boiler.

I note the recent decision of cabinet to increase the capacity of the boiler and also the associated expected increase in its efficiency. I also note that more additional waste will be treated increasing the amount to 93,000 tonnes per annum. How much in total of this 93,000 tonnes is now expected to be third party waste.

MR STEVE CHARMLEY, the Portfolio Holder for Business Growth and Commissioning will reply:

The issue of waste to the Energy Recovery Facility (ERF) was examined during the planning process. As previously stated the facility is designed to handle Shropshire municipal waste. Any spare capacity will be filled with commercial waste from the Shropshire area. This has not changed with the boiler upgrade. The planning permission has always allowed for up to 95,000 tonnes of waste to be processed at the facility.

QUESTION 7

MR MANSEL WILLIAMS will ask the following question:

Having attended the recent Health Scrutiny Committee that considered Cllr Barker’s decision to close two Day Centres for adults with Learning Difficulties and having witnessed the distress of carers who all spoke of their lack of knowledge of plans to close the Day Centre where their family member attended, would Cllr Barker agree that the consultations that had been undertaken in the lead up to his decisions were flawed. If Cllr Barker believes

the consultations were not flawed, could he explain how that large number of carers who attended the Scrutiny meeting were so ill-informed about such a fundamental fact.

MR TIM BARKER, the Portfolio Holder for Adult Services, Transformation and Safeguarding will reply:

I do not agree that the extensive consultation exercises undertaken on the future of adult social care and day service transformation were flawed.

I also do not accept that the numbers of people who attended the scrutiny meeting were significant or representative of the majority of families whose relatives attend day services. The families who attended scrutiny seemed to have a very clear view about day services namely that they did not want any change to occur and that the current day centre model was their preferred choice.