

Wiltshire Council

Points for discussion with Parish Councils in February

1. The Cabinet meeting on January dealt with the following agenda items:

- **An update on the Safety Valve Agreement.**

This concerns a Department for Education (DfE) programme to support Councils with a very high deficit in the High Need Block, that primarily supports pupils who have Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

Approximately two thirds of councils in England have some level of deficit in their HNB.

In Wiltshire **this cumulative deficit has grown from £2.1m in 2018/19 to £35.2m in 2022/23 (!)** - and is forecast to continue growing.

The Safety Valve Agreement offers councils additional funds from the DfE to help with their historic deficits, so long as the Department is satisfied that the council can return their DSG to a balanced position over the period of the deal.

This deficit has been held in a negative reserve on the council's balance sheet while a statutory override is in place to shield the rest of the Council's finances from this deficit. However, the statutory override is due to end in 2026.

So, whenever you hear the Council's leaders take credit for being solvent, unlike a lot of other councils, it is worth remembering that we are carrying this deficit and are dependent on central government largess to be able to keep servicing it.

- **Recommissioning for the Provision of Advocacy Services for Adults**

Provision of an independent Advocacy Service by a Local Authority is a statutory obligation. The Council's contracted spend for the current service for four years from July 2020 to July 2024 will be £1.8 million; i.e. £450K/year.

In addition to this contracted spend there has been unbudgeted spend for advocates to meet various additional referral needs, as the demand for advocates has continued to increase.

In order to contain the rising costs of the current 'whole life' service, the Cabinet decided to commission separate advocacy services for children, young people and adults. There will be an in-house service for 5-17 years and those between 18 & 25 classified as SEND, with a separate external contracted supplier to deliver Statutory Advocacy for Adults.

2. I attended a meeting of the **Environment Select Committee**, as an observer. The key items of interest were

- A review of a report on a consultation exercise on public transport throughout the county. No very surprising conclusions, as it seemed to me.
- There was a review of the annual report of the Wiltshire Council's Housing Board which is charged with developing and approving a business plan for the Council's housing, and with ensuring it is implemented.

The report contains a lot of detail on

- The work of the housing board day-to-day
- Work to catch up on housing repairs etc., and to clear a backlog that had accumulated during the pandemic
- Reorganisation of the Housing Board and management
- Planned maintenance
- The **Housing Energy Efficiency Programme (HEEP)**

This was the single item I found most interesting. It involves work to improve energy performance of council housing, cutting carbon emissions and reducing costs for tenants. The programme has focused on properties with the greatest potential increase in energy efficiency.

Unsurprisingly, there has been a lot of positive feedback from tenants who have benefited.

Interestingly, two model properties in the same street in Bemerton Heath have been fully refurbished with identical insulation, fixtures and fittings including solar panels and electric vehicle charging points, but with different heating systems; one uses an Air Source Heat Pump, the other is heated by infra-red panels. The Council will be working with the tenants to monitor performance and the costs from each system.

3. You will be aware that I have been doing what I can to publicise **the appalling state of roads through Tisbury and the Donheads.**

I put out a press release that received coverage in various local media including on the BBC's local news programmes which obtained a response from the Council leader, Richard Hewer.

I have tabled a question for Caroline Thomas, the Highways and Transport portfolio holder for next Tuesday's Cabinet meeting, calling for at least a doubling of the budget for maintenance of non-principal roads ('C' and un-numbered roads) and for budgets to be published down to Area Board level. Both requests are likely to be rejected by the Cabinet, but they have been warmly welcomed by the Lib Dem group of councillors.

4. The meeting organised by Tisbury Parish Council to consider River Nadder water quality issues took place on 23rd January as planned. Others of you were there, so I don't need to report on that.
5. During a preliminary conversation among members of the South West Area Board, Nabil Najjar raised the proposition that we should collectively support and participate in preparing **a South West Wiltshire trail on the Explore Wiltshire app.**, that he was involved in launching last year. It is likely Parish Councils will be asked to contribute to the cost of production.

I'd be grateful for guidance on how this proposition goes down with Parish Councils, ahead of a meeting I have been asked to take part in to discuss it on Monday 12th February.

I confess to being somewhat confused by a degree of mixed messaging. **At the same time as promoting the Explore Wiltshire app, Wiltshire is withdrawing £150K/year funding for VisitWiltshire** which is the county's official Destination Management Organisation, responsible for promoting Wiltshire and supporting tourism in the County, created by Wiltshire Council in a public/private partnership 13 years ago.

In a widely circulated message, Peter Wragg, VisitWiltshire's Chairman claims it has successfully worked to support and grow our tourism industry, promote local businesses, and create local jobs. He argues that this cut will make us ineligible to receive funding and support from VisitEngland or VisitBritain, as we will no longer meet the criteria for the Government's new national public/private sector funded structure of Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEPs).

Wragg argues this means that the impact of losing the £150k funding from Wiltshire Council will exact a much greater impact on our local businesses and communities with the loss of £5.6million in direct and indirect international visitor spend per annum from April 2024. That figure rises to a loss of £50million per year in short-term economic impact if domestic visitors are also taken into consideration.

I've asked Nabil Najjar to comment on this issue, but so far received no response.

6. I've been asked to participate in a preliminary discussion of what measure the Council and the South West Area Board might be able to take to support the local economy. This will be a topic on the SWAB agenda. As a start point for our local discussion I have asked for access to data on footfall along Tisbury High Street that may be available from the Council

Any thoughts would be most gratefully received.