West Harptree Parish Council Report
Dave Wood 18/2/23

Thank you for your patience while I've not been well. I look forward to seeing everyone on Monday.

Supported Bus Services in the Chew Valley
There is a great deal of concern across B&NES (and in the wider region) about cuts to bus services. These concerns are even greater in the Chew Valley where proposals would cut all bus services in the valley.
The relevant facts are:

- Most bus services are fully commercial with no subsidy and are not impacted by this current proposal. However all the Chew Valley bus services are subsidised.
- Bus services and bus subsidies are the responsibility of the WECA Mayor, by law, rather than Councils. B&NES Council contributes c£5m to WECA each year for transport including c£700k as a contribution to bus subsidies. This is increasing to c£1m following this week's budget. The level of subsidy from WECA required in the B&NES area has jumped from c£700k to c£3m.
- All supported (subsidised) bus services were recently retendered by WECA and prices came back from bus companies 2 to 3 times higher than current prices. Bus companies say this is mostly down to inflation but also trouble attracting bus drivers.
- WECA has a £50m bus budget provided by central government. In areas outside of WECA this amount is given to the Council to control (e.g. North Somerset). However the £50m comes with strings attached that whilst it can be used for new bus services it cannot be used for existing bus services.
- Part of this money is being used to trial DRT (demand responsive transport) in North East Somerset including Chew Valley from April 2023. This is being described locally in the area as an 'uber bus'. I feel DRT could be part of the future solution of bus services however as things stand it is untested, fairly last minute and lacking detail in parts. Experience from elsewhere in the country is that DRT can absolutely work but it does require a fair time to bed in and for users to feel comfortable with it. I don't feel that DRT is an immediate replacement for bus services in the Chew Valley.
- When the bus cut issue became clear just before Christmas WECA and B&NES made a joint plan for North East Somerset. This plan was new bus routes to act as replacements for bus routes being withdrawn. The reason being that WECA can use its £50m on new services but not existing.
- This plan saw replacement of bus routes across NES, locally this included the Chew Valley Link and the Chew Magna to Bristol service. The pros of this service is that it is more frequent than the existing services. The cons are that it is slower than (say) the 672 because it would link Hinton Blewett; also you'd need to change bus at Chew Magna to get into Broadmead in Bristol. However at least it was a frequent Chew Valley bus service.
- Unfortunately at the 11th hour WECA decided not to fund the new bus services it had tendered in the Chew Valley (or indeed any of the NES bus services apart from the Somer Valley).
- We continue to lobby WECA to not to leave the Chew Valley without any bus services. I certainly feel that outcome would be completely unacceptable.

Speeding Scheme Part 2
I have continued to push the speeding study to form part of this year's work programme. I understand the scope of the study was shared with parish councillors in January with the following timeframe:

- Commence January / February 2023
- Early drafts for review mid May 2023.
- 2nd Draft early June and public meeting.
- Final reports July 2023

Starting this municipal year is important (even if scheme drafts and public meetings are in June) as any attempts to move it to 2023/24 often leads to a delay of some months.

Speeding Scheme Part 3
At the most recent public meeting I stated my intention to bid for further funds for a Part 3 of the scheme as soon as possible. Senior officers present managed expectations that the backlog in highways schemes against the size of the Transport Improvement Programme made it less likely I would secure funds in three consecutive years.
Against all odds I'm happy to report that I secured a further £15,000 (separate to the cost of the Phase 2 study) in the Transport Improvement Programme for 2023/24. The final vote on this as part of Council Budget will be the day after the February WHPC meeting.

Harptree Hill Drainage Repairs
I'm also happy to confirm that I've secured £50,000 for highways drainage repairs for Harptree Hill in the B&NES 2023/24 budget to be adopted on 21/2/23/

LPPU Adoption
The LPPU was formally adopted by Full Council in January. There are many implications to this but two to draw attention to are:

- Our 5-year land supply is now secure for a further 2-3 years. This means speculative development in villages like West Harptree are likely to fail. There was a speculative application elsewhere in my Mendip Ward for 65 houses that was submitted and determined before the adoption of the LPPU. Just the presence of the LPPU in its final but unadopted state was enough for B&NES to confidently reject this application.
- B&NES now becomes the first Council in England to have a net zero housing policy, including all future houses built being energy self-sustaining.

New Local Plan
The new Local Plan (2022-2042) formally commences later this year but there has been consultation already with parish councillors and other stakeholders. I defer to Jon's report on this previously circulated. The NLP is due for adoption in late 2025. The timing is important on this to ensure a robust land supply to avoid speculative development (which is usually in villages) in the future.

Rural houses in the NLP / my manifesto

As I would expect the NLP consultation sessions with parish councillors reflected a concern about future housing allocations being forced on villages. This is a concern I share.

In my role as LD Manifesto Chair for the 2023-27 administration (assuming all goes as planned in the May election) I have been articulating the following:

- Housing allocation should be towards areas of dense employment to reduce journey times
- A presumption that B&NES should engage with parishes to find IF and where and what type of houses should be built in their parish, rather than housing allocations being forced on villages.
- A move away from RA1/RA2 village distinctions in favour of a more general approach about distance of travel from centres of employment and services.

New Year Recycling Collections

In early 2021 and 2022 new year recycling collections locally and across B&NES were patchy to say the least, and this was raised with me several times as the responsible Cabinet Member.

The reasons in those years were a combination of low driver numbers (the national HGV driver shortage means high wages in the private sector) exacerbated by seasonal sickness (often Covid in early 2021 and 2022).

In new year this year disruption was much, much lower (I'm expecting figures to qualify this in the coming days) despite the problems of driver recruitment/retention now being a long-term national issue, and the very nasty bugs going around in this first 'post-pandemic' season.

The actions we took to bring about this change were:

- 18 months of our loader-to-driver training scheme where we employ truck loaders without HGV licenses and put them through their HGV training and test. As well as going out and selling the Council as an employer.
- Commitment to 10% excess of drivers and loaders employed at any one time in order to account for holidays and sickness. This 10% was reach in November 2022 and made a significant impact even in the difficult winter we just had.
- A very careful and sensitive pay negotiation that avoided any strikes.

Council Budget 2023/24

High levels of inflation have been unfortunate timing, coming off the back of Covid lost income. This means we've needed to find over £10m of savings again this year. I had to push extremely hard to sustain the £1m investment in street cleaning and the £2m extra investment in road repairs. I have also pushed hard on bus funding and funding for local-level transport schemes.

I'm pleased to report that despite this we have a balanced budget for the 4th year in a row. This was only achieved once out of the previous 4 years.