

APPENDIX B

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 7 DECEMBER 2023 QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER, CABINET MEMBERS AND COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment from Councillor John Lee

Would the Cabinet Member join me in welcoming the additional funding announced by the Government last month for highways re-surfacing across this county and country, and could he briefly explain how our share of this investment will be deployed in Nottinghamshire?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment, Councillor Neil Clarke MBE

Yes indeed, I will join you in welcoming the additional funding announced last month by the Transport Secretary, Mark Harper.

Across England, local highway authorities will receive £150 million this financial year, followed by a further £150 million for the following 2024/2025 year, with the rest of a total £8.3 billion funding being allocated through to 2034.

For Nottinghamshire in the short-term, this means an extra £4.7 million spread over this year and next year, which we will use to re-surface more roads across the county than previously planned.

Thanks to our Highways Review and Highways Improvement Plan we are already making more efficient use of resources to complete larger, “right first time” patch repairs, and it’s fair to say these are receiving a broadly positive response from the public.

For example, an Arun Dale resident was impressed with the speed, efficiency and professionalism with which the Via team completed road resurfacing works in his area. I quote his comment:

“I just want to compliment your team that's just finished the job in Arun Dale. What a marvellous job they've done! Come 3.00 o'clock on the second day, they were done and dusted - there was neither a machine, lorry or a man in sight and they made a really good job and they really got stuck in. I was very impressed with the way they worked, they were a very good team who were swift and on schedule.”

Chairman, the County Council and its partner – *Via* – has already delivered over 100,000 m² of large-scale highway patching this year and residents can make use of the ‘Nottshighways.co.uk’ website or the ‘MyNOTTS’ App to see over 300 locations where we’ve made these repairs since April.

We recognise that winter is always a particularly challenging time, and snow and ice can cause significant damage to the surfaces of our roads and footways. This

additional funding will allow us to plan and have resources in place to respond more quickly to this damage and keep our highway network safe.

In addition to our large-scale patching repairs, we also intend to accelerate the delivery of highway resurfacing schemes that have already been identified but which have been programmed for future years. The knowledge that Central Government has made this money available will allow us to collaborate with our contractors and their suppliers to ensure we are able to deliver the best possible value for our works.

So yes, Councillor Lee, of course we should welcome this funding, but let's describe it as a "qualified" welcome because we could always do with more.

It's important to view the extra £4.7 million we are receiving in the context of the £150 million road repair backlog we inherited, and we need to be clear with the public that this money will not mean we can immediately repair all the roads in Nottinghamshire that need attention.

It's also important to view this extra £4.7 million in the context of other announcements in the recent Autumn Statement that bring unfunded costs on this Council in other ways, so while we will spend this money on highways, as intended, it doesn't resolve other budget pressures we face.

Without wishing to pre-empt Motion Two in the next item on today's agenda, I can confirm that we will continue to lobby various Government departments to provide greater amounts of funding, and highways continues to be one of our big priorities in that regard.

The response to such lobbying from Government tends to come in phases or tranches of money like this, rather than all at once, so I think it's perfectly fair to acknowledge this funding as a step in the right direction, without relinquishing our entitlement to lobby for more such funding in the future.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources from Councillor Michelle Welsh

The Council recently reported that over 25% of NCC workforce absences are due to mental health issues, and that 60% of absences are long-term.

What is the Council doing to support these staff?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, Councillor Richard Jackson

The Council has been supporting employees with a wide range of measures that have seen sickness absence levels reduce consistently over the past 15 months, from 12.1 to 9.97 days. I'd particularly like to just put on record my thanks to Councillor Gordon Wheeler and Councillor Jonathan Wheeler as the former portfolio holder and deputy for Personnel because this was one of their priorities and something that they have particularly driven.

The most common reason for sickness absence, as Councillor Welsh points out, is mental health and that accounts for 25% of absences. It's part of an increasing national picture as many organisations have seen a rise in mental health being a main or major cause of sickness absence.

But we should note, Mr Chairman, that 45% of our employees have no sickness absence at all.

We have a wide range of measures in place to support our employees directly and to enable our managers to support their teams. These are things such as:

- Free 24-hour access to our counselling service provided by Health Assured.
- Mental health first aiders across the organisation – several employees are trained to support colleagues and signpost them to support services across the County, and we are currently increasing that provision.
- Access to Occupational Health, including a nurse with a specialism in mental health.
- Information for managers on supporting staff with mental health issues including guidance on managing stress in the workplace.
- Access to the Business Disability Forum to offer support and advice around long-term sickness cases.
- Grief cafes.
- A Council 'wellbeing newsletter' with tips, support, and advice, and
- Wellbeing "time to talk" events.

Coming in the next year or so we also have a 'stress risk' assessment tool for schools and managers, wellbeing webinars and books, and mental health training for managers.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources from Councillor Steve Carr

The final accounts report to Full Council 23 July 2020 indicated the purchase of land at Toton for £22.143m. This was for, and I quote "...future development in conjunction with the proposed HS2 rail route." At the Overview Meeting on November 23 – you confirmed that the Council still own this land. Are there any plans to sell this and do you believe the price of this land has been impacted by the failure of the Government to keep their promise over HS2?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Asset Management, Councillor Keith Girling on behalf of the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, Councillor Richard Jackson

I'm happy to take this question as it falls within my remit. For clarity, Councillor Carr, it also falls within my remit to purchase land and property although the land you are referring to was purchased before my appointment as Cabinet Member for Economic Development and strategic Asset Management. I hope that helps if you have any further questions on this subject.

Chairman, Councillor Carr is correct. The Council did buy this land and still holds it. The land was purchased with the benefit of planning consent for residential use upon which the original purchase price was based. At the time of purchase, risk to the Council was mitigated by the ability to sell on for residential use, should proposals around HS2 falter. This remains the case. The value of the land therefore has never been directly linked to the HS2 proposals, and based on this in the current market has a higher value now than at the time of purchase.

The Council continues to consider its options for the site alongside wider opportunities at Toton, Chetwynd and Ratcliffe on Soar, working in conjunction with Broxtowe Borough Council, which has adopted a supplementary planning document related to the area, and the East Midlands Development Corporation. This work will continue with stakeholders in 2024 with the intention of agreeing the long-term usage of the site for the benefit of residents and businesses.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment from Councillor Eric Kerry

Nottinghamshire County Council currently offers free travel on the tram network between 9.30am and 11pm on weekdays and all day on weekends and bank holidays, to holders of a valid English National Concessionary Travel Pass for bus travel.

Given that we are currently consulting residents on whether any changes should be made to this non-statutory concessionary tram provision, and given that today's agenda considers the potential for an East Midlands Combined County Authority with significant powers and funding for strategic transport, would the Cabinet Member explain what possibilities there may be for concessionary tram travel (funding) arising from the creation of this new regional authority if agreed?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment, Councillor Neil Clarke MBE

As a Travel Concession Authority, Nottinghamshire County Council has a statutory duty to provide free travel on local bus services for holders of a valid Travel Pass as you indicated. Holders of concessionary passes are split into two groups:

- those meeting the elderly age of entitlement, and
- those with a disability.

The pass allows free travel on buses between 9.30am and 11pm on weekdays and all day on weekends and bank holidays.

The County Council also offers free tram travel on the tram network during these times to these concessionary bus travel pass holders as part of our tram concession scheme. This, however, is a non-statutory requirement.

The tram journeys made by concessionary bus pass holders and their companions cost the County Council taxpayer £900,000 per year, and it is no secret that we, like other councils, are facing significant financial pressures on our budget due to high levels of inflation and energy costs.

In that context, where we need to ensure that we are targeting resources effectively and efficiently at those who need it most, we are seeking the views of concessionary tram travel passengers, and taxpayers throughout the County, on whether they think any changes should be made to the current tram concession scheme to reduce the cost to the taxpayer. Four possible options, one of which of course, Mr Chairman, is 'no change'.

The consultation is ongoing until 7th January next year, so there is still a month left for residents to express their views. We will consider all responses, and I want to emphasise that no decisions have been made.

Councillor Kerry's question makes a valid point, especially in view of the decision taken earlier today, that there are new possibilities appearing on the horizon regarding the future funding of transport initiatives, including concessionary travel schemes such as this in the question.

Given that the County Council, as an authority with extensive social care responsibilities, will need to spend increasing amounts of its resources on meeting child and adult social care demands, it's important to recognise that the emerging East Midlands Combined County Authority will have extensive responsibility for Transport policy, with a £1.5 billion transport fund at its disposal.

Neither this County Council nor Combined Authority are required statutorily to provide free concessionary tram travel, but the Combined Authority will soon become the proper body to decide the long-term future of this provision, and the organisation best equipped to fund it.

From next year it will be the Combined Authority, rather than us, that is the transport authority.

The outcomes of our current consultation will therefore be as useful and informative to the deliberations of this new regional authority as they are to this Council, and that's why we want as many people as possible to engage with the current, ongoing consultation process.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care from Councillor Paul Henshaw

Can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the recent closure of the Ashdale Care Home in Mansfield, amid reports highlighting serious safeguarding failures?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Councillor Matt Barney

Just before I get into answering the question, I'd just like to acknowledge that obviously Scott and I have huge sensitivity for this, not least for the residents involved. Of course, any time we get ourselves into this situation you can't underestimate the anguish that causes for those who are living in whatever home, and their families, and of course our staff, and the care home staff, so just to put that in mind before I answer.

Ashdale Care Home in Mansfield was given an immediate closure notice on the 21st September 2023 by the Care Quality Commission. They found the home to be Inadequate and on subsequent visits the care did not meet the requirements of their registration, so this was removed.

Colleagues in our Social Care Teams responded to support people to move that day, under difficult circumstances given the distress this creates to people, their families and staff working at the home. Given the health needs of several of the residents, the work involved a range of health professionals. Indeed, the partnership work that took place around the time of this distressing event was significant and impressive.

Where there were concerns about the wellbeing of individual people, the usual safeguarding work has taken place. I can confirm that we have ensured that people who moved are thriving in their new place of residence.

I have thanked our staff here, and staff at the care home, and indeed the other agencies involved, right down from our Chief Executive to the front-line staff. And I take this opportunity to do so once again. Thank you, Adrian, thank you to the staff.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources from Councillor Francis Purdue-Horan

At the start of November, this Council adjusted its Medium-Term Financial Strategy estimates which showed that by 2026/27 it will need to spend £60.2m more than its predicted income. Could you update Council on whether this figure has changed following the Autumn Statement?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, Councillor Richard Jackson

Councillor Purdue-Horan effectively posed the same question to me at Overview Committee, so he shouldn't be too surprised that I'm going to reply today much the same as I did at that meeting.

He is correct about our initial estimate that the proposed increase in the National Living Wage equates to an additional £5m requirement for the next financial year. This is solely due to the likely impact upon the costs of Home Care and Residential Care services.

However, the Chancellor's Autumn Statement represents only one part of the information and evidence that will contribute to our next MTFS projection when it is

published. There are many other variables, as I said at the Overview meeting, that need to be considered.

For example, while the National Living Wage uplift represents an additional pressure, we can also factor into our calculations that inflation has fallen recently, by more and faster than predicted, which will have a positive impact on our projections. Likewise, work is ongoing to mitigate the known pressures on our budget; and, of course, we wait to discover the implications of the Local Government Settlement later this month.

What I will say at this stage, Chairman, is that I'm confident that the next MTFS is likely to show an overall reduction on the previously published £60.2 million budget gap, rather than an increase.

We will publish an updated MTFS at the appropriate time, when it has been worked through properly, rather than rushing out a simplistic calculation in the wake of the Autumn Statement alone, although I know the Council Leader is happy to speak about the broader implications of the Autumn Statement in response to the next question this afternoon.

Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor André Camilleri

Would the Council Leader provide a summary of the implications, for Nottinghamshire, of the Chancellor's Autumn Statement?

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

There's a bit to go at here. Some really positive aspects to discuss.

There are also some challenges, so I'll start with the elephant in the room from that perspective. I'm aware that the Autumn Statement didn't address local government funding. Colleagues will know we've got very significant pressures on budgets and services. Councillor Jackson has just alluded to some of those challenges. This is why this is the right time to make that case, ahead of the Local Government Settlement that comes in December. We've talked about coverage of that in recent days and the work we are doing to try and do that. This is the right time in the cycle to highlight these challenges in conversations with ministers across departments about that for several weeks.

In response to Councillor Zadrozny earlier on, I met the Local Government Minister, the Chancellor, Prime Minister and others. Councillor Clarke has met Transport ministers on several occasions, the CCN Conference allowed us to lobby further on this. We are making that case loud and clear.

An important point, perhaps and I'm sure inadvertent late omission in the Labour Party's press release around their motion that went out last week – we know the position on local government spending isn't finalised until the Settlement, which we don't get a draft of until late December, so it's fair to say, though some have jumped to very negative conclusions, we don't know yet what the Government intends to offer us. We'll find out in a few weeks' time.

One significant challenge that does come from the Autumn Statement is the rising National Living Wage. Government of course wants to lift people very rightly and understandably out of low pay and tackle the cost of living, which is a laudable aim, but obviously that does add budget pressures to local councils as well, and we'll work through that as we make those plans in the coming year.

There are also some really positive factors for residents and for our economy across Nottinghamshire, as well as those things we need to grapple with.

As a conservative with a small 'c' I've long called for Government to address the issue of high taxes. I was pleased to hear the Chancellor say that he has the headroom to begin to cut taxes for our residents. The 2p cut in National Insurance is a start. Alongside National insurance cuts, for self-employed people, will keep more money in the pockets of local residents.

I've been pleased to hear the Prime Minister also reiterate this point this week and trail the fact and the idea of further tax cuts to come in the New Year which will be most welcome for both Nottinghamshire residents and businesses. That stands as a tax cut for 27 million people around the country, 2 million self-employed people, and an £11 billion cut in business taxes to help drive growth and investment. These are the biggest tax cuts we've had since the 1980s. We need to start to address the trend of rising taxes as the economy recovers and bring that burden down. I hope that this is just the start.

Small businesses across the county will be relieved at the extension of the high street 75% business rate relief. I've had representations from a range of pubs and shops about this issue in advance of the Statement, that it would have caused real problems if it had gone up, so positive news for those businesses that it remains heavily discounted as well as the freeze of alcohol duties that will help our local pubs.

Increases in Universal Credit and local housing allowances will support some of our county's poorest families with up to £1,200 a year, whilst the second-largest rise in state pension I think we've ever had will do similar for pensioners: an increase of £900. Additional support to help people who are economically inactive to get back into the workforce, with tailored employment support and training, are most welcome and again will benefit some of our county's most vulnerable residents to get back into meaningful work with significant help.

So, there's lots of individual support out there for residents, for businesses and, as I've mentioned already, on an economic regeneration front and an investment front, there's the East Midlands Investment Zone, Freeport extension, and others that I won't go over again.

In short, Mr Chairman, noting the absence of that particular local government announcement and the need to address that as we are seeking to do between now and the Settlement in a few weeks' time, there's an awful lot in here for our residents and businesses and supporting our county's economic potential, and in there, safeguarding people against those cost of living challenges as we seek to rebuild our local economy that is to be celebrated from the Autumn Statement.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment from Councillor Penny Gowland

Are the Council aware of the number of passengers who rely on the concessionary tram scheme, that are unable to access the online consultation?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment, Councillor Neil Clarke MBE

I have to say, Councillor Gowland's question is bit of a strange one, if you actually read it correctly because obviously, it would be impossible for us to be aware of the precise number of passengers that are unable to access our online consultation. Indeed, the same applies to anyone who wishes to take part in this consultation, because we don't know in advance exactly who will respond, or exactly how many of those individuals don't have an internet connection or are unable to respond.

Just to try and be helpful, Mr Chairman, I'm going to try and sort of re-interpret Councillor Gowland's question. Perhaps she was wanting to ask:

What is the Council doing to ensure that anyone who is unable to access the online consultation can take part in other ways, and that nobody will be excluded from taking part?

On that basis, I'll proceed to answer my own interpretation if you like, Mr Chairman.

OfCom figures released on 23rd November this year show that around 93% of adults have access to the internet, but we are aware that not everyone can respond online. That's why we have measures in place to ensure that people without online access are not excluded from this and other consultations.

Since Monday 13th November, printed copies of this consultation document have been available at all libraries across Nottinghamshire. All residents need to do is ask a member of library staff for a printed copy.

Similarly, anybody wishing to take part in the consultation is welcome to phone the County Council on 0300 500 8080 where, if they explain that they cannot access the online consultation, our customer service staff will assist in completing a consultation response, as is standard practice for any of our consultations.

So, Chairman, nobody should feel unable to take part in this consultation. We want to hear the views of the Nottinghamshire public and we will not be making any decisions on this matter until we have studied the consultation responses.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Children and Families from Councillor Dave Shaw

Nottinghamshire County Council runs a bus for young people in Hucknall every Wednesday evening. This gives young people access to a wide range of social and recreational activities including music, dance, arts, sports and adventure activities as

well as usual youth club activities such as Xbox, arts and crafts, games, coffee Bar, and also health advice. Could the Cabinet Member give the young people of Hucknall the assurance that Nottinghamshire County Council will continue to provide this vital service until at least May 2025?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Councillor Tracey Taylor

Nottinghamshire County Council is in better financial shape than many other local authorities, but nevertheless, it is a matter of public record that we all face significant pressures.

In that context, we are currently reviewing all of the statutory and non-statutory services that we provide, as we do through our budget monitoring and development process every year, to ensure that our resources are being targeted as effectively and efficiently as possible, at those who most need our support. We will bring forward our budget proposals for 2024/25 at the appropriate time next February.

What I can say is that this administration has a track record of investing in services that proactively support the development of children and young people to give them the best start in life. We focus this investment particularly in areas of the county where financial or social deprivation are most severe, where a lack of such proactive and early intervention services might otherwise increase the risk of young people requiring more intensive and expensive support from this council, and from other public service providers, as they move into adulthood.

Previous administrations have actively considered scrapping the mobile youth bus service. The Conservatives have sought to maintain and indeed to improve it.