

COUNCIL MEETING

23 November 2020

Member Questions

Question from Cllr Bullivant

The investment made by Teignbridge DC to create the Albany Street hub providing support for families in need and emergency accommodation has been a great success, improving the lives of those in need and giving them the support and security they have needed at a critical time in their lives. It also helped Teignbridge by reducing the costs of providing emergency accommodation.

Can the Executive explain why, after being invited by the government to apply for funds, the Executive chose to decline the offer to acquire additional property for the same purpose?

Torbay applied for and received a grant of £1,277,500 and Exeter received a grant of £2,596,697.

Teignbridge officers have explained that no request was made because:-

- 1. We have sufficient accommodation for rough sleepers through leasing arrangements with Teign housing*
- 2. The main problem we have maintaining rough sleepers in accommodation is revenue funding for support once they are housed due to the complex needs of the client group- in particular drugs, alcohol and mental health .I believe the government received feedback from many Councils that this funding pot did not address the needs of rough sleepers as it focused on bricks and mortar and provided capital funding only.*
- 3. Our rough sleeper numbers are low (6 approx) and all have been offered accommodation and refused to move inside*
- 4. We do not have night shelters or hostels with communal facilities which the funding was seeking to provide an alternative to in light of the pandemic*
 - a) The reduced costs and greater success in helping those in most need demonstrated through the Albany street project runs contrary to the comments above explaining the subcontracting of services to Teign Housing*
 - b) The provision of support services provided by the council should be in place regardless of whether there is a new facility therefore no additional costs should be involved*
 - c) The planned development of Sherborne house, given its collocation with medical and mental health centres plus the proximity of Albany Street and its onsite support staff would be an ideal opportunity for TDC to assist those in most need*
 - d) The statement that the council chooses to ignore this group because of the potential costs involved is extremely worrying and is a complete change in direction For this council.*

e) Homelessness is something that occurs for many reasons and is not always because of drugs, drink or mental health issues, it is wrong to link homelessness to these three problems only and stigmatise these people by so doing. There are others who would be affected who could have been helped.

Can the Executive therefore give a clear statement of our commitment to help those in need and explain the reasons why this offer of support was refused.

Response from the Executive Member for Homes and Communities

The Executive supports the elected members view that Albany House has been a success and provides much needed accommodation and support for families who are homeless . The success of this model of accommodation is substantially due to the funding model which underpins it, which enables its revenue costs to be met by the income it generates, and the focus on providing a safe environment for homeless families with some shared facilities.

The funding the member is referring to is the Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP). This funding aimed to support councils and their partners to prevent rough sleepers returning to the streets, post the directive to bring everyone in during the first lockdown. The NSAP is made up of 2 sources of funding: £161 million capital to deliver 3,300 units of longer term move-on accommodation within the next 12 months (part of the £433 million total); and £92 million of funding to pay for interim support to ensure that people do not return to the streets.

Teignbridge bid for part of the £92million available for support to ensure people did not return to the streets and were awarded £146,244 to provide accommodation, support and housing solutions to rough sleepers who have been accommodated since the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Despite the significant rise in reports of rough sleeping since the first national lockdown, we have managed to maintain low overall levels of rough sleeping within the district. Prior to putting in bids for funding under the Next Steps funding programme, either for the capital element (which we did not bid for) or the revenue funding, we were advised to collaborate with the homeless advisors at MHCLG. We were advised that, given our success at bringing in rough sleepers during the pandemic and housing them in self-contained accommodation (unlike other Councils who were more reliant on night shelters and other provision with shared facilities), and the low level of rough sleepers that remained on the streets, any bid for capital funding was unlikely to be successful. Given this, officers advised the PH for Housing that it was not best use of officer time to prepare a bid which had little chance of success and efforts should be focused on utilising the funding we had received to support those rough sleepers in accommodation whilst continuing to engage with those on the streets to encourage them to take up offers of accommodation. To answer each of the members points in turn:

The Next Steps funding did not enable the Council to bid for funding to create a model similar to Albany House as it was aimed at providing accommodation for rough sleepers not homeless families. It is acknowledged that there is a need for accommodation and support for rough sleepers and the Housing service have

developed a number of successful models of accommodation to accommodate this client group including crash pads and self-contained accommodation for single households. This is in accordance with recognised good practice for accommodating this client group, with the move away from shared facilities such as night shelters and hostels (which the next steps capital funding was seeking to address) and adopting a “housing first” model. As we are not a stock holding authority, we are required to either lease accommodation from our registered social partners such as Teign or the private sector. There are some significant advantages to leasing from social landlords as we can rotate the properties or hand them back if there is no demand (thus reducing our costs) and also it enable the conversion the tenancy to permanent offer of housing if the individual is successful in maintaining their temporary tenancy and a replacement property to then be leased.

Funding for support services is not devolved to the Districts but managed by Devon County Council who have procured a Devon wide floating support service for homeless households. Demand for this service far outstrips supply and the provider operates a waiting list. There is no specific support contract for rough sleepers. We are currently negotiating with Devon County to devolve this funding to District level and then commission our own services according to local need

The Council has not chosen to ignore this group. Housing Services brought in 20 rough sleepers during the lockdown and has offered every rough sleeper accommodation. In addition to £146k we were awarded in September 2020 for rough sleepers we were also awarded funding secured via the Rough Sleeper Initiative and we have established a highly effective Rough Sleeper Outreach and Support Service including outreach work from mental health and drug and alcohol services

With regards to Sherbourne House no decision have been made regarding the housing needs this development will address.

This Council acknowledges that homelessness can occur for many reasons and there is no one size fits all approach to both housing those who are homeless, and supporting them to maintain accommodation. This is why we have a number of different accommodation models dependent on the needs of the clients and a Homeless strategy which identifies the route causes of homelessness and seeks to develop solutions to address them. The statement made by the officer does not make any statement about the reasons why households become homeless. It states that the majority of rough sleepers have complex needs such as drug, alcohol and mental health issues which mean they require significant levels of support to enable them to both accept offers of accommodation and come off the streets, and maintain it. Unfortunately this statement is factually correct with regards to Teignbridge and has been recognised in many national research studies into rough sleeping. This Council will continue to bid for funding to support the aims of the strategy where we have clear evidence we meet the criteria for funding and need for additional resources. We are reviewing our Housing and Homeless strategies currently and members will have the opportunity to comment on them in the New Year

Question from Cllr Clarence

As an overview and scrutiny member of Strata, following the last meeting on the 8th September on zoom when my connection failed at what I felt was a vital time I never got the chance to ask what I wanted. I also felt that as a member of TDC that I would like help with maintaining my personal laptop which I use in conjunction with my "I'pad for council work. Indeed I have asked this at many a previous meeting with no result, Strata not having that remit from council to enable that help.

I am also concerned of the makeup of the Strata Executive, being so small in elected members, with just the leaders of the three councils member wise. (Plus the 3 C/Es.) Thus the burden of scrutiny falls heavily on the O/S committee. In turn that led me on to do a piece of research myself which I am sure as leader you might be interested to evaluate. With no O/S Strata meeting scheduled for some time I felt a question to Full Council was therefore appropriate.

I decided therefore to ask the 151 officers of other district councils in Devon two fairly short questions which were as follows:

- 1. What is your councils annual budget for looking after your councils I/T services/provisions?*
- 2. What number of employees do you have doing that?*

All 151 officers kindly replied, some with a bit of extra narrative and some with summary figures. With that in mind I produced the following for evaluation, plus a participating 151 officer requested seeing my research, hence so happy to share with all 151 participating council officers, plus other 151 officers.

Council	IT Service/provision costs	Number of Full Time Employees	Population size of council
Mid Devon DC	£957,000	8.48	81,695
Torrige DC	£1,226,000	11.6	63,839
North Devon DC	£1,215,639	12.86	94,001
South Hams DC	£1,291,000	15.00	87,004
West Devon BC	Paired with South Hams, sharing services/costs, FTEs		55,528
<i>Strata costings (done by myself, so open to challenge)</i>			
East Devon DC	£ 2,516,000	74 (over 3 councils)	144,317
Exeter City Council	£2,448,000		128,900
Teignbridge DC	£1.836,000		132,844

Observations by myself:-

The minutes of the Exec Strata meeting held on 22.9.20 make for an interesting read, notably the Strata Finance Report with Appendix B where the profit and loss account for Strata Service Solutions Ltd shows a loss for the year of £1,162,233. I

find interesting the wording “the directors are satisfied that the guarantee provided by the three councils.....the company can continue to trade and invest in the infrastructure to grow the company”. How I get my £6.8m, given to Strata, rather than £6.6m is because Strata is given that extra bit of money for capital projects in case anyone picks up on that.

I do thank the IT director of Strata for the email put out by him on the 24.9.20 to all councillors giving an appraisal in the value for money debate, two days after the Exec meeting, but please read on:- The 5 Councils of Mid Devon, Torridge, North Devon South and West Devon I suggest figures compare very favourably by comparison with one another, however if we were to split the 74 FTEs of Strata by 3 that still leaves pretty well 25 FTEs for each council. Noting, South Hams and West Devon, about our (TDC) size in population manage with just 15 FTEs. So hard to justify why we can't get better member support for personal devices?

Noting too the 5 Councils of Mid Devon, Torridge, North Devon, South Hams and West Devon ,having a population of 382,067 are served by councils having 47.94 FTEs and East Devon, Exeter City and Teignbridge having a population of 406,061(not so dissimilar) are served by having 74 FTEs council employees.

My question to the leader of TDC therefore is:- In view of the figures above can you justify what seems are excessive costs for our IT services / provisions delivered by Strata Service Solutions Ltd and should we somehow be looking to make considerable future financial savings in this area with better member support on personal devices that we use in conjunction with our council work?

Response from the Executive Member for Homes and Communities

I welcome Cllr Clarence's question in relation to our IT service costs.

We review all of our costs each year and look to deliver savings where we can as part of our budget funding gaps. This includes Strata.

We review the annual business plan provided by Strata and challenge the elements of delivery and costs included.

We also work towards meeting the increasing savings targets that were set each year.

What is important is that we get value for money and resilience.

Over the past 6 years it was clear that additional investment was required in IT to support resilience of our IT function.

This has been established as part of the infrastructure work and roll out of the global desktop as part of our flexible working requirements.

We have worked through renegotiation of contracts and systems integration where appropriate.

In relation to the figures quoted the Finance department has reviewed these and provided the best comparatives possible bearing in mind that each Council requires different levels of support depending upon which services are delivered in house or externalised. E.g. we provide leisure and waste in house and host the building control partnership for 3 Local Authorities.

In addition the figures will vary depending upon the level of support that the various IT departments provide – for example we provide printing and street naming and numbering. Others don't.

Bearing that in mind the figures look favourable as a percentage of net revenue expenditure and per head of population, and the cost per IT FTE is the lowest from the ones we have been able to compare.

We will continue to work with Strata and explore how Strata will help to deliver financial savings whilst supporting delivering future development changes, infrastructure, security etc.

Question from Cllr Daws

Question 1

1. I have recently noticed new TDC logo's on the foot of emails. Though I may have missed the memo on this, if a decision has been made to rebrand TDC, can you remind myself, other members who are not aware and the public of the following: the decision making process, the cost of the rebrand, including but not limited to the design and predicted cost of implementation of this exercise? Together with the timing and rationale of any decisions made.

Response from the Leader

In October 2020 the Senior Leadership Team and I gave approval for the Council to introduce its new digital logo which is part of an ongoing accessibility project driven by government accessibility legislation. We are required by the legislation to ensure our websites and digital content, including social media platforms, e-newsletters, meet the new accessibility standards.

Implementation will be through a phased approach, but we've updated our website, intranet, social media accounts and e-newsletter mastheads with the new logo, and will be rolling it out to all digital documents at the stage they are created. This will only be applied to new content and not applied retrospectively, to ensure there is no additional costs associated.

There was no associated cost for the design or roll out of the accessible digital logo, as it was designed and produced in-house for use on the council's own digital channels and electronic documents. Members were informed about these changes in the Members Newsletter no.53 dated 29 October 2020.

Question 2

2. Can TDC make public any financial transactions between the council and landowners in the last two decades on parcels of land that have subsequently been adopted into the Local Plan or on areas of land that are adjacent to adopted sites in the Local Plan?

Response from the Executive Member for Corporate Resources

Yes in line with freedom of access to information legislation. Cllr Daws may wish to note that land and buildings owned by the Council are set out on the Council's website (<https://www.teignbridge.gov.uk/business/commercial-property/council-owned-properties-and-land/>) and also available to the public by searching land registry records.