

COUNCIL
23 FEBRUARY 2010

COUNCILLORS' QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLOR ERNIE CLARK
HILPERTON DIVISION

TO COUNCILLOR JOHN BRADY, CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT, PLANNING AND HOUSING

Question 1

The only area of Wiltshire Council to still have council housing is Salisbury. However, I now understand that Wiltshire Council intends to embark on a small-scale council house building project in the Trowbridge area. What is the logic behind this bearing in mind

- a) the houses will be nowhere near existing stock,
- b) the Trowbridge area is already well served by several RSLs, and
- c) the recent Comprehensive Area Assessment found that the WC council house service is not being operated in a cost-effective manner? Would time not be better spent getting our house in order, if you'll excuse the pun?

Response

Cabinet approved a programme of five bids to the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to deliver a total of 64 new affordable homes to be developed, owned and managed by the Council on Council-owned sites in July and October 2009. It will now be possible to provide 65 units across these sites. Of these, 22 units will be in Salisbury and the remaining 43 units in the Trowbridge area.

All five bids submitted were successful and Wiltshire Council has secured a total of almost £4.3m of investment by the HCA in addition to funding provided to RSLs for the provision of affordable housing. This pot of funding was specifically for Local Authorities to bid for and was not open to bidding from the RSLs. Consequently, if Wiltshire Council had not taken up this opportunity the funding and the additional 65 affordable homes would not have been secured.

As reported to Cabinet in July 2009, detailed discussions took place prior to bidding with the Head of Housing Management. He welcomes the opportunity to reduce the overall age of the housing stock, recognises the maintenance efficiency benefits of so doing, and has confirmed that he is able to effectively

manage the completed units from a base in Salisbury. Housing management staff currently work on a patch basis and the officers working in the most northern patch would be able to cover the new properties in the Trowbridge area. The current maintenance contract will shortly be up for renewal and the new properties will be included in any new contract agreed.

The CAA has no relevance to the need for more affordable housing in Wiltshire and the points raised by the CAA are being dealt with separately and will not stand in the way of us delivering more affordable homes. It should be noted that the CAA has not 'red flagged' the service and bringing five Councils in to one is a challenge and we need to accept that there will be areas which will need attention as part of that process.

Question 2

In the first consultation document for the Local Development Framework, Hilperton seems to have been 'de-listed' as a large village. How many other villages in Wiltshire have also been deemed to no longer exist by this document?

Response

Although I understand that it might appear from the consultation document that Hilperton has been “de-listed” as a separate village, this is not the case. In the Spatial Strategy background document, which accompanied the Wiltshire 2026 consultation, and on which the consultation document is based, Hilperton is identified as part of a ‘grouped settlement’ (Appendix B). This list includes ‘Tidworth and Ludgershall’, as well as the ‘Trowbridge and Hilperton (including Staverton Marina) functional grouping’. ‘Laverstock and Salisbury’ are treated similarly in the South Wiltshire Core Strategy.

Appendix B to the Spatial Strategy background paper states:

“If Hilperton were located at some distance from Trowbridge, it would be able to function more independently as a small town or village. However, due to its proximity to Trowbridge, and its close relationship with its neighbour, it cannot be considered in isolation.”

There is an eminently practical reason why, for the purposes of the Core Strategy, Hilperton should be treated as a part of the ‘Trowbridge/Staverton Marina/Hilperton’ functional grouping. Namely, that the Local Development Framework should allocate an appropriate level of development to each settlement in accordance with its needs. By treating Hilperton as part of a “grouped settlement”, such additional development can be accommodated at the most suitable location, or locations, for the grouping as a whole. If Hilperton were regarded as separate and distinct from Trowbridge for the purposes of the Core Strategy, additional development would have to be accommodated in or around the village to satisfy, what would then be, a separate need.

This 'grouping' of settlements for the purpose of the Core strategy, is just that. It implies no loss of identify for Hilperton, but merely reflects, from a spatial planning perspective, the relationship between settlements either abutting or in close proximity to one another.

TO COUNCILLOR FLEUR DE RHE PHILIPPE
CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND RISK

Question 3

With the advent of one council and SAP, the public were constantly promised that substantial savings would result. However, the proposed WC council tax increase is on a par with many other councils. What has happened to these much-vaunted savings?

Response

Both the One Council and Business Management Programmes (BMP - SAP) have exceeded their business plan cost reduction targets for the first two years. These savings are to be independently verified by our external auditors.

The Executive has channelled these savings into two areas; (1) reductions in the rise of council tax levels - this is the fourth consecutive year where the rate of rise has been smaller than the preceding year, and (2) priority service growth areas as identified by the public during the budget consultation process; highway repair and maintenance, care for older people and children's services.

TO COUNCILLOR FLEUR DE RHE PHILIPPE
CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND RISK

Question 4

A constituent has an interest in the WC proposal to upgrade its benefit database as he assists one of his relatives who is a Trowbridge resident in sheltered accommodation and receiving both housing and council tax benefit. He asks: What measures are being taken to ensure that WC does not end up with an overpriced and unworkable system, like so many modern database systems seem to end up? Is WC proposing to buy a system that has already been purchased by other councils and demonstrated to work properly or is it looking for a brand new development which is certain to have inbuilt and hitherto undiscovered risks? My constituent is rightly concerned that vulnerable people do not end up carrying the can for slack Council IT policy.

Response

The aim of the new revenues and benefits system is both to improve the service to customers and make it more cost effective. When selecting and purchasing the new system great care will be taken to ensure it is the right solution from a reputable provider, and that it provides value for money. The system will be thoroughly tested and implemented with a detailed implementation plan. Other authorities, who have implemented a revenues and benefits system, will be contacted at an early stage in order to learn from their experience.