

APPENDIX A

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 12 May 2022 QUESTIONS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN

Question to the Chairman of the Transport and Environment Committee from Councillor Lee Waters

It's now been over 7 months since the publication of the Highway's Review done after years of abject failure from the Conservative-led County Council. Would the Chairman tell us what recommendations have actually been implemented on the ground by Borough / District?

Response from the Chairman of the Transport and Environment Committee, Councillor Neil Clarke MBE

Chairman, if someone is looking for positive action it probably isn't a good idea to use misleading and somewhat derogatory phraseology in questions, like 'abject failure'.

It is in fact less than six months – 17th November last year to be precise - since the Transport & Environment Committee agreed nearly 50 improvement outcomes from the cross-party Highways Review Panel, and that agreement was unanimous, Chairman, I can't recall if I've mentioned that in previous meetings? It was unanimous, Mr Chairman, the recommendations.

Members duly asked the Policy Committee to develop a Highways Improvement Plan to deliver those recommendations, and that Plan was approved in February this year – three months ago. Of course, unanimously, Mr Chairman.

Forgive my growing cynicism, but it is obvious that when certain Independent Alliance members ask questions like this, they are not interested in the facts or the answer. They are simply creating a vehicle for false sound-bites to court media attention and undermine the positive things that this Council is working to achieve.

There are, however, many positive and constructive members in this Chamber, including many opposition members, and for their benefit I'm happy to set out some of the progress so far, which is far removed from abject failure which has been implied.

- For the first time we have established a 3-year capital programme to support long term planning, scheduling and delivery, with additional emphasis on unclassified roads and footways and drainage works - the programme is now live and is being delivered across the county;
- We have undertaken a detailed review of the division of responsibility between the Council and Via in key areas including highways policy and strategy, highways core asset management and works provision, and major capital programme management;
- We have delivered operational improvements: a new operational Hub has been established by Via to better coordinate maintenance works and ensure a whole

street approach, and additional training for Via staff has been delivered to strengthen the focus on customer care, work quality and performance; and

- We have invested £12 million of new funding over the next four years in doubling the number of repair gangs across the county to help us move to a “right repair, right first-time approach” that delivers permanent repairs whenever possible on roads most affected by repeat-visit pothole repairs. The new gangs have already started work, Mr Chairman, and will be up to full capacity by the summer, doubling that previous capacity.

Lest we forget, Chairman, Councillor Waters voted against this extra investment at the budget Council meeting, so he has a bit of a nerve asking this sort of question now!

Transport and Environment Committee has received regular updates on progress towards implementing the Highways Review recommendations across the County, and our cross-party Highways Review Panel will continue to meet, to monitor and receive updates, as well as being tasked with reviewing road safety including 20mph speed limits following the motion agreed by Full Council on 20th January 2022.

There is, of course, much more work being delivered. The changes underway will naturally take some time to fully implement. But good progress is being made, and I and senior officers have recently visited both Councillor Martin and Councillor Wilmott in their divisions to discuss specific matters and the improvements we are making.

If Councillor Waters is willing to engage more positively I am sure I would be happy to visit his division as and when.

Finally, Mr Chairman, a bit of tongue in cheek: I do notice this is momentous because Councillor Wilmott has not asked a question about roads at this particular meeting. Maybe he has actually named all of the roads in Hucknall, or at least in Ashfield, and there are no more roads left to name, so that is momentous!

Question to the Chairman of the Finance Committee from Councillor Mike Pringle

Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, will the Chairman, in an act of full transparency and solidarity with the Ukrainian people, instruct the appropriate Council officers to assess whether this Council currently have any financial interests, such as contracts or investments, which could be of direct benefit to the Russian economy and publish the findings as a matter of urgency?

Response from the Chairman of the Finance Committee, Councillor Richard Jackson

Council officers have assessed whether the Council has any financial interests, such as contracts or investments, which could be of direct benefit to the Russian economy.

I can confirm that we have no direct contracts with any Russian organisations, or indeed Belarusian organisations.

The one contract that could have had an indirect benefit to the Russian economy is one that we have with High Park Industries which provide wood pellets that fuel biomass boilers maintained by the County Council. High Park Industries buy supplies from a Scandinavian company which in turn used to buy from a Russian supplier. They (High Park) have confirmed to us that they have now changed their supplier, so there is no longer any direct connection with Russia in that chain.

Prices have increased as a consequence of this change, but this will not affect us until next winter because the provider already had enough wood pellets in stock to meet our demands until then.

I appreciate the spirit and point of Councillor Pringle's question. Nottinghamshire County Council is in solidarity with the Ukrainian people. We do not wish to be involved in any transactions that could be interpreted as supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I think it is also important to emphasise that our opposition is to the actions of those governing Russia, not to the Russian people, most of whom have no control or support for the decisions and actions of Vladimir Putin.

Question to the Chairman of the Children and Young People's Committee from Councillor Tom Hollis

Would the Children and Young People's Department agree to do a full review of Nottinghamshire County Council's policy of buying residential properties for use as children's homes. Do you have confidence in Homes2Inspire's ability to keep our most vulnerable young people safe?

Response from the Chairman of the Children and Young People's Committee, Councillor Tracey Taylor

Nottinghamshire County Council is required to make provision for residential children's homes for some of the children in our care. The specification for children's homes, supported by the expectations from OFSTED as the regulator, are for homely settings based in domestic homes as close as possible to children's family, friends and local community. It is therefore necessary for the Council to buy suitable properties for its own long-term use, and to its financial advantage, to provide properties to not-for-profit providers who would struggle to obtain finance at the same rates that the local authority achieves. This also means that the local authority can use its information to position the homes where they are needed and can choose - if necessary, change - the provider running a home without disrupting children's placements or having to find further properties.

Homes2Inspire have a block contract to provide a number of homes on behalf of the local authority. Their homes, including those in Nottinghamshire, are regularly inspected and rated highly by OFSTED. They are also reviewed regularly by our own children's commissioning team using our Quality Assessment Framework. They are the preferred provider for a large number of local authorities throughout England. They work with some children who have very complex care plans and where their health needs and behaviours are extremely challenging. Our assessment is that they do this as well, if not better, than any other provider in the market.

Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor Kate Foale

Does the Leader consider that the oversight of an East Midlands Development Corporation and East Midlands Freeport under the oversight of an East Midlands Combined Authority Executive Mayor will consolidate too much decision-making powers in the hands of one person?

Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Ben Bradley MP

I understand the premise of the question. I think it is probably based on, perhaps an understandable lack of information, because we are only starting just now to have this conversation in a more public domain about governance, about how a Combined Authority will be managed as we go forward over the course of this year.

I don't think it's right to suggest that a Mayor would have direct power over all of these things in the way that the question seems to indicate. The Freeport is a separate entity, the Development Corporation is a separate entity. I would like, personally, to see those things consolidated into a structure where we can work more collaboratively together. How that looks is a matter of negotiation between all of the authorities including districts and boroughs across Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire and we'll come to that in due course, but the Freeport obviously sits over a different geography, it is run by a board with an independent chairman, it would not be run by a Mayoral Combined Authority. The Development Corporation could be folded into a Combined Authority but again has an independent board, has independent leadership within it, and there are various options for that which will be considered over the course of the coming months.

I think it is also worth pointing out that in any Combined Authority structure, the Mayor will have very few areas where he or she is able to just directly make a decision in conflict with the wishes of the local authorities within it. There is a Cabinet made up of the various upper tiers, districts and boroughs will likely be involved in many areas of decision-making directly. I spoke to Andy Street this week, who informs me that over the entire course of the West Midlands Combined Authority no financial decisions have been taken that weren't unanimous in the six or seven years of that authority, so I think it is fair to say there will be significant checks and balances on the power that you talk about.

There will be nothing that is taken from local authorities as they exist now and given up to a Mayor, in fact it is bringing things in the other direction, so I hope that clarifies that we will have significant checks and balances on all of that, and all of that will be a matter of negotiation, including with some of those districts and borough leaders in the room, over the coming months.

Question to the Chairman of the Economic Development and Asset Management Committee from Councillor Helen-Ann Smith

Can the Chairman of the Economic Development and Asset Management Committee please give this Council an update on the new Council Offices at Top Wighay Farm, Linby? What services will be moved there and what discussions have the Council had

with Departments and Trade Unions about moving staff? Further to this, are there any plans to move Council Meetings there including relocating the Council Chamber?

Response from the Chairman of the Economic Development and Asset Management Committee, Councillor Keith Girling

Before I answer the question directly, let me give a bit of background. On 2nd November 2021 my Economic Development and Asset Management (EDAM) Committee approved a report on the Investing in Nottinghamshire Programme which set out the future direction of the programme following a review by Members.

In that meeting I asked Members to consider changes to the scope of the Programme in light of the Council's approval of the hybrid working policy.

The report prioritised four building projects, which included the provision of a new-build office at Top Wighay, and these were all approved to proceed.

A planning application for the new office and enabling works for the wider development has been submitted and is due to be considered at Planning Committee in July.

The services identified to be based at the Top Wighay office development are as follows:

- the Customer Service Centre
- the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub
- the Schools and Family Support Service
- the Adult Access Service
- the Integrated Community Loan Service
- and the Business Service Centre

But there is one thing I can tell you definitely won't be based there, Chairman. Despite what you may have read in the Hucknall Dispatch, or heard from local councillors, what I can categorically tell you is Hucknall Library will not be based in the development at Top Wighay.

Hucknall Library will not be based in the Top Wighay development.

I can confirm that all impacted staff have been kept up to date throughout the approval process and have been advised of all the likely timescales.

The Trade Unions have also been kept up to date around the development and were last briefed at a meeting of the Central Joint Consultative Negotiating Panel on 11 November 2021.

There are currently no firm plans to move Council Meetings, including relocating the Council Chamber to Top Wighay Farm.

All of our buildings, however, will be built with the principle of having flexible spaces that are able to accommodate a variety of uses should this be a required in the future.

The report of EDAM Committee recognised however that this wasn't the end of the review into the programme.

With the implementation of our hybrid working policy, I have asked officers in the County Council's Property Team to continue to review occupancy in our buildings and to assess whether there are additional benefits that can be derived from the estate. As outlined in the November 2021 report, provision has been made in the Invest in Nottinghamshire Programme for contingency funding to support feasibility and legal work where this is the case.

Question to the Chairman of the Communities Committee from Councillor John 'Maggie' McGrath

Can the Chairman confirm whether this Council's policies relevant to the allocation of the Local Communities Fund, at the discretion of this Council, would allow for funding to be reprioritised toward alternative community activity not specified within a successful bid, but equally eligible in meeting the criteria of the Fund?

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

Chairman, I must be straight-forward and say that the short answer to Councillor McGrath's question is 'No'.

The Local Communities Fund is a member-led scheme and therefore all awards must be approved through the relevant committee or Cabinet Member.

To reach that point, applications are carefully considered to examine how closely the proposed activity meets the Council's priorities. Applications are also checked to ensure that appropriate governance measures are in place and sufficient match funding has been secured to make the project viable.

Where the number of applications received exceeds the amount of funding available, the relevant decision-making councillors must make choices about which applications should be funded, and which should not.

For those applications that are approved for funding, binding agreements between the Council and the applicant are prepared and signed, and thereafter the project is monitored to ensure that the funding is being managed and spent in line with what has been agreed.

It follows that if an organisation does not spend its funding in the way it originally agreed to do, the Council must ask for the return of that funding. We owe it to all applicants and Nottinghamshire taxpayers to apply these rules fairly but firmly.

However, Chairman, where an application is unsuccessful, we would of course encourage a new, fresh application to the appropriate element of the Local Communities Fund (LCF), if the applicant has reached a position where there are better able to meet the criteria, and assuming that the LCF is open to applications at that time.

As I stated in a previous Written Reply (which is in these Council papers at the back), if a Local Communities Fund application is unsuccessful our officers are always ready to continue discussions with the applicant to identify possible alternative streams of funding, be that from this Council or elsewhere, and to help them understand why an application was turned down, with a view to ensuring that future applications have a better chance of success.

Question to the Chairman of the Children and Young People's Committee from Councillor Michelle Welsh

As Nottinghamshire will not be one of the 75 local authorities successful in receiving a proportion of the Government's £302 million fund for the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme announced on 2 April 2022, can the Chairman update the Council on how the Government's decision will impact the 36 services and interventions expected to be delivered by the Family Hub Network?

Response from the Chairman of the Children and Young People's Committee, Councillor Tracey Taylor

You are correct that Nottinghamshire will not be receiving Family Hubs and Start for Life funding, because our local authority did not qualify. Originally, the funding was going to be distributed through a bidding process, but the Government instead opted to target the funding according to deprivation criteria, and Nottinghamshire County was not identified as one of the council areas in most need.

The Family Hubs and Start for Life Fund focuses on elements of the Best Start for Life Programme including breastfeeding support, parenting programmes, parent-infant mental health support and home learning environments. All of these areas are already priorities for the Best Start Partnership, which is a sub-group of the Health and Wellbeing Board.

There is no statutory guidance on Family Hubs, but as I indicated in the Council budget debate a couple of months ago, we are confident that over the coming year we will be able to work with partners to establish Family Hub Networks with the required services and interventions to support our local communities.

Nottinghamshire County Council has retained strong Children's Centre and Youth Services and has a Family Service delivering a range of interventions which we will be able to shape - along with health, voluntary sector, schools and other services - into networks that will deliver for local communities in line with the Government's ambition.

A funding bid has been submitted to DfE (Department for Education) in December for the Family Hub Transformation Fund, and we are expecting an announcement in May.

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

Has Nottinghamshire County Council made any approaches to any organisations to discuss the relocation of any library services from their current locations?

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

Nottinghamshire County Council holds discussions with various parties across the county about ways of improving accessibility to the range of services provided by Inspire. We continue to seek ways of ensuring our communities can access a range of complimentary services in one location where that is appropriate. Sometimes we are approached by other organisations wishing to initiate such discussions, and sometimes we initiate discussions ourselves together with other partners.

As I stated in my budget presentation in February, this Conservative administration will protect and maintain Nottinghamshire's network of libraries. Nobody who has access to a library within a reasonable distance of where they live now will cease to have that access in the next four years, nor beyond if we continue in office.

In most or all cases, these libraries will remain in their current buildings, but of course we are happy to explore, with any potential partners, co-location or re-location of services if this can provide an even more cost-effective or customer-focused way of delivering our already excellent library service. We have a duty to our customers and taxpayers to do so.

Any such discussions that developed into a firm proposal would then see that proposal submitted to a full consultation with the library customers and of course, the relevant divisional county councillor or councillors.

However, Chairman, as I have said on several occasions now, we will not reduce the number of libraries we provide, and we have no plans to relocate key town centre libraries into alternative locations. For example, I'll state there are no plans or discussions to re-locate Hucknall library.

The truth is that at a time when many local authorities are reducing their library services, Nottinghamshire County Council is committed to maintaining and where possible improving our libraries network, and we should all be proud of that position.

Question to the Chairman of the Transport and Environment Committee from Councillor Jim Creamer

Does the Chairman agree with Government's Bus Back Better strategy, which states: "where physically possible, there should be significant investment in bus priority - bus lanes at a minimum"?

Response from the Chairman of the Transport and Environment Committee, Councillor Neil Clarke MBE

My answer to Councillor Creamer's question is yes, where physically possible, and where appropriate.