

MEMBER QUESTIONS

COUNCIL
24TH SEPTEMBER 2020

Question from:	David Vasmer
Subject:	Highway Consultant
Portfolio Holder:	Steve Davenport
Director:	Mark Barrow

I note the highway consultant hired by Shropshire Council has now left and is working for another authority. The cost of hiring the person was published by the Council. Can you please confirm for how many days he was helping Shropshire Council and what was the gross cost of this employment.

The highway consultant worked as follows:

2019/20 financial year – approximately 62.5 days at a cost of £62,500 plus VAT

2020/21 financial year – approximately 80 days* at a cost of £78,000 plus VAT

*Finalised figures are not yet available as the consultant provided a few additional hours in August for which invoices have yet to be received.

It is also notes that the consultant has been instrumental in formulating a new Highways Structure, the third in two years. When will elected members be informed of what this new structure looks like and learn who does what job? It would be good to receive this in advance of the media publishing it.

The new structure is purely a proposal at this stage and will be subject to the normal staff and union consultations before being finalised and recruited to. The structure has been developed to meet the needs identified in a comprehensive consultation which included a panel of councillors, senior managers, staff and other key stakeholders. Members will of course be informed of their key contacts once the restructure is completed.

The service has been currently operating an interim structure due to various personnel changes and as such has been necessarily fluid these last few months however these are now becoming more settled and an interim structure will be shared in the coming days.

Question from:	David Vasmer
Subject:	Highway Consultant
Portfolio Holder:	Steve Davenport
Director:	Mark Barrow

As a result of the Pandemic the Government requested councils to improve pedestrian safety without undue delay. Councils were encouraged to take rapid action and so dispense with the previous for advertising and carrying out lengthy consultations on changes.

Given these new rules, and a council's ability to implement highways changes, why has the council not implemented the motions, which had cross party support, made at previous meetings? These include putting in place 20mph zones outside schools which was passed at the Council meeting on 19th December 2019, and the School Streets motion passed on 16th July this year. Why have these not been implemented for the start of the school term when all children returned to school?

A paper is being presented at this Full Council for consideration that specifically addresses the implementation of 20mph outside of all Shropshire Schools and provides a rationale, resource allocation, issues to be addressed and timescale for implementation. The paper has been co-authored with Education colleagues and provides an approach to implementation of 20 mph. Hopefully the paper is self-explanatory.

Within this paper the issue of School Streets has also been addressed as 20 mph may not be applicable to all schools due to factors such as location, geography or the schools immediate neighbourhood, but schools streets may well provide other tools. Hence, a "blended" approach may well provide greater benefits and anticipated outcomes of safer school routes, reducing accidents, improving air quality and assisting Obesity via Active Travel. To assess, plan and implement interventions and liaise with stakeholders (Schools, Police, School Transport) requires the necessary planning and preparation time of which the paper presented at Council aims to address in a planned and considered manner.

It should also be noted that work across the county in dealing with COVID-19 is ongoing and continues to be implemented, utilising the guidance from National Government, and this has necessarily diverted staffing resource to addressing these issues. In towns such as Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Bridgnorth, Ludlow, Church Stretton , Much Wenlock, Whitchurch for example, road closures have been applied, high streets pedestrianised , one way systems implemented, COVID-19 reminder signs installed, bus routes reorganised, wider footpaths created and this has undoubtedly supported high streets in their economic recovery by encouraging a safer environment by allowing Pavement Permits to businesses to extend their trading space. Evidence via Shropshire Councils Town Centre Recovery Group is key to providing advice, guidance, support and ensuring appropriate funding opportunities are directed as appropriate continues.

Further, the work of the Passenger Transport Group in ensuring school transport is available but also COVID-19 Secure, has been key over the summer. There is further work to be done for social distancing on the approach to schools, and requests are starting to be received , as indeed other social distancing concerns and locations continue to be raised through various channels - this work, and its resource impact will need to be considered and managed, but it does demonstrate the work provided to date in supporting our communities.

Question from:	Heather Kidd
Subject:	Road Safety Issues
Portfolio Holder:	Steve Davenport
Director:	Mark Barrow

What priority does the Councils highways management give to road safety issues where there have been repeated accidents or a fatality?

In March 2016, Shropshire Council developed a new standard approach to accident cluster site identification and analysis following a best practice review. Specifically, this approach was developed

to enable Shropshire Council to meet its statutory duty under the Road Traffic Act 1988 to conduct studies into accidents on roads, other than trunk roads, within the local authority area and take appropriate measures to prevent such accidents. This approach also provides a mechanism to recognise those accident cluster sites that are most likely to have a road environment contributory factor, identify any trends in accident cluster sites and to prioritise interventions using an objective and robust methodology. This allows the Council to better prioritise the limited capital budgets it has available to areas where the greatest accident reduction benefits can be achieved.

Accident cluster sites are identified annually using police data on reported road traffic accidents and Shropshire Council's spatial accident data. A detailed process is employed that generates the location of cluster sites and then uses various metrics, including trends in terms of cause, casualty type and severity, and local engineer input to create a ranked list of accident cluster sites on Shropshire's highway network. Initially, a cluster site is where three or more accidents occur within a 50m radius of each other over the past three-year period. Funding is then allocated to investigate, design and implement appropriate traffic engineering measures at the highest priority sites, that reduce the risk of future road traffic accidents taking place. Any schemes entering a design programme must be allocated an appropriate capital budget; this is typically from the Integrated Transport Block capital grant.

How are these prioritised against routine works?

Shropshire Council receives separate capital funding allocations for highway maintenance work and local transport measures from the Department for Transport annually. The allocations are based on needs assessments and to a large extent this helps inform the balance between investment between maintenance and highway improvements. Part of the allocation is the Integrated Transport Block (ITB) capital grant which provides funding support for transport capital improvement schemes costing less than £5m. The grant is intended to fund projects that aim to address improvements in a range of areas such as road safety, congestion, active travel, air quality, public transport and accessibility. This grant is 100% externally funded and is not augmented by Shropshire Council and demand upon this budget is always greater than the available financial resource.

At times there are subsequent opportunities to fund additional safety measures through development funding and bids to government for thematic initiatives which enable the authority to undertake more work than its annual capital allocations may allow. It should be noted however, that routine and reactive maintenance work and other highways and transport initiatives such as active travel etc. are undertaken to proactively maintain the highway and movement around it in a safe condition so as to prevent opportunities for accidents and as such are considered to be safety measures in their own right rather than distinct to road safety budgets. Accident risk assessment is an intrinsic part of decision making across many activities undertaken within highways. For example, engineers will consider accident history when selecting the type of aggregate used when surfacing a road.

Shropshire Council also has regular liaison with West Mercia Police and the Safer Roads Partnership where accident sites are discussed and any sites requiring more urgent intervention are identified.

What would the average time for delivery of such schemes be from when agreed (on site) to completion? Please include those which simply need changes to white lining and improved signage and NOT those requiring complex road layout changes and significant capital funding.

The identification and treatment of accident cluster sites typically sits within a three-year rolling programme. Site identification and prioritisation, design programme development and preliminary

design work takes place in Year 1, ongoing design and works programme development takes place in Year 2 and construction is programmed for a future year. The delivery of a scheme on site can be influenced by site specific characteristics (i.e. distance from local power supplies, condition of the road upon which lining is to be laid, whether the sign is in stock or not etc.) and the magnitude of the scheme. Opportunities to deliver minor works sooner or to integrate schemes with other planned work are always explored. Where minor capital works are identified that require minimal or no design work, work can be delivered on site in Year 2 of the above cycle or earlier if programming and funding allow.

Outcomes of liaison with West Mercia Police, as outlined above, may prompt the need for more urgent reactive work that would be revenue funded.

Question from:	Roger Evans
Subject:	Contract with Highway Contractor
Portfolio Holder:	Steve Davenport
Director:	Mark Barrow

As a result of the input from the consultant and others it is understood a new contract has been negotiated and agreed with the Highway Contractor working for Shropshire Council. It is further understood a new set of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) have been included in this new contract. Can it be confirmed that the new contract and way of working will reduce the cost of highway work commissioned by this council. In answer to this can examples be given on how this will be achieved.

The new arrangements are not a new contract but a variation to the existing contract to provide some clarifications on areas of contention, embed formal governance arrangements and introduce a new suite of Key Performance Indicators. Whilst agreed in principle the new variations are still being finalised and therefore have not yet come into effect.

The contract variations in themselves will not reduce the cost of highway work commissioned through the contract, which within many areas of highway maintenance already provides demonstrably good value for money. The parties within the Highway Alliance however, are actively working together to develop complementary staffing structures and identify opportunities for reducing costs through new ways of working from beginning to end of current processes and introduction of innovation all of which will improve the value for money that we derive from our budgets.

Can members be informed, since no information has at present been supplied to elected members, details what these new KPI's are, including what do they measure and how they differ to previous ones.

Whilst broadly agreed, as the contract variations are still in discussion KPI's have not yet been finalised and therefore unable to be circulated. Once complete however, these will be made available and performance against them reported annually.

Can members be informed how these new KPIs were arrived at. Do they follow national or the best industry standard targets.

The KPI's reflect national good practice, drawn from known benchmarking information, and also reflect the priorities of the council as laid out within the original tender bid.

Question from:	Pam Moseley
Subject:	Condition of Cycle/Pedestrian Paths
Portfolio Holder:	Steve Davenport
Director:	Mark Barrow

Initiatives to increase cycling and walking by the population are being promoted at both national and local level, to meet aspirations to reduce vehicle usage, reduce associated emissions, and address obesity in adults and children. These are welcomed.

However, the condition of the cycle paths and combined cycle/pedestrian paths In Shrewsbury, mostly installed some years ago, are in a poor, and in some places, unsafe condition. Some of the surfaces are degraded, the road markings worn away, the adjacent vegetation overgrown, and the width of the paths greatly reduced by encroaching grass, weeds, and fallen plant debris which has accumulated over a very long time. This is likely to be also the case in other locations in the County.

The effect of this is to make the paths less safe due to being slippery when wet, and also being too narrow to accommodate cyclists, and in some cases, pedestrians, especially when travelling in opposite directions. As such they are perceived as less attractive to users, and this mitigates against them being used by cyclists and walkers.

Can the portfolio holder please explain how the cycle and joint cycle/pedestrian paths have been allowed to get into this condition, and explain how the situation can be remedied with, I hope, a regular maintenance schedule put in place to keep them in a good and safe condition.

Funding for highway maintenance has reduced significantly for highway authorities across the country over several decades, particularly in revenue budgets which are used for cyclical and reactive maintenance to prevent issues such as the overgrowth, localised flooding, white line refreshing etc. to which you refer. This has understandably seen a deterioration in the condition of the nation's roads, footways and cycle paths and as such the situation within Shropshire is not unique but reflected across the country. Notwithstanding this however, Government have recognised this problem and have increased capital budgets in recent years and allocated significant one off investment to support highway authorities in stemming this decline. Further funding is needed however and officers are engaged with colleagues across the country in lobbying for more funding to better reflect these local needs.

Funding is not the panacea in its own right however and officers are beginning to undertake a review of our highway maintenance strategies to ensure that resources are better allocated to support contemporary priorities and reflective on national best practice and are working closely with our supply chain to continue to identify opportunities to derive better value for money from the budgets we do have available to ensure that we can increase the amount of activity that we are able to undertake.

Question from:	Ruth Houghton
Subject:	COVID Impact on Local Economy
Portfolio Holder:	Steve Charmley
Director:	Mark Barrow

Covid 19 has had a wide impact on our local economy in Shropshire with many businesses adversely impacted. The financial support through business grants issued by the Council, whilst some took some time to come through, were welcomed and very valuable to eligible businesses. Support from the Marches LEP has also been essential for many businesses too. Unfortunately many successful , but home based businesses, received little, if anything, in grant support.

Going forward, post pandemic, how will this Council ensure that economic development is a priority for the whole County and how will new higher paid and higher skilled jobs be attracted to all areas of Shropshire.

Shropshire Council were initially awarded c£91 million from government to support local businesses through the COVID-19 crisis, split across two funds, the first supporting small businesses with rateable values under £15,000, who would receive a grant of £10,000 and the second supporting businesses within the retail hospitality and leisure sector. Occupiers from the retail, hospitality and leisure sector would receive a £10,000 grant if their rateable value was under £15,000, or a £25,000 grant if their rateable value was between £15,000-£51,000.

In total, 6,906 grants were distributed to the value of £81.6m, reaching 92.5% of eligible businesses. This splits out between the two grant funds as follows;

Small Business Grant

- Supported a total of 5,200 businesses, each receiving a grant of £10,000.
- Total value of £52m paid out to businesses.
- 90.66% of businesses that we believe are eligible have received support.

Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant

- Supported a total of 1,706 businesses, each receiving of either £10,000 or £25,000 (dependant on rateable value).
- Total value of £29.6m paid out to businesses.
- 98.61% of businesses that we believe are eligible have received support.

In addition, government awarded a 5% uplift on the original awarded grant funds that could be granted to occupiers based on local demand, totalling approx. £4.5m. Government had outlined that charities, market traders, B&B's (paying council tax rather than business rates) and occupiers of shared offices/workspace, would be eligible through the Extension Grant, whilst businesses in the wider retail, hospitality and leisure sector (including supply chain and businesses not open to the public), care and business enabling businesses would be considered subject to meeting eligibility criteria.

This fund also benefited from funding awarded through the Marches LEP to top-up the fund by a further £570,000, along with supporting a broader market towns recovery programme to the value of £187,000. The outcomes through these funds can be confirmed as follows;

COVID-19 Extension Grant (government funding)

- Supported a total of 768 businesses, with a total of £4.1825m committed to date, which is broken down as follows;
- B&B – 86 businesses supported to the value of £215k
- Charities – 30 businesses supported to the value of £150k
- Shared Offices – 209 businesses supported to the value of £522.5k
- Shared Workspace – 94 businesses supported to the value of £940k

- Market Traders – 64 businesses supported to the value of £160k
- Care – 38 businesses supported to the value of £380k
- Retail Hospitality and Leisure – 259 businesses supported to the value of £1.815m
- Working on a small number of outstanding applications to ensure all remaining funding is allocated. This will be completed before the deadline outlined by government of 30th September.

COVID-19 Extension Grant (MLEP funding)

- Supported a total of 93 businesses, with £570,000 of MLEP funds allocated as business grants.
- These were split across Retail, Hospitality and Leisure and Business Enabling sectors.
- 9 Business Enabling and 12 Retail, Hospitality and Leisure businesses supported with £10,000 grants (based on employee numbers).
- Total value of these grants was £210,000.
- 72 Business Enabling businesses supported with £5,000 grants (based on employee numbers).
- Total value of these grants was £360,000.
- We are currently tracking job safeguarding figures of 354, with some final due diligence required before final figures are confirmed.

Shropshire Market Towns Fund (MLEP funding)

- £137,000 allocated against 7 key market towns, ranging from £5,000-£50,000 in value, with those impacted by flooding earlier in the year seeing greater pots of funding.
- A further £50,000 was allocated as part of a competitive process with ten successful bids splitting this pot of funding.
- Outputs will be monitored based on the delivery of projects over the next three months.

Unfortunately, not all businesses were able to access grant funding and where this was the case, these businesses were signposted to other support mechanisms available such as the Self Employed Income Support Scheme, Furlough schemes and soft loan funds launched by government.

We continue to support our market towns and we are working on a programme to support more employment land to be ready for investment to help support our towns and communities.

Through the Council’s Economic Task Force, we are also working closely with partners including DWP, the LEP, employment and Skills providers to support businesses and communities in these challenging times. We are also continuing to work across our business networks to support businesses to grow and encourage new businesses to invest in Shropshire.

*PLEASE NOTE THAT THESE FIGURES ARE CORRECT AS OF 15/09/2020 AND ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE BEFORE 30TH SEPTEMBER, WHICH IS THE FINAL DATE GRANT PAYMENTS CAN BE MADE.

Question from:	Ruth Houghton
Subject:	COVID Impact on Local Economy
Portfolio Holder:	Lezley Picton
Director:	Mark Barrow

As lockdown has eased and we have started to welcome visitors back to Shropshire, this has been particularly welcome in the South West of the County for our local visitor economy. However we are sadly experiencing many breaches of the countryside code including camp fires on historic monuments such as Mitchells Fold, excessive litter with overflowing litter bins, wild camping and camper vans parked overnight at local beauty spots. How will the Council work with partners and

stakeholders such as the NFU, The National Trust , English Heritage and others to address this growing problem and what is this Council doing to ensure that the range of holiday accommodation available for visitors seeking a Staycation in the county is varied and of good quality as well as compliant with Covid 19 safety measures.

Council owned visitor attractions are being managed with an enhanced regime of management, stewarding and cleaning, to ensure that visitor safety is paramount.

A new media campaign is being planned, working with partners to help encourage responsible use of the countryside by visitors and to adhere to the Countryside Code. Our Visitor Economy Officer is reviewing a range of on-line communication to monitor the promotion of visitor activity in Shropshire and to build in messaging around this. Laminated posters highlighting the Countryside Code have been made available.

Council officers are working with Telford and Wrekin Council, Visitor Shropshire and Discover Shropshire and Telford to make sure that current Government Guidance is being highlighted to businesses through relevant e-newsletters, social media and websites.