

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

AGENDA ITEM 25

QUESTION 1

MR DUNCAN KERR will ask the following question:

I note that the Clerk to Worthen with Shelve Parish Council has sent you an open letter complaining that Shropshire Unitary Council's short sighted financial planning has left you unable or unwilling to provide the services needed by residents of Shropshire. Fortunately she suggests a solution and urges you to conduct a referendum on increasing council tax above the capping limit. Will you be heeding this advice?

MR MALCOLM PATE, the Leader will reply:

A response was sent to the Clerk of Worthen with Shelve Parish Council on 3 November 2016 and this is copied below for your information and provides, I believe a complete and succinct response to the important questions that were raised.

“Dear Ms Crossland,

Thank you for the open letter dated 25 October, which sets out some of the options for tackling the financial circumstances we find ourselves in. I am very pleased that Worthen with Shelve Parish Council are engaging with this process and, as you know, I am always willing to meet and discuss concerns that you may have along with Cabinet Member, Councillor Cecilia Motley.

As you describe, we are asking Town and Parish Councils to assist us by taking on or funding some specific local services. This devolution is happening on a national basis and many Town and Parish Councils, including Town and Parish Councils in Shropshire, are seeing this as an opportunity to take control and deliver better public services in their communities. I would be very interested to understand more about the perspective of Worthen with Shelve Parish Council in this regard.

I note your request that Shropshire Council considers a referendum in order to raise additional Council Tax across the County as an alternative to working in partnership with Town and Parish Councils. However, my Members believe that this would be a very high risk strategy. The cost of a referendum has been estimated to be over £700,000, with no guarantee of the outcome and with the potential therefore that the problem persists having spent considerable time and money. My Members have great faith in the ability of the Town and Parish Councils and believe that a referendum would also undermine the opportunity

to strengthen their role and further improve their offer and accountability within our communities.

I hope that this addresses your very valid request and I look forward to further discussion on how we can together go forward in the best interests of communities served by Worthen with Shelve Parish Council.”

In addition I would ask Members to consider the Financial Strategy Report which is before Council today and sets out our approach to managing a period of unprecedented uncertainty in Local Government finances.

QUESTION 2

MR DUNCAN KERR will ask the following question:

A constituent of mine recently contacted me as the Council had taken over 8 weeks to process a change of circumstances in relation to his benefit. In a comment to the Oswestry Advertiser a Council spokesperson stated that they had a backlog of some three weeks. This has resulted not only in distress, but also in financial loss for the Council in issuing, then cancelling, summonses. What was the cause of these problems? What has been learnt from investigating them? And, what system changes have been made as a result?”

MR MALCOLM PRICE, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing, Regulatory Services and Environment will reply:

We were working about four weeks behind at the beginning of September 2016. We are currently less than two weeks behind with dealing with correspondence.

Council Tax Support and Housing benefit are means tested and we require a variety of supporting documentation to verify the claim before making the assessment. Sometimes we can be waiting for documentation to be supplied from third parties such as DWP.

Ensuring we have all of the appropriate information can sometimes lead to delays in claims being assessed.

Timescales and workloads can vary throughout the year. We do try to keep claimants up to date, and give them an idea of when they are likely to hear from us about their claim.

QUESTION 3

MR MILES KENNY will ask the following question:

One of the great benefits to Shropshire businesses is the terrific countryside of stunning landscapes, rural tranquillity and rich biodiversity which brings in visitors who enjoy the countryside and spend money. Many choose to live here, even locate their businesses here because of the countryside.

It is therefore with some dismay the local Shrewsbury MP wants to see a road driven through some of the most environmentally sensitive land near Shrewsbury, rich in biodiversity and of ecological significance. This proposed new road, the so called North West Relief Road runs parallel to and overlooks a SSI and is right next to a RAMSAR site.

The local MP has obtained a grant close to £1m to try to prove the case for businesses for the road.

- i. How involved was Shropshire Council in obtaining the grant?
- ii. Can you ensure that businesses involved in making the case for businesses include businesses involved in the countryside and tourism?
- iii. Most importantly will you see that a thorough ecological survey is carried out along the entire route of the proposed North West Relief Road?

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

i. How involved was Shropshire Council in obtaining the grant?

To provide some brief context, the Shrewsbury North West Relief Road (NWRR) has been a strategic proposal for many years. There have been numerous evaluation exercises and consultations around the proposal throughout its lifetime, although none of these to date have proceeded to a full bid for construction costs.

The NWRR sits within the Councils listed long term strategic pipeline schemes, but with the evidence base being in need of further development work. Shropshire Council submitted earlier this year, a bid for funding under the Department for Transport's Local Major Fund (LMF). This application was submitted via, and supported by, the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership. Allocations under the bidding round were allocated on a competitive basis by DfT. It is understood that Shropshire Council's bid was one of just 6 successful bids from a total of approximately 60 submitted.

Shropshire Council was successful in being awarded £942,875 of external revenue funding under the LMF. This is matched with £49,625 of local funding

This round of the LMF gives the opportunity to access external DfT revenue funding within the 2017/18 financial year. The bid requested funding to refresh historic evidence held concerning the NWRR, with a view to examining the

current potential to re-establish a business case for the NWRR. A refreshed business case will allow Shropshire Council to put the concept of a NWRR into a present day setting, where such initiatives as the Shrewsbury Integrated Transport Package and the Oxon Link Road are also programmed for delivery over the next 5 years.

It is to note that, there are currently no guaranteed national funding opportunities to which an emergent positive business case could lead to an application for future construction costs. The Council will however, over the next year as the business case is examined, continue to liaise closely with DfT and also the Midlands Connect initiative in order to ensure that the outcome of the business case refresh is ensured as high as possible profile in any future national construction funding rounds.

ii. Can you ensure that businesses involved in making the case for businesses include businesses involved in the countryside and tourism?

To clarify the approach to an Outline Business Case ; In its simplest form it is an independently scrutinised estimation of the costs and impacts involved in delivering the road (design, consultation and build), and offering these costs up against the benefits that would potentially result from the roads opening. There are accepted DfT methods and models that can be used to estimate a “cash value” to benefits such as reduced congestion, air quality, improvements in journey times for cars and freight movements, as well as the benefits in road safety that may result to both pedestrians and cyclists. The wider economic benefits can also be assessed in terms of the amount of potential development land that may be unlocked (both for residential and employment opportunities).

An assessment can then be made as to the viability / benefits that would accrue from such a new road by comparing these two figures.

The business case refresh will also need to acknowledge the wider benefits that may accrue to those travelling into England cross border from Wales, and also strategic issues such as freight movements to and from the North West Ports etc. The concluding report around all of these issues will be the Outline Business Case for investment. Therefore Shropshire Council will as part of the early stages of the refresh, engage (already now underway) with landowners and affected parties, associated businesses and other key stakeholders such as those in countryside and tourism.

iii. Most importantly will you see that a thorough ecological survey is carried out along the entire route of the proposed North West Relief Road?”

To confirm; should the Outline Business Case be considered for further work pending submission for construction costs, that a thorough and comprehensive ecological and environmental study and assessments would be fully observed as a matter of course.

QUESTION 4

MR MILES KENNY will ask the following question:

The supply of new affordable houses for rent is not keeping pace with demand for those eligible for social housing. Last year only 166 affordable for rent new houses were built of which around only 120 or so were available for younger people to rent.

- i. Excluding priority applicants what chance has a young couple on a low income in getting an affordable rent home to rent?
- ii. Including priority applicants what is the probability of any new applicant renting an affordable rent home?
- iii. Central Government on the side of developers has removed part of the obligation to provide affordable housing on all developments, including the obligation to provide dwellings available for affordable rents which has contributed to increasing the gap between the numbers of affordable homes for rent and open market housing. Shropshire Council have land which they are disposing of, should we not be making it a condition that such land held in public ownership is available only for providing homes at affordable rents?

MR MALCOLM PRICE, the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing, Regulatory Services and Environment will reply:

- i. *Excluding priority applicants what chance has a young couple on a low income in getting an affordable rent home to rent?*

The Housing Register currently has 5,305 applications of which 720 are aged under 25 in the following housing need assessment bands:

Priority 18
Gold 51
Silver 367
Bronze 284

In 2015/16 of the 1,696 property allocations, 267 were allocated to young people in the following bands:

Priority 38
Gold 66
Silver 119
Bronze 44

- ii. *Including priority applicants what is the probability of any new applicant renting an affordable rent home?*

In 2015/16 the overall mean average waiting time for allocations was 13 months. For under 25's it was a mean average of 8 months. The 1,696 properties were allocated to the following housing needs assessment bands:

Priority 207
Gold 439
Silver 661
Bronze 389

- iii. *Central Government on the side of developers has removed part of the obligation to provide affordable housing on all developments, including the obligation to provide dwellings available for affordable rents which has contributed to increasing the gap between the numbers of affordable homes for rent and open market housing. Shropshire Council have land which they are disposing of, should we not be making it a condition that such land held in public ownership is available only for providing homes at affordable rents?*

The Council will always consider the future use of any land it declares surplus to requirements. This consideration includes the assessment of the best outcome for the Council and will take into account the particular circumstances of a potential disposal on a case by case basis. The Property Strategy and Review Team are continuously reviewing the Council's Estate to identify opportunities for future development which includes the provision of affordable housing within the county. The assessment of need and consideration for housing development is also covered in the disposals protocol whereby senior officers are requested to comment on any disposal proposals. It would not be appropriate to have a blanket approach to make all surplus land available for affordable housing as this would not be realistic in terms of a number of variables including previous use, location and planning considerations. The Council is also bound to achieve best value in the disposal of its assets and the use of capital receipts underpins its corporate capital priorities.

QUESTION 5

MR TIM BARKER will ask the following question:

Can the Portfolio Holder for Adult Services please advise Council as to our cost and delivery performance as shown in the National Performance and Cost Tables as compared with other authorities?

MR LEE CHAPMAN the Portfolio Holder for Adult Services will reply:

Shropshire Council continues to compare favourably with other local authorities for the performance of our Adult Social Care services and in relation to the cost of care.

The Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework is a set of measures that take account of all aspects relating to Adult Social Care including feedback from people who use services.

Shropshire Council's results for 2015/16 were better than the West Midlands average for 64% of the measures and better than the England average for 68% of the measures. Comparison with the family group of unitary council averages has been possible on 13 of the 22 ASCOF measures and the Council was better on 6 of these measures (46%).

For example, more people in Shropshire felt that they had control over their daily life than the average for England and the West Midlands and correspondingly a greater proportion of people who use services in Shropshire receive self-directed support and choose how their needs are met, compared to the West Midlands, England and family group averages.

There are also a greater proportion of people with a learning disability in paid employment and living in their own home or with their family in Shropshire compared to the averages for the West Midlands, England and the family group. However, delayed transfers of care overall and attributable to Adult Social Care were not as good as the comparative averages and this is a significant continued area of focus for the Council and Health partners.

In terms of cost, the three main areas of expenditure relate to long term care provided in Nursing Homes, Residential Homes or through Domiciliary Care.

Shropshire's average cost per week for Nursing Care in 2015/16 was £484. For the same period the West Midlands average was £559, and the All England Average it was £596. The average for the family group councils was £614. Our figures for Shropshire set out the gross cost of what the Council pays and does not include the Free Nursing Care contribution which is funded directly to the care homes by Health.

For Residential Care Shropshire's average cost per week was £695. This compares well to the West Midlands average of £708, the England Average of £716, and family group average of £727. In fact, despite the favourable comparison, Shropshire's average cost per week is increased due to some very high cost residential care for people with learning disability.

Our average cost for Domiciliary Care commissioned from providers was £16.03 per hour which was more than the West Midlands average of £13.82, the England average of £14.28 and the family group average of £15.26. Not all figures will be like for like. The rate for Shropshire is inclusive of mileage and enhancements for weekends, bank holidays and a specialist element of reablement. During the last quarter of 2015/16 Shropshire Council introduced brokerage for Domiciliary Care packages. It is expected that this system will help stimulate the market and enable providers to identify opportunities to deliver more efficient working and therefore enable a more competitive market.

QUESTION 6

MR DAVID TURNER will ask the following question:

Would the Leader tell me what has been done to give the Authority a clear forward direction?

MR MALCOLM PATE, the Leader of the Council will reply:

Thank you for your question.

I was appointed as Leader of the Council almost one year ago and from the outset I have ensured that the Cabinet operates more corporately, making decisions together rather than individually thus improving decision making and engendering a broader understanding of the issues and opportunities across portfolios. Working with the Cabinet and my wider group, we have then achieved three deliberate and fundamental changes in direction:

1) We have reviewed the financial strategy and recast this to be both realistic and prudent. The Financial Strategy now reflects that we need time to plan for significant self-generated income. It has also been a 'living document' with regular updates brought to Cabinet over the last 12 months as opposed to the previous approach where the strategy was presented in December just prior to it being consulted upon.

2) We have developed a corporate plan which sets out our ambition and how the Council will achieve this. This is not a 'motherhood and apple pie' document. All members, staff and the wider general public have had the opportunity to feedback and contribute. Scrutiny has reviewed the plan and have made helpful suggestions which have strengthened the plan. Strategic Action Plans have also been produced to ensure that the key outcomes will be delivered.

3) We have developed a new performance management framework to monitor the progress of the Corporate Plan and the Strategic Action Plans.

Actions And Culture To Deliver Strategy

There have been many more subordinate actions to support and deliver the above three key strategies. For example, actions that will reinvigorate the Council to take pride in our staff and what we do together with our communities. We are an excellent Council by almost any comparison of cost and quality and it is time to remind ourselves of this. The resilience of our staff and the savings we have made in the face of austerity are extraordinary. I have been clear that our staff are our greatest asset and resource, and we should encourage, respect and work with them in full cooperation. I have made clear that officers bring their skills, expertise and training to our work and make recommendations and elected members set the policy direction and make decisions for officers to deliver. An environment of trust and respect will lead to commitment and this in turn is crucial to continued excellent performance in difficult times. As Conservatives we are in power and have formed the Administration, but I have also been clear that we are open to members of other parties to make suggestions and constructive criticism which we will work together wherever we can and act on suggestions as appropriate. In short we have set a culture of operating that is respectful, transparent and collaborative whilst being decisive and ambitious.

Income Generation

In the future we will need to generate significant income as government funding diminishes. We have invested in our staff structures to create capacity and accountability to ensure that we generate more income as well as new income going forward. We are looking at how existing income streams can be

maximised whilst being fair in what we charge to individuals and communities. Our staff across all services are business planning how they will achieve additional income. The level of innovation is incredible with, for example, outdoor recreation staff planning to deliver their services at no cost to the Council and our Community Enablement Team drawing in income by offering their skills, knowledge and expertise to others. Our health promotion service, Help2Change has been commissioned by West Mercia Police to provide a health screening service for its employees. This entrepreneurial approach is happening in services across the Council and our staff are becoming enthused and motivated by it. In my first few weeks as Leader we contracted to fit solar panels on the Shirehall which are now generating an average of £20,000 income per year and will pay back our investment in 11 years, after which all the income will be profit.

We are looking for investment opportunities and using our borrowing power where a substantial return can be realised and risk appropriately managed. It is important to use this potential wisely as this is where we can begin to close the income and expenditure gap over the next three years. Whilst we have diminishing government income, the potential for investment with a commercial return is a great opportunity. The Council can create and play a much greater part in growth needed to make our County sustainable alongside and in partnership with the private sector. Councillor Michael Wood is leading on commercial opportunities wider than the Council's services with each portfolio holder playing their part in developing these new income streams. For example, we are looking at our role in developing the housing that are communities need and how we can create multiple income streams by doing so. We will look at how our key town centres can continue and increase their potential as important economic hubs and essential features of our lifestyle as well as provide both increased and new income to the Council. I must stress however, that this is an approach of looking for a secure return on investment of at least 10% or more and is not an opportunity to fund risky projects or projects that will require future revenue. The recent procurement of a partner for a Shropshire Energy Company is a fantastic example of what can be achieved and I congratulate all involved in that particular initiative.

Economic Development

In Shropshire we enjoy a strong and diverse economy and we intend to build on this. We will work to strengthen our existing core businesses in agriculture, food and drink production and also continue to establish and grow small and medium enterprises, which in Shropshire continue to proliferate at twice the national rate. However, we are now ambitious for new and appropriate growth in larger businesses which will create jobs, retain and attract young people and make our County sustainable. The University Centre Shropshire will be a key contributor to this. We are again investing in our staff structure to drive all of this forward and I am pleased that Gemma Davies will join us as Head of Economic Development in the new year. She is joining at a good time when we have turned around our relationships and fortunes with the Marches LEP, we are part of arguably the most successful forerunner of combined authorities in the West Midlands Combined Authority, looking at other partnerships in the North around HS2, we are reviewing our Planning Framework (SAMDEV) and

increasing our ambition for growth and prosperity alongside our business colleagues on Shropshire Business Board. This ambition is captured in our new Economic Strategy which will be available in its first iteration in the new year. All this marks a sea change in taking responsibility for our destiny into our own hands

Vulnerable People

The key purpose of the Council is to protect vulnerable people and, despite financial challenges we have continued to make this our priority. Our corporate plan makes it clear that children are our top priority, closely followed by vulnerable adults and we have protected these budgets. Our Adults and Children's services continue to be exemplars.

Transformation delivered

Whilst we run some of the most efficient services across everything we do, there is always scope to improve process. So far we have delivered savings in services and we have learned that the best outcomes are achieved where we change process, not just reduce staff. Going forward we will refocus on improving process and not just making cuts. We recognise that investment is required to deliver process efficiencies. The greatest example of this is our investment in IT which will enable the Council to embrace the digital age, automate process where possible, improve reliability of data and allow the internet based self serve which people want. We recognise however, that some people require face to face contact and, although demand for this is reducing as people channel switch to on line, we will continue to provide it for those who need it.

I made it clear in my first week of office that we will be staying in the Shirehall. We will be investing to improve the quality and experience of our key building.

Plans are in place to reduce our footprint of buildings around the County and enable our staff to work in a modern agile way. We are working across all public sector partners, exporting the LGA 'One Public Estate' programme from which we have received £130,000 and which has the potential to join up and revolutionise how we work, share buildings and reduce overheads whilst providing the quality of infrastructure our communities deserve. All of our local public sector partners and voluntary and community sector partners are involved. The most recent example of this involves Shrewsbury Town Council who have their new office base at Shrewsbury Library.

Partnerships

We recognise that the Council cannot achieve all that we aim for alone and we have become much more open to partnership working. The evidence of this ranges from how we are working to devolve services to Town and Parish Councils, improved relationships with the Marches LEP, improved relationships with Telford and Wrekin Council, our ongoing dialogue and joint working with the Voluntary and Community sector and improved working with our NHS partners. Partnership working is not always an easy route but we have made it clear that it is our intention to work with others. The feedback I am receiving is

very positive and our renewed enthusiasm for partnership and cooperation is appreciated.

Influence and Networking

Over the last year I have been keen to rebuild our influence as a principle authority within local government. We have re-engaged with regional partners, with the County Council Network and with the LGA. Clear evidence of this is that James Walton, our S.151 Officer, is part of a national group looking at the future funding of local government. By being part of a network we understand and learn from others facing similar challenges and also have the opportunity to unite and lobby as appropriate to make our point clear to government.

I was very pleased to secure a visit from Greg Clark earlier this year, the then Minister for Communities and Local Government, to Shropshire. I have also met with Ministers in London to promote economic growth and funding into the county and corresponded directly with them on matters impacting upon Shropshire. I was lobbying on the unfairness of adult social care from my first day in office and I am pleased that this has now become a national campaign which has united all local authorities, the NHS and other bodies of influence.

Cecilia Motley continues to perform an excellent job as the Chair of the Rural Services Network, making the case for rural areas. Shropshire Council's public health staff are playing a leading role nationally, working with Public Health England to highlight rural health inequalities as these are not fully recognised at present. I was also very pleased to meet ~~its~~ Cecilia and councillor Heather Kidd recently so that we could share information that Heather might use in her capacity as a member of the People and Places Board.

Summary

I am very grateful for this question and I hope this answer explains how we are working at the strategic level as well as giving just a few examples of what it means on the ground.

I am very heartened to hear our officers say in open forum, that despite the challenges getting ever tougher, they are more confident than ever that we are planning a way through.

I am grateful to the Cabinet and my members for supporting and initiating responsible levels of ambition backed up by realistic, deliverable plans.

I hope that Council will approve the annual budget in February, and appreciate that this is just part of a carefully considered three year strategy driven by our developing Corporate Plan. I will now set our horizons further ahead and, with my Cabinet colleagues, begin to plan our future for a timescale of 10 - 20 years ahead.

