

Wiltshire Council

Annual Council

14 May 2013

Item 15 - Questions from Councillors

From Councillor Ernie Clark, Hilperton Division

To the relevant Cabinet Member

Question 1

With the rebuilding of County Hall, what emergency radio coverage does central Wiltshire now have? Does it have any?

What provision has been made for RAYNET volunteers who used to have equipment and facilities at County Hall? What happened to their stored equipment?

Response

RAYNET is the Radio Amateur's Emergency Communications Network, a volunteer organisation that supports all the emergency services by providing a specialist communications capability. The organisation has confirmed that it would be able to set up and work from a car in the car park of County Hall, if necessary.

The Highways Incident Room is equipped for and uses the County wide radio network to permit communication with Wiltshire Highways maintenance vehicles. This system makes use of transmitters based on one Thames Water and three Home Office sites to give coverage across the County.

Both the Highways Incident Room (Chalfield room) and the adjoining Major Incident Room (Westwood room) have been equipped to enable RAYNET volunteers to provide emergency radio coverage from either room. Some work is outstanding but it is anticipated the works will be complete and will have been tested shortly. RAYNET's Wiltshire County Controller has confirmed that it is satisfied with the provisions being made.

The Westwood room currently also includes the BBC studio, on a temporary basis, which will be re-located back into County Hall when the refurbishment is completed. This will free up an additional mast/antenna for the two rooms.

Equipment stored in the County Hall basement has been moved into storage cabinets, close to the Incident Rooms to make it easily accessible. At the same time the opportunity was taken to dispose of some surplus or obsolete equipment. RAYNET are also advising on the upgrade of some equipment.

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From Councillor Ernie Clark, Hilperton Division

To Chairman of Standards Committee (once appointed)

Question 2

Now that the Standards Committee has to be politically balanced, it seems to serve little real purpose other than being a political 'platform' for some members. What was the cost of the committee to the council tax payer over the last year? The figure should include allowances paid to non-councillor members of the committee, committee chairman allowance, officer time, paper costs, postage, mileage claims etc. I do not expect the figure to include subcommittee work for hearings etc.

Response

Annual Council at its meeting on 15 May 2012 approved the establishment of a Standards Committee to discharge the Council's functions in relation to the new standards framework under the Localism Act 2011, including the duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct and the Committee's wider role of oversight of the constitution and complaints handling.

During 2012/13, the new Standards Committee met on 2 occasions, namely 30 July and 24 October.

The cost of the Committee for the period 2012/13 (from inception of the new standards framework on 1 July 2012, excluding assessments, reviews, sub-committees and hearings) was as follows:

Payment to non-voting co-opted members £1120 x 4 =	4480
Chairman's allowance	2517
Postage and printing	120 (approx)
Mileage allowance	287

The cost of providing officer support to the Standards Committee are met within existing salary costs and, apart from travelling costs (as covered above) no additional costs are therefore involved.

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From Councillor Linda Packard, Chippenham Lowden and Rowden Division

To the relevant Cabinet member

Question 3

What provision has Wiltshire Council made for checking the quality of the work undertaken by the contractors who make the repairs to the Highways and pavements in Wiltshire?

Response

The Quality of work produced by contractors is important, and completed work is inspected by experienced highway staff in order to ensure it meets the required standard. On some specialist road and bridge work our highways consultant, Atkins, supervises the work to ensure it is to the correct specification.

Question 4

What are the penalties, financial or otherwise for the contractors if they do not reach the required standard of work?

Response

Where work carried out by the Council's highways contractor does not achieve the required standard the contractor must rectify the fault at their own expense.

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From Councillor Brian Dalton, Harnham Division

To the relevant Cabinet member

Question 5

With the imminent closure of Salisbury Bus Station, very likely in July or August, what solution (short term and long term) is the council providing for displaced buses onto the narrow streets? How many buses an hour are the council expecting to be displaced?

Response

Councillor Dalton will be aware that the bus station is not owned by the Council and that it is the bus company that has decided to sell it.

The Council has identified with the bus companies a number of possible locations for new on street stops, and for places for buses to lay over between journeys. The closure of the bus station will displace 14 buses an hour, and it is considered that as well as the existing on-street stops, this will require provision of four new stops in the city centre. The suggested locations for these are now being investigated for technical and operational feasibility, following which discussions will take place with the bus operators to agree which services will arrive and depart from which stops. No date has yet been confirmed for the closure of the bus station, but the new stops will be in place before this occurs.

The suggested solution will be reviewed with the Salisbury Area Board before any decisions are made. If Councillor Dalton has any suggestions we would appreciate hearing of them.

The development of a plan to respond to the closure of the bus station will be the first phase in a longer term review of traffic in the city centre in the context of other changes that are imminent or proposed, such as the Maltings redevelopment. The solution that will be implemented in the short term will take account of this in order to minimise the need for further reorganisation at a future date.

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From Councillor Terry Chivers, Melksham Without North Division

To the Leader of the Council

Question 6

In Sheffield the City Council has recently taken over the running of local post offices under the Sustainable Communities Act. This was a valid proposal under the act because it would help boost the local economy.

This project has been so successful that the Council have now opened a further two post offices, and this model is now being rolled out nationally.

Melksham Post Office could soon be lost from the town Centre as the post office is looking to re-locate it elsewhere. Could Wiltshire Council look at taking over this service and running it from the campus?

This model could also be used elsewhere in the County when town centre post offices are under threat.

Response

A verbal response will be given at the meeting.

Question 7

Many local residents have complained that letters and phone calls to Wiltshire Council are going un-answered. Is this a result of redundancies or just bad management?

Response

It is the result of neither redundancies nor bad management.

Customer Services average monthly telephone connection rate for 2012/13 was 92.1% versus a target of 90%. Letters are answered within 10 days; emails are acknowledged daily and also answered within the 10 days.

Question 8

How many official complaints have been made regarding un-answered mail and phone calls?

Response

The corporate complaints team has not received any formal complaints at Stage 2 of the council's complaints procedure that relate solely to unanswered mail and phone calls. Complaints at Stage 1 of the complaints procedure (informal complaints) are responded to by front line services and are not centrally recorded.

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From Councillor Jon Hubbard, Melksham South Division

To the Cabinet member with responsibility for Children's Services

Question 9

Could the cabinet member please inform me what the plans are for the £0.5m property purchased on Spa Road in my ward some 3 years ago. Initially we were informed it would be a Children's Home, and the council sought planning permission accordingly.

Next it was to be the 'Aspire' centre, and again planning permission was sought for this.

Now the building sits empty and boarded up.

How much has it cost in rates and insurance for this building to remain empty for over 3 years?

How much, including appropriate provision for officer time, was spent on planning and associated costs for these aborted schemes.

What are the plans for the future of the property?

How does purchasing a residential property and keeping it empty for over 3 years fit in with the council's Empty Home Strategy?

Response

An offer was made for 50 Spa Road that was conditional on receiving planning permission for change of use to a residential care home which was granted in November 2010. The purchase completed in January 2011. A new strategy for creating local placements for young people instead of placing them in residential care was subsequently developed and the property was redesigned as a centre that would provide dedicated support for looked after children and young people. This redesign required a revised planning application which was approved in September 2012.

The running costs associated with this property since its purchase total £14,339 to date which includes minor maintenance, insurance and rates.

A total of £44k has been spent on planning, legal and architects fees (including those legal fees associated with the purchase) and officer time on the two schemes that have been developed for the use of this property.

The future of the property and the next steps for the service is the subject of a meeting between Members (including the Lead Member for children's services) which has been arranged for 13th May 2013.

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From Councillor Peter Edge, Wilton and Lower Wylde Valley Division

To the relevant Cabinet member

Question 10

Could the Cabinet member please answer the following questions:-

- 1) How much did Wiltshire Council receive for the sale of Nadder Middle School in Tisbury?
- 2) How much did Wiltshire Council pay to buy back the former Nadder Middle School in Tisbury?
- 3) How much did Wiltshire Council receive for the former Wilton Middle School?

Response

- 1) Wiltshire County Council sold the former Tisbury School in 2005 for £525,000 to Thistledown Education Trust.
- 2) Wiltshire Council purchased back the Tisbury School in April 2012 for £610,000 from Thistledown Education Trust.
- 3) Wiltshire Council and Salisbury Diocesan Education Board jointly sold the former Wilton Middle School in July 2010 to Thistledown Education Trust for £1,850,000. These proceeds were split equally between SDBE and Wiltshire Council, with a receipt to Wiltshire Council of £925,000.

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From Councillor Terry Chivers, Melksham Without North Division

To the relevant Cabinet member

Question 11

Does this ruling group on this Council, agree with the bedroom tax?

Response

A verbal response will be given at the meeting.

Question 12

Can you give me an assurance, those Council tenants that get into arrears due to the bedroom tax won't be evicted?

Response

A verbal response will be given at the meeting.