

## **COUNCIL 25<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 2021**

### **MEMBER QUESTION REPORT**

#### **Question from Councillor Tom Biggins**

Now Brexit has been done and the United Kingdom has taken back control of its sovereignty, to help our local economy recover, can Shropshire Council use these new freedoms to redouble its efforts in the next few months to launch a “Buy Shropshire” campaign to promote the purchase of Shropshire products and services from local producers, farmers, manufacturers and suppliers.

Now that we have real hope through the vaccination programme of coming out of lockdown, can we also put every effort into helping promote Shropshire for tourism and staycations in 2021 to help support our town centres and the hospitality sector.

#### **Response from Councillor Charmley - Portfolio Holder for Assets, Economic Growth and Regeneration**

On December 12 2019, Boris was elected to become our new Prime Minister, elected on a promise to get Brexit done - having duly delivered on that promise, and released the UK from the shackles of EU bureaucracy.

Having this freedom presents both challenges and opportunities for Shropshire council.

Since the General Election, the Council has been, and continues to work hard to ensure that appropriate support and guidance has been made available to businesses within the county to support them in navigating their way through Brexit transitional period. The council has also been busy navigating through a range of business support measures as part of our covid-19 economic recovery programme.

Since the first lockdown period, Shropshire Council delivered more than £100m of funding across a range of grant schemes and supported more than 9,000 Shropshire businesses in the process. The Council has also run a grant programme for our market towns, investing significantly in our town centres. Whilst these numbers will rise further, funds remain available to Shropshire Council and we will be continue to support businesses through this difficult period. In addition, the Marches Growth Hub has been working in collaboration with Shropshire Chambers to deliver a series of events, with over 250 businesses signing up for the virtual events.

One element of the funds currently being delivered is the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG), with Government awarding £9.33m to the Council to support a range of business support programmes. Officers have used these funds to deliver a discretionary grant scheme. An element of this grant will be used to focus on economic recovery during the coming financial year. A programme of activity is currently being finalised alongside a range of business groups. It will be focussed on Brexit transition and Covid recovery.

We are also developing a programme of activity, firstly around buying locally, and this will include working with key partners across the county including the two BIDs to create a platform for online promotion and infrastructure for retailers to support their online presence. A focused campaign for our tourism and visitor economy sector is also a priority, working in partnership with our Destination Management Organisation (DMO) and other tourism bodies across the county. This will produce

focused marketing campaigns of activity to promote Shropshire as a destination for both day visits and short breaks.

Support for the economy, whether it's the High Street or wider tourism sectors, is a high priority for the Council as we continue to plan for a post Brexit and Covid world.

### **Question from Councillor Ruth Houghton**

The lack of affordable housing is a problem for many Shropshire residents including those living in rural communities. The Ministry of Housing for Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) put the number of empty homes in England in October 2019 at 648, 114.

Can Council confirm how many empty homes there are currently in Shropshire, where they are and what actions are being taken by this Council to bring these back into use to address local housing need?

### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Strategic Planning**

There were 1524 Long Term Empty Properties in Shropshire on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021, with an additional 722 empty properties which are exempt from Council Tax charges because for example, the owner is in care.

Council Tax visiting officers will visit properties which are registered as being empty. There are also the Council Tax premiums applied to empty properties, which is paid in addition to the normal council tax charge, as follows:

- More than two years and less than five years 100% premium
- More than five years but less than ten years 200% premium
- More than ten years 300% premium

Regulatory Services receive reports of empty properties and we investigate when an empty property is causing any of the following problems:

- It's insecure
- It attracts flytipping
- It attracts anti-social behaviour
- The empty state is causing it to be physically damaging to another property.
- It's dangerous (in conjunction with Building Control)

We aim to work with owners of empty homes to resolve these problems and secure the improvement of the empty property. We also offer advice for returning their property to use but we will consider enforcement options available to us in accordance with the Council's Better Regulation and Enforcement Policy. A proposal is being developed to increase enforcement capacity.

There are a range of options available to bring empty properties back into use. We aim to work with owners of empty properties to assist them in returning their property to use through engagement. For those owners looking to sell, rent or renovate the property we will provide advice and signposting.

An empty properties task group has been established which includes officers from:

- Regulatory Services
- Planning Policy
- Historic Environment
- Building Control
- Council Tax

Whilst our roles differ in relation to work on empty properties, the ultimate aim of all members is the same, which is for properties to be returned to use.

The group is producing a new Empty Homes Strategy and works together to ensure

- that all members are aware of empty properties that the teams are working to return to use
- there is no duplication of work on empty property cases
- that expertise is pulled in from correct teams where necessary
- We link into the objectives in the SC Housing Strategy and Action plan
- We link into STaR Housing and Cornovii

Returning Empty Properties to use is a long and slow process. A partnership approach and perseverance are essential to achieving success. There is no one size fits all approach and enforcement is not a simple or appropriate method to return every property to use.

### **Question from Councillor Andy Boddington**

In January, the leader of Shropshire Council sent a letter to every household in the unitary area with the subject “Support for you from your council during lockdown”.

- 1) Why was this deemed necessary given the extensive promotion by the council, local newspapers, local radio and social media of the local coronavirus offer by the council and health authorities?
- 2) How much did the exercise cost?
- 3) Who signed off the expenditure?
- 4) Why was the letter from the council leader, not a politically neutral figure such as the Chief Executive and the Director of Public Health?

### **Response from The Leader of Shropshire Council**

In January, the Leader of Shropshire Council sent a letter to every household in the unitary area with the subject “Support for you from your council during lockdown”.

1. Why was this deemed necessary given the extensive promotion by the council, local newspapers, local radio and social media of the local coronavirus offer by the council and health authorities?

The letter highlights the Council's and other organisations' support available during this third national lockdown. Keeping our residents fully informed of the range of support that the Council offers is, I believe, incredibly important, particularly at this time when people face many more difficult weeks in lockdown.

As a council we want to be sure that every household in the Council's area has access to this information and help as we recognise that the pandemic is impacting in so many different ways on people's lives.

While many residents do engage with the Council on this issue and follow local news, our experience is that there are also many people who do not. The most effective way to ensure that this information is available to all Shropshire Council residents is to write to every home. This is information about specific services to Shropshire residents that is not promoted nationally.

The letter ensures people are fully aware of the local support available to them during the national lockdown from Shropshire Council, and that this information is as widely available as possible to all county residents.

2. How much did the exercise cost?

The cost of this was 41.5 pence per household, 23p less than the price of a 2<sup>nd</sup> class stamp. The total cost was £55,800 and was funded through additional grant money the council has received to help with its response to the pandemic

3. Who signed off the expenditure?

Director of Public Health and Executive Directors

4. Why was the letter from the council Leader, not a politically neutral figure such as the Chief Executive and the Director of Public Health?

As the Leader, I am ultimately responsible for and accountable to the public, and it is appropriate that this letter was sent from myself. This has been done by many other council leaders, indeed BBC Radio Shropshire reported earlier this month that neighbouring Telford & Wrekin Council has issued 4 such letters to their residents in the 10 months since the pandemic began at a cost of £140k (cost per mailing is lower due to T&W having 40% fewer households than Shropshire).

**Question from Councillor David Vasmer**

At the Cabinet meeting on 8th February 2021 the Leader of the Council, under questioning from Cllr Roger Evans during a debate on the Financial Strategy, outlined the sources of the Council's funding for the North West (Relief) Road which he reported as being from the LEP, Section 106 and CIL. This was not made clear in the financial papers presented to Cabinet. However on 16th May 2019 the Council debated funding for the North West (Relief) Road and resolved that "a further report will be brought back to Council, to identify the agreed mechanism by which the Council's funding will be obtained and allocated as part of the approval of the Full Business Case Submission." It is clear from the Leader's response to Cllr Evans that "the agreed mechanism by which the funding will be obtained and allocated" has been finalised so why has a report not been brought to Council as agreed on 16th May 2019? Why has the Full Business Case not been submitted to the Council for approval before the submission of the Planning Application? Or will it be delayed until the next meeting of the Council on May 21st?

**Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport**

To confirm that the current funding sources for the North West Relief Road (now incorporating the former Oxon Link Road western section – Holyhead Road to A5) are as follows;

DfT Funding £54.4m

LEP Funding - £4.2m

Balance funded by Shropshire Council ;

£19.8m (NWRR)

£8.7m (OLR)

Total Project Budget- £87.1m

The above funding allocations have been previously approved by Council as part of the Programme Entry for both DfT and the Marches LEP, and are included in current financial strategies. The match balance to be funded by Shropshire Council will comprise a mix of S.106, CiL (local and strategic) and land receipts. This approach has been agreed by Council as part of programme entry and the further detail around this funding requirement and sources will be confirmed in line with the Full Business Case. The Full Business Case (FBC) is due Dec 2021.

Prior to its submission to DfT in line with the current agreed NWRR programme, the FBC will be considered by, and require the endorsement of, Full Council. It is currently expected to be presented to Full Council in November 2021.

#### **Question from Councillor David Vasmer**

Despite repeated requests, we have not received information about the performance of Highways contractor Kier against a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which had been agreed to monitor Kier's performance. Given the poor performance of Kier in completing road repairs for a contract worth £21m a year, when will Councillors be given KPI performance data to enable us to properly review the operation of the Highways contract?

#### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport**

Key Performance Indicators have been developed and agreed and are now being calculated for this year and will be used to manage the contract going forward. All of the new indicators will take full effect from 1st April which is the beginning of the new financial year. Discussions are currently underway to understand issues of data quality and reporting and it is anticipated that this will be complete and a report available shortly. As members know I continually press for improvement in our contractors performance and I welcome these new indicators as it will help us drive better services. It does appear that our contractor is not hitting the required level for completing work on time and we are working with Kier to understand their plan to improve this. This performance data will form part of future reports on the performance of council services considered by Cabinet and Overview/Scrutiny Committees.

#### **Question from Councillor Kate Halliday**

Shropshire has had three significant flooding events in the last year, with devastating effects on residents and businesses. We can no longer assume that flooding will be a once-in-twenty-year event. There are currently no clear plans for flood prevention measures other than those that are already in place, which have not prevented flooding for many communities in Shropshire. What are the Council's short, medium and long term plans for flood prevention in Shropshire?

#### **Response from – Councillor Davenport – Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport**

Off the back of the Feb 2020 floods, the Environment Agency have commissioned initial assessments into what flood risk management options could be possible in Ironbridge, Bridgnorth, Ludlow and Shrewsbury. These reports are due to be completed before the end of the financial year. These studies include investigations into Natural Flood Risk Management (NFM), land management practices, reservoir operation and storage options across the catchment. Whilst it is still almost inevitable that engineered solutions will be required somewhere in the catchment, we are now looking at further options and combinations of options, to reduce flood risk and manage water resources.

Feedback we have had to date has primarily been from those communities and partners living upstream of the North West Relief Road and we are now looking at the wider catchment. As a result, our immediate focus is on engaging with communities along this part of the catchment, taking on board their knowledge, views and ideas. This will inform the wider solutions we investigate. We anticipate these investigations will take into early 2022 to complete. At that point we will share our proposals more widely, although much of it will already have been discussed with the community and partners throughout the scoping process.