

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

COUNCIL 26 SEPTEMBER 2024

Question received from Mr Mike Streetly

Last month Shropshire Council explained that it only had written confirmation of a commitment of £54.4 M for the proposed NWRR from the Dept for Transport. The council has acknowledged that the contract for the road is expected to cost £110M or more on top of the £36.5M that is expected to be spent by the time the contractor starts work in April. This will have a very significant impact on the 'value for money' of the project.

We note that the new Government has launched a major review of all unfunded spending commitments and also a specific review of low value road schemes. This has resulted in the Highways Agency pausing work on a number of schemes. The new Transport Minister has also highlighted her spending priorities in terms of Active Travel and buses.

Given the massively increased costs of the proposed new road, the council's precarious financial position and the low probability of the new government providing any further money for the scheme will Shropshire Council now stop all spending on the project?

Response from Councillor Dan Morris, Portfolio Holder for Highways

Following recent discussions with the DfT we can confirm that that schemes such as Shrewsbury NWRR, which are already part of the committed Large Local Majors Programme will continue to be assessed by DfT at FBC stage in the normal way. Our understanding is that recent government announcements relate to schemes in other national programmes that have not yet been admitted to programme entry, unlike the NWRR, and are therefore at a much earlier stage in their development. We have been given no reason to believe that government will not continue to support this scheme.

Can I also be clear that Shropshire Council does fully support Active Travel (including the recent Council approval of the draft Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Programme), and an enhanced Bus offer (with the recent publication of the Bus Service Improvement Plan), and is keen to see these develop to a greater level within urban Shrewsbury and more widely, but that is simply not possible without first removing the high volumes of traffic that cut straight through the town, rather than around it.

Question received from Mr Frank Oldaker

Opposers to the granting of planning permission for the Shrewsbury North West Relief Road made it clear last year that they would challenge the decision by seeking a judicial review.

Although it is now approaching a year since the planning committee vote no decision notice has been published and the absence of this has meant that no judicial review process can even be started.

How is the Council revising its programme for the project to allow for the time judicial review(s) will take and the possibility of the planning permission being quashed by The Court?

Response from Councillor Dan Morris, Portfolio Holder for Highways

In line with the requirements of the Northern Planning Committee decision in February (7 months ago – not a year) to grant the scheme full planning permission notice on the completion of the required 3no section 106 agreements, work is now at an advanced stage on these. It is not unusual for large complex schemes such as this to have various factors affecting the issue of the planning decision notice.

The current project programme, as agreed with external funders, continues to have sufficient time built in to address any challenge to the issue of the planning permission notice. Separate and parallel workstreams not requiring the issue of the planning notice such as main contractor procurement, and preparatory work around the discharge of pre commencement planning conditions, continue to progress through this period.

The Council will bring the Full Business Case to Members later this year, and within this will be the fully resolved costs and build programme.

Question received from Emma Bullard

The veteran oak tree at Shelton Rough, known as the Darwin Oak, has been shortlisted for "Tree of the Year 2024" by the Woodland Trust
<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/tree-of-the-year/>

The Woodland Trust has shared details of this magnificent Shropshire tree with its 500,000 members, as well as the general public. As a result, this Shrewsbury tree has been featured in publications including the Daily Mail, Time Out magazine, and The Scotsman, raising the profile of the town and the wider county.

Does the council agree that this is very welcome publicity for Shropshire's landscape and natural heritage? Will you encourage Shropshire residents and visitors to visit the Darwin Oak to admire it for themselves, and to vote for it to be the winning "Tree of the Year"?

Response from Councillor Chris Schofield, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regulatory Services

Shropshire is home to over 5,000* veteran trees, according to the Woodland Trust, including the magnificent Royal Oak at Boscobel House. Our woodland parks at places like Condover, Haughmond Hill and Corbet Wood contain numerous veteran oaks, as well as other, equally important, plants and wildlife. We'd encourage Salopians and visitors to enjoy these areas of stunning natural beauty to really see the best of Shropshire.

To learn about the true history of Charles Darwin and the wonderful history of our town, Shrewsbury Museums offer a wealth of information on Darwin and other influential Salopians, and Shrewsbury's Sabrina Boat Tours have a guided walk of Darwin's Shrewsbury on their website. We'd encourage people to support Shrewsbury's many independent businesses and attractions as they learn about the town's most famous son, rather than a tree on Shelton Rough.

Unfortunately, the tree in question does sit on private land and the council does not encourage people to attempt to reach it without the landowner's permission. Trespassing in these areas can actually cause damage to the natural environment there.

The route for the NWRR has been specifically chosen because it has the lowest environmental impact of possible routes. It impacts on the minimum number of veteran trees possible. Nine veteran trees – trees that have developed some of the features found on ancient trees but that are not ancient – have been identified for removal.

The area around the north of Shrewsbury is home to hundreds of veteran trees. One of these trees, which is due to be removed, has been informally named 'Darwin's Oak' by campaigners against the NWRR. There is no evidence of any connection between Darwin and this specific tree versus any other in the area.

As a council, we recognise the value of all trees in the area. We've weighed this against the significant benefits of the scheme – principally making Shrewsbury town centre a more pleasant environment in reducing traffic and pollution.

We've committed to woodland management plans to enhance the condition of 26 veteran trees in the area of the route, as well as an area of ancient woodland and two local nature reserves. We'll also replace each single lost tree with six newly planted ones. 84 new trees will be planted in locations specifically identified to give them the best chance of becoming the veteran trees of the future, and we'll create a

new four-hectare woodland of native tree species for the benefit of future generations.

As well as trees, there are plans to create biodiverse corridors and make much-needed improvements to natural habitats, which will attract and support a variety of wildlife.

The questioner will be aware that the Northern Planning Committee, having considered all of the relevant planning matters, has reached a resolution to grant planning permission for the North-West Relief Road, subject to the completion of the associated s106 agreements.