

CABINET 19 OCTOBER 2022
Member Questions

Question from:	Rob Wilson	
Subject:	Active Travel	
Portfolio Holder:	Ian Nellins	
<p>Which tier did Shropshire Council place itself in? Level 1</p> <p>Did Active Travel England agree with this assessment? Yes and it is worth noting that the highest proportion of local authorities were put in the Level 1 category</p> <p>How much Capability revenue funding has been awarded to Shropshire Council as a result? The funding levels have not yet been announced. Publication of final allocations for the Capability and Ambition Fund is expected to be late October/early November</p> <p>What will Shropshire Council be spending this funding on? In line with the Capability and Ambition Fund objective to 'build capability', 2/3rds of the funding will be spent on building technical capability within the Active Travel team i.e. retaining the School Travel Planning Coordinator so she can continue to develop and deliver Shropshire's School Travel Planning Programme and the School Streets Programme as well as recruitment of an active travel officer. The remaining 1/3rd of the funding will be spent on feasibility and design work for Phase 1 of the Oswestry Cycle Network – schemes which were within the top ten prioritised schemes in the draft LCWIP.</p>		

Question from:	Roger Evans	
Subject:	NWRR	
Portfolio Holder:	Richard Marshall – Dean Carroll will respond in his absence	
<p>I note the recent U-turns that have been made by the Government and the increasing pressure they face on their budget. This includes the increasing need to trim future expenditure and put in place policies to ensure their Climate Change targets are met. We have seen in the press reports on how inflation is increasing the cost of all future construction projects. This was most recently seen when agreeing the capital funding needed to deliver a project at our last Council meeting.</p> <p>The estimated cost of constructing the North West Relief Road was originally £80m and is years out of date. Using the examples above its likely cost will</p>		

now be much higher than that original quoted. Under the present arrangement all costs over and above the original agreed budget will be met by Shropshire Council.

Will the Cabinet agree that until an updated estimate of cost is published, and assurances obtained from government to meet the extra project costs, instruct officers to stop all work connected with its construction?

As is usual for projects of this size, the current work around planning consent, detailed design and the preparation of the Full Business Case sits within a prescribed programme that leads through to constructor appointment and ultimately, full construction. In order to deliver the project in a timely and cost effective way, this preparatory work is key to its success and affordability. If work was to cease at this time in advance of construction, many opportunities for cost saving, accruing environmental benefits and the speed of construction would be lost. In addition to this, any delay at this time in proceeding with the agreed project programme would run the risk of incurring undue extra inflationary cost pressures ultimately, with a delayed start date on site.

It should be noted that the NWRR will also add considerable increased opportunities for active travel and public transport uptake within Shrewsbury as described in the Outline Business Case. Further to this, its synergies with The Big Town Plan and other initiatives such as the Mini Holland proposals, ensures that the road aligns with, and fully supports, the Councils new Shropshire Plan, particularly around Healthy People, Economy and Environment. In doing so it also remains in step with local and national ambitions around climate change and Carbon targets.

Conversations continue with DfT and other funders to address any potential cost increases due to exceptional external, and ultimately uncontrollable, inflationary pressures. Further updates on this will be incorporated into the Full Business Case on completion, for consideration by Members before its submission to DfT.

Finally, can cabinet members inform both elected members and the public the how much has so far been spent on the NWRR project.

To the end of the financial year 21/22 the total incurred spend on the NWRR was £18.1m, of which £10.4m was DfT grant funded. This is in line with the agreed terms of Programme Entry for the DfT Large Local Majors Programme and the Councils existing match funding commitment. The spend profile for the 22/3 year is currently being finalised with DfT and will be published as part of the Full Business Case in due course.

Question from:	David Vasmer
Subject:	Fracking
Portfolio Holder:	Lezley Picton
<p>Will the Cabinet join Shropshire residents in opposing Government plans to allow fracking?</p> <p>There is no doubt that we need to secure different types and sources of energy, however it is also clear that this need to enable significant changes to the energy market cannot be at the expense of local communities nor protected landscapes.</p> <p>There are places across the country which support efforts to explore for shale gas, and it has been made very clear by the government that local support must exist and be proven.</p> <p>As far as I am aware, in Shropshire, our communities do not support it and we will back our residents.</p> <p>If we do receive any applications for fracking, they will be considered on their individual merits and assessed against relevant law, national and local policies and all material considerations, as is the case with any planning application and the matter of public support will be paramount.</p>	

Question from:	Kate Halliday
Subject:	Proposed Health & Wellbeing Hub
Portfolio Holder:	Cecilia Motley
<p>On 4th Oct Shrewsbury Town Council (STC) held an extraordinary meeting to discuss the proposed health and wellbeing hub. The meeting was very well attended by Shrewsbury residents, many of whom expressed concerns about the proposals and are worried that with such a large change to GP services locally the only option to be presented at the consultation stage in April '23 will be to co-locate 6 practices together into one hub. STC Health and Wellbeing Hub working group were disappointed that there was no representation from Shropshire Council other than Public Health, when there were issues of planning and travel that the public asked questions about. Given the concerns of residents about the proposals and the engagement process:</p> <p>A) Will Shropshire Council investigate the legality of the engagement exercise to date, in accordance with the Gunning Principles?</p> <p>B) Will Shropshire Council actively investigate other funding options to support primary care estates with the practices involved in the hub proposals?</p>	

Thank you for the question

Firstly, to respond to the comment raised regarding the representation from Shropshire Council. NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin (NHS STW) is leading this primary care development; Shropshire Council is one of a number of partners. The main role of Shropshire Council as a partner is to help identify any other alternative site options in the Shrewsbury area that meet the criteria for the site and scope potential transport options for all sites the programme put forward. Until sites are identified, the transport need is not clear. Any future planning application would come to the Council as the planning authority and planning application would need to be considered against planning policy once submitted.

The leader of the Council, Chief Executive and Executive Director for Health, Wellbeing and Prevention were all invited to attend to provide clarity on the Councils' role and provide the current position relating to transport and planning. It was decided that Rachel Robinson was best placed to represent Shropshire Council given her role in the Council and on the Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee ("HASC"). At this stage in the process, until the site(s) options are agreed, there is no specific detail or technical queries relating to planning or transport that can be provided. To be clear, at this time the only information that could be given was to state the Council's role which was addressed in the meeting. At a future date officers will be involved in the process and will respond directly to the specific and technical questions as appropriate. Public questions in advance of the meeting relating to CIL monies were responded to during the meeting.

In terms of your request to formally investigate the legality of the engagement exercise to date in accordance with the Gunning Principles, this would require specialist input. Shropshire Council suggests that this question is brought to HASC on 31st October 2022 and, if required, independent expertise is brought in to support that process. However, should this require funding, a contribution would be requested from the Town Council

As with other primary care sites, with direction from the ICS Shropshire Council can work with the ICS to investigate other funding options to support primary care estates with the practices involved in the hub proposals, however we cannot do this in isolation. Successful primary care estates projects require NHS support. It is for the ICB to prioritise what investment is required, and how the ICB may support and respond to that need. Where the demand for individual investment is high, the ICB will work with their Partners to determine the solution and priorities for investment.

We understand that NHS annual Primary Care capital budget allocations are insufficient for large scale investment. Current NHS budget allocations provide minor improvement grants for primary care premises only.

Question from:	Peggy Mullock
Subject:	Cost of Living
Portfolio Holder:	Gwilym Butler

It is clear that the cost of living crisis will have a significant impact on a large number of families and residents in Shropshire this winter and beyond. We know many families and residents will struggle to pay their bills, keep their homes warm and afford basics, including food, this winter. This has been likened to the scale of the problem of the Covid pandemic with estimates from the Rowntree Foundation that the minimum acceptable standard of living for a couple with 2 children is £43,400 between them. The impact on residents' health and wellbeing is predicted to be significant.

What support is available locally for residents and what specifically are Shropshire Council doing to respond to the crisis?

Shropshire's Social Task Force

Organisations in Shropshire have been working together to support residents through the cost-of-living crisis through a social taskforce, chaired by Executive Director for Public Health Rachel Robinson. This taskforce brings together organisations to work in partnership to create a joint response to the cost-of-living crisis. Our partners include Citizens Advice Shropshire, Age UK, Marches Energy Agency, Community Resource, Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance, SALC, NHS representatives and many other key organisations who have been contributing via the taskforce and its subgroups including the Hardship and Poverty group and the Cost of living communications group.

Cost of Living Communications

With our partners we have developed three key messages we want all Shropshire residents to know:

- If you or someone you know is worried about money or is struggling right now, you are not alone.
- There may be simple steps you can take to cut costs or maximise your income.
- If you are getting into debt or your mental health is suffering, do not wait to get help.

We are encouraging residents worried about money to:

- Visit the cost of living help page for information on what support is available in Shropshire.

- Use our checklist to see if there are any steps they can take which may help them to cope with rising costs. Recommended steps include using a benefits calculator to check they are not missing out on income, exploring schemes which help with household bills, getting support with debt, and reaching out for mental health support.
- Use the 'Worrying About Money' leaflet to identify which organisation in Shropshire can offer support.

Our communications group are working to develop leaflets and other resources to support residents find the help they need with the cost of living crisis.

Cost of Living Training for frontline staff and volunteers who are supporting residents

Partners including Shropshire Council, Community Resource, the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance, Age UK, Community Resource, Marches Energy Agency, and Shropshire Citizens' Advice have developed a 2-hour online training session. Almost 500 people registered to attend the training sessions. For a recording of the session is available on the Shropshire Council YouTube channel <https://youtu.be/oDQaCScx5p4>. For copies of the resources please email shropshirecostofliving@shropshire.gov.uk.

Cost of Living Helpline

The Social Taskforce is working with partners to develop a helpline for residents. Based within Shropshire Customer Services, support will be targeted at households most vulnerable to the cost-of-living crisis.

Shropshire Local

The Shropshire Local team will be available in the Local Hubs in Shrewsbury and Ludlow and visiting libraries over the winter to support residents.

Shropshire Warm Welcome

To help residents stay warm and safe this winter, Shropshire Council and partners are compiling a list of venues, including libraries, village and town halls, community centres and faith buildings, where residents can go during each venue's normal opening hours to enjoy the facilities and keep warm. The list and map is available on the cost of living help page.

Cost of Living Data

Working with partners we have developed a preliminary index of vulnerability to the cost-of-living crisis. We will be using this mapping to help with the targeting of communications and support across the County.

Lobbying

In July, the social taskforce wrote to Shropshire MPs raising concerns about the potential impact of the cost-of-living crisis on our residents. The group

received a response from the Treasury in the weeks following acknowledging the points shared and promising that the government is working on solutions.

Financial Support for households

Household Support Fund

Since October 2021, Shropshire Council has been allocated three separate grants of £2.089m by the Department for Works and Pensions under the Household Support Fund – a total of £6.266m. Each of these allocations cover a six-month period, with the latest tranche covering the period 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023.

Initiatives supported through this Government funding include:

- support with food costs for children outside of school term times
- fuel grants and support with energy costs for vulnerable households
- targeted payments to pensioners and Housing Benefit families in receipt of council tax, Housing Benefit only claimants and for single working parents
- access to hardship funds through the Welfare Support Team.

Food Costs for Children

The Household Support Fund has supported children entitled to Free School Meals (current numbers approx. 7,500) with the costs of food in the following holidays:

- Household Support Fund 1: Autumn half-term 21, Christmas 21, Spring half-term 22, Easter 22. Total: 6 weeks
- Household Support Fund 2: Whitsun half-term 22, Summer 22 (3 weeks only), Total: 4 weeks
- Planned spend Household Support Fund 3: Autumn half-term 22, Christmas 22, Spring half-term 23. Total: 4 weeks

Household Support Fund 2 – April to September 2022 – Targeted Payments

The Revenues and Benefits team have administered targeted payments to support our most vulnerable households. Our targeted cash first approach has been welcomed and supported by partner organisations attending the Hardship and Poverty group. Allocations include:

- Pensioners in receipt of council tax support - £100 per household
8407 households paid or council tax credited with payment - £840,700
- Working Age Single Parents in receipt of council tax support - £200 per household
141 households paid or council tax credited with payment - £28,200
- Additional Top up for pensioners in receipt of council tax support, Pension Credit Pension Guarantee, and a disability benefit in payment (AA, PIP, DLA) - £100 per household

- 2427 pensioners received the additional top up payment totalling £242,700
- 84 households provided support with council tax arrears, totalling £139k

Household Support Fund 3 - Oct to Mar 2022 – Targeted Payments

In the third round of the fund, the Revenues and Benefits team are looking to target groups who have not received support previously. These include:

- Housing Benefit Only Claimants (925)
- Council tax Support Claimants in receipt of legacy benefit (not UC) (3292)
- Working families in receipt of council tax support (1054)

Household Support Fund: Supporting people in financial crisis via Shropshire’s Local Welfare Support Team

The Welfare Support Team works as part of Customer Services. It deals with applications for support through Local Welfare Provision for essential living costs, and it’s the first point of contact for homelessness enquiries. This, together with regular communications to stakeholder teams and partner organisations, means the team is well placed to find people in need. In the last 2 years, the team has awarded approximately £789,000 to Shropshire households in crisis.

During this current cost of living crisis, as with the Covid pandemic before it, Shropshire’s Local Welfare Provision funding Support Fund has seen increased investment. Awards made from this funding look at the whole circumstances a person finds themselves in, can be awarded for a wide range of needs, and the amount of money given is not a set amount, but is tailored to that actual need.

Supporting households with energy costs

Council Tax Energy Rebate

The Revenues and Benefits team have been working to distribute the Council Tax Energy Rebate, announced by the Government in the Spring of 2022. The main scheme is now closed. Over the 6 months of the scheme the Revenues and Benefits team paid out over £16.6 million to over 111,000 households. The Discretionary scheme (584k) closes on 30th November 2022. As agreed by Cabinet we are currently working on:

- paying £150 to households in receipt of council tax support in bands E-H
- paying £70 energy top up to residents on council tax support
- Identifying any other households suffering financial hardship and in need of further support if any discretionary money left over

The **Affordable Warmth and Energy Efficiency (AWEE) team** have delivered a range of activity to support residents throughout the ongoing cost of living crisis. Enabling grants to the value of £90,000 have been delivered to enable energy efficiency works for 300 households to date, at a value of £1.65m. Working with voluntary sector partners, energy advice support

delivered through the recent Warm Homes Fund delivered financial savings to residents worth £1.8m. In addition, Household Support Funding has delivered targeted energy debt support to the value of £76,000, supporting 92 vulnerable households in debt.

The team has secured Sustainable Warmth funding for delivery until the end of March 2023, to a value of £3.8m, supporting a minimum of 280 vulnerable households. We have also submitted a request for an additional £2m of funding to boost the number of supported householders by 180. Work is ongoing to submit an ambitious bid to the next stage of the Home Upgrade Grant Scheme for delivery between April 23 and March 25.

In addition, the team are also acting as lead authority on a Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) Scheme with 5 local registered housing providers to deliver whole house retrofit to 249 socially rented homes. The project will deliver investment worth £5.6m made up of £2.3m of BEIS grant funding with the rest of the finance being committed by the housing providers themselves.

Supporting children via the Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF)

HAF allows children and young people aged 4 (in reception class) to 16, who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals (FSM) and for those who have been referred by a professional to access free holiday activity, during the Spring/Easter, Summer, and Winter/Christmas school holidays. Shropshire Council has worked with local schools, voluntary and community organisations, and childcare providers to run the programme, which offers activities including sports, arts, cooking, forest schools and other exciting opportunities. Free nutritious meals are provided at each session.

In 2021/22 Shropshire Council received £682,770 and in 2022/23 £701,630 from the DfE to support families in the holidays. The HAF summer programme had a huge reach this year. 3509 HAF eligible children and young people were supported by the programme (this figure includes primary ages, secondary age and children with SEN). Additionally, the core providers that we worked with offered their own free places and paid places on their programmes, which led to a total of 7233 children and young people receiving support across the 6 weeks.

Question from:	Julia Buckley
Subject:	Highways Depot
Portfolio Holder:	Richard Marshall

One year ago the cabinet member for highways categorically assured me and the other residents of Bridgnorth that our highways depot was closing only temporarily due to some health and safety issues at another site. One year later cabinet is proposing a permanent closure, to sell off the asset and plug a hole in the Conservative's budget deficit.

Since the closure, Bridgnorth residents have repeatedly vocalised their concerns about:

- Injuries arising from reduced gritting on strategic pavements to schools
- Inadequate quantities, slow re-stocking and appropriate location of sandbags during flooding
- Slow responses to repair requests and reports "closed down" but not fixed by highways maintenance
- Dangerous pot holes and pavement surfaces

The statistics published in the report appendix relate to increased reporting of problems and do not address directly any of these issues.

Furthermore, despite repeated assurances of the legal requirement to do so, there has been zero consultation on this proposal with the residents or town and parish councils.

Can the cabinet member please explain to the residents, why their concerns have been ignored?

Why has the legal requirement for consultation not been fulfilled?

And why were the local elected Shropshire members for Bridgnorth not shown this report before it was published? Despite copies made available to the press 36 hours earlier?

Within the report, the Director states:

7.27. From an outcomes angle for communities, engagement with all Members as community leaders, and through Cabinet and Portfolio Holder, will continue to help the service and therefore the Council to ensure that information, feedback and concerns are raised with Highways and that actions may then be identified as necessary to mitigate any negative impacts.

Does the cabinet acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of Bridgnorth residents have repeatedly and consistently raised their concerns about the reduced service felt in the Bridgnorth area since the closure? (not least including the petition of over 2,000 signatories)

Referring to para 7.27 does the cabinet understand that this abject failure to deliver adequate services in Bridgnorth has led to a very negative impact in terms of reduced public trust and confidence in this Council?

I would like to thank the member for Bridgnorth West and Tasley for her question. The report recommends that the depots be considered for repurposing, redevelopment or disposal and as such local members will be consulted prior to any decisions on the future of the land, which as we speak has not been made yet, irrespective of any social media speculation by some.

The resident's concerns have far from been ignored and each one has been investigated. Injuries caused by icy pavements occurred on areas that would have been out of scope for the conditions set out in the Councils Winter Service Operation Plan 2019 and so would not have been gritted even if the service had been delivered by the Bridgnorth depot. The Head of Shropshire Highways, has in fact been working extremely pro-actively with the Headmaster at Castlefields School and between them set up a trial scheme, whereupon equipment has been supplied to the school and they are given access to the same weather forecasting that we use to action the Highways gritting programme. This scheme has been well received by the school.

Last year Council agreed significant new investment in to the Highways. All metrics have shown a vast improvement in maintenance, with more repairs being undertaken, more permanent repairs and a substantial reduction in the backlog of repairs than prior to the depot closures. The data provides absolutely no evidence that there has been any detriment to those services provided to the areas previously serviced by the depots nor that the level of service for Bridgnorth is inconsistent with the rest of the county. As a member for a division that was previously serviced by the Bridgnorth depot, I can confirm that during many of my Parish Council meetings within my division, it has been acknowledged that there have been improvements in the maintenance programme over the past Year.

It would be disputed that 'the overwhelming majority' of Bridgnorth residents have 'repeatedly and consistently' raised their concerns about the reduced service in the Bridgnorth area since the closure. Whilst concerns were raised regarding the perceived reduction in service prior to staff being transferred and the depots closed, there have been very few concerns raised about service issues since the depots were closed in October within any of the areas that they previously served and none that would have resulted in a different outcome had the service been operated from Bridgnorth.

Cabinet and Council has an obligation to ensure that the tax payers money is spent in the most efficient manner possible and therefore to spend between 2 and 3 million pounds on refurbishing the depots to the standards required under Health and Safety, with no benefits to the service provision is, I am sure the member for Bridgnorth West and Tasley would agree, not the most efficient manner to spend residents money"