

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

11 January 2022

Agenda Item 5 – Public Participation and Questions from Councillors

Question from: Chris Caswill FAcSS

To Councillor : Richard Clewer, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for MCI, Economic Development, Heritage, Arts, Tourism and Health & Wellbeing

Statement:

The use of Zoom and other remote communication technologies encouraged wider participation in meetings. Many organisations have recognised and applauded this and have taken steps to introduce 'hybrid' systems as part of returning to face-to-face meetings, allowing for remote access and participation alongside face to face. Wiltshire is a geographically large County with few good public transport links to Trowbridge. Moreover, the spread and transmission of COVID remains of significant concern.

Question 1 – (22-001)

Why has the Wiltshire Council leadership not welcomed and adopted this opportunity to improve public accountability and safe and inclusive engagement by adopting a hybrid approach? '

Response:

The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, permitted the use of online meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic and the Regulations expired on 6 May 2021.

The High Court issued a judgement on 28 April 2021, ruling that Parliament would need to approve legislation to allow local authority meetings under the 1972 Act to continue to take place remotely once the Regulations expired. In the spring of 2021, the Government announced that it would not extend the Regulations beyond 6 May 2021, stating primary legislation would be required to make such a change, and this could not be prioritised within the current legislative programme.

During the pandemic the Council has utilised hybrid meetings where possible and is investing in technology to allow hybrid meetings in the future. The Council's ability to do this, however, is impacted by the law, the size of our buildings and limits on room capacity in line with Public Health advice. The Council is also impacted by the availability of technology to facilitate accessible meetings in all meeting venues.

At the present time the only meetings that remain online include informal meetings such as agenda-setting meetings, working groups, meetings with officers, and briefings. These meetings do not require formal decisions to be made. Area Boards are another meeting that have continued to operate online, although this is subject to the agreement of the Area Board members. As Area Boards operate under executive powers delegated from the Leader, all executive Area Board decisions (Area Board grants, and CATG spending) can also be made by the Leader. Therefore, those Area Boards meeting informally online make recommendations to the Leader. These recommendations are then formally made by the Leader through a single-member decision process.

The approach to meetings will be kept under review in response to any government announcements or Public Health advice for Wiltshire.

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Question from: Cllr Ian Thorn

To Councillor : Nick Botterill, Cabinet Member for Development Management, Strategic Planning and Climate Change /

Question 1 – (22-002)

How much has Wiltshire Council spent on defending planning appeals (including written reps, hearings, enquiries) in this financial year?

Response:

Internal costs (of staff, venues, etc.) associated with appeals are absorbed within normal Service costs. External costs (of legal representatives, expert witnesses, etc.) for 'local inquiries' and 'hearings' held so far in the current financial year are c.£200k. External costs for further local inquiries and hearings scheduled in the current financial year are predicted to be c.£115k-£175k.

Question 2 – (22-003)

How many vacancies are there in Wiltshire Council's planning teams? How many roles have been frozen?

Response:

While there are currently 9 vacancies in the planning teams, all bar one of these are filled by agency staff, including that of the Chief Planning Officer. The single remaining 'real' vacancy is for a Spatial Planning Officer and this post has been the subject of interview and job offer but for one reason or another the candidate did not accept the offer and the place remains vacant.

There are no vacancies that are frozen.

Question 3 – (22-004)

How much has Wiltshire Council spent on the market towns initiative (£1 million per year (political) initiative) agreed at the February budget meeting in this financial year?

Response:

Forecast spend for 21/22 from the Wiltshire Towns Fund currently stands at £0.475m.

The recent announcement of further business support through the Omnicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant, as well as the addition to the Additional Restrictions Fund will likely mean the majority of spend from the 21/22 allocation from the Wiltshire Towns recovery budget will occur in 22/23. This response funding will take precedence in terms of staff resource.

Prior to the Omicron emergence, an underspend of £0.525m had been forecast against Wiltshire Towns recovery budget for 21/22. This is largely due to the number of grant funded programmes being prioritised for spend alongside the Council's investment, namely the Local Restrictions Grant, Restart Grants and Additional Restrictions Grant programme. It has been recommended that any underspend on Towns Recovery budget is moved into an ear-marked reserve for future initiatives.

Officers are still seeking to maximise use of the funding in 21/22.

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Question from: Cllr Ian Thorn

To Councillor : Richard Clewer, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for MCI, Economic Development, Heritage, Arts, Tourism and Health & Wellbeing

Question 4 – (22-005)

When will the complete business plan be published?

Response:

The full Business Plan will be published as part of the 1 February Cabinet papers, before proceeding to Full Council on 15 February

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Question from: Cllr Ian Thorn

To Councillor : Ashley O’Neil, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Public Protection, Licensing, Staffing, Communities and Area Boards

Question 5 – (22-006)

What is the current staff compliment at WC. How many vacancies are there and how many posts are currently frozen?

Response:

The headcount for the council on 5 January 2022 was 4870 and the full-time equivalent was 3689.

It is difficult to give an exact figure for live vacancies as it is a moving picture, and the number is impacted by many things, however:

- Significant levels of recruitment are taking place all the time to vacant roles across the Council and on 7 January there were 70 council jobs being advertised for 180 positions and 280 vacancies where the positions have been advertised and shortlisting, clearances or a candidate start date were pending.
- Some posts remain vacant as attempts to recruit have not been successful.

There are no vacancies frozen however, some vacancies are held temporarily pending service redesign (to ensure we have efficient staffing structures) or while staff are deployed to other roles, and in some cases for the delivery of savings because the post is no longer required.

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Question from: Cllr Ian Thorn

To Councillors : Richard Clewer, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for MCI, Economic Development, Heritage, Arts, Tourism and Health & Wellbeing / Ian Blair-Pilling, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Public Protection, Leisure, Libraries, FM, Operational Assets and Broadband

Question 6 – (22-007)

Can you clarify the public health responsibilities of the cabinet member for public health and the cabinet member for health and wellbeing?

Response:

Cllr Clewer Co-Chairs the Health & Wellbeing Board as part of his responsibilities as Leader of the Council recognising the strategic nature of the Board and Cllr Blair-Pilling oversees Public Health and Public Protection Services as part of his Cabinet responsibilities.

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Question from: Melanie Boyle

To Councillor : Phil Alford, Cabinet Member for Housing, Strategic Assets and Asset Transfer

Statement: Affordable Housing

According to calculations by the Halifax, Chippenham now ranks fourth in the nationwide league of places with the highest growth in house prices over the last year £381,181, £58,322, 18.1 per cent an increase of £1,121 per week. Almost three times the UK average increase of 6.2 per cent.

The article also says this is due to demand, the issue for local residents is these houses are being sold to investors who aren't even worried if they stay empty when they are making 18.1% profit. Chippenham has 130 properties for sale on Rightmove and many more thousands already approved and being built. Executive homes in the countryside that inflate the average prices when affordable housing would have brought it down to the national average.

Question 1 (22-008)

Q1 With so much profit in these houses why is the 30% affordable housing not being met? see https://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/housing-new-housing-developments?fbclid=IwAR3PoLvYq_HqwWHBo4CaQW2dYEel2Sjb67tVpA9eldRw5L4HiUzT1RDEZQ0 and below.

Response:

In line with Core Policy 43 of the Wiltshire Core Strategy and national policy major housing developments at Chippenham are generally required to provide 40% affordable housing. However, policy exceptionally allows for a reduced contribution in certain circumstances including viability considerations. See response to Question 3 also.

Question 2 (22-009)

What does Wiltshire Council plan to do to ensure the old ambulance site, old college site, Rawlings Farm and Rowden Brook meet their affordable housing quotas?

Response

See response to Question 1. The Council, as it has been, will continue to rigorously appraise new planning applications against policy to maximise affordable housing delivery and consider individual circumstances of sites.

Of the sites listed where applications have been determined: 40% affordable housing has been secured at Rawlings Farm; following consideration of viability assessment, 30% at Rowden Park; and the former Wiltshire college site was subject to viability assessment and secured a reduced commuted sum for off-site provision.

Question 3 (22-010)

I presume it is too late to do anything about Bluebells, Hunters Moon and Birds Marsh not providing their quota of affordable housing despite making so much profit?

Hunters Moon - 450 dwellings - 20 affordable including built and planned

Birds Marsh - 750 dwellings - 47 affordable including built and planned

Rowden Brook - 1,000 dwellings - Wiltshire Council website none built or planned but paper said 27 a few weeks back

Rawlings Farm - 650 dwellings - Wiltshire Council website no affordable dwellings planned

Bluebells - 72 dwellings - Wiltshire Council website no affordable dwellings planned

Langley Park - 330 dwellings planned - Wiltshire Council website no affordable dwellings planned

Response

The numbers of 'affordable homes' quoted are taken from a Council webpage, the link to which was provided in Q1. The purpose of this webpage is to provide

information for potential occupiers of affordable housing about what is in the immediate pipeline. It therefore only includes homes built in the previous 6 months and the likely completions of new homes in the next 12 months. It does not provide information on the total level of affordable housing across a site. There was previously an explanation to this effect on the webpage and we will ensure that this is re-instated for clarity.

With regard to Bluebells, Hunters Moon and Birds Marsh the levels of affordable housing have been established on these sites taking into account their specific circumstances, as follows:

- Policy compliant 40% affordable housing contribution has been secured at Bluebells (assumed to be land at Patterdown Road);
- Phases 1 to 4 of Hunters Moon secured 27.3% based on viability assessment, with 40% being secured on the most recent phase (phase 5).
- Birds Marsh development secured 20% based on viability assessment that took into consideration the cost of significant road infrastructure.

Question 4 (22-011)

Empty houses have increased 24% in Chippenham, matching the number of people on the Council waiting list, will Wiltshire Council be joining with 120 other local authorities to support Empty Homes week 28 Feb until 6 March to get long term empty houses back into use?

Response

The Council monitors empty homes carefully and engages with the owners, where it can, to understand the reasons for them remaining empty. There are few common themes regarding long term empty homes but one of the most common is the challenge of selling a unit within a retirement home or retirement complex. Often such properties can take much longer to sell or dispose of in comparison to traditional dwellings.

Where we have engaged with empty home owners we have unearthed complex family disputes or reluctance by one member of the family to dispose of an asset.

Question 5 (22-012)

Does Wiltshire Council charge double council tax on empty houses after 2 years?

Response

We levy an additional 50% charge on domestic property that has been unoccupied for more than 2 years.

We monitor these properties carefully and engage with the owners, where we can, to understand the reasons for them remaining empty. There are few common themes

regarding long term empty homes but one of the most common is the challenge of selling a unit within a retirement home or retirement complex. Often such properties can take much longer to sell or dispose of in comparison to traditional dwellings.

As stated in response to the previous question, where we have engaged with empty home owners we have unearthed complex family disputes or reluctance by one member of the family to dispose of an asset.

Question 6 (22-013)

What steps is Wiltshire Council taking to address the number of houses being taken out of the rental market and used for Airbnb in Chippenham?

Response

This is not just an issue in Chippenham, it is a national issue but particularly in Wiltshire and most commonly found in the most picturesque market town and villages, across the county. These issues are market led; homeowners are in a position to let their homes as holiday lets but they must be available to let for a minimum of 140 days per annum. There are disadvantages in terms of reducing the number of houses to rent as homes and there is a reduction in the number of domestic properties paying council tax as such dwellings are treated as businesses, however they do attract visitors, tourists and tourism, they do generate an income, but until the issue is addressed at a national level there is little the council can do to halt this phenomenon.

Unless there has been a material change of use in planning terms, using a property for short term Airbnb purposes is unlikely to require planning permission. If the use is more permanent that could trigger the need for a change of use in some circumstances, but this will depend on the specific nature of the use.

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Agenda Item 5 – Public Participation and Questions from Councillors

Question from: Melanie Boyle

To Councillor : Dr Mark McClelland, Cabinet Member for Transport, Waste, Street Scene and Flooding

Statement - Bus Back Better

Since the Bus Back Better scheme was announced last March I have been trying to find out who is responsible/accountable for buses in Chippenham? I have tried my Councillor, Town Council, Wiltshire Council and my MP. We have an empty bus that goes past our house 6 times a day, full size not environmentally friendly.

Question 7 (22-014)

Who is responsible for reviewing the usage and contracts when they come up for renewal to ensure money is spent in the best way possible to encourage the optimum use of buses?

Response

The Buses Team within the Passenger Transport Unit review bus usage to best match bus routes and timetables to demand when the commercial network doesn't provide. Whilst this is done in great detail at times of re-tendering, the process is ongoing during the life of the contract.

Contracts will specify a minimum capacity for buses, but it is left up to the successful bidder to decide how best to resource the operation from their whole fleet rather than specifying particular bus workings, self-contained to a contract. Timetables are often designed to allow for self-contained bus workings, but there is no obligation for bus

companies to follow them. So for example, at peak times the capacity required maybe up to 40 passengers, so a bus with capacity to manage this volume is required, whilst at off peak times, much fewer passengers are required.

Question 8 (22-015)

We are told about the high expenses of bus routes, on new estates how are buses financed for future generations? We see at Showell, Hunters Moon, Sadlers Mead and various sites that land is left for businesses but no business uses the land so buses would need to be to other towns where employment is available?

Response

Bus services to new developments are usually funded, in the initial stage, by developer funding. If these can be linked into the existing network the chances of them being financially sustainable when the developer funding expires are improved. However, if the service is not financially viable for the bus operator when the funding ends the decision whether to continue to support the service rests with Wiltshire Council. Linking new developments to employment locations is important, but as people are likely to be travelling to many diverse locations from a new housing development, connection to other buses or to trains are more important.

Through the governments new national bus strategy, money will be made available to Wiltshire Council through the recently submitted Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). This money will be facilitate increased usage of the bus to support improved air quality and net zero carbon ambitions.

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Agenda Item 5 – Public Participation and Questions from Councillors

Question from: Margaret Willmot

To Councillor : Dr Mark McClelland, Cabinet Member for Transport, Waste, Street Scene and Flooding

Statement:

The response to a question to Cabinet from Daniel Kronenberg on 14/12/2021 contained the following “we [Wiltshire Council] must be realistic that as a largely rural county, the majority of people will continue to travel by car for the foreseeable future.”

Wiltshire Council’s conclusions that this is a largely rural county is based on classifying areas which are ‘rural town and fringe’ (i.e. up to 10,000 residents) as rural. This includes places like Marlborough and Bradford on Avon which have many local amenities, thereby reducing the need to travel elsewhere. These places support public transport, including railway stations (e.g. in the ‘rural towns’ of Bradford on Avon, Pewsey and Tisbury) and an electric car share club (Tisbury).

So to rephrase Wiltshire Council’s response, those who live in towns – including rural towns – comprise over 72% of Wiltshire’s population (2011 census), and this proportion will rise given that development is being focused in the urban centres.

Across the whole of Wiltshire, 14% of households in areas defined as ‘rural town and fringe’ do not own a car (2011 census). The transport vision for the future needs to take account of all household members, including the young and old, as well as the multiple benefits of active and alternative travel, and the imperative of achieving ‘zero carbon’ goals. In a Wiltshire ‘where everybody matters’ transport planning should focus on providing sustainable alternatives rather than assuming the majority of people will travel by car.

Question 1 – (22-016)

Will Wiltshire Council undertake to take note of the increasingly urban nature of the county, and the needs of all those who are unable or unwilling to drive, in their transport planning for the county?

Response:

The Council acknowledges that Wiltshire's demographic is multi-faceted, requiring an approach to transport that responds to a variety of needs.

Reliance on the car is correspondingly greater in some areas compared to others, and our review of the Council's Local Transport Plan later this year will set out policies and strategies that reflect those differing needs.

Question 2 – (22-017)

Can Wiltshire Council please confirm that they will be progressing from the now outdated 'predict and provide' methodology which they seem to favour in transport planning to the latest and more visionary 'decide and provide' approach^[1]?

^[1] See 'TRICS Guidance note on the practical Implementation of the Decide and Provide Approach'
<http://www.trics.org/decideandprovideguidance.html>

Response

Although the Council still needs to have regard to conventional forecasting techniques, it is acknowledged that technology-based innovations and the effects of Covid-19 are a source of ongoing potential disruption and change.

Recognising the need to ensure that our thinking needs to account for a range of future uncertainties, our approach to reviews of our Local Plan and Local Transport Plan is looking to develop and assess a number of plausible future travel scenarios.

Scenarios are helpful in developing policies and strategies, as a more robust way of considering a range of uncertain future conditions.

