

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

14 July 2020

Question from Steve Perry – Chair of Cause

**Agenda Item 5 – Public Participation – Chippenham HIF Bid
Agenda Item 15 – Stone Circle Company Business Plans**

**To Cllr Philip Whitehead, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Development, MCI and Communications;
Cllr Richard Clewer, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Heritage, Arts & Tourism, Housing and Communities;
Cllr Pauline Church, Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement and Commercial Investment; and
Cllr Bridget Wayman, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Waste**

Statement

I asked a question to the then Cabinet Member for Finance, Simon Jacobs, at the last Cabinet meeting, to which I received a very half-hearted answer in which only part of my question was answered, and the rest avoided. My question then related to the fact that Mr Jacobs had not given any advice to Cabinet warning them of the overspending that was certain to happen due to Covid-19, the fact that the Council was obviously not able to meet its budget commitments legally, and that it was ok to commit over £5M of taxpayers' money to fund the group of Stone Circle companies being set up and the 'Future Chippenham' group to progress the Council's HIF funding for a new 'link' road around Chippenham. I have a number of questions relating:

Question 1 Cabinet Restructure:

Is the fact that Mr Jacobs is no longer in that Cabinet seat indicative of his performance since February in relation to financial advice to Council?

Response:

I have restructured my cabinet and executive to better align political direction with the Council's recovery structure as we emerge from the Covid-19 emergency. In no way should the moving of anyone from one role to another be seen as a comment on their effectiveness. The changes have been made to assign people with the most appropriate skills to the changing structure of council delivery. I have also removed some portfolio holder posts and one cabinet post to reduce the cost of the

administration in the financially challenging times we face. Again, this should in no way be interpreted as a comment on the effectiveness of any councillor, it is a response to changing circumstances.

I would also like to clarify that the role of providing advice to Cabinet and the Council lies with our Directors. When it comes to financial matters that is the role of the Director of Finance who is also our section 151 officer.

Question 2 – Chippenham HIF Bid:

Does the new Cabinet member for Finance feel the same way as Mr Jacobs did about funding a road being sold to the public under the false premise that its building will benefit traffic congestion in the town centre as well as bring monies into the town? The 7500 new homes projected will increase traffic in the town by upwards of 10,000 vehicles, adding to and not reducing the congestion and pollution issues already existing.

Response:

The traffic modelling conducted thus far has indicated that the distributor road would help reduce traffic flows in central Chippenham but has also identified additional improvements to the existing road network

Question 3 - Chippenham HIF Bid:

How does the proposed feeder road fit with the Council's declared Climate Emergency, and the fact that the world will hopefully be a different one after the current crisis is over in that less people will be travelling by car and road because working from home where possible should be the new normal?

Response:

The requirement for housing continues into the future and roads are needed to support this growth. Building the road first allow us to "future proof" Chippenham's ability to host further infrastructure. This will "unlock" areas for new housing and ensure that these are developed in a logical, strategic manner rather than the alternative, which will potentially see fragmented expansion from multiple developers.

Question 4 - Chippenham HIF Bid:

Can you detail exactly what mechanism is in place to ensure that the HIF monies will be recovered from the developers as is required by the terms of the HIF award?

Response:

Negotiations with Homes England are underway in respect of the Grant Determination Agreement that will form the basis of the Agreement between the

parties. These negotiations are commercially sensitive and as such it not possible to release further details in the public domain at this time.

Question 5 – Stone Circle Company Business Plans:

Does the Council really expect that the public will accept the outgoing CEO Alastair Cunningham as 'independent' on the boards of the Stone Circle companies, let alone as Chairman, and will he still be on the board of the LEP?

Response:

The Council as shareholder of the Stone Circle companies has the right to remove and appoint directors. It has already appointed independent Directors who have the expertise to make the companies a success. Directors have to act in the best interest of the Companies and its shareholder. It will be important to ensure that the Directors the Council appoints will be able to effectively fulfil that role based on their previous experience and knowledge.

As for Alistair Cunningham's role in relation to the LEP board he was not on the board he was an advisor. Due to his retirement he will not be continuing that role.