

Speaking notes for Cabinet Meeting on 8th February re Soot Hill

Good morning

My name is Jill Johnston and I am the Vice Chair of Comberbach Parish Council speaking on behalf of Comberbach Parish Council on the Soot Hill collapse. I'm accompanied by Mr John Ryder our Chair.

We instigated the joint letter (from Parishes across the Marbury Ward) to Mr Andrew Lewis in January this year to express our frustration and exasperation with CWAC's efforts to get the Soot Hill repairs completed.

I want to stress that we want this road collapse repaired and the road reopened as rapidly as possible.

Our concerns, and the reasons for speaking today, are about the Council's capability to manage this project to budget and to time.

These concerns stem from the ineffectiveness of the Council's approach which has been evidenced over the 14 months since the collapse happened.

Our concerns fall into 2 main categories

The first relates to Financial management.

Despite the fact this project began in December 2021 and will at its most optimistic span 3 financial years, the Report to Cabinet confirms that, thus far, no funds have been allocated, despite a contract being let with Balfour Beatty for £2.4 m in late Feb 2022 Reference DN612853 on The Chest Web Portal. The contract value is now predicted to be £3.5m with £1.5m being raided from the future Highways Maintenance budget with inevitable consequences for other areas of Highways maintenance need. The state of our roads is already poor so any further reduction in budget is to be deplored. The project should include the reinstatement of road surfaces in the surrounding Parishes because of the increased traffic through Highways diversions.

The as yet unpublished Council Accounts for 21/22 reveal there is some £25m in Usable Revenue Reserves and a further £15m in the Usable Major Repairs Capital Reserves. We are struggling to understand why these reserves have not already been considered to fund the repair project. The CWAC website and Mr Lewis's reply to our letter consistently refer to the complexity and engineering challenges of the scheme. Surely this must qualify as a Major Repair? Also what efforts have been made to seek funding from central government funds. Was this considered for Levelling Up – if not why not?

Our second area of concerns relates to the Council's Project Management capability. The CWAC website (which the Council cites as a principal means of engaging with local stakeholders and providing up to date information on progress) has been out of date and reveals milestones have been routinely missed. The completion date for the repair was originally promised by July 2023 (already some 15-16 months after the collapse). This has now slipped to December 2023 with a possibility of further slippage into 2024.

The admission in the Report to Cabinet that the Highways Department is only now planning to employ a qualified Project Manager reinforces our view that the Council does not have and has not had the capability to manage this work effectively. We understand that the promised Project Manager will report via the Head of Highways to the Director of Transport and Highways. The apparent failure by senior people in this Directorate to recognise the gap in project management skills does not fill us with confidence that future stages of the project will be any better managed even after the new appointment.

We would like assurances and expect that the contractor Balfour Beatty has the necessary skills and commitment to complete the project by Dec 2023, and that financial penalties will be applied should the deadline push into 2024

We believe the tax paying residents and businesses affected deserve better.

Thank you.