

## **COUNCIL 25 MAY 2017 - AGENDA ITEM 12**

### **– QUESTION TIME**

Questions and written responses provided below. Questions 7, 10 and 11 were not asked on the day.

**QUESTION 1** – Mr McDonald will ask Ms K J May:

*"Would the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility please inform me of the total cost of removing all asbestos from Council Maintained Schools?"*

#### **Answer**

This is not a straightforward question to answer. To start with, does all mean every piece and scrap of asbestos from everywhere in a school building. As of the 2 May 2017 there are one hundred and forty schools with recorded asbestos (FOI Request: #297307). To removal all asbestos from these schools would be an enormous cost to the Council and in the limited time from when the question was received it has not been possible to provide an estimate.

What must also be considered is that there are 33 buildings in 28 of the schools that are system built. In these buildings the asbestos is part of the fabric of the building (fire protection to steel columns). The guidance from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is to seal these columns to prevent fibre release rather than remove the asbestos. Total removal of the asbestos would require these buildings (schools) to be closed for the duration of removal and may entail demolition and rebuild. There may also be other schools where asbestos is used as insulation between steel girders (as yet unidentified by surveys) where total removal would also mean demolition and rebuild.

The Council's position for many years has been to manage asbestos in situ and progressively remove asbestos based on the risk of damage and disturbance. This follows current legislation and guidance from the HSE. The Council, working with Place Partnership, have an asbestos management plan and have a schedule of surveys and asbestos removal works for 2017-18.

If the question refers to removing all the asbestos currently known and being managed then again the timescale from the question to this response has been too short to give an estimate. A Service Instruction has been raised with Place Partnership for this information and as soon as costs for the removal of known asbestos is provided a complete response to this question will be given.

#### **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question, Ms May indicated that the Council took advice from the HSE regarding asbestos in school buildings and would never knowingly endanger the health of children.

**QUESTION 2** – Mr L Mallett will ask Dr K A Pollock:

*"Would the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility please confirm the total cost of developing and implementing the now discredited BaRHAM (Bromsgrove and Redditch Highways Model)"*

## **Answer**

By operation of a mechanism within the Council's contract with its consultant, the Council has recovered all of the monies paid which relate to the Bromsgrove and Redditch Highways Assignment Model (BaRHAM). There will then be a review of what, if any, value can be extracted from it. The Council also reserves its position in relation to any other costs that it may incur as a result of issues with BaRHAM and officers from the Council are working closely with planning officers in Bromsgrove to contain and mitigate their effects. As we move forward, the Council is optimistic that the arrangements which have led to successful Local Plan outcomes in other Worcestershire Local Planning Authorities can be replicated in Bromsgrove as its position on issues such as housing growth become clearer. Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4), upon which consultation has just closed, will provide enough details of current outline schemes and policy anchors to allow the promotion of schemes as the level of ambition for the new Local Development Plan emerges for the Bromsgrove area for beyond the current 2023 site allocations.

## **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question, Dr Pollock confirmed that the total cost of BaRHAM was zero. He emphasised that where a contractor had made a mistake in one area it did not justify cancelling the entire contract. The Council was introducing the necessary remedial measures to resolve the transport issues in Bromsgrove.

## **QUESTION 3** – Mr C Bloore will ask Mr S Geraghty:

*"The leader of the Council is probably aware that despite being six months over schedule residents in my division are still facing sleepless nights as six lanes of traffic are redirected passed their homes because of closures on the M5. What steps is he taking to hold Highways England to account for causing this misery?"*

## **Answer**

Firstly I would like to thank Chris for his question.

I understand the concern he raises in relation to the impact on local residents over a significant period due to the works carried out along the M5 by Highways England.

The relevant officers are in regular contact with Highways England and adjacent authorities in connection with this matter. Specifically, I am advised that the West Midland and Shires Traffic Manager's Group have met with Highways England and expressed their discontent with the number and extent of road closures on their network. This group is currently scrutinising HE network closure approval process. Whilst we cannot prevent these road closures as Highway England have powers similar to us as a Highway Authority, they do have a duty to liaise and consult with us and we have tried to mitigate the impact and reduced their requests in this way.

We will continue to scrutinise their processes to ensure minimum disruption for residents in Worcestershire. The works on the M5 are now almost complete with no further closures for this project expected after mid- June. However, I will ask the new Cabinet Member for Highways to look at whether there is any more we can do to try to influence Highways England future plans.

## **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question, Mr Geraghty explained that Highways England were accountable to the Government and therefore the Council was only in the position to

exert influence over them. He would investigate the legal capacity of the Police and Crime Commissioner to bring the actions of Highways England to account.

**QUESTION 4** – Mrs F M Oborski will ask Mr A T Amos:

*"Roadside verges provide valuable sites for wild flowers and are vitally important as habitats for many insects and birds particularly for bees. Whilst mowing of grass on verges is important at road junctions, at visibility splays and where pedestrian doorways might otherwise be impeded I hope the relevant Cabinet Member would agree with me that in other areas we should allow the verges to look "somewhat overgrown" to preserve their ecological value. If this is the case can the relevant Cabinet Member please explain the "heavy mowing" of the verges alongside the Bewdley By Pass where there are no junctions and where there is no pedestrian footway?"*

**Answer**

Many thanks for taking the time to report your concerns to us regarding the biodiversity of highway verges. As you point out, the safety of the highway user is critical and the verges must be maintained to ensure safety is not compromised. In 2015 Worcestershire County Council designated Worcestershire a 'pollinator friendly county' to promote the protection of pollinating insects and their habitats. With this commitment the County Council sought to make a direct difference to pollinators through the management of Council-owned and maintained land. In Worcestershire there are over 3000 miles of highway, much of which has a verge on both side. Under our current grass cutting maintenance schedule we monitor and cut visibility splays as necessary throughout the growing season. Every other verge is cut 1m back from the carriageway edge, a minimum of twice a year depending on growth rates. Some roads such as the A456 Bewdley bypass will require a 2m cut to ensure drainage features don't become blocked. This new cutting regime has opened up a significant amount of verge available to biodiversity. It is important however that the uncut verge is not allowed to turn to scrub, with this in mind, the full extent of verge will be cut over a three year rotational basis.

We also manage with our Countryside Service over 44 roadside verge nature reserves (which are valuable for wildflowers) across the County and are looking to increase this number over the next few years where practicable.

In relation to the A456 Bewdley Bypass, as the responsible body for the highway verges in Worcestershire we are also required to manage invasive weeds, including Ragwort. The A456 from Wharton Park Golf Club to Blackstone Riverside park and then onto the Kidderminster Road Roundabout is recorded as a Ragwort site due to the extensive colonisation of the verges by this plant and its proximity to grazing land. As such, it is cut back before the Ragwort has the opportunity to set seed. We will of course review this current cutting regime, once we have the Ragwort under control.

**QUESTION 5** – Mr Denham will ask Mr Geraghty:

*"The Leader has stated that one of his priorities is to improve the quality of our highways and pavements so that we are in the top quartile of national performance by 2022.*

*Which quartile of national performance does he intend our Children's Services to reach and by which year?"*

**Answer**

Thank you Paul for your question.

As you rightly state the Council's Corporate Plan, Shaping Worcestershire's Future, includes a commitment to improve the condition of our roads and pavements across the County aiming to be in the national top quartile by the end of the plan in 2022. This follows consistent feedback from the public over the years that Highways is one of their top three priorities.

The plan also has as one of its top four themes Children & Families and under the section headed "Safeguarding at the heart of everything we do" sets out what we are striving to achieve. The plan makes clear that we seek to always be there for the most vulnerable in society that need us most. This recognises that vulnerable children & adults are the other two top priorities of the public.

He will be aware that nationally, the OFSTED inspection system rates Councils Children's Safeguarding Services in relation to four categories rather than performance quartiles and that following our recent inspection the whole Council has got behind an ambitious improvement plan to ensure this vitally important service of the Council significantly improves. Worcestershire is not unique in facing challenges in this area, as of 18th May only 2% of Councils rated as "Outstanding" and 72% are "Inadequate" or "Requires Improvement".

The recently submitted improvement plan sets out an ambition to ensure we are rated "good" within five years. This is consistent with peer learning undertaken with other Authorities that have embarked on a similar improvement journey to our own. This will require a concerted focus by the whole authority over this period and cross party commitment to the plan and what needs to be done. I would take this opportunity to just reiterate our clear commitment to do just over the lifetime of this Council.

### Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question, Mr Geraghty indicated that there was a clear commitment for Children's Safeguarding Services to be rated as good in the next 5 years which would place the service in the top quartile. To achieve this, a concerted effort would be required by the whole Council and its partner organisations.

### **QUESTION 6** – Mr R C Lunn will ask Mr A C Roberts:

*"Can the relevant Cabinet Member explain, why the new Mercury payroll system introduced in early April for all staff working in schools, was not trialled more extensively to iron out faults, and also why running the old and new systems alongside each other, was ruled out as an option due to lack of resourcing?"*

### **Answer**

Trials and ironing out faults:

The new systems were tested through a phase of design, system and user acceptance testing. For example, 937 test scripts were run in system test and 945 test scripts in user acceptance testing.

Why weren't the systems run in tandem?

It is almost impossible to parallel run a replacement HR and finance system. The old and the new systems are not exactly the same, the data does not translate in every way on a 1-2-1 basis and the overhead of entering live data into the 4 systems involved would have been impossible to maintain.

The payroll was run in parallel over 4 iterations to ensure it was fit for purpose. E.g. at the fourth iteration on payroll, 70 out of 11,213 payslips were found to have errors ranging from plus 53p-minus 35p difference.

### Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question, Mr Roberts confirmed that the Independent Review would cover the issues associated with running the systems in tandem in more detail. He would also ensure that the scope of the Review would be circulated to all councillors.

### **QUESTION 7** – Mr R C Lunn will ask Mr A C Roberts:

This question was not asked on the day.

*"How much has the numerous issues caused by the implementation of the Mercury payroll system cost the County Council? Will this money be reclaimed from the service provider, and can schools similarly claim for all the extra time and work they have put in?"*

### **Answer**

It has cost a significant amount of time from Council Officers across the council to fix issues that have arisen. When the work is complete the full cost will be evaluated as part of a review.

### **QUESTION 8** – Prof Raine will ask Mrs L C Hodgson:

*"Over the past eighteen months this Council has responded positively to requests from the community for Worcestershire to play a part in supporting HM Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Programme (SVPR). As a result, a number of Syrian families are now living in safety once again and are rebuilding their shattered lives in communities in different parts of our county. We understand that the process of resettlement and local integration has generally gone very smoothly and, for this, the County Council, its partner, Refugee Action, and the many individual volunteers who have also been involved, are to be congratulated.*

*But, of course, there remain many thousands of displaced and dislocated Syrian families who are still having to endure the harshness of camp conditions in neighbouring countries, and who are so desperate for their chance of resettlement into safety and the opportunity to begin to rebuild their lives.*

*Our Government remains committed to the SVPR programme, which in turn depends on local authority co-operation, and many of us in Worcestershire are hoping that this County Council will want to continue the good work already done and be prepared to welcome more families – unfortunate victims of war in Syria.*

*So would the Leader please inform Council of plans by WCC for 2017-18 and beyond, to support further intakes of refugees from Syria under the Government's SVPR Programme? And perhaps he would also tell us if this County Council is willing to resettle some of the 480 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children that our Government has committed to accept into Britain, under the Dubs amendment, and who are currently living rough and in quite appalling circumstances in and around Calais?"*

### **Answer**

Since June 2016 we have resettled 14 Syrian families (50 refugees) in Worcestershire fulfilling the commitment made by Worcester Leaders last year.

We have not made a decision about taking further families under the Syrian Resettlement Programme for 2017/18 and beyond. Our priority at this stage is to ensure the needs of our existing families are being fully met to enable them to become independent.

This is particularly important as we enter the second year of resettlement for a number of our Syrian families. While there are clear signs that some families are in a position to carry out tasks independently and access mainstream services for support without the need of integration casework the needs of refugees are complex and diverse, some will struggle more than others, and it can take longer for full integration to take place.

To support this we are working with Refugee Action to shape the model of integration support provided to the refugees under our contract with them and this will remain our focus before a decision is made by Worcestershire Leaders on our future involvement.

Worcestershire has experienced a significant increase in unaccompanied asylum seeking children in last 2 years. Unscheduled arrivals have increased from 7 in March 2015 to 30 in March 2017.

Worcestershire County Council is currently dealing with a rise of looked after children in the county and therefore are unable to commit to accepting additional unaccompanied asylum seeking children at this time. We will continue to monitor the situation and in the meantime continue to fulfil our duty in supporting any additional unscheduled unaccompanied asylum seeking children arrivals that are presented to us.

#### Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question, Mrs Hodgson stated that the contract with Refugee Action was for two years. As part of the process each family would be assessed on their level of need.

#### **QUESTION 9** – Mr Jenkins will ask Mr A T Amos:

*"The Member Advisory Group on Residents' Parking completed a thorough review of the council's resident parking scheme and proposed some important amendments and improvements to the existing policy. Would the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility confirm when the report based on this review will be presented to Cabinet for approval?"*

#### **Answer**

I am advised that the report has been held in obedience until after the results of the county elections and once I have had an opportunity to consider the views of the Member Advisory Group, it will be my intention to present it to the Cabinet in the near future. I can assure Cllr Jenkins that there will not be any unnecessary delay in so doing.

#### **QUESTION 10** – Mr M E Jenkins will ask Dr K A Pollock:

This question was not asked on the day.

*"With the continuing damage to both the economy and our environment due to the congestion problems in Worcester and elsewhere in the county, it is imperative that we have a strategic plan for transport that can tackle these issues. Would the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility confirm when the new Local Transport Plan (LTP4) will be presented to members for adoption?"*

## **Answer**

The consultation on the draft LTP4 has recently closed and we've been very pleased with the extensive scale and quality of the responses. Officers are currently collating these prior to discussing with myself and colleagues in June. I would expect the final document in the Summer pending adoption in September.

### **QUESTION 11** – Mr C Hotham will ask Dr K A Pollock:

*"Please could the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility explain why so little of the improved highway infrastructure promised for North Worcestershire by the Longbridge area action plan has been delivered, with particular reference to the A441 in Hopwood?"*

## **Answer**

The infrastructure referred to was associated with the Longbridge Area Action Plan (LAAP), which was adopted in 2007. It contained a list of desired infrastructure changes covering both Birmingham City Council (BCC) and ourselves. However the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) regulations from 2010 removed the ability for "roof tax" styled tariffs to be used and instead introduced, subject to overall scheme viability, a set of "tests" where only contributions that are considered necessary, reasonable and directly relevant to a scheme can be justified.

Therefore the lack of contributions to the A441 works to date flows from changing legislation and the two relevant Planning Authorities accepting that the overall economic viability of the Longbridge scheme results in no case for a contribution to the A441 works. Moving forward, the latest advice from Bromsgrove District Council (as the responsible local planning authority) suggests it is difficult to see how any of the Longbridge redevelopment will actually warrant contribution.

Clearly should any developments be forthcoming, that directly increased the pedestrian activity over the A441 to warrant a controlled crossing, then it can be delivered as part of those schemes. However in practice a significant development would be needed at Hopwood to generate this level of demand and there at present are no such proposals in the locality.

### **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question, Dr Pollock suggested that any queries regarding the LAAP and its relationship with the Bromsgrove District Plan should be addressed to Bromsgrove District Council.

### **QUESTION 12** – Mr R M Udall will ask Ms K J May:

"Can the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility confirm how many people are employed by our tenants on farms and small holdings owned by the County Council?"

## **Answer**

There are 87 tenants occupying the Smallholdings Estate which ranges from bare land holdings of a couple of acres to fully equipped holdings. However the Council have never required tenants to provide information on the number of employees they have to run their businesses from the land. The number of individuals a tenant employs is the responsibility of the tenant and is not a factor in managing the approved smallholding strategy and therefore this information is not known to the Council.

### Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question, Ms May undertook to look into the possibility of implementing the Fair Employment Charter as a condition of tenancy for tenants on farms and small holdings owned by the Council.

#### **QUESTION 13** – Mr P Denham will ask Dr K A Pollock:

This question was not asked on the day.

*"I refer to the suspension, for about eight weeks, of the very well-used bus stop at Cathedral Square in Worcester, caused by the current redevelopment works.*

*Can the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility advise Council what consultations took place with bus users before deciding the locations of alternative bus stops?"*

#### **Answer**

The temporary suspension of the bus stop is necessary to facilitate the redevelopment of Cathedral Square. There are no suitable temporary alternative locations for buses to stop so passengers have been advised to use the nearest alternative stop which is located at the bus station. There are no statutory requirements to consult passengers on the temporary suspension of bus stops. I appreciate that the suspension of the stop is inconvenient for some passengers but I feel that the transformation of Cathedral Square will justify the temporary disruption.

#### **QUESTION 14** – Mr A I Hardman will ask Mr A T Amos:

*"The Hedgerows in Mitton Bank, the entrance to our County from Gloucestershire, are a very important landscape feature and much admired by visitors at this time of year. Bredon Parish Council maintain that the hedgerows are in the ownership of the County Council, and hence could be saved for the Nation if the Inspector of the North Gloucestershire development plan makes a decision to allocate the bank as a development site; which could lead to their destruction.*

*Will the leader please organise a site visit with the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility, and Head of Highways to meet with Bredon Parish Councillors to determine ownership, and their future management?"*

#### **Answer**

Yes, we will ensure that appropriate officers meet with relevant Bredon Parish Councillors to determine ownership and future management