

Wiltshire Council

Council

17 May 2011

Councillors' Questions

Questions From Councillor Michael Cuthbert-Murray
Westbury East Division

Question 1 – to Leader

Would you please quantify exactly what you mean when you refer to “Front Line Services”?

Response

Front line services are services which are delivered directly to or for the council’s customers – that is: citizens of all ages, visitors and businesses. These services include (among many others) benefits, housing, planning/development control, registration, social services, schools and education, leisure, road repairs, libraries, waste collection and recycling, parking, licensing, and libraries. Services such as ICT, human resources, procurement or finance, while essential for front line service delivery, are support services.

Question 2 to Councillor John Thomson

Could you please give reasons for the inordinately long delays in finalising the tender documents for the Help at Home contract?

Response

The tendering process for these services commenced on September 23rd when expressions of interest were invited. Pre-qualification questionnaires were returned and evaluated by January 15th. Bidders days were held in February, March, and two in April with the Invitation to Tender being issued on April 21st.

This is an extremely complex procurement that has necessitated a completely new approach to the commissioning of care and support services. We are not aware of any similar procurement having been undertaken either regionally or nationally. Throughout the tender process which has been lengthy, regular meetings have taken place with prospective providers to ensure they are able to inform and influence the final documents. This has resulted in a suite of Invitation to Tender documents which are detailed, informed by providers, customers and commissioners, and which reflect an approach to their development that is consultative. Throughout the process prospective providers have been fully informed of the tender timetable.

The net result of this work will be a new integrated care and support service that will be focused on meeting the needs of customers and which will be available to the whole population of Wiltshire. Alongside this care and support service the Council will be commissioning an out of hours response service and a new equipment and practical help in the home service. As a result of these services it is expected that more people will be able to remain in their home of choice because they will be able to access a range of services that will assist them to do this.

Question 3 to Councillor John Noeken

Are you entirely certain that your IT department has now stabilised and is operating at an acceptable level given the missed target deadlines and the increased costs particularly in respect of the Disaster Recovery program that is still under performing some 4 years after its commencement?

Response

As the Cabinet member with responsibility I spend a fair amount of time with staff from all levels of the ICT Team. Over the past six months I have witnessed at first hand the significant improvement in delivery achieved by the staff within ICT. As members may be aware, we have recently been featured as a case study by Microsoft and across the board feedback on the improvements to the service in recent months have been consistently positive. At the time of the in source from Steria, we briefed members of scrutiny that performance was likely to dip before recovering, to the great credit of the team involved performance has actually improved. As with all services, some target deadlines have occasionally been missed but I am proud of the significant overall improvement made and the ability of the ICT team to do this within ever tightening budgets. We regularly update our Disaster Recovery plans and I understand that ICT Managers have already agreed to update scrutiny on our business continuity and disaster recovery plans and approach.

Question 4 to Councillor John Noeken

Do you believe that morale in your IT department is high and are you aware of accusations of “bullying” from middle management towards subordinates?

Response

I am most certainly aware of an accusation of “Bullying” that was raised by an anonymous person on the 15th March 2011. This claim was unsubstantiated, and no further claims have been received since then. This council does not tolerate any such alleged behaviour. Like all good organisations, we have confidential systems and procedures with a robust whistle blowing procedure in place designed to protect people who wish to raise concerns. You also specifically mention morale in the IT Department. I know from my own personal involvement in that area that morale is good; an area which has achieved so much, particularly in the last twelve months with colleagues who are passionate about their progress and their vital contribution to the council and its systems.

Question 5 to Leader

Are you still of the opinion that a zero percentage rise in Council Tax can be achieved for financial year 2012 – 2013?

Response

At this stage we have recently set out a four year Financial Plan to deliver our Business Plan. That sets out the aspiration for a no rise in Council Tax in 2012-13. We have made no departures from that. We will continue to review our funding and cost base throughout 2011-12 and identify and review all options to continually improve services and make efficiencies to deliver a balanced budget.

Question 6 to Councillor Toby Sturgis

If you really want to achieve harmonisation across the Council, when are you going to open the Refuse Collection contract for tender across the whole County and not just in West Wiltshire?

Response

The waste collection contract for west Wiltshire ends in 2014. During 2011-12 we will carry out a fundamental review of our waste management services. This will result in the production of a specification for future service delivery and will inform whether collection services will be provided directly by the council, by a single private sector company or a combination of service providers.

Question 7 to Councillor John Brady

If you really want to achieve harmonisation across the Council, when are you going to ballot the tenants in the former Salisbury District Council Area to ascertain their view as to moving to Housing Association control of the housing stock?

Response

Wiltshire council has a strong commitment to ensuring that our tenants receive a very good quality landlord service and that we work to deliver the aspirations of our tenants.

There have been two previous ballots of all council housing tenants on the question of transferring the stock to a housing association. These were both conducted by Salisbury District Council and on each occasion the proposal was firmly rejected by tenants. The most recent ballot was conducted in 2006 following an option appraisal that led the council and tenant representatives to believe that there were considerable benefits to be delivered through stock transfer. After a thorough consultation all tenants were able to vote in a ballot and over 70% of those voting registered their opposition to stock transfer.

Since the stock has been the responsibility of Wiltshire Council it has been very evident that there has been no desire on the part of our tenants to transfer to a housing association and the council has been keen to reassure tenants that we have no desire to go through a very costly consultation and ballot that would very likely produce the same result. Furthermore the change in the financing of council housing as provided for in the Localism Bill effectively removes the financial advantages of transferring to a housing association and indeed appears to offer a much improved opportunity for investment in our stock.

We know that the tenants have expressed their clear preference to stay as council tenants and so we are now committed to an ambitious programme of improvement to provide a landlord service that is amongst the top performing local authority landlords.

Question 8 to Councillor Dick Tonge

Are you entirely happy that your review of car parking charges last winter was entirely unequivocal?

Response

I am happy that the review was conducted in a professional, open and transparent manner and was subject to a high degree of public and councillor scrutiny.

In summary;

An initial report on the proposed approach to reviewing the Local Transport Plan (LTP) parking plan was presented to the Environment Select Committee on 12 January 2010; the resolution of this committee was taken on board in the subsequent review undertaken by the Council's term consultant, Mouchel.

Public consultation on Mouchel's reports was carried out from 12 July to 3 September 2010. In total, 570 people and organisations responded through the consultation web portal or by completing questionnaires and submitting letters, making 4,582 comments. A number of letters were also received from Parish and Town Councils, and Chambers of Commerce. In addition, a petition and survey were organised by Amesbury Community Partnership and Mere and District Chamber of Trade respectively.

While a number of respondents did comment on the nature and length of the consultation document, the subject matter and the breadth of the intended audience necessitated that the document covered the full gamut of parking matters in adequate detail. Overall, the consultation was undertaken in conformity with the Council's consultation strategy and was based on the principles set out in the Wiltshire Local Development Framework (LDF) Statement of Community Involvement. As required by government guidance and internal procedures, the review was also subject to an equality impact assessment.

Feedback on the consultation findings was presented to the Area Boards between 22 September and 23 November.

The Environment Select Committee considered the review at its meeting on 2 November and then again on 21 December. The LTP3 Car Parking Strategy was considered and approved by the Council's Cabinet on 14 December - the officer's report shows how respondents' comments were considered in producing the final strategy document. Full Council then debated and approved the strategy at its meeting on 22 February 2011.

In terms of the review itself, this sought, amongst other things, to deal with a general lack of consistency in parking charges, standards and management in Wiltshire as a result of having four former district councils. An important part in achieving a more consistent approach was the introduction of the concept of four spatial bands which was based on the hierarchy in the emerging Local Development Framework (which considers the role and function of towns, and their level of facilities and services), population levels, the availability of sustainable transport alternatives and operational parking issues. The majority of respondents to the consultation supported the concept of spatial bands.

The process outlined above clearly demonstrates that the review of the LTP parking plan was open, transparent and subject to a high degree of public and councillor scrutiny. And, by adopting the four spatial bands, the management of parking in Wiltshire's towns is now more consistent and fairer.

Question 9 to Councillor Fleur de Rhe Philipe

How are you getting on with reclaiming the lost money from Icelandic Banks? How much is still outstanding? How would you use the money if it were to come back tomorrow?

Response

The Council has outstanding deposits with two Icelandic banks (Heritable and Landsbanki) and (since July 2009) has received a number of repayments from the administrators of Heritable, amounting to over £5 million, which equates to about 56% of the original investment (£9 million).

Due to ongoing litigation proceedings, no repayments have been received from the administrators of Landsbanki (original investment of £3 million). Repayments should commence later in the year, but will depend on the outcome of an appeal lodged with the Icelandic Supreme Court relating to the decision of the Reykjavik District Court that local authorities do have priority status. The Council is liaising with the Local Government Association and legal representatives who are confident that the decision will be upheld on appeal.

Of the £12 million invested, this leaves just under £7 million outstanding. It is unlikely that the Council will recover the whole amount, however, based on the latest

information, indications are that we should recover at least 80% of the original investment.

Placing investments (and, depending on the cash position, taking out short term loans) forms part of the day to day treasury (cash) management process. Cash received (recovered) from the repayment of outstanding investments is returned to this process to fund immediate cash requirements or re-invested pending future cash requirements.

Questions From Councillor Ernie Clark Hilperton Division

Question 1 to Leader

What progress is being made to recover the 'non-pensionable honoraria' awarded either for doing additional work or 'acting up' at Kennet District Council? Has any money actually been recovered yet?

Response

We are pursuing recovery however recovery is being contested. It would be inappropriate to comment further.

Question 2 to Leader (amended since original submission)

The pay-bands of the Chief Executive and Chief Officers (2nd tier and above) are now available on the WC website. Will the Leader advise how many officers in tier 2 or above received a pay rise in the last twelve months?

Response

The pay scales of all employees of Wiltshire Council are increased annually in line with the nationally agreed pay award. **However there has been no nationally agreed pay award for 1st and 2nd tier officers (including the Chief Executive) and all other HAY graded senior managers since April 2008, and for other employees there has been no pay award since April 2009.** In addition to the nationally agreed pay award all employees subject to the terms and conditions negotiated by the national joint council or the joint negotiating committee for Chief Officers or Chief Executives are subject to incremental progression within the salary range for their post up to a maximum. For most employees there are four incremental salary points, and this is the case for all 1st and 2nd tier officers. Incremental progression takes place in April each year, and is a contractual entitlement. For 1st and 2nd tier officers progression is subject to performance. In April this year 11 1st and 2nd tier officers received an increment out of a possible 25, as a majority are already at the top of their salary band and therefore have had no incremental pay increase this year or pay award since 2008. There have been no other pay rises, other than for promotion, in the last 12 months.

Question 3 to Leader

Publically available information shows that the Chief Executive of this authority claimed £1,292.80 expenses for February this year. Can a breakdown of this figure please be given.

Response

The following provides a breakdown of the Chief Executive's expenses claimed in respect of February 2011:

£1,200	-	Accommodation costs of £600 per month (as per agreed relocation package – figure relates to costs for February and March)
£ 92.80	-	Travel and subsistence

Question 4 to Leader

The Local Government Group states, for officers in tier 2 or above, that

'Data on individuals.

10. Data to be published for each individual includes Organisation Name, Body (organisational identifier), Individual's Name (subject to consent), Job title, Service Area, Full-Time Equivalent, FTE Pay band for disclosure – this will be shown in £5,000 bands...'

However, this authority has chosen to ignore the £5k banding and, instead, publishes the whole salary band for each officer. Why is WC choosing to do this? Who made the decision to do so?

The whole idea was that the public had an approximate idea of what senior officers earn. Showing the whole spread of the pay scale seems to be an obvious attempt to thwart the wishes of Parliament. However, I am pleased to see that our senior officers have consented to their name being shown together with their job title and commend them for their openness.'

Response

The government has pledged greater transparency across the public sector through publishing data to strengthen accountability to citizens. The government has committed to publishing certain information on salaries, spending and contracts by January 2011. Guidance on this is available on the LGA website, and was revised in November 2010. This guidance outlines definitions of senior managers, i.e. those at first and second tier, and the requirement for us to publish senior salary information. The guidance provides a frame of reference for the main areas to consider and includes the provision of individual data on all senior employees earning more than

£150,000 by job title and name and individual data on all senior employees' earnings between £50,000 and £150,000 by job title only.

The Information Commissioners Office (ICO) has provided further guidance on how to disclose this information. This guidance emphasises the importance of looking at each individual case, but advocates routine disclosure of salary scales. It recommends disclosure only 'to the extent necessary to fulfil a legitimate public interest'. One way of doing this would be to disclose salary scales to the nearest £5,000, and this is the approach taken by the council initially. However when the salaries of the Chief Executive, Corporate and Service Directors were first published a number of queries were raised. The information was causing some confusion as it did not disclose actual salaries. In some cases the salary bands were exaggerating the actual salary for that employee. To provide clearer information about the salaries of senior managers, which goes beyond the guidance provided, the decision was taken by the Service Director HR & OD, in conjunction with the Governance team, to publish the actual salary range for each post. Permission to do this was sought from each senior manager, in line with the ICO guidance.

Question From Councillor Mark Packard
Chippenham Pewsham Division

Question 1 to Leader

- a. What was the structure and number of staff in Internal Audit in January 2011?
Which posts have now been declared redundant?
- b. What was the cost of the internal audit team as of January 2011?
- c. Who took the decision that the head of Internal Audit should be declared redundant?
- d. What alternative arrangements were in place when the decision was taken to make the Head of internal Audit redundant?
- e. What are the implications of this redundancy decision for the Council's options for providing and managing Internal Audit?
- f. What are the implications for public and staff confidence in the internal audit process of selecting the post of team leader for redundancy?

Response

- a. The structure has been revised with the removal of 2 of the original 5 FTE Principal Auditor posts, and therefore the team reduced from 18 – 16. Note that these are not all FTE posts and that 1.4 posts are occupied by part time staff i.e. FTE equivalent was 16.6 posts and is now 14.6.
- b. £720k to be £680k.

- c. S.151 Officer in consultation with HR and Corporate Director of Resources.
- d. This is explained in the report to Audit Committee 13.5.11 in background.
- e. This is explained in the report to Audit Committee 13.5.11 in background.
- f. No different from other parts of the organisation. The Council remains committed to an excellent IA function and is exploring all options to ensure that not for just now but coming years.

Question From Councillor Chris Caswill
Chippenham Monkton Division

Question 1 to Councillor Fleur de Rhe-Philippe

- a. Please list the Council activities audited by the Internal Audit team since the Council was established
- b. On what percentage of these audits were High Risks identified, and what was the total number of identified High Risks in the completed audits?
- c. On what percentage of the identified High and Medium risks was management action declined?
- d. Which of these audits have been considered in retrospect to have been unnecessary?

Response

- a. The Council's audit plans, IA Progress Reports and IA Annual Report set out the detailed coverage of IA in the last few years. These are available to all members and have been through Audit Committee. It is not proposed to list all completed audits here as there are so many, but the Section 151 Officer and I would be happy to discuss this with Councillor Caswill.
- b. In 2009-10 Internal Audit reported on the outcomes of 25 individual audits. 20 of these audits (80%) identified high risks, a total of 58 high risks in all. In 2010-11, up to and including the Progress Report to the Audit Committee on 23rd March, we reported on 29 individual audits, of which 16 (55%) identified high risks, a total of 43 high risks in all.
- c. Before audit reports are finalised, Internal Audit agrees with management the actions to be taken to address all high and medium risks identified by the audit, therefore in none of these cases do we have management actions declined.
- d. No audits have been deemed unnecessary.

Question 2 to Councillor Fleur de Rhe-Philippe

Does this Administration accept and work within the guidance on internal audit provided by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)?

Which of the nine "Core HIA responsibilities" identified by CIPFA does the Council leadership now consider to be redundant?

Response

The Cabinet have asked Officers to look at alternative options to deliver an excellent Internal Audit function that includes delivering the CIPFA Code in all aspects. We feel the report considered by the Audit Committee addresses that.

None of the Core HIA Responsibilities identified by CIPFA are therefore considered redundant.

Question From Councillor Russell Hawker Westbury West Division

Question 1 to Leader

I refer to my questions to full council on 22nd February this year, which were all entirely dodged by the brief answer given that *"the chief executive has instigated a review of the process followed"* in this matter and that *"the outcome of the review will be reported to Cabinet at the earliest opportunity."*

My questions did not just relate to "the process followed", but also related to many other issues, such as the correct or legally-required process and the steps taken by individuals, including John Thomson and other cabinet members.

Can you please confirm that all my questions will be properly answered either in the report from the chief executive (which I understand is now expected to go to the cabinet meeting in June) or, if there needs to be separate answers for my questions not dealt with in the chief executive's report, that they will be properly and promptly answered by you or one of your colleagues or - for the purely technical legal issues perhaps - by a well-suited, impartial and properly qualified officer like Ian Gibbons?

I remind you of the full extent of my previous questions on 22nd February 2011, as follows:

I refer to the Confidential "Complaint Investigation Report" dated 31st August 2010 which was circulated to members by email on 11 February this year and which purports to exercise power to judge whether an alleged racist comment is actually racist.

Exactly what Law (specifying, please, the precise legislation and/or regulations and/or statutory guidance, including clause numbers and quoting the parts that apply

in this matter, or common law, including citation and basic decision summaries and principles that apply) applied or applies to the council in relation to racial equality in public meetings of the council and / or partners?

Where exactly in any of the Law does it say that a comment is racist just because someone asserts that it is - or any basis looking anything like this? What does it say?

Where exactly in any of the Law does it say that the usual common law test of "reasonableness" cannot be used at the discretion of any tribunal or judge in assessing the meaning of words in Law and whether a comment reasonably means what the complainant thinks and alleges?

What powers and authority did the "Investigator" have to carry out an investigation and also judge what is relevant and choose what is fact or not and then also decide and state a determination of the allegations in the report (ie. one person acting as in-house investigator, jury and judge), stating exactly who gave the investigator these powers and why?

What tribunal or judicial decisions exist that show that the phrase "jungle drums" is racist?

Why does the Investigation report not bother to explain any relevant law (ie. no reference to legislation or caselaw)?

Why does the report not bother to explain how the comment is believed to breach the law?

Why does the report not bother to explain the powers of the investigator or where any powers come from?

Why would anyone receiving such a report be expected to think it actually has any status in law or be legitimate or be part of any competent activity of the council or deserves to be treated with anything but concern for its obvious and astonishing shortcomings?

Which members of the cabinet were involved in this matter? At what stage did they know the contents of the report and were they required by the constitution of the council or Law to decide on how to proceed with the matter (please specify who, dates and what was decided)? Did any cabinet member approve the report (who and when)? Which staff were involved in approving the report and actions that followed?

What legal advice was given by any properly qualified legal staff in this matter at any stage (why and to who and when, by whom, stating the qualifications of the staff)?

Do you accept that there should be a better way of handling trivial complaints and have you identified what legal possibilities exist? When will a lawful but common sense approach to trivial complaints be implemented, and how?

Response

The report has not yet been finalised, and it would be inappropriate to pre-empt it by responding to these questions at this stage. However, the report should address most of the issues that have been raised by these questions.

Question From Councillor David Jenkins Westbury North Division

Question 1 to Councillor Toby Sturgis

- a. What are the chances that Wiltshire Council will start to charge residents for disposal of household rubbish at Household Recycling Centres?
- b. Will the fact that Westbury has a number of existing waste sites (at least two) have any influence on the selection of additional waste sites as detailed in the "Proposed Draft Waste Site Allocations Development Plan Document dated June 2011" in the Westbury area?
- c. I would also like to know when the work on the MBT (Mechanical Biological Treatment Plant) will start and be ready for use?

Response

- a. At present, we have no plans to charge residents for disposal of household rubbish at Household Recycling Centres.
- b. The fact that Westbury is currently home existing waste facilities does not, and arguably should not, have a bearing on the decision to allocate additional sites for potential waste uses around the town. The adopted Waste Core Strategy identifies existing industrial estates and existing / former waste sites as being **potentially** suitable **in principle** for the allocation of new facilities. Westbury offers a range of opportunities to explore the development of new waste facilities, but an allocation in a draft plan does not necessarily equate to a particular site being developed for waste uses. That will be a factor for the market to consider, but it should be borne in mind that the council is obliged by national / European policy and legislation to ensure that it has identified and allocated a flexible range of sites to address current and longer-term waste arisings.
- c. Work is scheduled to commence in August 2011. The facility is expected to be operational by late Summer 2013.

Question 2 to Leader

How many cases of fraud and theft have been identified by internal Audit activities since the formation of Wiltshire Council?

Response

Internal Audit has carried out six investigations into cases where offences have been confirmed, the total value of these cases amounting to some £33,000. In addition we have also investigated one case where police enquiries are still in progress, and which is thought to be worth around £20,000. All of these cases were referred to us from other sources, and so were not identified in the first instance by our own activities.

Question From Councillor Helen Osborn Trowbridge Lambrook Division

Question 1 to Leader

There is much talk in Trowbridge that the Chief Executive of this Council has, or is about to, increase his salary to over £200,000. Could the Administration please publicly state that this is not true?

Furthermore, could the Administration also consider following Eric Pickles' advice and reduce the Chief Executive's salary to the level of the Prime Minister's?

Response

No, the current salary range for the chief executive is £171,000 to £189,000. This salary range is based on market information about the median pay rates for the same or similar jobs in other councils and public sector organisations.

In terms of the comments by Eric Pickles about reducing the chief executive's salary to the level of the Prime Minister's, this is not an action being considered.

Question 2 to Councillor Toby Sturgis

Over a year ago I tabled a question to this Council on the delegation of services and assets from Wiltshire Council to Trowbridge Town Council. At that meeting I received what might at best be termed a holding response.

Last week I spoke with the Trowbridge Town Clerk and was informed that there has been no real progress - just fine words, but no action or meaningful proposals.

Please can I today have more than a holding response?

When will this Council transfer services and assets to Trowbridge Town Council?

A definite time line for negotiations would be a start.

Response

I spoke to the Trowbridge Town Clerk on Thursday 12th May to establish the status of delegation in Trowbridge.

Two possibilities have been discussed in detail;

Trowbridge Park – there is a complication with an existing contractor for grounds maintenance, the contract covers other parts of the Town and elsewhere. Novation of a contract partially and part way through its term is hazardous for all parties. It is unclear whether the best route is to go ahead with the transfer or wait until the grounds maintenance contract comes up for renewal. It is most likely that the lower risk route will be preferred and that the delegation will be delayed.

Allotments – the principle has been agreed and is with property to finalise the legal arrangements.

I am always available to address such issues should Councillor Osborn choose to contact me.

Question From Councillor Jon Hubbard Melksham South Division

Question 1 to Councillor Fleur de Rhe-Philippe

- a. Given that the Audit Committee's terms of reference include approval for the strategy for internal audit, will s/he explain to Council why the Audit Committee was not in any way involved in the decision to make the post of Head of Internal Audit redundant?
- b. Why was it decided not to even provide a paper on this to the Audit Committee but rather to allow the information to come out casually in remarks by officers? Who took the decision not to provide the Committee with a paper on this?
- c. Why is the matter of the provision of Internal Audit now scheduled to be addressed by the Audit Committee in secret? What is the Council trying to hide from the public?

Response

- a. The Audit Committee has approved the Strategy. Matters of personnel are reserved to the Head of Paid Service.
- b. A paper has been provided to Audit Committee and always was to be as agreed at the behest of the Chair of the Committee, Portfolio Holder and Leader.

- c. As the report sets out details of posts and costs that could be subject to a tender process or partnership. It is considered that this matter should be taken under Part II and be dealt with in closed session for commercial sensitivity – no other reason.

Question 2 to Councillor Lionel Grundy

- a. There have repeated delays in issuing the consultation document for the future provision of Youth Services in the county and the possibility of transferring the delivery of these services to a new Mutual. Could the cabinet member reassure me that once the consultation documents are finally released and the three month consultation period has taken place that there will be adequate time to properly provision any new service before it goes live.
- b. What role will young people play in the consultation process?

Response

- a. The draft 13 to 19 Commissioning Strategy is being issued for consultation on the 13th May. The strategy includes suggestions for the future of youth work services in Wiltshire. The Youth Strategy Group is leading on the development of the strategy and has been attempting to build consensus on the way forward. Young people and representatives from key agencies who work with young people have been involved in developing the draft. This has taken time but is good practice.

A decision was taken to delay issuing the draft to ensure that the document reflects the work which has taken place. It also allowed time to ensure the draft reflected latest Government policy. This is not a problem as allowance for slippage was built into the timetable.

The final 13 to 19 strategy along with a report detailing future plans for youth work services will be presented to Cabinet on 16th September. This allows sufficient time to implement any changes to take effect from 1st April 2012.

- b. Young people have been involved in developing the 13 to 19 Commissioning Strategy right from the start. A representative from Wiltshire Assembly of Youth is a member of the Youth Strategy Group. On 24th February 38 young people attended a consultation event. The draft strategy includes a section on young people's views. Further events will take place during the 3 month consultation period including focus groups of young people in each community area.

Question 3 to Leader

Conservative run Southampton Council have introduced a scheme almost identical to the one proposed by the Liberal Democrat group in February for providing council tax relief for Police Specials

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/hampshire/7898651.stm>). Does the leader still believe the scheme proposed by the Liberal Democrats in Wiltshire to be unimplementable and unfair, and if so does she think that her Conservative colleagues in Southampton have got it wrong?

Response

The scheme is an unusual one but any additional relief means a reduction in the council's tax base and its ability to raise the same level of income. For example around 60,000 residents in Wiltshire currently claim a 25% reduction in council tax which equates to a £22 million reduction in collectable income. Everyone has to pay more as a result of the award of any discount, relief or exemption.

Wiltshire is unlike Southampton in the way that it calculates the council tax due. Southampton, being a city council does not have to collect a precept in respect of the 256 parish and town councils we have in Wiltshire. The impact of offering additional relief, discount or exemption impacts not just Wiltshire Council's ability to raise the funds it needs but every parish where an additional exemption is awarded. The calculation of council tax including parish precepts is so sensitive that any new or additional relief granted would mean an increase in the council tax that the rest of the community has to pay, and specifically in towns or parishes where 'specials' would claim their relief.

Southampton do not have parishes or town councils to consider and so the cost of the relief would be borne fairly and equally amongst all its residents.

Wiltshire Council is committed to keeping council tax levels at their current levels offering stability for all its residents, many of whom already carry out a variety of voluntary and community work, particularly at parish level. Wiltshire has many different public services within the County and therefore to identify one specific service over another without justification for such a scheme could lead to arguments of favouritism. To fund them all would be considerable and add to the pressure of funding without increasing Council Tax. In this instance Wiltshire will not be following Southampton's approach.

Question From Councillor Peter Colmer Cricklade, Latton And Marston Meysey Division

Question 1 to Councillor Dick Tonge

- a. How many claims (number & value) have Wiltshire Council received in the financial year ending 31st March 2011 for pothole related damage, and how many of those claims have been paid?

- b. What are the comparative figures for the financial year ending 31st March 2010?

Response

- a. For incidents between 01/04/10-31/03/11 we have so far received claims that relate to highway pothole damage:

Total claims – 360 of which settled are 87; settled – no cost are 123 and compensation paid £26456.00

- b. For incidents between 01/04/09 – 31/03/10 we have so far received claims that relate to highway pothole damage:

Total claims – 698 of which settled are 245; settled – no cost are 413 and compensation paid £108214.80.

Question 2 to Councillor John Brady

- a. How many empty properties are there in Wiltshire as at 31st March 2011 as compared to 31st March 2010?
- b. Can you quantify the success of the empty housing team in resolving properties that have been empty in the past year?
- c. What are the comparative figures on the 'Homes for Wiltshire' register by band as at 31st March 2011 as compared to 31st March 2010 and compared to 31st March 2009?

Response

- a. In March 2010 we had a total of 5,525 vacant properties across Wiltshire compared to 5,446 in March 2011.
- b. One of the responsibilities of the strategic housing team is to try and bring back to use empty properties within Wiltshire. As at 31st March 2011 we had a total of 5,446 empty homes in Wiltshire which is a reduction from last year and equates to around 2.7% of our total stock. This is significantly better than the national average which is 4.1%. We mainly focus our attention on long term empty homes, which are those properties that are empty for a period of 6 months or more. In March 2010 we had a total of 2,026 long term empty homes, which has reduced to 1,754 being vacant in March 2011.

As part of our responsibilities in trying to bring back to use empty homes we have made contact with all empty home owners to try and encourage them to bring them back into use and we are also actively working with housing options to make best use of the private sector to maximise the opportunities for households who are threatened with homelessness through the Wilts Let

scheme. This year through our actions we have brought back to use a total of 342 properties.

This year we completed an empty homes survey which was sent to all Parish and Town Councils in September 2010. The main purpose of the survey was to identify any issues related to empty homes that are affecting local communities. We only received 28 responses and very few had highlighted any major issues associated with empty homes, but we would encourage any parish or town council to make contact with us if they have any issues associated with empty homes.

- c. Homes4Wiltshire was launched in April 2009 with a total of 6953 on the housing register. This was a significant reduction from the 14,784 households registered between the four previous district council's in March 2009. Since April 2009 we have noticed a steady increase in the amount of households that have registered with Homes4Wiltshire.

Below shows a breakdown of the register between the current five bands in both April 2010 and our most recent breakdown in April 2011.

April 2010 Band	April 2010 Households
Platinum	227
Gold plus	203
Gold	2,209
Silver	3,048
Bronze	4,987
Total	10,654

April 2011 Band	April 2011 Households
Platinum	187
Gold plus	435
Gold	2,864
Silver	4,105
Bronze	6,209
Total	13,800