

QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 14 JULY 2021

a) Question from Councillor R George to Councillor B Lewis, Leader of the Council

What is the reason for the County Council having failed to submit a bid to Round 1 of the Levelling Up Fund, and what plans are there to submit a bid in Round 2?

Response: Thank you Councillor George for your question. I have to say I am hoping this question has been put as a genuine misunderstanding rather than a wilful misrepresentation of the fact that this simply is not the case.

Firstly, the Levelling Up Fund is directed at TF2 and Unitary Authorities predominantly and as a county we could only ever submit one bid based upon a transport bid only and as you will hear we did. Indeed, my colleague Councillor Renwick, approved some kick-start funding to enable that work to get underway relatively recently.

Levelling Up Fund proposals will mostly come from the Districts and Borough Councils and I was happy to support a Round 1 application for £20m from Chesterfield Borough Council for town centre regeneration work. We will work proactively with other Districts and Boroughs on Round 2 applications once that process opens. Indeed, you might describe High Peak Borough Council as having failed to submit a Round 1 bid. I assumed you have asked that question of them? Anyway, to be clear I don't see that them not putting in a Round 1 bid is in any way a failure as I intend to do one for Round 2 and we will certainly be willing to support them in that bid as we have with Chesterfield recently. There is nothing partisan in this so again I go back to your point about being a "failed" part in this.

We were eligible to submit our own proposal for a transport project and indeed did submit an application form for Round 1 for the infrastructure to support the delivery of the South Derbyshire Growth Zone. The Council did not therefore fail to submit a bid. We do recognise that it is an expression of interest and it does require further development but nonetheless it is in.

The County Council will be in discussion with the Department for Transport on progressing that bid over the period of the summer and I will be happy to update members on any future developments at the appropriate time.

Supplementary question: I thank Councillor Lewis for his words, very sensible based on the facts about the Levelling Up Fund, the fact that Councils of any tier can only make one bid to both the rounds of that Levelling Up Fund and that not submitting one is not a failure, but would he therefore condemn the words of the MP for High Peak who circulated on social media, in the regional media and a newsletter

to thousands of constituents saying that “High Peak Council failed to submit a Levelling Up Fund bid” because they did not do so in Round 1 but chose, as he says very sensibly, to have waited for the support funding and collective work with this Authority for Round 2?

Response: Thank you, Councillor George, for your supplementary. I cannot speak for the MP of High Peak on this. I can only tell you what I have just said which is that they weren't ready at that point and that we are willing, as a local authority, to continue to work with High Peak Borough Council to ensure that they do put in a good bid for Round 2 and we will do everything we can to support them, as we will any local authority in Derbyshire. That is all I have to say on that matter I think, Chairman.

b) Question from Councillor C Dale to Councillor C Renwick, Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Environment

The Government proposes to reform the planning laws to remove local residents rights to object to individual planning applications. The House of Commons has passed a motion calling on the government to protect residents rights to have a say over individual planning applications. What are the views held by the Council on the governments proposed reforms?

Response: Thank you, Councillor Dale. This was actually a consultation nearly twelve months ago, but just by way of background on the 6 August 2020 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government published a consultation on its Planning White Paper entitled ‘Planning for the Future’ which sets out Government’s proposed reforms to the planning system in England, which I think we would all agree does need improving.

The proposals seek to streamline and modernise the planning process; improve outcomes on design and sustainability and reform the system of developer contributions to name just a few. On the whole many of the reforms proposed are to be welcomed although this was a very high level document, it was a consultation of around 25 questions and there was not enough detail to fully consider.

However, I suspect the councillor is probably referring to some of the reformed new zoning in the Local Plans whereby Planning Authorities would be required to zone all their land in three zones. That is growth areas which are suitable for large scale sustainable development; renewal areas which are for smaller scale development, and areas which are protected where stringent development controls would apply. Once designated in Local Plans - I think that is the key - land within the growth areas would be deemed to have permission in principle or a presumption in favour of development and that would negate the need to have outline planning application for development on land in those areas.

As I have said, the consultation was nearly twelve months ago and they had to have a response by October 2020 so perhaps you are a little late bringing this to our attention. However, this Council was not late. We did get a robust reply in. It is quite a long lengthy document but basically this was reported to the Council's Cabinet meeting for Highways and Transport on the 8 October and a formal response was agreed and submitted in time. Whilst there was no specific reference to any company consultation being curtailed, we picked up on members' concerns and we set out clearly that any impact or apparent democratic deficit on reforms of local democracy, and specifically limited opportunities for active elected member and local community engagement, would be a concern and the proposed new planned system after planning making stage of the process should include member and community engagement and more opportunity for engagement in the planning decision making would be reduced significantly for large scale developments that would impact most on local communities. That is what we would be concerned about.

We went on to say it is considered that the proposed reforms as set out undermine local democratic accountability and do not provide sufficient opportunity for effective engagement and that the White Paper should be amended in future to ensure the democratic deficit for elected members and local communities addressed, particularly in respect of a new proposed development management decision making process.

We said that then and we still stand by that. We hope that goes some way to satisfy Councillor Dale of our position. Suffice to say we have a close eye on what will be coming in the next stage of the development of the White Paper.

Supplementary question: Thank you for that, Councillor Renwick. I agree the significance hit me last year when a residents' petition objected to a development, not the fact of the development but the quantity of housing. I went along to the Council and said about the impact on the environment - obviously the Planning Committee agreed and reduced the number of houses - but my concern was there were conditions put on that planning permission because on the site there was a registered public footpath; there was an old Roman road and ruins; there was a bat corridor, everything you can think of was on that site, so they imposed conditions and the developers completely disregarded them.

Now nobody would have been aware properly in the local community if we hadn't have put the objections in because it brings it to your attention. I notice the developers were carrying on and they just disregarded it so we had to get in touch with Highways, it is now Places, in the time to get the registered footpath unblocked so we could use it. I had to get in touch with the archaeologists in the Planning Department. They had already chopped the trees down so they couldn't do the survey for the bat corridor. It brought home to me the significance of why it is important because of local knowledge and things to stop this kind of blatant disregard.

So are we intending to do any more action-wise or are officers just writing, or are we going to do anything as a Council? That was my question, are we going to be a bit more proactive? Thank you.

Response: Thank you, Councillor Dale. I have sympathy. I have issues with my own local Council and the fact that the previous Labour administration haven't even actually delivered a Local Plan since 2005 which has left us in quite difficult circumstances with local housing plans that we have had to deal with currently.

I don't know if you have read the document? It is 84 pages long. I think you will find that a lot of the issues you have raised have been addressed which is why I said in my opening remarks whilst you have raised issues about public consultation your supplementary question didn't go on to demonstrate your concerns around that, it is really more about the individual Planning Authority.

Now we are a statutory Authority at DCC so we do comment on applications but actually it is your own Local Planning Authority. I think you will find that as part of this consultation the issues you have raised will be raised by many and the hope is the new planning system going forward, which I think we would all agree needs to be improved, would address some of those queries that you have.

c) Question from Councillor K Gillott to Councillor Councillor K Athwal, Cabinet Member for Highways Assets and Transport

The A61 Derby Road, between Stretton and Chesterfield, has huge problems with congestion and traffic, particularly at peak times or when the M1 is busy. The main road through Clay Cross and into Chesterfield is now massively busy, over-congested and a burden on people and businesses getting around their daily business in our area.

Can the Cabinet Member outline what has been done in the last 2 years to develop practical solutions for the congestion afflicting the A61 south of Chesterfield, to reduce congestion, improve traffic flows and journey times for local residents?

Response: Thank you, Councillor Gillott for your question.

The issue that you raise has been decades in the making and this has certainly increased by years of lack of planning control by the then Labour Controlled North East Derbyshire District Council, for which I believe you were a member in those days, which allowed developers to build thousands of dwellings without adequate S106 infrastructure contributions. Ultimately this has, and continues to put many extra cars onto this already congested road adding to the challenges we face today.

Whilst through the A61 Growth Corridor Strategy this Council has continued over the last two years to deliver a range of interventions to assist with both the demand for

car travel and the management of traffic along the corridor. These measures include upgraded walking and cycling routes; the provision of real-time information for bus passengers and the installation of traffic signal controllers to allow the introduction of an urban traffic management and controlled system. This system is expected to be fully operational by the end of 2021 and will provide better co-ordination between traffic signals and improve the highways' observability to respond to incidents or congestion and to inform road users of possible problems in this area.

With the forward looking approach the Leader of this Council, Councillor Barry Lewis, holds regular meetings to consider longer term workable measures with Lee Rowley, the local MP, and the representatives of North East Derbyshire District Council to find ways to minimise traffic issues in this area. This includes allocating £200,000 towards a comprehensive traffic study to explore the options available to us as a first step in the process of finding a longer term solution. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Supplementary question: Can I thank you for that response. Obviously I look forward to going through it in more detail when I read the verbatim minutes of it.

This is an issue, as you have hinted at, that affects not just me but affects several councillors in that area and it is of great concern to the community.

I have to confess I didn't actually write the question. I had some help. The first part was written - well I lifted it virtually word for word from a Conservative leaflet put out just over two years ago and the second part was lifted virtually word for word, just changed into a question, from your manifesto pledge for May of this year.

By the time of the next election your Group will have run this Council for eight years. That is six years since you were first talking about it. People ask me about this almost on a daily basis so what reassurance can I give them? What will the A61 look like in terms of congestion in four years' time? Will it still be congested or more free flowing? What impact will it have in terms of the local businesses and local communities as well, or are these just words to keep the local people happy without any real action?

Response: Councillor Gillott, thank you for that supplementary question. You will be provided with a detailed written answer, but my short answer at this stage to you is this: I hope in four years' time the situation on the road will be far better than it has been for a while now. Thank you.