



COUNCIL MEETING – 18 February 2010

Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 1

From: Councillor Achwal

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Access

“During the heavy snow recently in January, Junction 9 on the M27 (the only major route into and out of Whiteley) was totally inaccessible making it impassible. Many residents and business workers had to abandon their cars. Then 2-3 weeks later in the rush hour there was a major pile up on the M27 near junction 9, again making the exit from and into Whiteley impassable.

After the first incident the bollards were lowered on Yew Tree Drive after some hours allowing traffic to flow in and out of Whiteley safely (although there were no signs displayed letting drivers know that this route was opened to traffic). As for the second incident the bollards were not lowered on Yew Tree Drive leaving drivers in a traffic jam for hours.

Could the Portfolio Holder request from Hampshire County Council exactly what emergency measures they have in place in case such events were to happen in the future?”

Reply

“Winchester City Council has no authority in this area but will of course press the County Council for quick action if there is any repetition.

The County Council does have an emergency traffic plan for Whiteley which is currently being revised, this will include improvements on how to provide better information to businesses and residents to help to alleviate such problems as have occurred in the question from Councillor Achwal.

The Emergency Planning Unit at Hampshire County Council will convene the meeting between the Police, Hampshire County Council Highways and the Highways Agency to review the current procedures in place.”



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QUESTION 2

From: Councillor Anthony

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Access

“Can the Portfolio Holder give us an update on the Yew Tree Drive (Whiteley) survey?”

Reply

“Hampshire County Council in conjunction with Fareham Borough Council and Winchester City Council have produced a draft questionnaire regarding access arrangements to and from Whiteley. The questionnaire builds upon work undertaken utilising the transport model ‘SATURN’ it is hoped that a consultation document will be sent to all residents and employers in Whiteley, Swanwick, Burridge and relevant sections of Park Gate before the elections ‘purdah’ period.

The Yew Tree Drive survey which is included in a questionnaire regarding access arrangements for Whiteley is being produced by Hampshire County Council with input from Fareham Borough Council and Winchester City Council. The questionnaire is still in draft form.

There will be a question within the document relating directly to Yew Tree Drive and its access arrangements; the final wording of this question however has still to be agreed.”



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QUESTION 3

From: Councillor Cook

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing

“Is the Portfolio Holder comfortable with the current system of bidding for Council Accommodation and confident that it is operating in an efficient and fair manner, having regard to the problems some persons have with the Information Technology involved and the pressure for housing in the more attractive areas of Hampshire?”

Reply

“The Council launched its Choice Based Letting system (Hampshire Home Choice) on 22 April 2009. It was a Government requirement that all Local Authorities had a CBL system in place by 2010 and that funding would be provided for those that developed sub-regional schemes. The Council developed its system with East Hampshire District Council and Havant Borough Council as neighbouring authorities with whom we shared significant developments, common housing challenges and who did not already have a CBL system in place. Recently Test Valley Borough Council has applied to join HHC with the Government confirming further funding will be available to facilitate their integration.

Since the schemes launch there has been 3.35 million ‘hits’ on the website and 47,000 bids by applicants (April – Dec 2009). 97.7% of bids have been made online despite the fact that applicants can bid via phone, in person, via the Customer Services Centre and by auto bid. Recent work carried out by the HHC Board has established that cross boundary moves are remarkable even between LA’s with approximately 12% of each LA lets going to out of district moves. It is worth noting that the Council’s previous allocation system also allowed out of district moves as it is a Government requirement that all LA’s have open access to waiting lists.

The bidding process was subject to a full Equality Impact Assessment in accordance with The CRE Code of Practice for Race Equality in Housing and the Single Equality Act 2009, advice and feedback was sought from all

stakeholders as part of the process as well as external validation of the final recommendations. As part of the impact assessment work an on-going review mechanism has been established to ensure that all groups are accessing the service in a fair manner. Changes to the bidding process have been made in response to customer suggestions, for example, the phone bidding system now has OAP designated properties listed first to minimise the call length from the client group least likely to have ready access to a computer.

The Scheme of Allocation covering the letting of properties through HHC is subject to a review by Officers to ensure it accords with the latest Statutory Guidance 'Fair and Flexible' which was published in December 2009. Any recommendations for change as well as a full report on the first year of operation of HHC will be brought back to the Council's Cabinet in June 2010."



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QUESTION 4

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Access

“Does the Portfolio Holder have any idea what the ‘Bridge closure chaos?’ refers to in literature currently being delivered to homes located around the Andover Road area in Winchester and does the Portfolio Holder believe that the work currently being undertaken by Network Rail on improving the railway infrastructure on the Southampton to Nuneaton line will bring very significant economic and environmental benefits to this region?”

Reply

“The literature referred to has not been produced by the City Council, County Council or Network Rail. Officers at the City Council have not seen the literature concerned, but understand that it was produced and distributed by the Liberal Democrat Party. It is therefore not possible for officers to comment on the contents or accuracy of the literature.

The works being undertaken by Network Rail should provide a significant improvement to the local environment by removing a substantial volume of heavy freight traffic from the local road network which is currently unable to use the rail network due to the constraints at the existing bridges.”



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QUESTION 5

From: Councillor Thompson

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing

“Could the Portfolio Holder explain what arrangements are being made to enable prospective tenants to view properties before they agree to the tenancy?”

Reply

“For many years, the Council has not had sufficient resources to offer ‘assisted viewings’ of empty properties for prospective tenants and has provided DVDs as an indication of property attributes and condition.

‘Unassisted viewings’ are usually not possible as properties are now advertised before the previous tenant has vacated the property or when contractors are still completing works on site.

With the recent emphasis on improving void performance, some assisted viewings have been offered in the last year, particularly for properties that are proving more difficult to let. However, the Landlord Service simply does not have sufficient staff resource to provide assisted viewings for every offer they make.

With general needs family accommodation in such high demand, the limited resource available for assisted viewings has concentrated on sheltered housing, some of which has required open days to generate sufficient demand.

Officers are proposing further changes to the current void process in the next six months. It is hoped that by further streamlining the process, some resource can be freed up to offer additional assisted viewings. However, it should be noted that whilst assisted viewings will improve overall customer service, they not only take up significant staff time, but they can sometimes also add additional delays in the letting time which affects both performance and rent loss.”



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QUESTION 6

From: Councillor Berry

To: The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Safety

“What effect has the current economic climate and the Council’s overall budget position had on the level of grant aid we are able to provide for the voluntary and community groups in the District?”

Reply

“While the economic climate and its impact on the Council’s overall budget position for 2010/11 has precluded a significant uplift in the total grant aid for revenue awards, the Cabinet at its 3 February 2010 meeting approved a modest increase.

Additionally for 2010/11 more money has been allocated to support ‘one off’ capital grant awards.

The details are:

In 2009/10 the total for the annual revenue grant awards to Winchester’s voluntary & community groups was £ 530,998. For 2010/11 provision has been made for awards totalling £532,320, a 0.25% increase.

In 2009/10 the total for annual Capital Grant awards to support community infrastructure projects was £56,000. For FY 2010/11 provision has been made for awards totalling £66,000, a 17.8% increase.

In 2009/10 an additional £18,000 was awarded (in grants of up to £500) via the Council’s Community Small Grants Scheme. For 2010/11 there are no proposed changes to the level of funding or awards criteria governing this scheme which will be accessible throughout the year.

Subject to final approval of the Council’s Budget proposals in CAB1964, none of the constituent parts of the Council’s Community Grants funding will be reduced. Taken in the round, for 2010/11, the level of grant aid available for voluntary & community sector will go up.”



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QUESTION 7

From: Councillor Stephens

To: The Leader

“Does the Leader recognise the real public concern over the release of reserve sites at Pitt Manor and Francis Gardens?”

Reply

“Yes, I fully understand the public concerns, but these are two of 4 Local Reserve Sites allocated within the statutory Winchester District Local Plan. These allocations can only be changed through the Local Development Framework process which the Council is taking forward. Current Government guidance requires local authorities to be able to demonstrate an adequate supply of housing land, based on the current requirements of the South East Plan and the methodology prescribed by the present Government.

Under the Government’s system the Council is unable to demonstrate an adequate supply in accordance with these requirements and I have written to the Minister asking for a meeting to discuss how they can be changed to meet Winchester’s concerns, and deal with the unfortunate potential unforeseen consequences. The Minister’s reply has reaffirmed the Government’s requirements and declined a meeting but I will be pursuing this further.

In the meantime the Council has had to concede at recent appeals into the Francis Gardens site and Little Frenchies Field that the land supply position warrants their release. The Francis Gardens appeal has since been allowed.”



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QUESTION 8

From: Councillor Cook

To: The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Access

“Would the Portfolio Holder state how many official or unofficial Traveller/Gypsy sites there are present within the District, and give their locations?”

Would the Portfolio Holder state if the Council has any intention of negotiating with Basingstoke and Deane BC and Hampshire County Council, the possible re-opening of the Dummer Traveller site?”

Reply

“The numbers and locations of Traveller/Gypsy sites are as follows:

Publicly-owned site: 1

Whiteley Lane, Titchfield
18 pitches, 10 currently occupied (due to ongoing refurbishment works, which are due to be completed in March 2010).

Privately-owned, with planning permission: 9

Ash Farm, Titchfield Lane, Wickham
2 pitches, 1 currently occupied.

West Fork, Bunns Lane, Hipley
1 mobile home, personal permission.

Eastwood Yard, Peststead Lane, Soberton
1 mobile home, 1 caravan - personal permission.

Joymout Farm, Curdridge Lane, Southampton
1 caravan - temporary & personal permission.

Land adj Rosalinda (Ashbrook Stables), Main Rd, Colden Common
2 mobile homes.

Land adj Buena Vista, The Lakes, Swanmore
5 mobile homes - temporary & personal permission.

Windy Ridge, Old Mill Lane, Denmead
1 caravan - personal permission.

Rambling Renegade, Pricketts Hill, Shedfield
2 mobile homes.

Travellers Rest, Appledown Lane, Bishops Sutton, Alresford
1 mobile home, 1 touring caravan - enforcement in progress against additional mobile home.

Privately-owned, without planning permission: 7

Cushty Tan, Mislingford Rd, Wickham
2 mobile homes - extant enforcement notice, not actioned due to personal circumstances.

Land adj Chapel House, Highbridge Rd, Highbridge
1 mobile home - planning application in progress.

Copperfields, land at Peststead Lane, Soberton
5 mobile homes - enforcement in progress.

Big Muddy Farm, Alma Lane, Upham
1 mobile home - enforcement in progress.

St Peters Farm, Church Lane, Hambledon
2 touring caravans - enforcement in progress.

Land opposite Woodward Farm, Alma Lane, Upham
1 mobile home - planning application submitted.

Ruperts Roost, land at Peststead Lane, Soberton
2 touring caravans - temporary stop notice issued.

The Dummer Traveller Site was established as a transit site. The issue of transit provision (rather than permanent pitches) has not yet been resolved in a regional context. At present, Local Authorities are awaiting the outcome of the recent Examination in Public (EIP) into Traveller/Gypsy provision in the South-East Region, before deciding how best to meet the obligations which will be identified and allocated to individual authorities.

There are two main corridors for Traveller/Gypsy movements to and from the West Country, along the A303 to the north of the Winchester District, and along the A27/M27 to the south. The northern route is close to the Dummer Traveller Site, but this has been abandoned and severely vandalised and would cost a significant amount to re-open. Currently, there are no plans to formally raise the matter with Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council or Hampshire County Council, until the outcome of the EIP is known.”



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QUESTION 9

From: Councillor Tait

To: The Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture and Sport

“In view of the negative publicity generated by a question asked at full Council on the 13 January 2010 could the Portfolio Holder bring me up to date with the activities that are taking place at the Tower Arts Centre and could the Portfolio Holder also confirm that she feels that residents are receiving excellent value for the financial support which is being given to the Centre?”

Reply

“Following the Full Council meeting in January, an article in *The Hampshire Chronicle* referred to a ‘perceived lack of programming in the New Year at Tower Arts Centre’, based on a Member’s comment that ‘the website was only advertising one show...after a busy autumn schedule’.

Whilst I cannot now comment on what the Member did or did not see on the website, is it true that the new season content was being loaded at that time onto The Tower’s new website which was launched within days of the Full Council meeting in January. The website is well populated with a wide range of performances and participatory activities. It includes a dedicated section for young people, including a performing arts school, art club, dance ‘academy’, the Republic music project and Blue Apple Theatre. This focus on young people is very much in the spirit of the Tower, and will be further strengthened when the centre launches its children’s festival later in the year.

The article in the Chronicle continued that ‘members of the public who received promotional literature in the past no longer do so’. Whilst The Tower may have mailed out 6,000 brochures three times a year in the past, many recipients were not attenders. The new manager has opted for greater use of cost-effective e-marketing, producing weekly, targeted e-newsletters for supporters. The Tower has two Facebook sites – with twice-weekly communications to fans – and a Twitter account. It has deliberately prioritised marketing tactics aimed at younger audience in order to develop and sustain a

bigger audience base. However, a simple flyer is still produced for those who prefer print.

The overall effect of this marketing strategy has been to reduce waste, manage within budget and build audiences. The results speak for themselves, with the attendance for most performances running at between 70% and 80% capacity, and adult classes oversubscribed. This is in spite of routine references to the 'closure' of the centre which still persist, and I believe that the staff of The Tower are to be congratulated for this success.

Finally, the press article stated that 'activity at the Tower became controversial after funding for it was diverted to the Discovery Centre in Winchester City Centre'. As I made clear in my response at the January meeting, there are very positive links between the Tower, the Discovery Centre, the Theatre and other venues in the town. There is a good understanding between the venues about individual programming strengths and aspirations. Funding has not be diverted to the Discovery Centre, but – as indicated in my reply in January - invested in a shared programme of audience development, programming and marketing which is clearly generating results for both venues.

I invite Members to explore the Tower programme for themselves and sign up to receive e-newsletters to suit their interests by logging on to www.towerarts.co.uk.”



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QUESTION 10

From: Councillor Cook

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing

“Why has a house in Jesty Road, New Alresford, that had been on the market for over eighteen months now been withdrawn from sale?”

How many Council Houses have been put on sale and then subsequently withdrawn from the open market?

How much rental income has been lost throughout the District from Council Houses that have been put on the open market, but have been unsold for a period of time?”

Reply

“Whilst the property in Jesty Road has been empty for eighteen months, the formal decision to sell the property was made in September 2009. Report CAB1892 highlighted the various options and surveys completed by the Council before making the decision to sell, which was due to the £25,000 cost of bringing the property up to a lettable standard.

Following advice from the appointed agents, some additional health and safety related works have recently been completed to make the site safe for marketing and this has further delayed the sale of the property. However, I must stress that it has not been withdrawn from sale.

No properties have been withdrawn from sale under this policy since its commencement in 2007.

Members will be aware that the sales policy is a direct response to the Government under funding housing major repairs by £3m a year. The policy remains the only viable option for raising much needed capital receipts to fund additional heating systems, disabled adaptations and kitchen and bathroom upgrades as well as to support the building of new affordable housing.

To date, 15 properties have been sold or are in the process of being sold through this policy. This has resulted in a net rent loss (after subsidy) of £32,000 due to the time taken between the properties becoming vacant and their eventual sale.

However, it must be noted that the cost of bringing these properties back to a lettable standard would have been in excess of £200,000. The sales have to date generated over £3 million. The 3 properties where sales have still to be completed (2 have above 'guide price' offers and are sold subject to contract) should generate a further £760,000.

In summary, the sales policy has provided just under £2m to support much needed repairs to the Council's housing stock and a similar sum to support the building of new affordable housing in the district.

The Government is due to announce proposals for the reform of the Housing Revenue Account any day now which may well provide the additional resources the Council needs to fund repairs to our stock. However, as this will not take effect at least until April 2011, it is recommended that the sales policy should continue for a further year."