

# **Report on County Council Matters to Wotton-under-Edge Annual Assembly, March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016 John Cordwell**

*This of course can only be a very brief summary of what has been happening at the County Council. It was written at the end of February so some of the information may well have been overtaken by events.*

## **County Council Membership**

The Liberal Democrat member of the council for Chuchdown died in February. The funeral at the Cathedral is on March 11<sup>th</sup>. In time a by-election will be held.

It is still a minority Conservative administration with a political composition of:

24 Conservative; 13 Liberal Democrat; 9 Labour; 3 UKIP; 1 Green; 1 PAB; 1 Independent; 1 vacancy.

During the 2015/16 civic year the council has had a Labour chair and a Liberal Democrat vice-chair.

## **My roles on the County Council**

I continue as Shadow Cabinet member for Fire, Planning and Infrastructure. The Cabinet Member I was shadowing has recently stood down from this position and another Conservative has taken his place, causing two vacancies for committee chairs: Planning and Commons & Rights of Way. I also continue as my group's lead member on the Highways Contract Advisory Group.

In addition to other roles I detailed in last year's report, during this year I was elected Vice-Chairman of the Planning Committee and currently I am acting chairman. I have also served on three scrutiny task groups:

- Access to the Forest of Dean: To consider the problems of access to and from the Forest of Dean and its impacts on the economy with recommendations on future infrastructure needs. It will report back to the Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee on 9<sup>th</sup> March.

- Climate Change: To review the conclusions and recommendations of the Fifth Assessment Report and recommend further action that can be taken by the council, local businesses and communities to address climate change. It will also report back to the Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee on 9<sup>th</sup> March.

Both these Task Groups also made recommendations on the Local Transport Plan (LTP) review.

- EU Referendum scrutiny task group: to establish and identify the social, economic and cultural benefits and disadvantages that membership of the EU has on Gloucestershire and to make the results available to residents before the referendum. This was overtaken by the announcement of the June 23<sup>rd</sup> date for the referendum.

More widely, I have continued to be a member of South West Councils and to serve on its Resources and Management Committee.

## **County Budget 2016/17**

Public consultation on council tax options for the County Council budget resulted in a preference for a 3.99% increase in the precept of which 2% is ring fenced for adult social care in line with the Chancellor's announcement last year. This is the first increase for five years.

After the consultation began the Government financial settlement for 2016/17 was announced and notification received of the final tax base and collection fund surplus/deficit figures from the six district councils. The net effect of these and other small changes was an increase in available funding which the Conservative Cabinet intended to add to reserves.

However, ahead of the budget meeting the Liberal Democrat Group put forward a series of proposals to use this windfall to improve services. In the media the Conservative Leader of the

council opposed them, but at the budget meeting almost all of these were accepted in whole or in part resulting in the following final additions:

- to invest a further £2.075M in road maintenance (including a roll-out of the lengthman scheme across the county). Within this, the amount available to each councillor for 'Highways Local' schemes is being increased from £22.5k to £30k.

(The Lib Dem proposal was that £1.2M should all be within the 'Highways Local' schemes.) At a meeting I attended in January it was pointed out by a county council officer last week that in 1995 the highways budget was £24M (when I was chairing the committee responsible for this!). Next year, prior to the budget meeting it would have been £13M!

- a £100k investment to improve the implementation process of Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs). The Conservatives removed the entire budget for TRO work in 2010. Since then the only ones that could be progressed have been those funded by developers, those specifically linked to the road safety hotspot list, and those funded from Parish Councils' 'Community Offer' match funding or from County Councillors' 'Highways Local' funding. The long (often two year) delay in implementing even these Orders has also been an issue with county councillors and parish councils.

- in places where the County Council charges residents for on-street parking permits, free permits for the first vehicle where it is a Band A Vehicle Excise Duty electric vehicle. (Estimated cost £5k per annum, to be reviewed after two years.)

- £25k investment to provide improved mental health support to children and young people.

- £50k to continue for a further year the Liberal Democrat initiative to fund free Y5 pupil visits to the Gloucestershire SkillZone, assisting in improving the safety of young people.

- £20k to the Child Sexual Exploitation scheme to spend on e-safety, with advice from the Children's Safeguarding Board.

- £150k to undertake some of the cycling schemes proposed in the "Barriers to Cycling" report produced last year on the request of Liberal Democrat councillors.

- £50k invested in seeking solutions to the pollution levels in the county's Air Quality Management Areas, subject to match funding from the district councils.

These changes leave the overall call on council tax payers for County Council services unchanged from the Cabinet recommendation. At Band D this equates to an increase in council tax of £43.51, to £1134.01. The county council Labour group did not put forward any amendments but voted against the budget.

The capital programme for 2016/17 includes £2.3M funding for the work on the Berkeley Bridges.

### **Other Highlights from County Council Meetings**

County Council meetings are now being webcast live on:

<http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/watch-council-meetings>

At its July meeting the council endorsed the recommendations of a task group into apprenticeships. It sought to reverse some perceptions of apprenticeships as an unfulfilling route into employment, encouraging better career advice to young people in schools and seeking greater support from employers. Motions debated included a need for better mobile phone coverage in the county and supported a council investigation into how this can be achieved. A scrutiny committee was due to consider this with mobile phone providers in February but the meeting has now been postponed until April.

At its October meeting the county council agreed to write to the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice demanding that plans to close Gloucester and Stroud Magistrates' courts be abandoned. The closures were confirmed in February leaving Cheltenham Magistrates' Court as the only one in the county.

At its December meeting a motion tabled by the Liberal Democrat group was concerned with the continuing failure of the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SWASFT) to meet their 75% target in responding to the most urgent calls within 8 minutes. There was unanimous agreement that the council's chief executive and council's leader should write to the

chief executive of SWASFT asking what specific actions are planned to tackle failing response times especially in the rural districts of the county (Stroud, Cotswolds, Forest of Dean and Tewkesbury).

The council also agreed that its Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee should explore the option of creating a county-wide ambulance service rather than the current regional one, with recommendations to be produced for the full council at a future meeting.

### **Children's Activity Fund**

Started in 2014/15, this annual fund allocates £5k to each County Councillor for their divisions. During 2015/16, locally this has supported play equipment in Hillesley Playing Field and Hamfields Leisure Centre and sport activities in Wotton through the Youth Centre. I am waiting for details of the scheme for the coming year as it is understood that the criteria for this grant scheme may change but already have two expressions of interest!

### **Highways Issues**

The new local highways manager, Andrew Middlecote has been in post since last May. The £20k I was allocated for the last financial year, 2014/15, under the Highways Local scheme remained unspent at the end of the year as Amey was unable to progress any of the proposals. This was rolled forward to 2015/16 along with a further £22.5k for that year.

In July unanimous county council support was given to a motion expressing concern over highway repairs in the county and the poor performance of Amey and its poor communication with county councillors, parish councils and the wider community. It was revealed that at that time that 58% of its work is delivered through 41 sub-contractors. There were issues over sub-contractors not being paid on time.

Local unsatisfactory work by Amey sub-contractors required several revisits to Parklands.

I received an apology that, despite my reminding them, most of the pyramid orchids on the verges of Old London Road were once again mown down.

### **Street Lighting**

The LED lighting contract has been awarded to Skanska to convert all the county's street lights (around 55,000) to LED lighting and for the general maintenance of the council's street lighting, lit signs and bollards.

A successful funding bid to the DfT enabled the value of the contract to be increased to £41M which will enable all the lights to be individually controlled from a central location.

The four-year core installation work to install the new LED lighting and remote dimming technology has started. The contract will also replace the life-expired concrete and aluminium street lighting columns from April 2016.

SSE will continue to deliver the street lighting maintenance contract until March 2016 when this will pass to Skanska.

I asked about new lighting currently being installed on new estates and odd extra lights such as requested by parish councils being LEDs. I had to remind the council about this when an extra light was provided in Ham from my Highways Local money. In February an LED light was installed in Haw Street.

### **Adverse Weather Plan 2015/16**

In January, I at last obtained a copy of this. I am concerned (not for the first time) that parish snow wardens and plough operators are not properly informed of what is expected of them and I raised this at January's meeting of the Highways Contract Advisory Group. At the same meeting concern was expressed that the advice of Gloucestershire Highways on planning applications to district councils was often buried in quite long responses and there was a need for a summary sheet at the start of the response. A recent SDC solar farm consent did not contain a condition requiring vehicles to enter the public highway with clean wheels and this has caused problems locally.

## **Local Transport Plan Review**

Consultation on this final phase of the Local Transport Plan (LTP) review process ran from 20<sup>th</sup> November to 5<sup>th</sup> February. Thirteen documents were consulted on: an overarching strategy, six transport model policy documents, including rail, and six “Connecting Places” delivery strategies, one of which is for the Stroud area. The final plan is expected to be approved by the County Council in June.

In the past the LTP was a bidding document for carrying out schemes. From 2015/16 most of Gloucestershire’s capital funding for transport has been coming through the Single Local Growth Fund (SLGF) which is allocated to the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the LEP has prepared a Strategic Economic Plan through which the SLGF allocation is made. So the LEP decides which schemes should go ahead, not the County Council.

## **Gloucestershire Rail Study**

Last June I attended a consultation event on this. It formed part of the update of Gloucestershire’s LTP. I ensured that the South Gloucestershire councillor whose division includes Charfield was invited to attend, which he did.

This desk top study was carried out by Amey staff from Yorkshire and staff from Southampton University. There were clearly gaps in their local knowledge, including all the work done on Charfield and also the proposed Gloucestershire Parkway project of a few years ago. Their conclusions did short-list Charfield and Hunts Grove as the two reopening priorities which should be pursued, although only in the long term.

I have continued to stress the reopening of Charfield station in meetings with GCC officers and through my response to the LTP consultation. The likely way forward for this is through the proposed MetroWest developments which provide an opportunity for improved Bristol-Gloucester services, including new stations, in the 2019 – 2029 period.

## **Highways England**

Previously the Highways Agency, Highways England gave a presentation to county councillors last summer. They are responsible for motorways and trunk roads. I mentioned the traffic lights at junction 14 of the M5 and they admitted that lessons had been learnt from this scheme!

## **Consultation on Public Transport, Community Transport and Concessionary Fares Review**

This consultation ended in January and the results were considered by Cabinet in February for any changes to services to begin in January.

Ten evening stakeholder events were held over the consultation period as well as on-bus and local centre engagement to encourage a strong and representative response from bus users. One of the evening events was held in Wotton after I complained that evening meetings further away would not be accessible by bus to Wotton residents! The Wotton one was well attended, particularly compared with others.

Soon after the start of the consultation Severnside Transport (a community transport based organisation based in South Gloucestershire) gave notice they could no longer afford to run the number 87 subsidised service managed by South Gloucestershire but to which Gloucestershire County Council contributed £54,000 annually. Changes agreed by South Gloucestershire, without notifying Gloucestershire County Council, resulted in South Gloucestershire providing a much reduced service between Wotton-under-Edge and Cribbs Causeway via Thornbury.

Consequently at short notice the County Council procured a replacement six month contract from Stagecoach giving a similar level of service for the Dursley – Wotton-under-Edge and Thornbury corridor, now numbered service 60. One option in Gloucestershire County Council’s consultation on the Mikes Travel service 201 envisaged a revised service 87 to Dursley linking with “direct services to Gloucester. The second option was to run the 201 service on its current route three days a week.

The Cabinet meeting in February considered the feedback from public consultation on options to change the way the council invests in local bus services and other issues. One outcome was the acceptance of a recommendation to replace the 201 service with a revised service 87 to Dursley to link with direct services from there to Gloucester. So there will be no direct service to Gloucester from Wotton in future.

In answer to a question I asked at the Cabinet meeting, it was acknowledged that having to change buses at Dursley would lengthen journey times and also be an extra obstacle to use of the service by elderly and disabled travellers. However it was argued that this was offset by an increased choice of onward journey opportunities by using Dursley as a hub.

Locally, minor changes are also being made to:

- the Dursley-Berkeley-Bristol service 88 to improve reliability and coordinate with other services. The alternative was a more extensive reworking of the timetable.
- the Wotton-under-Edge – Stroud service 40. This is to be maintained at the existing level but also diverting the service to serve communities on the service 36, Stroud - Rodborough bus route which is to be withdrawn. The alternative of reducing the number of journeys undertaken by service 40 throughout the day was not pursued. The consultation meeting in Wotton was a significant factor in this.

### **S Glos Review of Bus Services 84 and 86**

These are being revised by South Gloucestershire Council. Gloucestershire County Council was belatedly notified of the consultation which ended on 11<sup>th</sup> February!

I have been assured that the proposed 84 and 85 circular services will call at (our) Kingswood and that the service will be no worse than the current one. The timetables have not been decided and were not part of the consultation process. They could have an impact on school journeys, which I have questioned.

### **B4058 Speed Limit**

The long wait for this TRO, reducing 50mph sections between Charfield and Wotton to 40mph was recently formally advertised with a closing date of 18<sup>th</sup> February. It is being financially supported by Kingswood Parish and Wotton Town Councils and money from my Highways Local budget.

### **County Council Planning Committee**

One of the items considered at the July meeting of the committee was the importation of soil and formation of bunds on the clay pigeon site next to Folly Farm, Kingswood. This received approval with conditions, some of which I was able to strengthen. County matter planning applications are very rare in my division.

### **Fire & Rescue: Future Service Provision**

This consultation ended on 4<sup>th</sup> January. The outcome has been the closure of Painswick Fire Station and use of retained firefighters at Cirencester. The county, unusually nationally, will still have more fire stations than several years ago.

### **County Council Solar Power Proposals**

In July the County Council Cabinet approved a strategy for the development of ground mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) renewable energy generation on six sites on the council's estate. On the same day the Government announced a consultation on subsidies for solar power. Through a motion to the October meeting of the County Council it was agreed, with UKIP members abstaining, to request the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change that any intended changes to subsidies on solar power do not put at risk public sector/community led schemes such as the ones proposed for the county council estate, which require much longer to develop but which have a much greater social return. Early in February UK solar energy firms went to the

court of appeal, opposing the Government's early closure of the Renewable Obligation scheme. The outcome was expected in a few weeks.

Meanwhile, the County Council is to carry out long overdue weatherproofing and modernisation of the Shire Hall complex. This will include the integration of pv solar panels into the roof of Shire Hall and the Bearland building using £1M of a Government regeneration grant. The police are vacating their part of the Bearland building and this will be taken over as County Council offices by staff relocated from other parts of the current Shire Hall complex which will be demolished and redeveloped as part of the regeneration of the Quayside and Blackfriars area of the city, also using Government regeneration funding.

### **County Residual Waste Disposal Project – Javelin Park**

The opportunity for Stroud District Council to challenge the court decision expired in August. The main construction is due to start this summer. The plant is scheduled to be treating waste in 2019.

A decision by the Information Commissioner in response to a Freedom of Information request by a local resident required the County Council to disclose the details of the contract for Javelin Park by 12<sup>th</sup> November. The Cabinet Member, Cllr. Ray Theodoulou, said the County Council would appeal against the decision. Many members of the council, who have never seen the contract, have been asking for these details to be revealed for a long time. I will be tabling a question at the next County Council meeting asking what has happened to this appeal.

Last November's Cabinet approved a £17M one-off financial contribution from the council's reserves to mitigate the increased project cost caused by the delay in the facility coming in to service from 2016 to 2019. The Liberal Democrat group called in this decision, concerned that such a significant redirection of funds should have been determined by the whole council. Whilst the call-in was defeated in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee it has since been agreed by the council's Constitution Committee that the council will ascertain the reporting processes followed by other local authorities for transfers of significant funds from Council reserves to mitigate additional costs of a project.

A Liberal Democrat bid to include £30k in the 2016/17 budget funded from reserves to determine whether there are any discrepancies or anomalies regarding the procurement process and the subsequent contract failed. One of the top five public comments during the budget consultation was to "cancel the incinerator".

### **Devolution in Gloucestershire**

The Gloucestershire bid was submitted at the beginning of September. The county council leader has made it clear that it will not go ahead if the Government insists on the introduction of a 'metro mayor'. The only one of the ten partners who favours this is the current Police & Crime Commissioner. The County Council will continue to be the fire authority notwithstanding the Government's current consultation on "enabling closer working between emergency services".

More recently the Oxfordshire district councils have proposed a model of four unitary authorities, covering not just Oxfordshire. One of the proposed unitaries consists of the current West Oxfordshire and Cotswold Districts. This apparently has some support of the leader of Cotswold District Council, who is also a Gloucestershire county councillor. The repercussions for Gloucestershire would be immense. Another of the proposed unitaries would take in South Northamptonshire.

### **Fracking**

A Labour motion to the October County Council meeting to write to the Secretary of State to remove the licensing areas within Gloucestershire produced a procedural motion from Liberal Democrats to refer the issue to the Environment and Community Scrutiny Committee (ECSC). This succeeded with Labour voting against and the Conservatives abstaining.

The original motion was overtaken by events when in the 14<sup>th</sup> licensing round Onshore Oil

and Gas Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences (PEDLs) were offered for a total of 159 blocks including much of the Forest of Dean and a smaller area in the Vale of Berkeley around Sharpness, which includes a very small corner in my Division.

Following a briefing session for members of the ECSC the committee recommended that the Council should write to the Secretary of State requesting that the process for exploring hydraulic fracturing in Gloucestershire be halted. The County Council voted 21 in favour of this action with 26 abstentions.

**John Cordwell**