

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

AGENDA ITEM 6

QUESTION 1

MR ANDREW BANNERMAN will ask the following question:

Shropshire Council was given a large amount of public and charitable money to convert the Music Hall complex of buildings into a new, state-of-the-art Museum and Visitor centre. The aim was to make this the focal point of the Visitor Economy Strategy for Shrewsbury and the county. The Visitor Centre welcomes people to the town and county and the museum displays and interprets the county's rich heritage. It was always assumed that this would be free to all, unlike the temporary exhibitions, where an admission charge is expected. Nationally county and city museums are generally free to enter.

Can I please be told;

- If an admission charge is to be made, what this will be and how will discounts and concessions operate to mitigate the cost to families, students and those with restricted income.
- Who and which organisations were consulted before this plan was made.
- How many more visitors are expected at the new Museum than those who visited Rowley's House and what their estimated contribution to the Visitor Economy will be.
- If the formation of a Trust to run the Museum has been considered.

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

The Music Hall will be the focal point for the town's visitor economy and access to the Ground Floor and to the Roman and Pre History Gallery will be free of charge.

All admission charges and concessions are detailed within the Fees and Charges Schedule at Appendix 3 of the Income Review of Fees and Charges report to Cabinet on 11 December 2013.

The plan to charge is based on the consideration of all options and following debate and detailed discussion with relevant portfolio holders. The Council faces unprecedented financial challenges and the only option which provides a viable and sustainable future for the museum service is to charge.

Rowley's House has an average visitor footfall of 25,000. We anticipate 50,000 paying visitors to the new Museum.

The estimated contribution of 25,000 additional day visitors would be £825,000 to the Shrewsbury Economy per annum.

A number of options for future governance are under consideration, in line with all Council services.

QUESTION 2

MR CHRIS MELLINGS will ask the following question:

What is the impact across all housing providers in Shropshire of the "bedroom tax"? What is the Council's budget for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs)? How many applications to date have been received and approved? How much of the DHP budget remains unspent?

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

Impact across all housing providers in Shropshire

The impact of the under-occupancy rules for housing providers is measured and monitored by the Welfare Reform Sub-Group of the Shropshire Social Housing Forum. The Social Housing Forum is attended by the main social housing providers with housing stock in Shropshire. . To date this Sub- Group has focussed on ensuring early identification of affected households, development and implementation of a range of interventions and 'offers' to support households to address a shortfall in Housing Benefit, and management and monitoring of actual or potential rent arrears accruing as a result of reductions in Housing Benefit entitlement.

A primary impact for housing providers has been, and continues to be, the additional demand on staffing resources required to identify and engage with affected households, work with households and partners especially around financial inclusion, debt management and access to work, to facilitate transfers and exchanges to appropriately sized properties, and to map and monitor arrears.

Most housing providers have increased staffing levels to engage in these activities. Housing providers have also made some funding available to households to support a move to alternative accommodation, some through their existing 'Tenant Incentive Schemes', others through a tailored package of support according to individual household needs. Another key impact has therefore been financial with respect to staffing resources and help to move.

The impact of the regulatory changes on rent arrears levels has been mixed, and appears closely related to the degree of engagement achieved with affected households. At this stage, and from the information currently

available, the majority of affected households who have engaged with the support available have either no arrears or are managing to keep the level of arrears under control. Only a small percentage of households are not engaging (2%-14% depending on household profile/provider), and it is mainly in relation to these households where arrears may be rising. Housing providers are however continuing to try to engage with these households.

Overall, housing providers are reporting little change in the level of arrears/ % rent collection in relation to previous years, although the arrears profile may be different. In some instances, % rent collection has increased, possibly as a consequence of targeted work and support around rent arrears in general.

The Welfare Reform Sub-Group will be undertaking a more detailed statistical evaluation early in 2014 when more data will be available and any longer term impacts may be more apparent.

Discretionary Housing Payments

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) are additional payments for people currently receiving Housing Benefit who require further financial assistance with their housing costs. DHP is paid for a time-limited period and is intended primarily as 'transitional' assistance.

From April 2013, each Local Authority was given extra funding in the DHP budget to support people affected by the Welfare Reforms.

Year	National DHP budget	Shropshire DHP budget
2010/2011	£20 million	£50,667
2011/2012	£30 million	£56,983
2012/2013	£60 million	£106,201
2013/2014	£155 million	£277,475

Each Council has a limited amount of money available to spend on DHPs. Shropshire Council uses the DHP budget to:

- Alleviate hardship and help prevent homelessness;
- Support vulnerable people in the community;
- Help people through family crisis or difficult life events.

As of 4th November 2013, the Shropshire DHP fund stands at:

Net paid to date	£101,337.94
Total committed	£22,306.16
Budget unallocated	£153,830.90

Up to and including September 2013, 841 applications have been received. A breakdown of awards and refusals per month shown below:

DHP Applications (2013)	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Totals
Number of awards	82	54	56	77	52	31	352
Number of refusals	155	66	90	87	75	16	489

Each claim is considered on its own merit and is means tested. The majority of awards have been made to those identified as under occupying their homes who are struggling to meet their rent shortfall. For most claimants DHPs will only be awarded on a short-term basis to allow time to consider longer term solutions such as moving, finding employment, increasing hours of work, taking in a lodger etc.

The vast majority of refusals are due to excess income.

QUESTION 3

MR CHRIS MELLINGS will ask the following question:

In 2013/14, Shropshire is one of those authorities which passports in full the Council Tax Benefit Support Grant to its Parish & Town Councils. Why is this not the case for 2014/15?

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

Cabinet agreed on 13 November 2103 to continue to allocate Council Tax Reduction Grant to Town and Parish Councils. As the amount of this grant is not separately identified in 2014/15 finance settlement, Cabinet agreed that the amount to be allocated is equivalent to the 2013/14 figure reduced by the same proportion as the Council's total government funding has reduced by. This is a reduction of 10.4% and will reduce the allocation from £0.648m to £0.581m.

QUESTION 4

MR CHRIS MELLINGS will ask the following question:

At period 4, the Council's Revenue monitoring report indicated that forecast income from car parking was down by £530,000. What is the current forecast?

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

The shortfall in car park income at period 4 was reported as £530,000. In the period 6 monitor the shortfall was not separately disclosed, but had fallen to £400,000 and will continue to be monitored closely.

QUESTION 5

MR MILES KENNY will ask the following question:

How many 'rough sleepers' are there and what provision has been made to provide them with appropriate shelter during the cold spells this winter? Where will the accommodation be and will it provide support?

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

Shropshire Council's Rough Sleepers' Task Group/Housing Options Team is currently working with 14 rough sleepers across the County. The Shropshire Cold Weather provision starts around 16th December, earlier if the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol is activated by 3 consecutive nights of below zero temperatures.

With respect to accommodation being offered this year, the Council is continuing to implement the approach taken in previous years, to offer a period of settled accommodation with support to the 14 identified rough sleepers from mid-December to March the following year. It has proved more challenging this year than in previous years to secure appropriate accommodation, especially from within the privately rented sector. However, sufficient accommodation has now been identified. Where dogs are not acceptable within the accommodation, access to kennelling can be arranged. The accommodation available is located across the County, specifically: Shrewsbury; Oswestry area; Church Stretton area; and Whitchurch area. Those rough sleepers taking up the offer of accommodation will be able to apply for Housing Benefit for the period of occupation.

In May this year, the Shropshire and Staffordshire (Homelessness) Prevention Partnership implemented a new 'rough sleepers' outreach service, funded through DCLG sub-regional Single Homeless Prevention Funding. This is a rapid response outreach service for rough sleepers and aims to support

individuals to end rough sleeping. The service is delivered by a specialist provider: Brighter Futures. Initially a 6 month pilot, this service has been extended to February 2014, using the DCLG sub-regional funding. In addition to the DCLG sub-regional funding, Brighter Futures have recently secured funding from the Homeless Transition Fund, which will extend the service in Shropshire until the end of 2014.

Each of the 14 rough sleepers identified is engaged with Brighter Futures and is in receipt of support and assistance through this route. Through the winter period, where required, Brighter Futures support will be supplemented with housing support provided through the Council's temporary accommodation support staff in partnership with housing support providers across the County.

The Shrewsbury Ark

Shropshire Council works closely with the Shrewsbury Ark (10 Castle Foregate opposite the Railway Station. Open 9 – 4:30 Mon – Fri). The Ark is a drop-in centre providing advice and support for homeless and vulnerable people. The facilities and services include provision of advice, information and support, access to health care, meals, clothing, shower facilities and so on. For more details, the website address is www.shrewsburyark.co.uk and the phone number is 01743 363305. People from out of the Shrewsbury area can access the Ark services and should contact the Ark directly. Transport into Shrewsbury can be problematic, and people may be referred to services closer to or in their locality.

Emergency Situations

In emergency situations, Shropshire Council will grant travel warrants and small amounts of money to enable rough sleepers (with a local connection to Shropshire) to access 'direct access hostels' in the region. This is with the view that accommodation and support will be sourced for the rough sleeper to return to Shropshire in a planned way. This arrangement operates on a year-round basis.

Out of Hours

Shropshire Council's Housing Options Team operates an Out of Hours Service for homelessness all year round. Emergency calls are responded to at the time they are received.

StreetLink

This is a new service (launched December 2012) to help rough sleepers in England by involving the public. Concerned individuals can make reports through a telephone hotline and website in order to connect rough sleepers with local advice services. Members of the public wishing to assist someone sleeping rough may use this line for assistance, as may rough sleepers themselves (telephone line 0300 500 0914 and website www.streetlink.org.uk)

Each year, the Rough Sleepers Task Force Group sends a Briefing Note to Members with respect to arrangements for rough sleepers during the winter

period. (The Briefing Note for Winter 2013/14 has been prepared and will be sent to Members week commencing 9th December 2013).

QUESTION 6

MR MILES KENNY will ask the following question:

How many fixed penalty notices for dog fouling have been issued this year across the county? Were they all paid up within the required time? And as a consequence of there not being paid in time were any prosecutions brought and if so how much were they fined?

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

Since 1 January 2013 we have issued three Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) for dog fouling, on each of these occasions the dog walker was witnessed to fail to pick up after their dog by an officer of the Environmental Maintenance team of the council. Of the 3 FPNs, 2 were paid within 10 days at the discounted rate of £50 and the third one had to be cancelled, due to an error in the administrative processing of the notice, making it invalid and unenforceable. If a FPN has been issued and the recipient fails to pay it we would take that case to court for prosecution under the substantive offence, which could lead to a fine of up to £1 000.00.

In addition to this we have sent two formal warning letters, these are letters that we issue following the completion of an Environmental Crime Report. These reports are completed by officers of town and parish councils and our contractors. They can also be issued, in certain circumstances, by officers of Shropshire Council. These formal warning letters are sent out to offenders, on the first occasion they are witnessed allowing their dog to foul, providing they are cooperative and/or resolve the problem they do not result in a Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) being served. If they are witnessed on a second occasion or are not cooperative it can lead to the issue of an FPN.

It is also worth pointing out that there has been a consolidation of the Dog Control Orders in Shropshire this year. This has resulted in a uniform approach to dog control, including fouling offences, across Shropshire. These went live on 1st November and should assist dog owners in understanding their responsibilities where ever they are in Shropshire.