

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCILLORS' REPORT



Report Reference C-21-31
Meeting Date 7th March 2022
Agenda Item 6
Prepared by Town Clerk

1.0 REPORT OF CLLR ABEL

I must confess to finding it very difficult to write a report for you this for council meeting. With both the situation in Ukraine and the latest information from the UN on climate change. We certainly face some challenges. You could argue that these are not for us to worry about. I could not agree.

We have had three named storms coming to the UK almost back-to-back. Named storms have to reach certain criteria to be named. There is a change in the use of certain expressions regarding weather events. It used to be until very recently called a once in a 100-year event or a once in a decade event. They are now using a percentage. So, for instance a 1% event would have been a one in a 100 year event. Perhaps they ought to change the rating of significant events if they are going to be more frequent than previously understood.

As climate change and environment champion I have been looking at the Dean Moss peatland area near Macclesfield¹. This is a complicated issue. I was there on Sunday (27th February) afternoon hearing all about it and its potential, firstly to be a carbon sink and to retain the existing carbon that is stored there which will be released if it is developed, but also to improve biodiversity and provide a real amenity for all our futures. It is challenging as it has outline planning permission and is 45% owned by Cheshire East Council. The wisdom of Solomon is surely required.

I'm pleased to say that the environment and communities committee of which I am vice-chair voted unanimously to sign up to UK 100. The organisation that provides, regardless of political background the ability to work together to achieve the best possible outcomes, by sharing information, research, and best practice. This is with the view to the whole of Cheshire East being carbon neutral and not just the council which has been the aim here tofore. This was a unanimous vote unlike the full council meeting where I found myself arguing against a fellow independent. Some of these independents are just too damned independent.

I am working on and have been supporting groups within Cheshire East:

- 1) Energy generation
- 2) Energy storage
- 3) Investigating insulation and ventilation for homes and businesses.

¹ This area is part of the South Macclesfield Development area with outline consent for a strategic development. A reserved matters application has recently been submitted and has drawn objection from Cheshire Wildlife Trust and others.

I have also been working on the state of our roads with other Cheshire East Councillors. Extra money is being allocated to hopefully improve this situation.

I strongly believe that we need to be working more closely together to overcome the problems that face us in our local communities. As such I am not a fan of the politics, particularly in local government. I wish people would find it in the hearts to be polite, courteous, and respectful of each other's views.

The committee system seems to be working well. Continuing to give opportunities for Ward councillors to have a greater input than has been possible in recent times. This has allowed each committee to review its own budget and by doing so contribute to the whole budget.

There will be an increase in Council Tax. This in my opinion is another area in which Local Government needs to have real control of our finances to achieve long term goals and not be reliant on Central Government controlling so many of the factors that affect us all.

2.0 REPORT OF CLLR DEAN

2.1 PLANNING DEPARTMENT REVIEW

I submitted an agenda item to the Environment and Communities Cttee last year calling for a root and branch review of the Planning Department, its systems, resourcing, protocols etc due to the number of complaints received from residents about planning delays and lack of communication.

This was approved and subsequently set in motion under the control of Jayne Traverse, the new Exec. Director of Place at CEC, who is a qualified town planner and has worked in three other Councils as well as the Local Govt. Association (LGA). Her Phase 1 report is due in April but I can report she has already made significant headway in analysis of where the problems are and is currently putting in place some 'quick win' changes, which will improve things. Other improvements, like a new IT system and putting in place the conclusions of the resources review will take longer, but she is hoping that most actions can be completed by this time next year.

I am Chair of the Members' Advisory Panel that is overseeing the review, and we receive monthly progress reports.

2.2 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY ROAD MAINTENANCE BUDGET

Due to our concerns about deteriorating road surfaces, I worked with Cllr. David Brown (Con) of Congleton and the Finance Officer to prepare an amendment to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) - a four year budget - which significantly brings forward capital expenditure on road repairs (level 1 and level 2 resurfacing rather than pothole filling).

On top of the government grant for road maintenance, Cheshire East was due to spend £7m/£4m/£4m/£4m of capital on roads during the four year MTFS period. The amendment was to bring this work forward and spend £7m/£6m/£6m in the first three years instead. This will create more borrowing requirement but savings on pothole filling (evidenced by previous years' spending patterns) will pay for this. It gives the Council three years to work with other Councils via the LGA, and government to secure more funding going forward for road maintenance.

The amendment was approved by the Corporate Policy Committee and is now part of the MTFS.

2.3 COUNCIL BUDGET

We (the Conservative opposition) tried and failed to get an amendment tabled in full Council to reduce the 2022/23 Council Tax rise from 2.99% to 1.99%. We wanted this due to the tsunami of higher costs already about to hit our residents - with inflation over 5%, and heating and petrol costs going up exponentially. It is actually a change that is more than affordable, as money saved up from excess govt. grants during lockdown, and good financial management by the officers, has created an increase in General Reserves from £10m to £11.5m, and the creation of a mysterious MTFS Reserve of £8m on top of this.

The loss of 1% from the proposed rise this year will cost the Council £2.4m which can obviously be funded from the MTFS reserve. This reduction in income will also be carried forward over the remaining years of the MTFS of course, but this can be managed by future year's Council Tax increases depending on the particular circumstances at the time - we felt that this year was the wrong time to ask residents for the maximum allowed increase in their payments to the Council, when the Council can demonstrably manage on a lower increase. The amendment was not allowed to be heard by full Council, refused by the Monitoring Officer as it was received 'too late' after a new deadline was imposed in the recent Constitution changes.

We will work to get these changes reversed as we think they are undemocratic - these important issues should always be heard in full Council.

2.4 WINTER GRITTING

We have submitted a request for details of the 'need for gritting' scoring used for individual roads in the Borough which resulted in many roads being taken off the gritting schedule, as it appears mistakes may have been made. Some dangerous roads have been taken off the schedule and many accidents have subsequently occurred on those roads (mostly in the Nantwich area). One example of mis-scoring is in Knutsford where I discovered early on that Bexton Road was to be removed from the gritting schedule, despite having four schools along it! The officers had ignored the main Academy Senior School entrance on Bexton Road in their scoring, assuming it to be a rear access to the middle school only.

This was promised to be corrected (which would have put Bexton Road back on the gritting schedule) and I would be grateful if any Town councillors could let me know if they have seen Bexton road being gritted this winter.

3.0 REPORT OF CLLR GARDINER

At February Council Cheshire East Voted to raise its share of Council Tax by 2.99%. I voted against this proposal not because of political expedience, but because I genuinely believed it was a mistake. Cheshire East fared better than expected in its allocation of direct un-ring-fenced grants from the Government and holds reserves just shy of £20 million. Therefore, there was no need to ask hard-pressed residents to face such an increase this year.

At the same meeting although I supported proposals to progress with petitioning against the Bill to facilitate HS2b, which whilst not objecting to the principal of the railway line will enable the Council to ensure that appropriate mitigation is secured to protect the environment of those who will be impacted by this part of the route. This reflects a similar procedure employed for the HS2a which runs south of Crewe.

There was a Notice of Motion debated at the Full Council meeting, which was proposed and seconded by the Council Leader and his Deputy (respectively) and asked the Council to support calls for the Government to allow a more flexible approach to how the Council's meetings were held; namely to allow meetings and/or individual councillors to attend virtually.

I did not support the Motion which was passed because although there are some merits to such a proposal, I felt that on balance holding in person meetings were more appropriate for decision-making meetings, particularly when debating important issues whereby you could see the reaction of everyone else involved not just the person on the screen.

I also had concerns about the veracity of decision making when during many virtual meetings I have attended during the Pandemic the only screen that was visible was that of Chair and that of the member speaking at any given time.

There are precise rules dictating that a person may only vote on an item if they are present throughout the discussion on that item and I cannot swear hand on heart that in the SPB meetings I chaired that every member who voted was virtually present throughout, because I had no way of checking.

Finally at the meeting I asked the Cllr Mannion if an item could be added to the work programme to consider a review of the Council's policy and practice regarding the issue of rough sleepers and the homeless, following an incident that occurred in Knutsford on Christmas Eve.