

## **COUNCIL 16<sup>th</sup> JULY 2020**

### **MEMBER QUESTIONS REPORT**

#### **1. Question from Councillor Kevin Pardy**

A statement by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Claire Porter, published in the Shropshire Star and copied to me, included the following, "We did used to offer this training in mid-term too, but it was stopped due to the poor take-up."

If it is the case that that training has been "stopped", will the Leader please explain why the temporary CEO, Karen Bradshaw stated, "Councillor Nutting has attended this training but, as it was some time ago, he has confirmed that he is scheduled to, and will, undertake refresher diversity training."

#### **Response from the THE LEADER**

##### **COUNCILLOR PETER NUTTING, LEADER:**

Whilst this training is only mandated for new Members after a local election, it is expected that Members take responsibility for their own training and development. The learning portal is available to all Members for on-line learning and Members are expected to book onto appropriate training. It is not a training course where you attend in person.

I determined that it was time that I did some update training on diversity and equalities, and I undertook this training recently.

#### **2. Question from Councillor Viv Parry**

The Councils agenda in cutting the wild flowers on grass verges is hopefully going to change by not cutting where it is not needed if this does not happen is it possible for the litter including plastics to be removed first by litter picking. Plastic shredded into small bits with a strimmer this can cause death to birds and small mammals, we need to help to save them. *There* is a reduction in garden birds, insects and small voles and I as a resident and Councillor realise that there is a shortage of money and labour, but we are pledging to help wild life in Shropshire for Tourists and Locals. Please spend that bit more to save the way beautiful Shropshire looks and help nature

#### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways**

##### **COUNCILLOR STEVE DAVENPORT**

The question rightly raises the importance of Shropshire's 5,000km's of diverse and valued verges. I regret the points raised are not site specific, therefore I am unable to provide site specific responses. It is however widely known we have been consulting

with other authorities, looking at best practice such as the Wildlife Trust's excellent advice document "Managing road verges" alongside exploring operational options for a much more refined approach to verge maintenance balancing safety, wildlife and nature. The competitive environment created by nature and the dominance of problem species means it is not as simple as mowing is automatically a bad thing. Shropshire can look forward to a more diverse verge network in the future, building on the work we have already done such as the reinstatement of the ditching and culvert maintaining program, which has transformed miles of ditches already this year restoring a long-lost wildlife habitat. So far this year we have already reinstated approximately 30km of rural highway ditches in south Shropshire.

Shropshire can also look forward to a comprehensive paper on the subject within the current financial year.

### **3. Question from Councillor Andy Boddington**

Councillors have been frustrated for several years that controversial and difficult applications in their divisions have not been selected for consideration by a planning committee. The selection process of which applications goes to committee is opaque. That undermines the core principal underpinning local government and planning – that all decisions at every point should be open and transparent. Decisions on which items go to planning committees are decided in agenda setting meetings. These are private meetings with no public minutes or public terms of reference. It is not clear what the criteria are for selecting one application over any other. We are told that decisions are based on 'material considerations'. But this phrase is ill-defined – legally it means anything that is material in the judgement of the decision maker.

Planning is one of the most public functions of our council. We need to ensure that it is delivered using robust criteria in the most open and transparent way possible.

Can the portfolio holder:

1. Explain the criteria by which planning applications are selected for consideration by planning committees, including what weight is given to parish council and local member opinions?
2. Provide the membership template for agenda setting committees?
3. Commit to routinely publish the minutes of agenda setting committees?

### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Communities, Place Planning and Regulatory Services**

#### **COUNCILLOR GWILYM BUTLER**

The process for determining planning applications is set out in the Council's constitution and scheme of delegation and this identifies those planning applications which will be determined by planning committee.

Within the constitution:

"Applications requested to be referred, by the Local Member, to the relevant Planning Committee within 21 days of electronic notification of the application and agreed by the Planning Services Manager in consultation with the committee chairman or vice chairman to be based on material planning reasons"

In terms of the Parish or Town Council the constitution provides for committee referral in the following circumstances

“Applications where the Parish Council submit a view contrary to officers (approval or refusal) based on material planning reasons the following tests need to be met:

(i) these contrary views cannot reasonably be overcome by negotiation or the imposition of planning conditions; and  
(ii) the Team Manager (Planning) or Principal Planning Officer in consultation with the committee chairman or vice chairman and the Local Member agrees that the Parish/Town Council has raised material planning issues and that the application should be determined by committee”

To clarify, the agenda setting meetings are organised to agree which planning applications should be considered by planning committees. It is not an agenda setting “committee”.

4. **Question from Councillor David Vasmer**

For each year over the last five years could you give me the following information about planning enforcement:

- 1) The number of staff employed to undertake this task
- 2) The total number of planning enforcement investigations undertaken
- 3) The number of cases when an applicant was asked to submit a retrospective planning application
- 4) The number of cases which resulted in enforcement action being taken by the Council

**Response from the Portfolio Holder for Communities, Place Planning and Regulatory Services**

**COUNCILLOR GWILYM BUTLER**

1. The number of staff employed to undertake this task

There are two dedicated Planning Enforcement lead officers working across the County with specialist knowledge and experience who undertake the majority of formal enforcement work.

Another officer provides dedicated business support to the planning enforcement process and all planning & enforcement officers and some of the natural and historic environment team also undertake preliminary enforcement investigations usually in relation to cases they have had prior involvement with or which is associated with the locality they work in.

This brings the total to 37 officers overall who have some involvement with the planning enforcement process.

In addition to this the Council was successful in bidding for £40,000 from Government in July 2019 to fund a temporary resource to provide Enforcement support in areas of Shropshire covered by the Greenbelt.

2. The total number of planning enforcement investigations undertaken

Data is only held from 17/18.

- 2017/18 - 531 cases received, 477 cases closed.
- 2018/19 - 625 cases received, 507 cases closed
- 2019/20 - 609 cases received, 471 cases closed

There will always be a number of cases on hand and under consideration.

3. The number of cases when an applicant was asked to submit a retrospective planning application

Planning Enforcement cases are considered in accordance with the Council's Planning Enforcement Protocol and having regard to Government advice in the NPPF and National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG). In over half all cases received following investigation there is no planning breach found or a minor technical breach is identified. The NPPG states:-

- In deciding, in each case, what is the most appropriate way forward, local planning authorities should usually avoid taking formal enforcement action where:
- there is a trivial or technical breach of control which causes no material harm or adverse impact on the amenity of the site or the surrounding area;
- development is acceptable on its planning merits and formal enforcement action would solely be to regularise the development.

5. **Question from Councillor Tracy Huffer**

**Support for young people during and after lockdown**

It is now more than three months since the UK imposed lockdown on most of its residents. Young people found their schools had closed overnight. Youth activities were cancelled. Drop in sessions such as BEAM became phone only access. Young people found themselves having to spend more time in the family home than they were used to. Having to confront family tensions without the relief of being able to talk to a teacher or adviser at school. Without being able to drop to a youth event or BEAM in a casual way.

We have built up easy access to wellbeing and mental health support over decades. We have seen how youth events, drop in sessions and positive activities have reduced tensions and prevented longer term issues with younger people. During the Covid-19 emergency, young people have found it difficult to access support.

In this question, I am not asking for details of how young peoples' education has changed. That is well documented. What our council needs to know is:

- 1) What plans were put in place to support young people through youth clubs and other positive activities during lockdown?
- 2) What are the recorded outcomes from the interventions of these plans (at an aggregated level)?
- 3) What plans have been put in place to support young people through youth clubs and other positive activities as we emerge from lockdown?
- 4) Will unspent budgets for youth support from 2019/20 be transferred into 2020/22?

### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services**

#### **COUNCILLOR ED POTTER**

1) SYA are the main provider of commissioned youth activities in Shropshire, and has moved its operation to inviting young people to attend 'virtual youth clubs', as an alternative to face to face open access youth clubs given the lock down and social distancing rules provided by the Government. SYA has not furloughed staff throughout this period – which has supported the continuation of this provision to young people.

2) SYA as the commissioned provider have provided the following information

- Family specific positive outcomes and examples include:
  - Through virtual zoom sessions, a disabled older sibling has been able to join in with the session. Giving the parents well-deserved time to themselves while all children are being occupied safely. - Bridgnorth
  - A young lady self-isolating due to having chemo and is now still able to access zoom session fun with a few individuals - Market Drayton
  - An LGBT+ young man was given a birthday cake by us (Doorstep delivery) when we found out no one was celebrating his birthday with him, as the family aren't supportive of him. Attends Shrewsbury XYZ group, lives in Telford - Children in need funded work
- Encouraged, supported and trained voluntary youth groups to use virtual platforms - all affiliated clubs contacted 100 across the county uptake from: Bridgnorth, Whitchurch, Hinstock, Hanwood, Nesscliffe, Wem, Shrewsbury, Scouts, Young Carers, Broseley
- Over 40 club sessions per week are being delivered by SYA and affiliated clubs
- Delivered commissioned clubs in Ludlow, Bridgnorth, Whitchurch, Market Drayton, Westbury & Minsterley
- VCSA clubs in Bridgnorth x 5, Wem x 2, Hinstock, Hanwood, Nesscliffe, Broseley, Whitchurch x 5, Shrewsbury x 7 (inc 5 x STC provision), Oswestry.
- County wide XYZ, Scouts, YFC

In addition:- Shropshire Council Early Help Teams during the month of April 2020 and in response to Covid 19, have supported a total of 407 families. Offering direct support to more than 314 parents/carers and more than 145 children and young people. The

Schools Family Support Workers financed through the Troubled Families funding have supported a further 226 families in total.

During this period the Early Help teams have worked with 48 families at Tier 2 that would normally access their schools and other agencies for this level of support and the Schools Family Support workers have offered support to 134 families from the schools 'vulnerable list'.

Children who are open to Children's Social Care (Child in Need, Child Protection and Looked After Children) have received direct support where needed. This has included the provision of art materials or outdoor games to children who needed them from their social workers.

We have a Targeted Youth Worker and Family Support Worker who have continued to work with our older Looked After Children supporting them with activities, visits in the garden, supporting foster carers as well as developing online activities.

The Virtual School has supported carers where children have needed to be educated at home and linked children in with activities such as The Hive on Line.

3) SYA are currently updating their policies and procedures and risk assessments to ensure outreach support is available on the streets for the minority of young people who are meeting and socialising, to a greater extent ignoring the rules. Next steps include re-engaging with known young people to promote the re-opening of clubs, check on the physical and mental health and help them work through any issues, whilst reinforcing government covid-19 messages. As part of the youth support proposal – throughout Covid 19 period - Shropshire Council has had and will continue to have ongoing conversations with Town and Parish Councils in preparedness for changes in Government's Covid 19 guidance. The fully funded detached youth support team will be recruited with the management team being recruited first – which is underway now July 2020 – who will then recruit the rest of detached frontline workers. This will help to provide the capacity to further develop and support town and parish councils to move forward with their commissioning plans to fund open access youth clubs in local communities, before and up to March 2021.

4) Youth support activity has continued to be funded and delivered, throughout 20/21. The timeline to deliver the youth support implementation plan as agreed in Cabinet paper is March 2021.

## **6. Question from Councillor Dave Tremellen**

On Friday 22 May 2020 elected Members were copied-in to the daily Covid-19 up-date from joint interim Chief Executive, Andy Begley, to all salaried staff of Shropshire Council.

In the middle of that staff up-date Mr Begley said...

*We have mentioned changes and the new normal many times, but what has perhaps not been as clear is the fact that we will not be returning to the old ways of working. We cannot return to how we worked for many reasons. Covid is an obvious issue, but the reality is we need to make sure that our services and our organisation, as a whole, is fit for purpose going forward, and able to serve our residents as effectively and efficiently as possible.*

He went on to say...

*There is no more room for inefficiencies, there is no more time to delay - this is here, the need is now.*

*As a management team, and with the support of several council services, plans are being drawn up as to what Shropshire Council could look like. These plans are being fed by responses from the staff survey, data we have about how we are working now, service requirements and Shropshire's future needs.*

Critically, the reference to...

*"... the fact that we will not be returning to the old ways of working"...*

...is an unequivocal statement of intent sealed with that one word "fact".

*"There is no more room for inefficiencies, there is no more time to delay - this is here, the need is now."*

*"Throughout this process we will work with staff to make sure everyone has a voice".*

Well, that's one joint-interim-Chief Executive doing his job by telling the salaried staff what's about to happen to the council in the future.

**Which begs the question: when will the Leader of the Council do his job and tell elected representatives what's about to happen to the council in the future, given "... that we will not be returning to the old ways of working"?**

### **Response from the LEADER**

#### **COUNCILLOR PETER NUTTING, LEADER:**

I have made no secret of the fact that Shropshire Council, like every other Council in the country, acknowledges that the post Covid world will be very different, and that the way Councils do things will inevitably adapt based on the Covid experience. We have successfully continued to deliver services to the people of Shropshire during lockdown. Over 2,500 staff have been working from home, meetings have been held virtually, including Cabinet and Council meetings. We have worked in ways that would have been unimaginable less than six months ago, and we must now adapt based on what has worked well during this time. I have set out my direction in the Financial Strategy report that was approved at Cabinet on 6th July, and in reports at this Council meeting today, that we must build on our recent experience, build on what works, rely less on our buildings, use IT to maximum impact, enable staff to work in an agile way and use local assets in a much more efficient way. This is, of course, still work in progress, but I am ambitious for a new and dynamic Shropshire Council which is flexible in adapting to the needs of our communities.