

CABINET 7 SEPTEMBER 2020

MEMBER QUESTION TIME

1. Question from Councillor David Turner

The Cabinet agenda item 7 seeks support for water management including flood risk management measures north of Shrewsbury.

It continues with the theme of a catchment wide approach to river management and the development of long-term sustainable interventions.

Whilst I appreciate that thrust of the paper is about fluvial flooding and has a focus on the development of the North West Relief Road, it does appear to be very Shrewsbury-centric. It states that Shropshire Council received claims for February flood related grants for 438 residential properties – some of these were from Much Wenlock, where homes flooded yet again – the majority in the High Street.

The impact of flooding in Much Wenlock poses a risk to life and property (64 properties in the town were flooded in 2007), and the 2017 flood alleviation scheme has provided only a partial solution. Would you therefore please ensure that the consultation gives careful consideration as to how the proposed measures will mitigate the impact on Much Wenlock, provide downstream protection for those properties alongside the fast-flowing Farley River, and avoid contributing to flooding of the Severn from Buildwas through Ironbridge, Bridgnorth and further South?

Response:

Can I thank Cllr Turner for raising the point that whilst this paper does focus on the River Severn and in particular the relationship with the Shrewsbury North West Relief Road, I would like to reassure Cllr Turner and all of our communities affected by flooding that a full assessment of those needs is being prepared and will be brought forward as part of either a strategy for the River Severn catchment or the Councils own highway and drainage capital programme. I can also confirm that the areas highlighted will form part of those assessments.

2. Questions from Councillor David Vasmer

1) In section 2.2 of the Flood Prevention Paper to be considered at Cabinet it makes clear that water management measures to reduce flooding will only be considered in conjunction with the North West Relief Road. Why is an alternative option of a dam, as outlined in section 8.1, not being considered

given the opposition witnessed by the flooding of councillors email boxes this week by opponents to the North West Relief Road?

Response:

The work underway with the Environment Agency is to model and assess the optimum flood prevention measures and ultimate design solutions. Early modelling indicates that developing an embankment supporting the North West Relief Road and installing a flood control mechanism underneath the new bridge could be a cost effective intervention. It is likely that the combination of both the NWRR and any Flood Barrier would significantly enhance the business case for both schemes and allow for greater benefits to be realised from investment than either project as stand-alone schemes and therefore makes any potential flood barrier a more affordable and deliverable project. However I would like to stress that other options for interventions and measures will be fully and equally assessed as part of developing the final business case. This is a genuinely open community engagement process that will meaningfully help shape and inform any firm proposals.

2) Have officers given any consideration of a third option to promote flood alleviation? It would involve paying farmers to allow their land to be flooded and negotiate the creation of wetlands along with strictly enforced planning policies so that every building development within the Severn catchment area has its own Sustainable Urban Drainage Scheme. This would have the effect of storing water in hundreds of small schemes and at the same time reduce run-off by encouraging water to naturally percolate through the ground. It would be cheaper, more environmentally friendly, easier to control costs and start immediately, rather than waiting for the construction of a road or dam, neither of which will be ready for this winter or the next one.

Response:

The work of the River Severn Partnership is to look and assess the full suite of interventions that will be needed throughout the catchment area to provide betterment. Given the scale of the area and river systems, it is clear that not one measure will provide a solution but that we require a long term suite of measures at various scales that overall provide the integrated management approach and from which we can harness multiple benefits. As part of this holistic approach, the River Severn Partnership has been allocated £5.4m for carbon offsetting, 'slow the flow', and natural capital projects and all of these interventions will form part of the final solution. Active consideration is being given to a scheme of compensatory payments to farmers and landowners affected by flooding. Sections 4.3 and 8.6 of the report do refer to compensatory payments and I can reassure Cllr Vasmer that a range of options will be considered as part of the options analysis. The Environment Secretary, George Eustace has made many public statements to that effect.

3) In section 5.5 the benefits of flood alleviation measures are listed and in subsection (ix) it includes a significantly reducing flood risk - can that be quantified? And has the idea of erecting barriers, which were successful in protecting Frankwell, been considered along Smithfield Road?

Response:

The design ambition for any future scheme is that it should provide a 1:100 year flood protection particularly when considering projected future river level rises. Against climate change impacts and projected river level increases none of the existing measures currently in place are likely to be effective over the longer term. The new national Flood Risk Management Plan sets out the need to look towards a longer term future and recognises that we need to deliver innovative actions to resilience in local places and make greater use of nature based solutions. It recognises that there is not always cost effective solutions to trying to protect urban areas with barriers. The likely cost would be many times the cost of this scheme plus there is an ongoing deployment cost to erecting and dismantling barriers every time there is flood event which would literally cost millions of pounds. That said, if this scheme or set of measures were to be completed by 2027 then some short term measures will need to be considered in the meantime and this is also part of the work being considered by the Environment Agency and wider River Severn Partnership.

4) At previous Cabinet meetings we were told that a business case and planning application for the North West Relief Road would be submitted by the end of July. That has not happened. Can we assume that, given the likely reduction in traffic following the impact of Covid-19, a convincing business case could not be presented? And that officers have therefore added a flood prevention element so that the Council could access capital funding for improved flood risk management?

Response:

I totally disagree with the insinuation of opportunistic environmental benefits. Can I draw it to Cllr Vasmer's attention to the fact that the River Severn Partnership was formed in September 2019 to bring policy and decision makers together to develop future sustainable water management options. In making the £40m grant award earlier in the summer, Government recognised how we in Shropshire are leading the way nationally in developing an 'holistic' approach in infrastructure investment. The current proposal is that a revised 'hybrid' planning application for the NWRR will be submitted which covers the entire road in full and water retaining embankment as outline, leaving the detailed design as a reserved matter. We are committed to maintain current progress in delivering the NWRR

5) In the Flood Alleviation paper there appears to be very little consideration of the overall environmental impact of the proposals other than

a vague commitment to a "water-based, leisure resource that includes natural wildlife and habitat" between Shrewsbury and Oswestry in sections 2.3 and 5.6. and wetlands in 7. 3-7.5. Will consideration be given to negative environmental impacts and proposals for their amelioration?

Response:

Any future proposal will be focused on delivering overall net environmental gain. Whilst the flooding and climate change challenges mean flood risk management is naturally a key driver, any proposal will also need look to provide wider environmental benefits. The River Severn Partnership includes a wider range of environmental partners and input of groups such as Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Natural England will be extremely important in agreeing the final solution.

6) In section 7.6 the Flood Prevention Paper says the creation of wetlands increases the environmental benefits of the North West Relief Road and concludes that the NWRR is a "key enabler to this work" But this is directly contradicted in section 8.1 which says that a second option "involves constructing a physical dam" which would could also create new wetlands so therefore the NWRR is not key enabler. Can a record of this mistake be placed in the Cabinet minutes of this meeting?

Response:

I think Cllr Vasmer you are confused as there is no mistake or contradiction. I've already set out that a range of options an mitigations will be considered in full. That does not contradict that at this stage joint development along with the construction of the NWRR will be considered as a model offering many construction efficiencies. The flow of the river is continually changing and we need to be clear that some areas of land might only be affected at times of peak flooding times. Clearly we are keen to ensure that as few properties as possible would be negatively affected by any future proposals.

7) Given the Government's policy of encouraging people to return to their workplaces, will the Council now encourage staff to return to work in their offices? Is it true that some staff have not been allowed to work from their offices for up to four days out of five, even if conditions at home were not suited to home working?

Response:

Following the decision not to refurbish Shirehall we are required to restrict the total number of staff who can access Shirehall at any one time to ensure that we are complying with fire regulations. In addition to make Shirehall COVID Secure and taking into account the government requirements for social distancing, we have had to reduce numbers further and prioritise the staff that

come into Shirehall. We are able to offer access to Shirehall and other administrative buildings for essential staff who cannot work from home or due to their role requiring access to equipment. We will, however, shortly be providing additional, bookable space for a limited number of employees to work within Shirehall, and other administrative buildings which will allow employees more flexibility than they have had over the last 5-6 months. We appreciate that it has been a difficult time for employees who have been working from home and continued to provide council services and we are working with Managers and their teams to work out how this will work most effectively. We are also working up a package of support to staff to assist with working from home arrangements. However, any employees who are having difficulties should speak to their line manager for support.