

## **COUNCIL 11 MAY 2023**

### **PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

#### **Question from Heather Waters**

Government recently introduced controversial legislation that requires voters on polling day to show photo ID when casting their votes at polling stations. This country has never accepted the need for universal photo ID, which is a document carried at all times by citizens in many neighbouring countries. Consequently, a good number of UK citizens do not automatically possess accepted methods of photo ID for this purpose. It falls to local authorities to provide the new ID.

How many residents in Shropshire are expected to need additional photo ID for voting?

How many have already applied for this new document?

What is the expected cost to financially-challenged Shropshire Council of issuing these new documents?

Will government directly fund the issue of voter ID documents or are Shropshire council tax payers expected to pay?

#### **Response from Councillor Gwylim Butler, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate Resources**

The Electoral Commission (EC) undertook a Public Opinion Tracker of around 5,000 people in February 2022, which allowed them to estimate that around 4% of people in Britain did not have any of the pre-existing forms of photo ID required to vote. Using this 4% figure against Shropshire's total electorate would equate to potentially 10,000 individuals not having any of the acceptable forms of photo ID. But this figure would be lower if based on election turnout. For example, at the last general election turnout in Shropshire was around 70% so this would mean possibly 7,000 people would need a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) in order to vote, and at the last local elections in 2021 turnout was, on average, 40% so approximately 4,000 people would need a VAC.

In January 2023, the EC launched their national awareness campaign and the VAC application portal opened. Since then, Shropshire has received 361 VAC applications. The VAC online portal is provided by central government and whilst Electoral Service Teams are required to verify applications via the portal, once verified, the printed document is sent out by a central government print provider. Although there are a few small exceptions when paper application forms are requested and processed.

It has not been possible to ascertain the overall costs associated with this work yet given that Shropshire did not have scheduled polls on 4 May, however, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities have determined new

burdens funding for local authorities to cover administration costs associated with VAC applications and staffing to deliver polls with this additional requirement.

### **Question from Linton Waters**

Shropshire Council undertook to develop Climate Emergency mitigation training for all teams across the council, all councillors, including the cabinet and to appoint Climate Emergency Champions in all council departments. This was an appropriate undertaking to guarantee all decision makers understand the enormity of the challenge that is upon us.

It is that vital that sound climate-friendly decision making runs through all council projects and day-to-day management. Knowledge is key in being certain each and every decision does not hamper work to reduce carbon emissions but positively contributes to climate mitigation aims.

Can you confirm how many council staff, managers, councillors and cabinet members have undertaken and completed carbon literacy and mitigation training?

If not all staff/councillors please state when this essential training will be complete.

### **Response from Councillor Ian Nellins, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Climate Change, Environment and Transport**

Shropshire Council is demonstrating its commitment to the climate strategy by targeting Carbon Literacy training at key staff and senior managers with further training sessions planned.

The ongoing commitment supports the Council's existing, active programme of Carbon Literacy training, delivered by Save Our Shropshire, and which resulted in Shropshire Council being formally accredited as a bronze level 'Carbon Literate Organisation' by the international Carbon Literacy Trust after completing

Carbon Literacy is 'an awareness of the carbon dioxide costs and impacts of everyday activities, and the ability and motivation to reduce emissions, on an individual, community and organisational basis'.

Councillor Ian Nellins, Shropshire Council deputy leader and cabinet member for climate and the environment, said: "Our accreditation as a carbon literate organisation is a visible 'badge' that shows we are both committed to tackling climate change, and serious about establishing and maintaining a low carbon culture.

"Last year the Council's Cabinet and senior management team, including myself, the Council Leader and the Chief Executive, completed the training together with a number of senior managers.

"This has been extended to other staff during 2023 and altogether this amounts to 20 key members and officers.

“We are now in the fortunate position of having four carbon literacy graduates who are fully informed and equipped to carry out staff training and they are developing a strategy to manage the roll-out of a wider programme to help ensure that the challenge of climate change is widely owned and embedded across the organisation.

“In addition, to this commitment, an introductory e-learning module on climate change is already available to all staff through the Council’s internal training portal.”

Shropshire Council declared a climate emergency in May 2019, and in December 2020 adopted a Climate Strategy and Action Plan, which establishes the objective of achieving net-zero carbon performance for the council by 2030.

The council’s corporate footprint represents only around 1% of Shropshire’s total carbon footprint, but the council can influence as much as 33% of emissions through its regulatory and support functions.

Ian added: “Shropshire Council has recently commissioned detailed modelling of its supply chain carbon emissions and this will inform the focus of further efforts to reduce our carbon footprint in future years.

“We have prioritised staff involved in commissioning and procurement for Carbon Literacy training, to recognise the fact that 93% of Shropshire Council’s carbon footprint now derives from indirect ‘Scope 3’ emissions, largely from goods and services provided by others.

### **Question from Tom Forrester**

Shropshire Council is looking to reduce public access to its call centre by reducing the call centre hours and thereby saving £85,000 whilst it is still preventing direct public access to the Shirehall.

How can Shropshire Council justify this cost saving when it is spending an undisclosed remuneration to an unknown number of its own staff via 'loss of office' payments which include £117,000 to one member of staff alone on top of their existing salary?

The Council have already partially upheld a complaint about the biased consultation process undertaken to gather local residents' views on reducing the call centre hours.

Should the review of call centre hours and other community service cost savings under consideration be postponed until we can establish just how much money is being wasted on loss of payments being paid to its own staff as this money could be better used to help sustain and improve our vital local services?

### **Response from Councillor Robert Macey, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Digital**

Thank you for your question.

Your opening sentence mentions the public access element regarding Shirehall so I would just like to provide some reassurance. The Shirehall has not been used as a customer service point for several years now, however it remains open for the public to access council meetings.

The council's in-person customer service is now through our Shropshire Local facilities which are open 5 days a week in the Darwin Centre in Shrewsbury and 4 days a week in Ludlow Library, as well as regular Shropshire Local mobile visits at several different towns across on most weekdays of the month. A full list of the Shropshire Local mobile locations is on our website which is just part of our improving online offer to Shropshire residents providing the ability to request services and access information 24/7.

The remaining part of the question looks at two separate issues which are not directly tied to each other than they both have an impact on the council's budget. The same could be said of any of the savings of expenditure proposed within the budget agreed by this council in March.

The proposed changes to the Customer Service Centre as consulted on don't result in any changes to staffing levels. The justification for any 'loss of service' payments across the entire council would be dealt with and agreed in line with council policies as they would in any other council.

So, on this occasion the answer to your question is no, the review of the Customer Service Centre should not be postponed.