

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

24 March 2020

Questions from Ian James – Bremhill Parish Council

Agenda Item 13 Future Chippenham Update

To Councillor Philip Whitehead Leader and Cabinet Member for Economic Development

Pre - Statement

At no time has Bremhill Parish been informed of this cabinet meeting where the item concerned at 13/14 of the agenda proposes a road and 7,500 houses many of which will be built in the parish of Bremhill.

A number of my colleagues have written questions, and statements for this meeting. Due to the Coronavirus the public are unable to attend and speak at the meeting due to Government directions.

The inclusion of this item on the agenda at this time when the country is in a fight against a major pandemic when the public are not able to attend to speak in a democratic forum smacks of panic within the Council to get this agenda item through with little or no comment.

I would suggest that this has been put into the agenda to attempt to pass it through cabinet with no representation from the public.

The agenda item regarding development to the east of Chippenham should be withdrawn from the agenda, and placed back when the Coronavirus has subsided and members of the public can attend. I am sure you appreciate the need to maintain the democratic process of government meetings.

Another issue is Bremhill parish council was not informed that this agenda item would be discussed. Mr Whitehead assured members of the parish council in

December that every opportunity for consultation would be made to allow the parish council to be included in the process. this has clearly failed again.

Question

Please assure me that this matter has been discussed at the highest level, and the decision as to whether this item will remain in the agenda for 24th March.

Response

It has been so discussed and a decision taken to retain this, and other items, on the Cabinet agenda for 24th March.

The Cabinet is the Council's principal decision-making body, and collectively Cabinet Members have responsibility for taking the day to day decisions within the Council.

Councillors must be physically present at any formally constituted meeting to be part of the quorum, vote and thereby take decisions. At present this is a legal requirement (Schedule 12 to the Local Government Act 1972).

A number of decisions to be made by the Cabinet at their meeting on 24 March 2020 have deadlines attached and are time limited. Delaying a decision at this point will impact greatly on the long-term health of the Council, its ability to deliver its core services, and future strategic projects that enable this.

At this time the preferred method of public participation is via written statements and questions submitted in writing to be considered at the meeting. Members of the public are able to join the meeting remotely via skype and also watch proceedings through the webcast.

Specifically, in connection with this Agenda Item 13 the risk is failing to agree contract terms between the Council and Homes England. That risk is small, and there is clear intention in the negotiations from both the Council and Homes England to achieve a contract. Once we are successfully in contract much of the budget requested for 2020-21 can be recovered. In this report we seek only to be wholly transparent about expenditure and risks as well as the long-term benefits that will accrue.

Statement

I applaud the Council on the successful bid for £75m, however the way the Council went about this bid behind closed doors is a trait that unfortunately this Council has a habit of doing. If there is any hint of opposition, questioning or the requirement for consultation this Council carries on regardless of public opinion.

The HIF bid had no credible public support, and yet the Council clearly stated to the Housing Minister that there was public support, why would the Council go to these lengths to put this bid into government?

There are a number of questions Cabinet members should be asking: The profit the Council makes from the sale of Hardens Farm is that going back into the Council it improve public services such new bus routes, the provision of a decent social care programme or will it be used to reduce Council Tax?

The developers who already have large land banks, and surplus cash in the bank of in excess of £2billion, are requesting this support to allow them to build £1 million houses alongside the River Marden. Is this right that we the tax payer should be supporting builders and developers, unless the council can assure you that there will 40% social housing.

This £75m is just a loan to the Council and the developers, both will have to pay this back to the Council to allow further infrastructure projects to continue in Wiltshire. The question Cabinet members should be asking “is when will this money be paid back to the council?” Developers have a very poor record on actually completing developments with all the requirements in the original plan. Some go bankrupt, and others just leave developments unfinished. Can you trust the developers to repay this money?

This Council has carried out a bid which lacked consultation, because it knew that if it went through the correct consultation process it may not have succeeded in getting the support it required. The council ignored this democratic process and submitted the bid. The Council now faces the problem of applying for planning permission for a road where there is no local plan to the east of Chippenham. Surely that cannot be right?

Secondly if the planning permission is granted for the road, and it is built by 2024, and the housing development comes up for planning the planning inspector may well refuse planning for a number of reasons, the high risk of flooding to Chippenham town centre, the value of the landscape, and the fact that a planning inspector passing the Bremhill Neighbourhood Plan stated that development should not breach the disused rail track thereby conserving the separation between Chippenham Town and the village of Tytherton Lucas.

This is a straight forward matter, and I would ask that you delay any decision on this agenda item until members of the public are able to express their views on this

agenda item. To agree to loaning taxpayers money to start this process without knowing the full risks involved could mean the Council loses this money you are being asked to approve today. You will be pressured, but the due diligence has not been proved, and the rush to pass this agenda item during the Corona virus pandemic smacks of opportunism. Perhaps the £5m would be better spent on Social Care to empty the beds at Great Western Hospital which will be urgently required in the coming weeks.