

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCILLORS' REPORT



Report Reference C-21-25
Meeting Date 1st November 2021
Agenda Item 6
Prepared by Cllrs Tony Dean and Stewart Gardiner

REPORT OF CLLR TONY DEAN

BROADER ISSUES

The main issue for CEC is still COVID. It has emerged in the last few weeks (after a year of radio silence on the question) that CEC has actually been more than fully funded by the Government for all its COVID related extra expenses. So much so that it has been able to carry over approx. £10m from the 2020/21 year to the 2021/22 accounts, £5m of which has gone to boost reserves. The rest is being earmarked for estimated sums of further COVID expenditure this financial year. Any unspent government grants will have to be repaid to the Govt. eventually, but the £5m is a buffer against unexpected levels of expenditure this year.

The other main issue for the Council is, in my view, the Council's current Constitution. We Councillors have a Teams session on this on 12th November, when I and many other Councillors, I'm sure, will make their views known. The problem is that the way the new Committee System Constitution is currently written allows the ruling Coalition to severely restrict scrutiny and debate. At yesterday's Council meeting for example, only two of the five Notices of Motion submitted were allowed to be debated, the others being sent straight to the relevant Committee for consideration. This may seem OK, until you realise that that means most of the Councillors will not get a vote on these issues. Of the two that were allowed, each political Group (there are four) was allowed only two speakers, each restricted to two minutes maximum on the microphone! Many people who felt strongly about these issues were therefore not heard. It is a restriction on democracy in my view, but the meeting was four hours long, even with these restrictions. The meetings are longer than necessary partly because we have at least half an hour of 'Mayor's announcements', 'Leader's announcements' and 'Deputy Leader's announcements' at the beginning which are mostly a stream of self-aggrandising political statements about how wonderful everything is in the Council, now that they have control. We must change this because the Council meetings are pointless in this form, we can swap bluster and hubristic announcements for proper debate of the main issues.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

There are a lot of parochial issues (Bark Run is one of ours) being fought over at the moment, and a few 'specifics' which cover the whole Borough. I will mention the Borough ones only.

Town Centre Vitality plans

These are still in an early stage of production. I have read the interim report for Knutsford, which does not yet move us forward towards a funded plan for Knutsford. Adam and others can update you on the results of a recent meeting with the consultants, which unfortunately I couldn't attend.

Winter gritting routes

Highways have made a mess of the official scoring system and mis-scored many roads in the borough, allowing important roads to be struck off the gritting routes. The one I have been dealing with regards Bexton Road in Knutsford, which despite having the main entrance to the Academy on its Western flank has not scored enough on the official list (<100) to be gritted. As I understand it, the main entrance to a secondary school scores 100 on its own! This is without consideration of Egerton Primary and Yorston Lodge which also score points (lower than secondary schools). Over a year ago I received a verbal apology about this, and an assurance it would be put right, from Paul Bayley, the senior officer involved. Despite this, when the gritting routes for this winter were published, Bexton Road was initially missing. I again pointed out the mistake and again was informed it would be corrected. I await the commencement of gritting to check that it has actually been corrected.

Household Waste Recycling Centres

The decision to leave Congleton without a HWRC since the end of the lease on the existing centre in September, still stands despite many complaints from Congleton folks and people who live near the already busy Macclesfield and Alsager HWRCs, which are the nearest alternatives. In my view these are too far away from Congleton and the current situation will encourage fly-tipping, and create more CO2 emissions from those people who do decide to transport their waste all the way to Macclesfield or Alsager. The reason that this is a 'Borough' issue is that if this anomaly is accepted as permanent, there will be further HWRC closures in future.

There are other contentious issues in the air, the main one being that the Coalition has chosen to ask over 85s to pay £5 a week for their in-home device support to help them live at home - this was previously a free service - Stewart will know more detail about this.

REPORT OF CLLR STEWART GARDINER

Two of the three recently appointed Directors took up their posts in early October; Jane Traverse as Director of Place and Helen Charlesworth-May as Director of Adults & Health. Deborah Woodcock is due to start as Director of Children Services later in November. All three women have significant in-boxes to deal with.

At CEC Full Council in October, little formal business was enacted; with items seeking formal changes to the budget; mostly dealing with Covid related income and expenditure, because all items over £1million require Full Council approval, even in respect of monies coming-in from Government by way of grant funding. Please note the headline in the Knutsford Guardian (20th October) misrepresented the facts in stating Cheshire East was allocating funds to local residents, when it redistributed monies that came direct from Government to deal with these issues.

However, the meeting gave an opportunity for Councillors to debate two motions (most motions to Council are proposed. Seconded and referred to the relevant committee).

- The first motion was accepted unanimously and gave officers authority to progress with a bid for Crewe to be the location of the HQ for Great British Railways.

- The second sought approval for the Council to make the UK100 pledge and join the UK100 network. There was some confusion in the debate about the costs implications for joining the network and so this was passed by not unanimously, with cross-party dissention.

During questions I asked when the Stanley Centre would reopen to service-users, because it had been closed since the start of the pandemic. The Chair of the committee was absent through ill-health so I have been promised a written response which I will hope to share at the meeting.

There is still a significant backlog in the processing of planning applications, which will not be helped by 2 of the 3 applications on the agenda for consideration last month, being withdrawn at the last minute to allow additional information to be considered.

At the Adults Committee at the end of September reports were considered looking at the Adult Social Care Improvement Plan, the recommission of the contracts for advocacy services and assistive technology and NHS Health Checks.

There was a vote on charging over 85s for assistive technology – I vote against this as I thought it was short-sighted and morally bankrupt, however the proposal was supported by the majority of the committee.

Finally, there was a debate on the issue of food poverty, in which the role of Cheshire East (with Government money) in supporting residents in need and agreed that the Council should look at adopting its own 'Right to Food' Strategy. In it's amended form this was approved unanimously.