

COUNCIL
22 February 2011

COUNCILLORS' QUESTIONS

QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR JON HUBBARD
MELKSHAM SOUTH DIVISION

TO COUNCILLOR JOHN THOMSON, CABINET MEMBER FOR ADULT
CARE, COMMUNITIES AND LIBRARIES

Question 1

At the recent Area Board meeting in Melksham, attended by the Cabinet Member, the proposed new Community Campus was on the agenda. A presentation of the council's single proposed site was given but there was no opportunity for questions or discussion. Instead a very limited number of points of clarification were permitted. From these it became clear that no economic impact assessments, transport studies or feasibility studies have taken place, and they will not take place until after the final consultation for the public has completed.

In addition, the public are being invited to participate in a consultation on the issue before the issue is debated and before councillors (and the public) have the opportunity to ask questions of officers in a public forum such as the Area Board (the consultation is due to close on the 15th March and the Area Board scheduled for the issue to be discussed is on the 29th March).

Could the cabinet member please tell me:

- 1) In his opinion does this "putting the cart before the horse" demonstrate best practice or will he confirm that, in this instance, the council have got it wrong?
- 2) If he does believe that the practice that has been followed is acceptable could he please explain how this demonstrates how the Council's by-line "where everybody matters" can be justifiably used?
- 3) Does he intend to make it standard practice for the facts about proposals only to be disclosed only once any consultations have been completed?

Response

- 1) The Council has undertaken an assessment of the options for developing a community campus to serve the Melksham Community Area and following an appraisal of the audit and research work done to date a preferred option has been put forward for public consultation. The audit and research work has not included an economic impact assessment or a transport plan as this would form part of a potential future planning

application. This was made very clear at the Area Board on the Wednesday 2 February 2011. An initial baseline feasibility study on the preferred site has been undertaken to determine broad deliverability and initial cost estimates. This information was made available at the Area Board and on the Council's website.

The proposed preferred option has been presented to the community and the Council is asking that local people make their views known at a specially convened Area Board on the 29 March 2011. Detailed questions were not recommended for the Area Board on the 2 February as the intention was to give a detailed presentation and supporting information that would most likely give local people the answers to the majority of questions. Local people have been asked to consider the proposal and are invited to participate in a detailed debate, held in a public forum, on the 29 March.

In the interim period local people have an opportunity to participate in the consultation by direct contact up to the 29th March with the Council through either a dedicated email address or by writing into the Council. In addition the Melksham Community Area Partnership are holding a series of consultation events and will be collating information to present to the specially convened Area Board on the 29th March. The consultation is being led by the Area Board, rightly in my view.

The concept of a community campus is essentially tailoring service provision to the local community to ensure local needs are met. An extensive consultation exercise is taking place, led by the Area Board, this I understand will include opportunities for open debate, but as the only locally elected body representing the entire community area, it is only right that the elected members of Area Board shape the consultation process as I believe they have in this case.

- 2) The Council has been open and transparent about the process to date through a detailed presentation at the Area Board on the 2 February 2011. This included the rationale behind the preferred option and it is intended that any questions local people have about both the proposed option and the rationale behind it can be openly discussed at the specially convened Area Board on the 29 March 2011, I understand that is the specific purpose of the special area board meeting. Once these discussions have taken place locally elected Members will be asked to come to a view on whether they wish to support the current proposal. This ensures locally elected Members will have an opportunity to take part in, and observe the detailed debate before making a decision on how they would wish to project to proceed.

**TO COUNCILLOR JOHN NOEKEN, CABINET MEMBER FOR
RESOURCES**

Question 2

At the recent Area Board meeting in Melksham the proposed new Community Campus was on the agenda. A presentation of the council's single proposed site was given but there was no opportunity for questions or discussion. Instead a very limited number of points of clarification were permitted. From these it became clear that no economic impact assessments, transport studies or feasibility studies have taken place, and they will not take place until after the final consultation for the public has completed.

In addition, the public are being invited to participate in a consultation on the issue before the issue is debated and before councillors (and the public) have the opportunity to ask questions of officers at the Area Board (the consultation is due to close on the 15th March and the Area Board scheduled for the issue to be discussed is on the 29th March).

It has therefore not been possible for members or the public to ask questions in a public forum on this issue. Therefore I am asking today, and in order that they are a matter of public record, the questions that I believe I, and others, should have been permitted to ask at the meeting where the proposal was presented.

1. The library is currently used by a number of organisations that are based, or meet, in the Town Centre (such as the majority of the Town's primary schools and voluntary groups such as the Cubs). Can the cabinet member tell me what impact assessment has been made on how these groups will be affected by the closure of the town centre library?
2. Wiltshire recently spent £288,727 refurbishing Melksham's Town Centre Library. How does it represent best value for money to spend it and then scrap it?
3. Wiltshire Council, and its predecessor West Wiltshire District Council, fought the new Asda Development in Melksham on the basis that it was an 'out-of-town' development and this was against their policy. Could the Cabinet Member please inform me when they performed a about turn on this?
4. I, along with many others, have been asking for a copy of the proposals for the Campus for several months. Indeed in November when I presented to this council a petition signed by 2,184 local residents objecting to the proposed closure of the Town Centre Library and its relocation to the Melksham Oak site I was informed that there were, as yet, no such plans and that such documents were not yet produced. Yet now that we finally have the council's proposals I see that the

Sustainability Appraisal Report, the main document released to the public, is dated October 2010. Can the Cabinet Member please explain why this document was withheld from members, despite their requesting it, and could he say, categorically for the record, what other reports are being, will be or have been produced in relation to the Melksham Campus and provide a timeline for when they will be available to the public.

5. In the council's own sustainability report when looking at the preferred option the report itself identifies the potential impact on the Town Centre of removing the library and says (Page 54, item 13 Community Facilities) "If a campus were built in this location, retention of some services in the town centre eg the library, should be considered" and then (Page 55, item 14 Education and Skills) "Provision of a new library may be better located within the town centre where there would be greater accessibility to a wider number of people."

Most damaging however is the statement (Page 55, Item 16 Economy) "Directing services and facilities to town centre locations would draw people into the centre, helping to improve vitality and viability of retail and other businesses. Development of an edge-of-town campus would have the opposite effect and would be unlikely to aid regeneration – a priority for the town and stated in the Wiltshire LDF."

Why is the council not following its own advice and policy?

6. Why has the council dismissed the option of a split site campus, with the Library and Youth Centre being retained at their current locations and the new development at Melksham Oak housing the remaining facilities as being hypothetical and therefore impossible to cost? These facilities are in place at their current locations and surely the cost of these buildings is known to the council?

Response

1. The current proposal for a community campus in Melksham looks at the re-provision of attractive, up to date, accessible and improved library facilities within a campus facility on the Woolmore Farm site. This facility would be designed to cater for the needs of the Melksham community area and as such a potential planning process would include the production of a sustainable transport assessment and a plan to encourage continued use of library facilities for existing users.
2. The potential savings of delivering a community campus far outweigh the historical investment made into the existing library facility, details of which were presented at the Melksham Area Board on 2 March 2011. From a value for money perspective, it is important that future costs are analysed rather than historic ones.

3. In spatial planning terms there are a variety of policies that could be seen to either support central development or edge of town development, this would be dependent on the application concerned. An example of such a policy would be the adopted Leisure & Recreation Development Plan Document that advises the replacement of indoor leisure facilities in Melksham be firstly considered on the Woolmore Farm site.
4. The proposal for the Melksham Community Campus was presented to the area board in February 2011. As the question indicates, you have been asking for a copy of the Campus proposal, which was not available until the Sustainability Assessment was completed. It must be understood the Sustainability Appraisal is not the campus proposal but part of the process of developing one. All background information and audit and research work is available. The Sustainability Appraisal, a non-statutory spatial planning tool that is one part of the background audit work, was completed firstly in October 2010. However as a first draft it needed to be reviewed before being made available. Even now for example, the Sustainability Appraisal does not include any weighting for the travel plan which will need to accommodate any planning application. Any planning application will include consideration of the development of sustainable transport arrangements that will be to the benefit of the wider Melksham Community Area. The final draft of the sustainability appraisal was made available in early 2011 and the Council has made it clear that it is a public document and available to all. Additional work that will need to be completed assuming the current proposal proceeds include an economic impact assessment and the transport plan forming part of a planning process. The timeline for this is clear within appendix b of the campus development and management proposal Cabinet paper considered on 15 February 2011 and was specifically covered in the presentation at the area board.
5. The Sustainability Appraisal is not Council policy; it is a spatial planning tool which is considered one part of the audit and research work associated with the community campus proposal. The findings of the appraisal have been assessed against the remainder of the audit work and the current proposal best meets the wider objectives of what the Council is looking to achieve from the co-location of services and consideration of the report will both shape the nature of items such as transport arrangements to any Campus.
6. The proposed option for community campus delivery in Melksham is a single site option. The benefits to the library and youth services if they remain in their present position are likely to be outweighed by the wider benefits co-location presents. This includes the potential for better quality modern services, extended opening hours, cross-service use, vastly improved fit for purpose and efficient buildings that reduce running costs, significant ongoing financial and environmental savings and the reduction of risk to the Council. It is important to emphasise that the final recommendation to Cabinet on the Melksham Campus will be made by the Area Board, which is leading the consultation process.