

COUNCIL

Monday 10 October 2016

Agenda Item 6

Questions from Members

Unanswered Questions – Responses sent subsequent to Meeting

10. Question from Councillor Ms J Wassell to the Cabinet Member for Planning

A proposal was put forward by the County Council for an East Wycombe Panoramic Walkway passing through Micklefield, Totteridge and Bowerdean to the Railway Station. I instigated this as a way to encourage walking and make footpath improvements. The District Council felt unable to support this scheme at present. What further work is required to enable you to support this scheme?

Thank you Cllr Miss Wassell for the question. As you will know, last year we changed the process by which CIL monies are allotted each year. Whilst we have a published list of strategic priorities, we rely on the various service providers to consider all bids for their area of responsibility and submit to us a prioritised list of projects for CIL funding.

In this case, your request was submitted amongst many others by the County Council as the service provider for all transport projects and it was left to us to decide whether it met the purposes of CIL and was affordable. So when Cabinet decided on the final list of projects earlier this year, given the funding constraints and our commitment to fund the High Wycombe Town Centre Masterplan, the Cabinet felt there were higher priority projects that should be supported by the CIL. And this included funding for BCC to improve the bus network and for funding school places.

Inevitably funding will be limited and my view is that CIL funding should be directed towards strategic priorities which do of course include transport, as well as supporting town centre regeneration, and assisting our County Council and NHS colleague in ensuring there are sufficient school places and adequate health facilities in the district.

At the September 2016 Cabinet meeting, a decision was made on how CIL will be broadly allocated for the next three years for strategic priorities and I would refer you to that report. Bucks County Council have not raised the panoramic walkway scheme as a priority for next year and it is not clear how this scheme relates to the LTP strategy to increase active travel, i.e. cycling and walking, especially as the proposed routing would in fact increase the journey time.

I do wonder whether as a scheme that is more local in character this scheme might be better suited as a candidate for the 15% of CIL that is within the recommendation of the town committee. Also of course insofar as this reflects BCC transport priorities there may be scope for BCC highways officers to consider making the case to request specific contributions from large developments in the local area.

11. Question from Councillor M Knight to the Leader of the Council

Today is World Mental Health day. On 21st September a Commons Select Committee published a report into mental health services which made a number of recommendations including developing an effective strategy to integrate health services and to join up relevant public services to ensure continuity of care for those with mental health problems.

Could you outline how frontline services at Wycombe District Council, such as Housing and Revenues and Benefits, integrate positively with local mental health services?

A number of the Council's service areas work closely with the mental health service to assist and improve the lives of customers with mental health conditions. Housing, Housing Benefits and our Communities teams attend multi agency case conferences to discuss individual action plans to support clients, attend team meetings and work closely to ensure that vulnerable claimants get the maximum support they are entitled to.

From a housing benefits perspective we will pay out an estimated £46m in housing benefit this year to support claimants as a whole. In addition to this we estimate £259,000 will be spent on discretionary relief aimed at those members of the community who need extra help and support.

In terms of strategy, our homelessness strategy includes a number of actions relating to mental health including the developing of a protocol for clients leaving hospital with mental health needs as well as general strategies around assisting all members of the community who face housing difficulties.

12. Question from Councillor R Raja to the Leader of the Council

Although the council is boosting its overall balance sheet, it is reducing "usable reserves" and boosting "unusable reserves". Would she agree that this seems wrong at a time of planned investment in housing, especially, when most of the boost in the balance sheet originates from changes in the valuations of existing assets?

The Council has a well published Major Projects Programme which is set to deliver the Council's Corporate Plan and priorities. The Council has made a clear choice to invest in its District and committed significant resources to support regeneration and also increase the Council's revenue base to offset losses in government funding.

Local authority reserves are split between usable and unusable reserves (non-cash backed) reflecting the ability of the authority to make use of these resources. Whilst we have consciously been investing our usable resources (cash backed), this has meant that our unusable reserves have increased reflecting the growing asset base and value of these to the Council. An example of this is the recent development at Handy X.

If the Council did not make these investments the Council would have needed to reduce its leisure provision and meet funding reductions in other ways such as reducing services or increasing charges.