

## **COUNCIL 22 SEPTEMBER 2022**

### **MEMBER QUESTIONS**

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

The disposal of housing stock by local Housing Association, Connexus in southwest Shropshire is of serious concern given the dire shortage of affordable accommodation in the area. This is further compounded by the fact that no new building is taking place, which isn't due to a lack of planning, but the total stop on new developments, including any that Cornovii may wish to develop, due the challenges posed by the Clun River phosphate problem.

Will the Portfolio Holder please confirm how many people are currently on HomePoint waiting for housing in Southwest Shropshire and what is this Council doing to mitigate the environmental factors affecting the Clun River in order to open up new developments in the area? As Cornovii are currently unable to develop in the Southwest of the County will the company instead consider the acquisition of these disposals from Connexus in order to refurbish and develop affordable housing in the area?

#### **Response from Councillor Rob Gittins, Portfolio Holder for Digital, Data & Insight and Built Housing**

Current registrations on the Council's HomePoint system, broken down by Place Plan area, show the following numbers of households awaiting housing in Southwest Shropshire:

- Bishops Castle 132
- Church Stretton 122
- Craven Arms 72
- Ludlow 284

In respect of Shropshire Council's actions to address the environmental issues affecting the Clun Valley and its development implications, I can provide the following information. Shropshire Council has led the establishment of a Strategic Clun Liaison Group to bring together senior leaders from across the Environment Agency, Natural England and Severn Trent Water with the aim of establishing a multi-agency response to address issues in the Clun as soon as practicably possible.

At present, there is no up-to-date Nutrient Management Plan or Special Area of Conservation Restoration Plan for the Clun catchment. It is Natural England's responsibility to lead this work.

It is Natural England's position that mitigation measures to ensure that development is nutrient neutral cannot be defined or implemented until the measures required for restoration are known. This is because Natural England want certainty that any such mitigation measures will not compromise the ability to restore the Special Area of Conservation. As a result, residential development cannot currently be permitted within the catchment area.

Natural England and the Environment Agency, as the two responsible bodies, have now commenced work to scope the Special Area of Conservation Restoration Plan. The Council is committed to supporting both organisations in this work to bring it forward as soon as is possible. The Council is seeking clarification on the timeframe for its preparation through the monthly Liaison Group.

Despite the need firstly to understand the restoration requirements for the Clun, the Council does not want to wait to develop an evidence base and understanding around mitigation. The Council has therefore reached agreement with Natural England to undertake this work alongside work on the Restoration Plan.

A Mitigation Measures Study has been completed by the Council which provides a phosphate budget to enable understanding of the phosphate contributions made by development proposals. This also allows the Council to understand the measures needed to enable new development to achieve nutrient neutrality. This work was assisted the recent Local Plan examination.

The Council is now taking this work forward to provide a more detailed delivery plan for mitigation and is keen to ensure this is put in place as soon as possible. This includes exploring whether development which can clearly demonstrate nutrient neutrality can proceed in the absence of a restoration plan. The scope for this work is currently being agreed with DEFRA and DLUHC.

In respect of planned disposals of certain affordable housing stock by the local Registered Provider Connexus, CDL and STAR are exploring any potential to purchase the units on either an affordable or private rented sector basis. However, it should be noted that the key driver for Connexus to dispose of the homes is their poor thermal performance and the associated high costs of refurbishment. The issues associated with these homes arises from their rural locations, heating systems, build type and associated high construction costs. These same issues will also affect the viability of the homes should CDL and STAR purchase the units

### **Question from Councillor Kevin Pardy**

On the 30th of June 2021, the Shropshire Unitary Council Cabinet agreed to a recommendation to accept a contract between Shropshire Council and the SCLG (SERCO). The recommendation mentioned a contract of "up to five years". The Council Leader stated that the recommendation was for important reasons.

On the 15th of July 2021, the recommendation was presented to the Full Members Meeting with a significant change of wording, from 'up to five years' to 'for five years.'

On the 17th of July 2021, I emailed the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Motley, asking why there had been a change. I did not receive a reply.

On the 4th of August, I sent another email to Councillor Motley requesting a reply, again I did not receive a reply.

On the 7th of July 2022, at Full Council, I again asked why the wording of the 2021 Contract with SCLG (SERCO) had been changed. The Portfolio Holder replied saying, 'she didn't know why Councillor Pardy, "had it in for SERCO". This reply, once again avoided answering the question.

I will ask again, and with the public in mind I hope the question will be answered directly and accurately. My question is:

Why was the wording of a recommendation by Cabinet on the 30th of June 2021 with reference to a contract between Shropshire Unitary Council and SCLG (SERCO) changed, from "up to five years" to "for five years" when presented to Full Council and who made the decision to change the wording?

### **Response from Councillor Cecilia Motley, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Culture, Leisure & Tourism and Transport**

The extension to the contract with Shropshire Community Leisure Trust is for 5 years, with a break clause in year 2.

The extension negotiations came at a time of considerable uncertainty in the leisure market. Issues include:

- The speed of income recovery following the Covid pandemic
- Rapidly increasing inflation
- Increases in utility costs
- Increases in staff salaries

This meant that there was a significant increase in subsidy required.

Given that the impact of the issues mentioned above are yet to be fully understood, it was felt prudent to add a break clause at the end of year 2,

so that the delivery of the contract could be monitored and potentially reviewed, by both sides, depending on how market conditions change over the next 12-18 months.

As a result, whilst the contract is for 5 years, there is an opportunity to renegotiate the contract for years 3-5, or to retender if market conditions are favourable.

The wording change from 'up to five years' to 'for five years' simply more accurately represents the full term of the contract. The drafting of Council reports benefit from the input of many colleagues providing their professional advice.

### **Question from Councillor Heather Kidd**

#### Border issues with Concessionary bus passes

Concessionary bus pass holders have had a real issue along the border with Wales since introduction around 15 years ago. People can travel into Wales to use vital services and return free. They cannot change buses. If they need to walk or drive to Churchstoke (in Wales ) to catch a bus to Newtown for an appointment at Newtown or Welshpool hospital or the dentist then their pass is not valid. The Oswestry area has similar problems when travelling to Chester

In the light of the cost of living crisis will the Leader of Council and Transport portfolio holder, please:

- Raise the issue with our border MP's (Philip Dunne MP and Helen Morgan MP ) and ask them for urgent talks with the Welsh Government and the Transport Minister in Westminster to make this free both sides of the border?
- Consider working with Powys to put a local agreement in place? This could be cost neutral for both authorities.

This would both be good for the environment keeping people out of cars, save money for those facing huge hikes in costs and reduce the expensive problem of using taxis in some cases.

### **Response from Councillor Cecilia Motley, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Culture, Leisure & Tourism and Transport**

Thank you for your question, regarding the use of English Concessionary Bus passes in Wales and the impact that is having on passengers. The English National Concessionary Travel scheme when introduced was not intended for use in Wales for which separate legislation exists, however there are agreements in place that as you mentioned in your question,

allow Shropshire concessionary passengers to commence their journey in England and travel onwards to Wales.

The issue you highlighted is where passengers then want to change to a more local service in Wales for onwards travel to access essential services, for which their concessionary pass is not valid and a charge would be made. I don't believe we can provide a blanket approval for Shropshire passes to be used on any bus service in Wales, but I am happy for us to explore which individual services in Wales passengers are looking to use to gain access to essential services and I have asked our Transport Team to explore this option with their colleagues in Wales.

Officers will report back once they have had those conversations

### **Question from Councillor Dan Morris**

In December 2017 Shropshire Council submitted a scheme outline business case under the Department of Transport's Large Local Majors funding programme for the North West Relief Road (NWRR). In March 2019 the Department for Transport awarded £54m towards the construction of the NWRR. On the Shropshire Council Website page for the NWRR it currently states the following on timings:

- February 2022 – full business case endorsement by DfT
- Spring 2022 - appointment of contractor
- Spring/Summer 2022 - start of construction
- Spring 2024 – road open and project fully complete

I would suggest that now these timings are out of date.

The desire and need to build the NWRR was a democratically taken majority decision by Shropshire Council members. The building of the road had been mooted for decades, and through the hard work of many Shropshire Council officers, some Members and the MP for Shrewsbury and Atcham a large sum of funding was awarded by the DfT to help build the road. Many people I speak to are increasingly frustrated by the delays of getting this road built.

Please could Shropshire Council's Cabinet Member for Highways, Assets & Built Housing update council on what is currently holding the planning process up, when he expects the NWRR to go before Planning Committee, the plans to mitigate current inflationary pressures as a result of the delays and could he update council when he expects contracts to be awarded and when he thinks the road will now be in use?

### **Response from Councillor Dean Carroll, Portfolio Holder for Physical Infrastructure (highways and assets)**

The project team are currently undertaking more detailed design work to seek to remove objections raised by the Environment Agency and Natural England during the Planning Consultation. The project team remain confident that outcomes of the work will result in objections being removed. The detailed work currently being undertaken is work that was planned for post planning consent and so the delay will not have a significant detriment to timescales. It is hoped that a resolution will be reached in the coming weeks and that a planning application can be considered before Christmas. The web site will be updated to reflect the new timescales once the date of the Planning Committee has been confirmed.

### **Question from Councillor Rosemary Dartnall**

Please provide updated information about the proposed North West (Relief) Road in respect of the following areas;

- Has Balfour Beatty now completed the audit of Shropshire Council's project costing and confirmed, or otherwise, the most recently quoted total project price of £81 m (down from £87 m), provided to council some months ago?
- £20 m has been spent on preliminary investigations, we are told. How much of this spend is directly related to investigations for the elevated section of the proposed road? How suitable is the underlying geology for construction of the sub- and super-structure supporting the road at the west end? Is it possible to mediate for the nature of the subsurface sedimentary rocks?
- Does the administration remain convinced that this is a viable and worthy project, despite sound arguments that show it to be outdated, unlikely to relieve congestion, counter to net zero targets and poor value for taxpayers' money?

**RESPONSE TO FOLLOW**