

APPENDIX A

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 25 MARCH 2021 QUESTIONS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN

Question to the Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee from Councillor John Ogle

Given the extensive discussion about our highways during the last Full Council Budget meeting, could the Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee provide the official figures on the state of the county's roads and how we compare to other authorities?

Response from Councillor John Cottee, Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee

Our county's roads are classified into four groups – A roads, of which we maintain 362 miles; B and C roads, of which we maintain 695 miles; and unclassified or 'U' roads, of which we maintain approximately 1700 miles. As such, we are responsible for maintaining a total of around 2700 miles of highway – the distance between Nottinghamshire and Newfoundland, Canada.

Of this vast network, just over 400 miles of highway are in need of repair. As we are in election season, I am sure that every member of this council will insist that all 400 of these miles are in their division, so I will make clear that this total is comprised of many small sections of road that are distributed throughout the county. Very few of these sections will be especially long and, as always, our first priority is to ensure that our roads are safe for local people and for motorists.

Perhaps members would hazard a guess as to how many miles of our classified road network requires repair – One hundred? Two hundred? More? Well, Chairman, the answer is 32 miles – comprised of 7 miles of 'A' roads and 25 miles of B & C roads. This is less than the distance between County Hall and Worksop town centre, and the robust maintenance that we oversee on these roads mean that we rank second out of all county councils in the country for A-road maintenance, and fourth for the maintenance of B and C roads.

To put it more simply, we are amongst the best in the country when it comes to maintaining our primary roadways. The difficulty is that our unclassified roads are in much greater need of repair, the reasons for which are well-covered: we have experienced several successive difficult winters, COVID restrictions and these have come after decades of underinvestment from Old Labour administrations.

I hope members will therefore forgive me when I dismiss the claims that have been made in the past – and will no doubt be made again later today – that our rural communities are somehow undeserving of the funding that they receive. I will again make clear that our system of maintenance is in line with authorities across the country, and plainly delivers results on our main roads.

However, it is important to add that although our market towns have their fair share of unclassified roads, so do our rural communities – and in fact these are often major causeways between villages that are essential to their ability to travel. Moreover, these rural communities see many more HGVs travelling at speed on their unclassified roads, causing thousands of times more damage than even the biggest family car on the market.

The half-cocked electioneering from the Ashfield Independents on how taxpayers' money should be spent - based on their back-of-a-cigarette-pack calculations and not backed up by any proper statistics - would likely leave Ashfield with just as much funding as under the current system, or even open up the possibility of leaving them worse off!

Our investment in roads over the last four years is something we should be proud of, and has left a golden legacy for the next administration.

Question to the Chairman of the Finance and Major Contracts Management Committee from Councillor Muriel Weisz

In the budget statement, you referred to the way in which the budget addresses inequalities throughout the County. Could you please provide one substantial example of how you have achieved this in the 2020/21 budget, and a further specific example of how inequalities are addressed in the budget agreed at February's Full Council for this coming financial year?

Response from Councillor Richard Jackson, Chairman of the Finance and Major Contracts Management Committee

Chairman, this question reminds me of one from Councillor Rhodes to Councillor Cutts in July 2019, when he asked what she had been doing to serve the needs of the communities of Nottinghamshire.

The Leader would have been well within her rights to spend the full hour giving a comprehensive answer to such a glib, open-ended question, but as a courtesy to other members with better questions, she restrained her reply to a lean but pointed twenty minutes!

Perhaps Councillor Weisz has learned from her Group Leader's mistake by asking me to pick just two examples of how our 2020/21 and 2021/22 budgets address "inequalities".

Her question is somewhat puzzling in the distinction it makes between this year and next year, because so many examples of our work tackling inequality are funded by ongoing budget commitments, rather than one-off spending.

However, after a quick survey of colleagues, several have asked me to highlight the ongoing investment we make in supported employment services, which help adults with mental and physical disabilities to overcome the potential barriers to employment presented by such conditions.

We have a gross budget of almost £4.4 million in the coming year for supported employment services.

Our i-Work service helps vulnerable people to live active, fulfilling lives by finding them work opportunities, including within our own services such as County Horticulture, County Enterprise Foods and Solutions4Data.

In fact, we have taken specific action to protect the long-term future of County Horticulture, investing more than £500,000 in a major refurbishment and improvement project at the service's main site at Brooke Farm in Linby, concentrating our operations there and making it a far more attractive and commercially viable facility than it was previously.

Unfortunately, the official reopening has been delayed by the COVID-19 lockdown, but we expect the benefits of this project to be realised when we move back to a more 'normal' operating environment.

And speaking of COVID, I am surely compelled to highlight, as my other "permitted" example, the additional £92.9 million investment made in 2020/21 so far, in response to the pandemic.

Within this figure, our most intensive and targeted support has been offered to people identified as being disadvantaged and most vulnerable to the impact of COVID for various reasons, including poor mental or physical health or financial hardship.

I do not know whether Councillor Weisz had examples such as this in mind, or whether she wanted to highlight or challenge other aspects of our work, but that's the problem with such a non-specific question. It does not even specify a type of "inequality" she may have in mind: Economic? Health? Gender? Ethnicity? Education?

As with the word "deprivation", some politicians use words like "inequality" in a lazy, generic way, as nothing more than a vehicle for a pre-prepared political message. I don't know whether Councillor Weisz is doing that or not. If she has a supplementary question, we will no doubt find out.

If the intention of the question is sincere, it would have helped to be more specific, perhaps highlighting a particular type of inequality, or a particular policy area where the questioner thinks our budget should do more or be deployed differently.

I cannot even refer to Labour's alternative budget from last month as a clue to what Councillor Weisz and her colleagues might have done differently to address inequality, because there was no alternative budget.

Given that any supplementary question must be on the same matter and cannot introduce new, more specific information, I can only answer the question, quite literally, as it has been asked.

Question to the Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee from Councillor Alan Rhodes

During a terrible pandemic, when working people and their families are losing their jobs, furloughed, or having a pay freeze imposed upon them, how can the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Place justify a 40% increase in the charge for 'Residents Only' Parking permits from £25 to £35 per vehicle?

Response from Councillor John Cottee, Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee

Residents' Parking Schemes provide parking spaces for residents in areas where such demand is high. Charges for permits were introduced in 2010 and the initial charge of £25 has remained unchanged for ten years until 2020, when it was increased to £35 to recover some of the costs of administering, maintaining and enforcing such schemes. The increase was approved by Communities and Place Committee on the 5th March 2020.

The figure of £35 was benchmarked against many other local authorities and it compares favourably. Leicestershire County Council, for example, charge £50 a year. Derbyshire County Council are comparable at £35, but they charge £50 for a second vehicle, unlike Nottinghamshire County Council.

A permit for £35 a year works out at less than 10 pence a day for access to parking close to the home. And let's not forget we make no charges for Blue Badge Holders and those over 75, and we have provided a free parking permit scheme for NHS and social care staff during the COVID pandemic.

In March 2021, in recognition of the prevailing economic situation around COVID, the Committee decided not to increase the costs of residents' parking permits from the figure agreed a year earlier. Prices therefore remain the same as they have been for the last 12 months.

There was a typographical error in the March 2021 committee paper where the legacy figure of £25 had been appended to the report, but this was corrected at the meeting, so members fully understood that they were voting to maintain the current price at £35.

Would Councillor Rhodes prefer that the people using the service pay a proportionate cost, albeit one which does not fully cover the cost to this Council; or would he rather that it fell upon the taxpayer at large, even if they are not a beneficiary of the service?

Question to the Chairman of the Finance and Major Contracts Management Committee from Councillor Mike Pringle

You will recall that at the budget meeting last month, I delivered an observation that the budget presented by your group was disingenuous. Since then, the National Audit Office, the official Parliamentary body for auditing government, have also spoken out to highlight the plight of local government finances, and I quote "the financial position of the sector remains a concern and authorities are setting their budgets for 2021-22 with limited confidence". Would Cllr Jackson now like to provide an honest account to

the people of Nottinghamshire of this authority's ability to continue delivering high quality, sustainable front line services after this financial year?

Response from Councillor Richard Jackson, Chairman of the Finance and Major Contracts Management Committee

I really am grateful to Councillor Pringle for his question as it gives me yet another opportunity to remind colleagues that our sound financial management of this authority is allowing us to continue delivering sustainable front line services to our residents that they need.

Chairman, Councillor Pringle has some nerve tabling a question like this in view of Labour's "no-show" at last month's budget meeting.

I presented a full budget report a month ago today and five appendices, properly signed off by our Service Director for Finance. If Cllr Pringle is suggesting that this budget is 'disingenuous', and by implication unsound, then he is effectively contradicting our Section 151 Officer.

I gave a comprehensive presentation accompanying the budget report. I explained openly and honestly - as shown in the Council budget book - that there remains a financial challenge to be resolved over the medium term, as is the case for virtually every council in the country. Nottinghamshire's challenge is actually more manageable than the one facing many other councils because our starting position before the COVID crisis was comparatively strong.

The gap in the council's budget over the Medium Term is now, in fact, £15 million smaller than the one we inherited from the previous Labour administration in 2017, despite the unprecedented financial pressures we have faced due to COVID!

Last month I described the strategies we are already putting in place through Policy Committee and Improvement & Change Committee to resolve this challenge, which began as a three-tier approach "Achieve, Transform & Save" model for further corporate transformation, and has evolved into five strands of work which will form the basis of this administration's Council Plan for 2021-25. These transformation plans are focused on reducing the budget gap significantly over the medium term and continuing to balance our budget.

The "disingenuous" position presented at the recent budget meeting was actually that of the Labour Group. In response to our budget, Councillor Pringle offered only a brief presentation, mainly raising questions and concerns I had already answered.

To be fair, I cannot actually accuse Councillor Pringle of presenting a "disingenuous budget", because the reality is, he didn't present an alternative budget at all. That's why his question today borders on the farcical.

The Leader of the Labour Group made the embarrassing statement that he did not see it as their duty to present an alternative budget at the final budget meeting before an election. That's the main opposition group on this council, Chairman. Councillor

Rhodes apparently wants people to vote for him on the basis of no alternative financial plan whatsoever, which absolutely is disingenuous!

I'm not convinced Labour have even costed the loose collection of themes or the two pledges they recently made at their campaign launch. Councillor Rhodes and his colleagues certainly haven't explained to anyone how they intend to fund their plans, or what effect their additional commitments would have on budget sustainability. I did not think it was possible for the Labour Party to fall further still from the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, but at least Corbyn presented a costed manifesto – eye-watering though it would have been for taxpayers!

In the absence of any substance whatsoever, Councillor Pringle tries to make his question sound credible by quoting the National Audit Office, who were commenting on the exemplary role played by local authorities in protecting their communities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Audit Office report states that Government has supported local authorities in the COVID-19 pandemic response and that intensive engagement with the sector has provided a good evidence base for financial and other support which has averted a system-wide financial failure and managed the most severe risks to value for money in the short term.

Councillor Pringle is correct that the financial position of the wider local government sector remains a cause for concern. As I explained last month, the Coronavirus crisis has exposed the fragility of some councils' past decisions to borrow money for speculative commercial investment, and this worsens if the council then uses this as a basis to reduce or even freeze council tax.

Nottinghamshire County Council's sound financial management has already been recognised by the Local Government Association Peer Review. We are in a better position than most other councils, and with prudent financial management over the next four years – which would be guaranteed by a Conservative administration – we will continue to deliver high quality, sustainable services.

Ours is certainly not a “disingenuous” budget. It is built on solid foundations.

I could use the analogy that Labour's budget plan is akin to a house built on sand, but actually that would be disingenuous, because they haven't even got the sand!

Question to the Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee from Councillor Jason Zadrozny

Can the Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee please tell the Council –

1. How many times has the Council had to revisit pot-hole repairs in 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21 to date?
2. How much do you estimate that this has cost the Council to revisit pot-hole repairs in 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21 to date?

3. How much has this Council paid out in personal injury claims and how much has the Council paid out for claims by residents of damage to vehicles caused by pot-holes in 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21 to date?

Response from Councillor John Cottee, Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee

The data requested in points 1 and 2 of the question is not readily available, because there is no formal definition of a “re-visit” for recording purposes.

As I have explained in previous replies to the Council, once we are made aware of a highway defect, we have a legal duty to make a repair within set timescales, in accordance with our Highway Inspection and Risk Manual. For the worst defects, these timescales are between 2 hours and 1 working day. With other more minor defects, we have to complete a repair within 28 days. For the most urgent repairs which require a repair within 1 working day to make the road safe, we mainly use Viafix.

Often, when a member of the public asks our highways operatives to return to the site of a previous repair which they might think has failed, it is clear upon closer inspection that the previous repair is fully intact, but the older road surface around the repair has continued to deteriorate, especially during the freeze/thaw cycle in winter.

Our operatives will of course repair any further damage that has emerged around or close to the original repair, but this does not represent a direct repeat or failure of the previous repair, as implied by the word “re-visit” in Councillor Zadrozny’s question. It is simply another pothole report, which is recorded in the normal way. We are only aware of a few instances where the materials used to repair potholes have failed. The real problem is the prevailing condition of some of our roads owing to the road maintenance backlog this administration inherited in 2017. We want to move to prevention rather than cure.

This is why the Conservative and Mansfield Independent administration invested an extra £24 million to begin to tackle the problems our predecessors chose to ignore. We have invested in spray injection patching and hot box plant so that, in the future, we can rely less on pothole filling and more on permanent repairs and mechanised approaches. These approaches are also being rolled out in areas where there are clusters of individual Viafix pothole repairs, which are being identified pro-actively.

Regarding part three of the question, Nottinghamshire County Council has paid out £637,757 in personal injury claims caused by potholes or uneven surfaces from 2017/18 to the 23 March 2021. Almost 60% of that figure relates to 2017/18, before our £24 million investment in road maintenance commenced from February 2018.

Regarding damage to vehicles claims, the total amount paid out between 2017/18 and the 23rd March 2021 amounts to £159,264. However, once again, over 50% of that figure was paid out in 2017/18, before the commencement of our extra £24 million investment.

Question to the Chairman of the Leader of the Council from Councillor Liz Plant

Does the Leader agree with me that every woman and girl has the right to feel safe when out and about on the streets of Nottinghamshire?

Response from Councillor Mrs Kay Cutts MBE, Leader of the Council

Of course, I agree that every woman and girl has the right to feel safe in our county – and I would also extend this to cover men and boys as well.

I appreciate that this subject has rightly received more scrutiny in light of the appalling murder of Sarah Everard, but we must be clear that any attack on a person going about their daily business is always unacceptable.

Everyone has a right to feel safe on our streets, and both women and men can feel vulnerable in certain situations, especially if they are alone.

This Council continues to take seriously its responsibility to keep all its residents safe. Though responsibility for law enforcement obviously rests with the Police, we work closely with the office of the Police & Crime Commissioner through the Police & Crime Panel, and our Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub is essential in triaging serious concerns between the police and social services.

Furthermore, our Communities officers – working with borough and district council partners – continue to play their part in a range of measures promoting community safety.

Similarly, we are regularly updated on the work of the Violence Reduction Unit which includes the police and partners in health and education to tackle violent crime and the underlying causes of violent crime. I know that our Chief Executive Anthony May plays a pivotal role in this as Chair of the Safer Nottinghamshire Board, and his involvement in these issues shows how seriously this Council takes its responsibilities. Every resident of Nottinghamshire should feel safe in our county, and I am immensely proud of the collaborative work we have done with other local agencies and public bodies to address this serious issue.

Question to the Chairman of Communities and Place Committee from Councillor Eric Kerry

Further to the reply he gave to my question at Full Council on 17th December 2020, can the Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee provide any update on when we will see the opening of the new Enterprise Zone link road connecting Humber Road South and Lilac Grove in Beeston with Thane Road in Lenton?

Response from Councillor John Cottee, Chairman of the Communities and Place Committee

As of Monday this week, my officers had received a firm indication from Nottingham City Council that the link road you describe was due to be opened to the public for the first time at 10am on 31st March 2021.

In fact, we were re-sent a joint press release, which was first agreed in summer last year, with a view to the City Council issuing this in good time ahead of the opening.

Since then, I have been advised that the press release has not yet been issued, and that there appears to be a delay, owing to what was rather vaguely described as an issue with 'completion'.

It is fair to say the opening of the road has already taken longer than expected due to previous delays in the necessary legal agreements being completed and duly being signed off by Nottingham City Council and Boots.

Nottinghamshire County Council was not party to this contract, but I can assure you that County Council officers have done their utmost to bring forward this road opening. We confirmed to the City Council in writing last year that we are happy for the road to open.

The road travels through part of the Nottingham Enterprise Zone and links Humber Road and Lilac Grove in Beeston to Thane Road in Lenton. Around £5 million of public money from D2N2's Growing Places Fund has been contributed towards capital works within the Boots Campus, along with some City Council funding, and the opening of the road will be good news for the Nottinghamshire economy, especially in the Broxtowe borough area.

We have always recognised the potential of the Nottingham Boots Enterprise Zone to attract businesses and jobs to Nottinghamshire. This kind of capital infrastructure not only has a direct impact on economic growth but on the quality of life of residents. I hope that the road will open on 31st March 2021 as planned.

And I will confirm that I have asked officers, on this challenge from Councillor Kate Foale, to keep her informed all the way along where we are with the opening of the road in a bid to ensure that local members are kept up to date and that included Councillor Kerry.