

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

6 February 2024

Agenda Item 5 - Public Participation

Question from Celia Beckett - Chair of Hilperton Area Action Group

To

Cllr Nick Botterill - Cabinet Member for Finance, Development Management and Strategic Planning

Question (24-12)

Following the Government's decision to change the NPPF guidelines from a 5 to a 4 year housing land supply does Wiltshire Council intend to alter the number of houses that it has allocated in the Local Plan?

Response

No. The requirement to provide a four-year housing land supply is a transitional measure which only lasts for two years from publication of the December 2023 NPPF. The Local Plan will need to ensure that the Council can demonstrate a five-year housing land supply when it is adopted.

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Agenda Item 9 - Budget 2024/25 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy

2024/25 to 2026/27

Questions from Cllr Richard Budden, Tisbury Division

To

Cllr Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport, and Street Scene

Preamble

While campaigning for election to the Council last year, the topic raised with me most often and persistently was the appalling state of the roads in the area.

It is important to recall that for the 4,300 people living in Tisbury, including the villages of Donhead St Andrew and Donhead St Mary as well as Fonthill Gifford and West Tisbury - apart from the A30 that bisects the southern edge of the Donheads - there are no 'A' or 'B' roads to provide access. And that there are very limited public transport options; residents are otherwise entirely dependent on their own transport, via 'C' and un-numbered roads (so-called 'non-principal' roads) for access.

At Parish Council meetings the message is repeated again and again:-

- Roads and path surfaces are not merely potholed, but broken down. The consequence, in conjunction with blocked drains or gulleys is persistent nuisance, damage to vehicles and safety hazards for pedestrians. These roads are widely judged to be in a worse state than those in neighbouring counties and it is also widely believed that they are worse than those elsewhere in Wiltshire.
- Cyclists are at particular hazard. The stretch of the Wiltshire Cycle Way that runs through the Donheads is virtually unusable as a result of neglect.
- Despite reports posted by residents on the MyWilts app, repairs are not carried out in a timely fashion.
- The local economy is affected; businesses (the pub, restaurant and golf club) report customers complain of the poor roads and say this deters them from visiting.
- Residents avoid driving after dark because of the condition of the roads; service providers, carers, delivery van drivers, express fears for their safety and that of their vehicles; thus, in dispersed rural communities, the neglect of road maintenance adds to social isolation and deprivation.
- Vehicles driven onto verges to avoid broken-down road surfaces cause an increase in soil run-off, blocking drains and increasing river pollution

In September the Council announced an additional £10 million will be spent over the next two years:

“...on top of the £14m the council will spend this financial year... funded through the council's capital funding programme. [To] be spent on preventative maintenance and a road resurfacing programme including small, local repairs to the highways; verge repairs on rural roads and materials support to volunteers working on public rights of way.”

I wrote to Cllr Thomas, congratulating her on obtaining the extra funds, saying the additional funds were urgently needed to bring roads in my district up to a satisfactory standard.

In November, at a crowded meeting of the local Area Board, she spoke of how much money and effort the Council puts into maintaining the County's roads. No questions were taken from spokesmen that were there representing the Donheads parishes, but in the days immediately afterwards I copied to her a detailed map marking 16 of the places in these two villages where the road surface has broken down and requested a meeting with officers to discuss their plans. I stressed again the urgency of improvements needed to the road network in the area. This message received no response, so in early January I wrote again, forwarding a message I had received from a local resident who lamented that:

“roads in this village are a shambles.. When we moved here about 16 years ago the roads were in good order.. the village needs a lot of work and the lane we live in..is nearly unsurpassable. The whole lane needs to be resurfaced. Holes filled, drainage work etc. The whole village needs work, and has for many years”

Cllr Thomas' response was to repeat the Cabinet mantra that Wiltshire is one of the very few local authorities balancing its books, permitting it to free up additional funds and inform me that officers would be in a position to reply “in due course”. When I told her that residents quite reasonably want to know what it will take for the Council to begin to fulfil its obligations to maintain the highway, and whether there is any point in paying their council tax, Cllr Thomas replied drawing attention to all the other things the Council does, and that less than 10% of the current year's £465 million revenue is spent on Highways and Transport.

Reflecting the frustration of local residents and their Parish Councils I sought the support of local media to draw attention to the issue. Finally, on 18th January, Richard Clewer, the Council leader, conceded that a stretch of damaged road surface shown him in a picture by a reporter from the BBC deserved to be treated within days.

With this history, we can agree, I am sure, on several things:

1. It shouldn't require Richard Clewer to be interviewed by the BBC and for him to view pictures from a BBC cameraman for the council to take action when it is clearly and urgently needed. There has to be a better way.
2. To 'balance the council's books' Wiltshire Council has starved the budget for maintenance of non-principal roads.

The Council's commitment to spend an additional £10 million over two years on road maintenance is, of itself, an admission that failing over a number of years to provide sufficient funds to satisfactorily maintain non-principal roads has merely stored up problems; an example of being penny-wise but pound-foolish.

Data publicly available from the Local Government Association, based on returns to the Department of Transport, shows that in 2022-23 Wiltshire spent more than £20,000/mile on maintaining principal roads, but only a very little over £1,000/mile maintaining non-principal roads.

Amongst neighbouring counties, by contrast, the spend per mile on maintaining non-principal roads in the same period was:

- In West Berkshire, nearly twice as much; in Bath & North East Somerset, and Somerset, twice as much,
- In Swindon five times as much; in Hampshire, and North Somerset, over six times as much and in South Gloucestershire nearly nine times as much.

And amongst authorities that are 'statistical neighbours', similar to Wiltshire in terms of population demographics, rurality and deprivation:

- Shropshire spent one third more,
- Cornwall spent over two and a half times as much,
- Cheshire West & Chester spent nearly three and a half times as much,
- Northumberland spent over five and a half times as much and the East Riding of Yorkshire spent over twelve and a half times as much.

Road Maintenance spending 2022-23	Non-principal roads ('C' + un-numbered roads)	Maintenance spend on non-principal roads		Multiple of Wiltshire's spend/mile on non-principal roads
	miles ¹	£K ²	£K/mile	
Wiltshire	2457	2,537	1.03	1.0
Geographical neighbours				
West Berkshire	752	1,415	1.88	1.8
Bath and North East Somerset	595	1,247	2.10	2.0
Somerset	3,736	7,857	2.10	2.0
Swindon	474	2,448	5.17	5.0
Hampshire	5,032	31,623	6.28	6.1
North Somerset	627	4,345	6.93	6.7
South Gloucestershire	844	7,643	9.05	8.8
Statistical neighbours: authorities Council officers consider are statistically similar to Wiltshire in terms of population demographics, rurality and deprivation				
Shropshire	2,857	3,692	1.29	1.3
Cornwall	4,194	11,717	2.79	2.7
Cheshire West and Chester	1,203	4,212	3.50	3.4
Northumberland	2,723	15,614	5.74	5.6
East Riding of Yorkshire	1,909	24,927	13.06	12.6
Sources: ¹ Road miles are taken from Road length statistics (RDL) - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)				
² Maintenance spends are taken from Data and reports LG Inform (local.gov.uk)				

In light of which, it is hardly surprising Wiltshire's roads compare unfavourably with similar roads in other counties.

Before members of the Cabinet jeer or sneer "that way bankruptcy lies", they should

reflect that in villages and rural communities with no shops, doctors' surgeries, schools or other services, and with scant public transport, there are very few things that have more impact more immediately on more people, than broken down roads.

To avoid the capital cost penalty of fundamental repair to roads, following years of neglect, we need to see that 'C' roads providing access routes for rural communities are given the same priority for maintenance as 'B' roads elsewhere, and to maintain un-numbered roads also to a higher standard than previously, so they do not break down in the manner we observe currently in the Donheads and elsewhere in the Tisbury district.

Question (24-13)

In light of the foregoing, would you not agree with me that the budget in £ per mile for maintenance of Wiltshire's non-principal roads should be at least doubled, even though that will still leave it well short of the average among our statistical neighbouring counties, to match some at least of our immediate geographical neighbours?

Response

We have been very clear about how we prioritise highway maintenance, including at our programme of 'Highways Matters' events.

The expenditure figures quoted by Cllr Budden are for revenue expenditure only, which usually covers maintenance such as gully emptying, grass cutting, road sweeping and winter gritting.

The figures he provided do not cover the extensive capital investment which is generally used to improve the condition, including surfacing and surface dressing, with an annual budget provided by the DfT along with additional one-off grants such as the £3.6m for pot holes in 2023/24.

We take a risk-based approach to asset management in Wiltshire in line with the "Well Managed Highway Infrastructure Code of Practice", and this is incorporated and documented in the "Wiltshire Highways Safety Inspection Manual".

The percentages of road treated are published by the DfT. They group the non-principal roads together (B, C and Unclassified roads) and list the Principal Road (A Road) percentages. The 2022/23 figures indicate Wiltshire Council's % of A roads treated was 5.2% and B/C/U roads 2.6%. This compares with the national average of 5.3% and 2.4% respectively.

With the additional £10m capital investment, we will be able to undertake further work on non-principle roads across Wiltshire. The Forward Work Programme, which is evidence led, is in the final stages of preparation and the next step will be to publish the Plan through our Area Boards and once confirmed, schedule and undertake the work.

Road safety is a priority for the Council and network safety condition and resilience is an essential component in our comprehensive approach, including working with

partners, to reduce the number of people Killed and Seriously Injured on the County's network. The condition of roads (their surface and related infrastructure) and appropriately prioritised maintenance and improvement related to road use, can make a significant contribution to reducing collisions particularly those resulting in death and seriously injury.

With over 2,800 miles of road, the highway network in Wiltshire forms the Council's largest asset and it is important that it is maintained in the most cost-effective way that demonstrates value for money. This includes the use of asset management and whole life costing approaches to inform investment decisions, taking into account all factors including enabling sustainable economic growth and the environmental implications.

It is not realistic, or appropriate, to expect a 'per mile' doubling or more for maintenance of Wiltshire's non-principled roads which experience significantly less traffic.

It is important that residents continue to report defects to the Council so we can inspect all defects and take appropriate action.

Question (24-13)

Would you not also agree with me that, to allay suspicions of differences in the treatment of different areas of the county, the budgets, both revenue and capital, for principal and non-principal roads' maintenance and improvements needs to be clearly set out and publicly available in £ per mile, broken down at least to Community Area level?

Response

There are differences in the treatment of roads in the Community Areas due to the nature of roads and their distribution across the county. Our safety led prioritisation process inevitably leads to a focus on those roads with high usage.

As we have previously explained at the Highways Matters events, our new 'defect dashboard' is broken down by Community Area and regular updates will be provided through Area Boards.

We highlighted the data for South West Wiltshire at the Highways Matters event before Christmas, and it is also worth noting our Highways Annual Review of Service is presented to Environment Select Committee every year – 14 March last year and it is on the Agenda for March again this year.

The Highways Annual Review of Service is a comprehensive report detailing performance in the last 12 months and includes road surfacing, repairs, road safety improvements and structures work.

The concept of a spend per mile is not adopted by Local Authorities or the DfT given the wide variation in the asset - from dual carriage ways with junctions, lights and bridges used by thousands of vehicles a day, including HGVs, to single carriages way primarily used by tractors, horse riders and pedestrians.

Agenda Item 12 – Public Transport Strategy

Questions from Colin Gale, Pewsey Community Area Partnership

To

Cllr Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport, and Street Scene

Question (24-14)

The report, page 392 paints Demand Responsive Transport in a bad light following a public consultation survey conducted from September to October 2023. Demand Responsive Transport was only introduced in the Pewsey Vale on 31st July 2023 and was progressively rolled out to the other operating zones of Marlborough and Great Bedwyn in September 2023 and Marlborough and Hungerford on 30th October 2023. Experience during the preparation to the roll out of the new DRT service identified that the majority of the public did not know/understand what Demand Responsive Transport was and how it operated. Between August and December 2023, daily patronage per DRT vehicle has grown by 49%. The DRT vehicles are now carrying more passengers than the timetabled parts of the services. The average customer rating is 4.9 out of 5 stars in the first 5 months of operation.

The timing of the public consultation and the introduction of the Pewsey Vale DRT service has not given sufficient time for the public to appreciate the benefits of the service and hence perhaps the poor/negative responses. PCAP believe an update should be provided to the report and to the strategy to reflect the updated situation since the public consultation.

Will Wiltshire Council provide an update based on the latest information gained from the operation of the DRT services in the Pewsey Vale to offset the current report?

Response

As stated above, the whole DRT service (Wiltshire Connect) in the Pewsey Vale has been up and running since the 30 October 2023. It consists of 3 DRT vehicles and 2 semi-flexible/timetabled vehicles. It is agreed that giving more time for the DRT service to bed-in, may well help to change public opinion on the positive role that DRT can play in Wiltshire.

So far, data shows:

- Over 4,000 people have registered and downloaded the 'Wiltshire Connect' app.
- Over 2,500 individuals have made at least one journey.
- Over 17,000 passengers were carried in the first 5 months of operation.

- Between August and December 23, daily patronage per DRT vehicle has grown by 49%.
- DRT vehicles are now carrying more passengers than the timetabled services.
- There is an average of 3.7 passengers per vehicle per hour across the service in November. (Previously the 101/2 service averaged approx. 3 passengers per hour excluding schools).
- The average customer rating for the service is 4.9 out of 5 stars.

Despite some negative comments on DRT in the public consultation, our Public Transport Strategy will continue to look at DRT solutions to help complement mainline public transport services where it is deemed appropriate.