

Public Questions
Council 29 February 2024

Question from Mr Timothy Ashton

To ask the Portfolio Holder for Culture about the Council's state of knowledge concerning William Shakespeare's familiarity with Shropshire and the playwright's setting of As You Like It in the Wem-Soulton-Hodent area; to ask what formal steps have been taken and will be taken by the local authority to exploit this information to unlock cultural, economic and social opportunities for the people, business and students of Shropshire and to recover the county's identity as the destination of the English Grand Tour; to further ask if the texture of this matters as set out in public lectures in the City of London and the town of Wem can formally entered into the Council's consciousness.

Response from Councillor Robert Macey Portfolio Holder for Culture and Digital

Shropshire Council is aware of fresh research that asserts that As You Like It was set in North Shropshire and that contemporary productions were performed in the county. The Council is not clear whether the research has been widely accepted by the academic community.

Shropshire Council will be reviewing its cultural priorities and Destination Management Plan over the coming 12 months. Should it be confirmed that there is a legitimate connection between Shakespeare and North Shropshire, the Council will welcome any interested parties to approach the Culture, Leisure and Tourism team with appropriate information about the research with a view that it helps inform future plans.

Question from Mr Mike Streetly

Could you please confirm what the expected total pre-commencement costs of the combined Oxon Link Road and North West Relief Road are to date and what they will be (including costs of business case preparation) at the point at which road construction starts?

Response from Councillor Dan Morris Portfolio Holder for Highways

To the end of Quarter 3 2023/4, the OLR and NWRR had incurred combined spend of £28.2m. In order to reach Full Business Case completion and therefore moving to Main Construction , including programme critical advance works, is forecast to cost £15.164m. In total therefore the combined forecast spend prior to construction will be £43.364m.

Question from Jamie Russell

Shropshire Council says the North West Relief Road is “fully funded” by central government.

However, there is confusion over what “fully funded” means.

[Highways Magazine](#) recently asked the Department for Transport (DfT) to clarify the “fully funded” claim.

In response, the DfT stated it is committed to fully funding the NWRR's outline business case (OBC) cost, subject to the approval of a full business case.

The OBC cost was a maximum of £80m.

This is supported by the government's [Network North](#) webpage. It lists ten schemes, including the NWRR, due to receive money from the cancelled leg of HS2. It states: “These schemes, subject to successful business case approval, will benefit from an uplift in government contribution from 85% to 100% of their costs at the outline business case (OBC) stage.”

If the DfT's definition of "fully funded" is £80m, this leaves the NWRR with a significant shortfall.

Last September, council reports identified a funding gap of £95m suggesting the NWRR's cost is £175m+

The DfT has not publicly said it will cover this shortfall.

- Does the council's definition of "fully funded" align with the DfT's statement that it will only fund the full OBC cost of £80m (subject to the approval of a full business case)?
- Does the council have written confirmation from the DfT that it will fund the scheme beyond £80m?
- If the DfT funding is only £80m, who will pay the £95m shortfall; overrun costs; and any financial reparations required if the drinking water is contaminated?

Response from Councillor Dan Morris Portfolio Holder for Highways

In October 2023 the Secretary of State for Transport Mark Harper said the government would 'fully fund' the scheme. Senior Council Officers are in regular contact with the Department for Transport (DfT) and have been given no reason to believe that Government support for the NWRR will be anything other than that announced by the Secretary of State on TV, fully funded, at today's cost of construction.

Question from Ms Emma Bullard

Could you please explain what formal measures Shropshire Council has put in place to ensure complete separation of the Highways Department, NWRR project team and Cabinet from the Local Planning Authority function.

Could you please publish the relevant document(s) describing these measures.

Response from Councillor Dan Morris Portfolio Holder for Highways

Due to the line management structure in place with Tracy Darke being responsible for Strategic Transport since the departure of the Assistant Director of Infrastructure, which covers the NWRR project, measures were put in place by the Chief Executive to ensure that as Tracy Darke represents the LPA, she will have no line management responsibility for the project team. Moreover, any decisions relating to planning matters were to be reported to the Chief Executive, instead of her manager Mark Barrow, who is also on the project side.

Although this had been the arrangement, the Chief Executive confirmed this in writing on 12th June 2023.

Question from the Rev Paul Cawthorne

Noting the atrocious state of the roads in Hadnall and Clive parishes, including chippings being catapulted onto the pavement in Hadnall as repairs now increasingly fall apart within months of being done, please confirm what percentage of work time Mark Barrow spends on new road planning relative to his portfolio managing the permanent repair of potholes in existing roads.

Are rerepair costs of 1. increased use of bagged tarmac 2. residents' car damage costs from the chronic pothole pressures on springs, suspension, joints and tyres factored into county value for money costings by the Council chief financial officer?

Please release the optional new road funding expenditure projection for 2024 and the 2024 budgeted expenditure on permanent pothole repairs as opposed to temporary bagged tarmac repairs.

Response from Councillor Dan Morris Portfolio Holder for Highways

1. increased use of bagged tarmac

Shropshire Council have completely overhauled its operating model for highway services in recent years. A 'mixed economy model' is now in place and has seen all service metrics improve since it was implemented.

The cost of pothole repairs in Shropshire have reduced, due to greater levels of efficiency and a focus on "right-first-time repairs". Some of our operational teams do use HAPAS-approved bagged tarmac, which means it meets the required standard however and is still recognised as a permanent solution. Although the cost is slightly higher for bagged material compared to warm material from a Quarry, this is can

problematic in cold temperatures as it quickly goes off specification, which can lead to quality issues. The cost is also offset by not having to collect material, plant delays etc therefore productive output is increased.

2. Residents' car damage costs from the chronic pothole pressures on springs, suspension, joints and tyres factored into county value for money costings by the Council chief financial officer?

The condition of the roads within Shropshire is not unique, across the country with almost all highway authorities struggling to keep on top of defects with numbers significantly rising year on year, which has been exacerbated by the very wet winter which has severely stretched resources. Surveys of Shropshire's roads show that 13.6% (or 431 miles) of the highway network in Shropshire is considered to be in need of significant repair, which is obviously disappointing for Shropshire. However, the latest published national average (source ALARM survey March 2023) for roads in England across all highway authorities which showed that 18% (or 36,918 miles) of roads maintained by local authorities are considered to be in poor condition.

The positive trends are against a backdrop of prevailing challenges faced by authorities nationwide, grappling with a 20% inflation rate in the sector and resultant budget constraints. The move to a 'mixed economy model' has not only shielded the region from service reductions, but has also led to maintained satisfaction rates.

Please release the optional new road funding expenditure projection for 2024 and the 2024 budgeted expenditure on permanent pothole repairs as opposed to temporary bagged tarmac repairs.

All planned maintenance programmes will be published once our budgets have been confirmed.

Question from Ms Karen Pearce

In the Large Local Majors & Major Road Network Schemes - Quarterly Monitoring Return for 2023-24 Quarter 2 we read that the dept for transport has paid grants of £10,444,794 to Shropshire Council for the NWRP project but that £7,158,262 is outstanding.

The text says "It is to be noted that no payment of grant has yet been awarded to Shropshire Council for either the 2022/23 financial year or the 2023/24 forecast, therefore the balance outstanding is £6,438,078 which we would urge payment of ASAP."

Could you please provide an update on these figures? Could you also explain the £720k difference between the figures?

Response from Councillor Dan Morris Portfolio Holder for Highways

The grant payments outstanding at Quarter 2 of £2,660,807 for 2022/23 and £3,777,271 for 2023/24 and which total £6,438,078 have now been paid by the DfT

to Shropshire Council and were received in our bank account on 22/09/2023. No further funding is due this financial year.

The amount of £720,184 showing on the Quarterly return is actually an error on the DfT return spreadsheet which cannot be amended or updated by Shropshire Council at the time of submitting as it is a locked Cell that is calculating the sum. The Cell in question is I67, and it is not adding in cell I56 to the calculation. At Q2 the actual total in Cell I67 should read (6,438,078) as the variance – this error has been reported to the DfT for correction.