

Wiltshire Council

Points for discussion with Parish Councils in March

1. The Cabinet meeting on February 6th was mainly taken up with matters to be put before the full Council and dealt with there on February 20th

There was a bunch of financial instruments and resolutions:

- a) Financial Year 2023/24 - Q3 Revenue Budget Monitoring
- b) Q3 Capital Budget Monitoring
- c) Corporate Performance and Risk Report 2023/24 Q3
- d) Wiltshire Council Budget 2024/2025 and MTFS Update 2024/25-2026/27
- e) Housing Revenue Account Budget Setting including Dwelling Rent Setting 2024/25
- f) Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2024/25

During budget item d) there was discussion of a written question I had put to Caroline Thomas on the matter of roads maintenance. In my preamble I had set out comparisons showing that our expenditure on maintaining C and un-numbered roads is considerably less than the expenditure of neighbouring councils and other councils with which Wiltshire can be compared. **The East Riding of Yorkshire spends more than 12 times as much per mile on maintaining 'non-principal roads'.**

I called for a significant increase, which, un-surprisingly, was refused. I was accused (by Richard Clewer, the Council leader) of playing party politics.

I did, however, get an undertaking (of sorts) that data on how much is spent will be made available down to Area Board level so we should be able to confirm whether or not expenditure on roads maintenance in our area is in line with other parts of the county.

There were a number of other matters:

- g) Public Transport Strategy
- h) Wiltshire Design Guide - Adoption as a Supplementary Planning Guidance
- i) Revised Nutrient Neutrality Strategy
- j) Proposed Closure of Shalbourne Church of England Primary School
- k) School Admissions Policies 2025/26
- l) Wiltshire Council's Housing Board - Annual Report

I'd draw to your attention to item i. **Revised Nutrient Neutrality Strategy**

The key paragraph was:

The Government's announcement in December *[regarding the need to ensure Nutrient Neutrality of effluent from new developments]* confirmed that **the council has been awarded**, as lead authority for the Hampshire Avon catchment, **up to £9.8m for capital projects via the Local Nutrient Mitigation Fund to help pump-prime nutrient neutrality interventions** in the catchment.....Developer contributions via planning obligations (section 106 legal agreements, section 111 agreements, Unilateral Undertakings) will be sought for planning applications able to use the council-led scheme.

A first example of this fund being put to use was the announcement (the previous day) of a **scheme to provide householders with funds to replace damaged or inadequate septic tanks** that feed into the river.

This announcement, together with news that the local farmers group had received funding to set up their own river water monitoring that led me to send an email to Parish Councils say **Monday 5th February was a good day for the Nadder.**

2. Following the Cabinet meeting, after I had been asking a number of questions of her, I was given had a confidential briefing by Sarah Valdus, Director of Environmental Services on **the Council's plans for waste management and disposal**. Cllr Ken Holder, who is the responsible Cabinet member was also present.

3. **At the Council meeting itself, two weeks later:**

The budget which included a **4.99% council tax increase** was passed.

Lib Dems proposed three amendments, all of which were defeated.

- a) A modest increase in Area Board funding for elderly and vulnerable people. I am now more aware than I was previously of the good things being achieved by spending very modest sums on the elderly
- b) A reversal of the Blue Badge policy, to permit blue badge holders to park for free in Council-owned car parks. This would have had no impact in our area, but charges for disabled people in Wiltshire's town centres is a considerable burden, though unquantified.
- c) A restoration of funding to Visit Wiltshire or similar third-party organisation to promote tourism. Instead of which Wiltshire is determined to carry out this task itself, something for which it has no proven expertise, and is unlikely to be able to do so any more cost-effectively.

One item to note is that the Council will be using a fund from central government to repair and revive rural play areas, on the condition that the local parish or town council then takes over the responsibility for them in the future. Another example of Wiltshire Council pushing ongoing costs down to PCs.

- I again made the point about the appalling state of C and un-numbered roads, through the Donheads in particular
- I argued that a motion for the Council to support Wiltshire's local farmers by purchasing locally should have been more nuanced, referencing
 - the good work of farmers on the Wylfe and Nadder, undertaking to monitor pollution in their stretches of these rivers, and
 - the use of one of the bi-products from anaerobic digestion of food waste as a substitute for artificial fertilizers.

This latter point prompted Cllr Ken Holder to announce to the Council that he would be visiting Codford Biogas to assess its suitability to treat Wiltshire's **food waste when separate collection is introduced in 2027 (which was then the subject of a press release a day or so later).**

- I was appointed to a place on the Environment Select Committee. The significance of this is that not only is this the committee that oversees the Council's activities on environmental issues such as waste management etc.; it is also the committee that examines in detail **the annual report from the Highways management team; on the agenda for the next meeting, in late March.**
4. There was a meeting of the **South West Area Board on Wednesday 28th February**. Bev Cornish, Tisbury Parish Clerk has kindly copied me her notes on the meeting which I attach for the information of other PCs.

Following the meeting I had an informal conversation with Nabil Najjar, the Board's chair, picking up on the proposal that the Board needs to prepare and agree a list of priorities for maintenance etc. I am reluctant to get drawn into horse trading with my fellow councillors over whose roads are in the worse condition and in greatest need of repair. Hence I am keen to be able to update (during w/c 4th Feb) the lists I have previously submitted, taking into account Parish Councillors' perceptions of the key priorities. I will then press for the Council's officers to take on the task of preparing a definitive list of work to be carried out.

Any thoughts/comments/questions will be most gratefully received.