

ERMIN WARD

COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCILLOR REPORT – 2020

#12 Covid-19 PARISH REPORT - October 2020

COUNCIL - WEDNESDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 2020

REVISED BUDGET 2020/21 AND BUDGET 2021/22

Revenue streams have reduced significantly as a result of the pandemic, including car parking revenues which were forecast to be £1,680,000 lower than budgeted and the reduction of planning services resulting in a forecast loss of £450,000. A number of other revenue reductions including land charges services (£49,000 lower) and public protection services (£72,000 lower).

Revenue losses have largely been off-set by government support from a one-off grant of £1,062,180. There is a further government commitment to underwrite 75% of all lost revenue, so Cotswold District Council should be able to access a total of approximately £2,595,180 in government aid. The chief financial officer of the council concluded that CDC can manage the financial impact of COVID-19 in 2020/21, so long as promised Government funding for income losses is in line with their assumptions.

The current financial situation of the council was healthy and robust as CDC has substantial reserves to fall back on. However, concern was raised about the future financial outlook because the updated budget gave a number of areas where the council costs were rising significantly as a result of the pandemic.

The Conservative group put forward a proposal to stall council spending on non-essential items until February 2021 when the full impact of the second wave of COVID-19 wave could be assessed. This proposal was rejected by the Lib Dem administration.

COMMERCIALISATION STRATEGY

A 20-page report was presented by Cllr Tony Dale, cabinet member for Economy and Skills, laying out plans for CDC to borrow up to £54 million to make commercial investments to provide income for building social housing across the Cotswolds. The report states that CDC should look for investments to range between 25 to 50 years and to yield a 2.5% return on investment each year. If the investment strategy goes to plan it will provide the council with £1.36 million pounds of income each year and will also future proof the authority against any possible future government cuts to funding.

The report also gave examples of the type of investment opportunities the authority would be looking for, such as the acquisition of commercial property in the Cotswolds, regeneration of town centres, delivery of a business park and the construction of solar farms.

Another top priority is the delivery of social rented housing across the Cotswolds and the strategy is to try and develop a long-term vehicle for holding housing and housing sites. The report also lists giving loans to housing associations as a possible investment opportunity.

COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL CLIMATE EMERGENCY STRATEGY 2020-2030

A 63 page document. Let me know if you would like to read it.

- a. justify why the climate emergency is a high council priority;
- b. formalise a high level of ambition in taking action on climate, commensurate with the Council's declaration of a climate emergency in July 2019;
- c. set out the high level principles that underpin the development and execution of the strategy;
- d. identify the scale and sources of emissions from the district and from council operations;
- e. identify the points of greatest leverage in bringing about carbon reductions in the district; and
- f. set direction and identify priority action areas.

A suggestion for cross-party collaboration to tackle climate change was suggested at Council which I seconded. There are lots of actions that could be taken now which address climate change.

Devolution White Paper

£75,000 has been budgeted by CDC to explore a two council unitary authority devolution instead of just one under Gloucestershire.

The Government is expected to release a Devolution and Recovery White Paper calling for more unitary councils. Unitary councils bring the delivery of services for one area under one roof.

<https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/what-we-do-and-how-the-council-is-managed/functions-and-responsibilities/>

Cotswold District Council, Cheltenham Borough Council and Stroud District Council have discussed exploring this issue; Stroud DC has decided not to take it any further until the Government White Paper is published. Tewkesbury, Forest of Dean and Gloucester City Council make up the other Gloucestershire districts.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

At the CDC Council Meeting on 23 September, the CDC responses to two national consultations, [Planning for the Future](#) and [Changes to the Current Planning System](#) were unanimously agreed. I have responded in-depth to both white papers as an individual, briefly outlined in my statement below. I shall be lobbying and campaigning against the Planning for the Future white paper. Meetings with our Cotswold MP, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown have already been arranged to inform him of the responses from CDC and all of its members, with a view to requesting that he relays our concerns to Westminster.

The Planning for the Future white paper shows a deep misunderstanding of the planning process and a lack of awareness of significant issues. The proposal to set planning growth areas at Local Plan stage (which would undoubtedly be flawed given the time allowed) with less public engagement and democratic oversight at planning application stage, which would be a devastating erosion of local democratic process. There are good reasons why the planning process takes time. Planning demands a high level of scrutiny, bad development cannot be undone. Land availability is not the cause of delayed building projects, delays are caused by other factors including the delivery of infrastructure, dominance of national developers, land being held as an asset and the availability of finance. The document is littered with unsubstantiated soundbites such as sustainability, giving people a greater say and actively addressing climate change and yet there are no proposals on how these issues can be achieved. The focus on speed over quality and cost will result in poorer developments and increased harm to the environment. 6,438

deliverable planning permissions, including windfall sites, have been identified in the Cotswolds (2018-2033 adopted Local Plan), yet housing completions in 2019/20 were only 312. Land availability and the planning process are not at fault. The white paper proposal would increase the housing requirement in Cotswold District from an average of 420 homes a year to 1,209 homes a year. 80% of the District is in the Cotswolds AONB which would mean that the proposed target is unachievable let alone the terrible harm this would cause to the area.

There are some good initiatives which can be taken from this white paper. Better design, energy efficiency measures and preserving England's heritage is positive, but how these measures are to be paid for or regulated is not made clear. Also excluding areas of flood risk, resisting inappropriate development of amenity areas/gardens and more stringent controls in protected areas are also to be welcomed.

The Planning for the Future white paper is, in my opinion, flawed and needs to be revisited by planning experts. I believe it should be reconsidered without the use of inappropriate algorithms and formulas which aim to simplify the process but would be catastrophic for the Cotswolds.

Litter Picks

We had a fantastic show for two litter picks on Sunday 27 September. The first at the Centurian Garage and the A417 underpass was well supported by residents from both Duntisbourne and Winstone. It's heartwarming to see such a fabulous community spirit. The CDC fly-tipping team was notified and it should all have been collected by now. Thank you, everyone! Many hands make light work. Great job done.

Now I have litter pick equipment for 15 (gloves, hi-viz etc.) contact me if you identify a need for a litter pick. We don't need a national campaign to arrange one.

Bridge just below The Green Dragon

26th October 2020 to the 6th November 2020 - Road closed to allow for GCC bridge maintenance works A435 to Green Hatch Farm Cowley (between Cowley and Upper Coberley. If you require any further information regarding this closure, please contact the office on 08000 514514.

CDC have appointed a new Chief Executive

Robert Weaver was confirmed as the new Chief Executive for Cotswold District Council at a meeting of Full Council this week (23 September). Mr Weaver said: "I'm absolutely delighted to have been offered the role of CEO at Cotswold DC. The Council is clearly forward-thinking and has an extensive and ambitious Corporate Plan." This appointment is warmly welcomed by all members.

A417 update

A417 Missing Link Online consultation dates published. Plans will be available on a dedicated consultation website, available from 13 October. There will be an online exhibition, learn more about the proposals and provide your feedback.

<https://highwaysengland.co.uk/our-work/south-west/a417-missing-link/>

Pet Thefts

Recently there has been an increase of pet thefts across the region, a litter of puppies was stolen last week. Owners are advised to take precautions and avoid putting up images of their pets on public social media.