

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

18 October 2023

Council Questions

1.Question to the Leader of the Council received from Councillor Joe Porter

“Why has the Labour and Independent Administration only “cautiously” welcomed the Prime Minister’s announcement that the Leek to Stoke Railway will be reopened? Surely this should be hugely welcomed as one of the biggest economic opportunities for the Staffordshire Moorlands?”

Response:

“The Leek Stoke rail link project has many steps to go through before it can come to fruition. It is important to note that it is a long term joint project involving a number of public bodies and companies beyond this council including Staffordshire County Council, Stoke on Trent City Council, Network Rail and the UK Government.

Following the Prime Minister’s announcement, the project can move to the ‘Develop Stage’. This stage is rightly led by Network Rail as it will go deep into the technical detail of what is needed to be done in terms of construction, engineering, and railway architecture. If this stage is successful, the project will move to the final stage of planning which involves the production of a final business case.

This is a clearly defined path of development, typical for a regional infrastructure project that could involve up to £400 millions of public money. It will be some years before the groundworks could begin and even longer for it to become a reality.

As of now there are many variables to be considered. We do not yet know the views of our partner councils (Stoke and Staffordshire). The Government has recently said that some projects listed in the Network North policy paper are currently ‘illustrative’ rather than confirmed and while some projects have funding allocated to them, the Leek Stoke rail line does not. Also, there will definitely be one and possibly two general elections during the planning and construction stages so it is reasonable, given the HS2 situation, to factor that in.

In terms of caution, we also know how costs can change during the lifetime of large projects. There is no word yet from the government to confirm that the project will be fully funded from The Treasury. If a scenario developed where SMDC had to make a significant financial contribution towards the project, the council would have to consider that very carefully against our other priorities. We are committed to growing our local economy, improving public transport and developing tourism across the whole of the Staffordshire Moorlands. “

2.Question to the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Planning received from Councillor Paul Roberts

“What changes to the SMDC planning policies will the labour run administration make to reflect Sir Kier Starmer’s speech last week with regards to building housing on the Green Belt?”

Response:

“Any change to Green Belt policy would first require the Government to revise the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). If this were to occur the new NPPF would become a material consideration in determining any planning applications and any future local plan review would need to demonstrate conformity with it. However, until such time that the NPPF is revised no change to Council policy with regard to Green Belt development would occur.”

3.Question to the Leader of the Council received from Councillor Paul Roberts

“Can the Leader detail everything that the Member Development Champion who has been paid just under £800 between the election and now, has done during his time in the post?”

Response:

“Since their appointment on 20 June this year the Member Development Champion has been working closely with the Democratic Services team with regards to the delivery and design of councillor training and development activities. This has included:

- Reviewed the role of member development champion
- Ensuring that training seminars are actively promoted to members to maximise participation
- The use of video recordings of sessions where possible to enable councillors to view seminars that they were not able to attend (e.g. code of conduct, data protection and housing land supply seminars).
- Circulation of training and network opportunities delivered by the Local Government Association
- Reviewed the effectiveness of member induction programme
- Considering the next stage of seminars to be delivered covering areas such as overview and scrutiny

Presentations and recordings available so far have been emailed to members and uploaded to the Councillors’ Portal. This can be accessed via the Council’s intranet using the link <https://smdc.alliance-online.org/members/staffmoorlands>. In line with previous years following all-out elections, councillors will shortly be invited to attend a meeting of the Member Development Working Group following the successful delivery of a number of seminars. The meeting will be chaired by the Member Development Champion and is due to take place on 15 November at 2.00pm to

provide an opportunity for members to provide feedback on the seminars that have taken place so far and suggest development areas for the future.”

4.Question to the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Tourism received from Cllr Keith Flunder

“Can the cabinet member for Tourism confirm plans for the closure of the Butter Market during the improvement works, and does he think that the compensation being offered to stallholders is sufficient?”

Response:

“We have been liaising with Butter Market traders for a number of months through group and individual sessions. We have listened to the views of the traders in developing the proposals and this includes the approach to compensation, in the event of a closure. Last week, we wrote to the Butter Market traders to recommend closure during the refurbishment period. This is not a decision we have taken lightly and we have taken on board the feedback we received through group and one to one sessions with market traders and have reflected this within our compensation options.

In addition to the compensation offer, we have also made a commitment to facilitate outside trading for all traders who requested this with all traders located together close to the Market Place. Finally, we are also committed to securing storage options for traders taking up the outdoor trading option. We are working towards a scheduled start date of the beginning of April 2024. This will allow for uninterrupted trading in the indoor markets for the seasonal events that are important for many businesses – Valentine’s, Mother’s Day and Easter.”

5.Question to the Portfolio Holder for Services received from Cllr James Aberley

”The latest press release from SMDC announces the installation finally, of the new car parking machines that were signed off back in March during the Conservative administration. The press release requests residents to use alternative machines or the pay by phone app during the physical changeover of machines. Would the cabinet member agree with me that it is discriminatory against people who for whatever reason choose not to, or can’t use the pay by phone app, and in some cases car parks only have one machine, so there is also no other alternative available, and would the cabinet member agree with me that SMDC should suspend car parking charges with clear signage on a car park by car park basis during the replacement works?”

Response:

“The installation of new parking ticket machines in the Council Car Parks is now underway. To advise users how to pay for parking, a temporary notice will be placed on the car park Information sign where installation is taking place. This will remain there for the 2-3 hour period it takes to install the new ticket machine.

In the knowledge that it would be more inconvenient for parking users to pay during the installation period the enforcement of parking charges will be relaxed for that time. However, having listened to feedback the Council have also decided to relax parking charges in car parks where installation is taking place for the period of time it takes to have the new ticket machine operational.”

6.Question to Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism received from Cllr Mark Deaville

“We were all massively disappointed that Cheadle were not successful in their bid for Levelling-Up funding. We decided that we would still go ahead with a much-needed refurbishment and some refiguration of Cheadle Leisure Centre. I’d be grateful if you could update Council on these plans please – with timelines. I’d be grateful for a written response please before the meeting.”

Response:

“Officers are working with the professional team supporting Leisure Transformation Plan projects at Brough Park and Biddulph Valley Leisure Centres to develop viable options for the future refurbishment of South Moorlands Leisure Centre. This work is progressing well and the outcome will be included in future Leisure Transformation Plan reports which are due to be reviewed over the course of November and December”.