

COUNCIL 18 JULY 2019 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below. Questions 5, 6, 9, 10, 11 and 13 were not asked on the day.

QUESTION 1 – Mr P Denham will ask Tony Miller:

"Following the revelation on a recent BBC Panorama programme that a high proportion of plastics collected by local councils as recyclables end up in Malaysia and other poorer countries in mountains of non-recycled rubbish, can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment advise council what proportion of Worcestershire's plastic is actually being efficiently recycled and at what cost to the taxpayers?"

Answer

I thank Mr Denham for his question

In 2018/19 Worcestershire's residents placed more than 5,500 tonnes of plastics in their recycling bins, which equates to more than 9% of the content of the recycling bins sent to the Council's sorting facility (EnviroSort) at Norton, the remainder being other recyclable products such as paper, card, bottles and tins. The treatment of recyclable plastics separated at EnviroSort, as with any other product, is subject to market conditions. Currently all of this material is either sent to Material Reclamation Facilities (MRF's) for further sorting or to facilities for cleaning and processing into a form that is suitable for selling on to a company to make a new product. All of these facilities directly supplied with material from EnviroSort are located within the United Kingdom. Staff from the Council have visited EnviroSort, the MRF's and these other processing facilities directly supplied with material from EnviroSort to ensure that they have the relevant permissions and licences in place. The cost of recycling this material is built into the Waste Management Service Contract, providing a payment structure that incentivises recycling and diversion from landfill, at the same time as ensuring the cost is less than landfill.

Where materials are sent from these facilities is monitored by other regulatory bodies, such as the Environment Agency (EA) and I believe it is reasonable to work on the premise that the EA are doing their job and ensuring that outputs from these facilities are treated as they should be under the relevant legislation.

I believe the question relates to unlicensed outputs i.e material not controlled by the Council which are illegal operations and not supported by the County Council. Where a company does a house clearance, it is important to ensure that the operator has a license to do so and a place to deposit that material where it can be sorted in the correct way and that is where the process appears to be falling down. We should ensure that all residents know that they are responsible for any materials taken from their home, Putting your fridge-freezer outside the front of your house for the scrap merchant to collect is not the right way of dealing with it. A lot has been achieved to reduce the impact on the ozone layer because of the way in which gases are taken out of these machines and treated properly by our own people. If you are using an illegal service, you are not helping the environment at all

Supplementary question

It was requested that further checks be made to ensure that plastics were being recycled and not ending up overseas. If it was found that plastics were not being recycled, would it

be more beneficial to send them for incineration? Tony Miller responded that an audit trail of recycled plastics was maintained but the Council could not always track the waste collected by illegal operators. Where operators were found to be acting illegally they would be fined. Where illegal waste had been deposited in landfill, the operators had been dealt with through the courts. He would ask officers re-examine the audit trail to ensure that plastics were being recycled and not ending up overseas.

QUESTION 2 – Mr P Middlebrough will ask Alan Amos:

"On those occasions when the M5 is closed between junctions 7 and 8a in either direction, by the Police or Highways England, due to an incident or accident this inevitably causes major congestion resulting in problems for residents and travellers along the A38 through Kempsey, Severn Stoke, Earls Croome and Ripple.

With major works taking place around the Ketch Roundabout, what arrangements are in place with the Police and Highways England to ensure that traffic diverted from the M5 at this pinch point flows as freely as practical?

Who is responsible for ensuring this happens when an emergency motorway closure is ordered by the Police or Highways England?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Middlebrough for his question and his on-going interest in a wide range of Highways issues.

Full closures of the motorway are, of course, often and usually very disruptive. The A38 is the signed diversion route as it is the most applicable route for traffic when the motorway needs to be closed and I'm afraid that this will not change during the duration of the works at the Ketch roundabout.

During these major works, as with those currently being undertaken along this route, the requirement for any traffic management will be kept to a minimum sufficient to retain capacity at this junction. However, on those occasions when works do require such traffic management and a motorway incident occurs, the Streetworks team would liaise with the works contractor, West Mercia Police, and Highways England to minimise any disruption. Where possible - and it is safe to do so - temporary works would immediately be halted and any traffic management removed until any motorway incident had cleared.

But Cllr Middlebrough has raised a much more significant issue, namely the total and prolonged closures of motorways and, indeed, other roads by the police. Some months ago, I raised this whole matter with the Chief Constable following the total closure of Worcester Bridge in the rush hour and other occasions of total motorway closures. My concern is that vehicles have been removed from the scene, it is unreasonably and unnecessarily disruptive to keep roads closed any longer just in order to do some paperwork and, indeed, whether total closures themselves are even necessary when one or more lanes can be kept open. There needs to be a significant change of attitude to ensure that traffic is kept moving in every possible circumstance, given the enormous economic and personal cost of not doing so.

Supplementary question

In response to request, Alan Amos undertook to put pressure West Mercia Police and the Highways England to ensure that they took the necessary action to ensure that these pinch points ran as smoothly as possible in difficult circumstances. He did note that this would take some time.

QUESTION 3 – Mr A D Kent will ask Alan Amos:

"Surrey County Council recently announced nine new electric buses are to be used in Guildford town centre, could the Cabinet Member with responsibility advise whether electric buses are being considered as part of the Passenger Transport Review?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Kent for his question and continuing interest in electric vehicles. He should get one!

As part of the Passenger Transport Strategy process, we will be looking at all emerging technology with regards to the provision of bus services. The use and provision of electric buses is a commercial decision for the operators to take. The County will be talking to companies that currently provide services for us in Worcestershire and will explore ways in which we can help them. The use of electric buses would require significant changes and challenges to the infrastructure, for example to incorporate charging points, which is not something we can roll out throughout Worcestershire at this time quickly although we will, of course, explore options with interested operators.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, Alan Amos undertook to provide advice/assistance to the community sector to encourage the use of electric vehicle options for community transport, where possible.

QUESTION 4 – Mr S J Mackay will ask Ken Pollock:

"I am aware that recently the installation of the farm accommodation bridge on the Southern Link Road was delayed due to a problem with the contractor's crane. Despite that the project was completed well ahead of schedule.

This comes at a time when awards are being won for the design and completion of the extended rail bridge on the Southern Link Road. While delays do occur from time to time on large projects, can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility comment on the advantages to Worcestershire of projects being completed on time, as well as the quality of the work undertaken?"

Answer

I thank Mr Mackay for his question

The County Council has undertaken a number of major transport infrastructure projects in recent years (such as the Hoobrook Link Road) and has a number of others nearing completion or well underway (such as Worcestershire Parkway, Kidderminster Railway Station and the Southern Link Road). Taken together, they represent in excess of £100m worth of investment in the County.

These large civil engineering projects are extremely complex and entail the development of a detailed business case, securing funding (often from multiple partners), lengthy land negotiations (sometimes requiring the use of compulsory purchase powers), extensive ecological and geological surveys which often identify previously unknown challenges that need to be overcome, a comprehensive design process, the need to secure planning approval, extensive stakeholder and public engagement, a thorough safety audit and a robust procurement process.....all before a spade is put in the ground.

Once on site the contractors will often encounter Donald Rumsfeld's "unknown unknowns" such as unrecorded infrastructure or the seemingly ubiquitous slow worms, as well as having to contend with the vagaries of the British weather.

We are always under pressure to announce an opening date at the start of the process I have just outlined and it is hardly surprising that from time to time the completion date of these larger projects slips a little from the date initially announced. Even so, I believe we have an excellent track record when it comes to the delivery of these major schemes which are essential if we are to keep Worcestershire moving and open for business.

I am grateful to you for mentioning the many accolades that the Council has received for the Battenhall Railway Bridge Project. It was a winner at the 2019 ICE West Midlands Civil Engineering Awards and won Best Large Project at the 2019 Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation West Midlands Awards. It has also been Highly Commended at both the Rail Business Awards and The MJ Local Government Achievement Awards in the Highways Management category. I think colleagues will agree that this illustrates that our schemes are designed and constructed to a high standard.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our contractors on this particular project, Alun Griffiths Contractors Ltd, SLC Rail and our designer, Jacobs – all of whom were commissioned by our in-house Major Projects Team.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, Ken Pollock agreed that the eventual completion of the four-lane road between the Ketch and the Powick Roundabout would divert traffic away from Worcester city centre thereby alleviating congestion and cutting journey times.

QUESTION 5 – Mr R C Lunn will ask Alan Amos:

"Does the Cabinet Member agree with the Commons Transport Select Committee that funding of bus services in England is uncertain and needs reform?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Lunn for his question to which my short answer is "yes, I do".

Which is precisely why we have launched a public consultation on drawing up a Passenger Transport Strategy is designed to provide a clear framework for the whole County network and certainty of policy and funding for the next 3-5 years.

Bus use in Worcestershire has declined over the last 50 years which reflects the national trend. The County's Passenger Transport network is essential to our growing economy. As there is less funding available to support Passenger Transport services, we are addressing this issue through the development of a Strategy designed to support the scale of planned future housing and employment growth within the County. Over 13 weeks, we are asking our residents for their views and opinions on services so that we can provide an efficient, resilient and integrated system that everyone can access. We are out and about in local areas asking residents what they think and asking what would encourage them to use our bus services and we are expecting a huge response.

Our clear objective is to provide attractive, affordable and quality services with good network coverage, in the most efficient and cost-effective way.

QUESTION 6 – Mr P M McDonald will ask Karen May:

"In light of the £54,000 spent on Non-Disclosure Agreements (Gagging Orders) to five employees, would the Cabinet Member please inform me of the issues that required this?"

Answer

With reference to 'Non-Disclosure Agreements' (NDA) it is important to note that this can have different meanings. An NDA sets out terms by which one or more parties agree not to disclose confidential information that they have shared with each other as a necessary part of doing business together and can cover commercial or staffing matters.

The Council does not routinely use NDAs for employees in relation to commercial matters and these do not give rise to any payment. In the context of staffing matters we do from time to time use Settlement Agreements (a type of NDA) which relate to where the employer and employee seek to reach a mutual agreement on the terms of an exit from the business. All proposed payments require approval by the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development (or nominated member of the HR Leadership Team) and involve advice from Legal Services before they are confirmed.

It would not be appropriate to give details about individual employees. The use of settlement agreements continues to be an appropriate way to bring employment disputes to a mutual conclusion.

QUESTION 7 – Mr B Clayton will ask Tony Miller:

"Ultra fast charging is essential for meeting our goal to be carbon neutral by 2050. What work is underway to ensure that all WCC sites have Ultra fast charging?"

Answer

I thank Mr Clayton for his question

The following response is based on the assumption that by, Ultra-fast charging, Mr Clayton is referring to 100kW+ electric vehicle chargers, (often referred to as Ultra-rapid).

While there are currently no plans for the County Council to install Ultra-rapid chargers at all WCC sites, the siting of Ultra-rapid chargers in Worcestershire is something that is being considered as part of WCC work on a County ultra-low emission vehicle strategy.

Current advice on Ultra-rapid charging is to locate multiple Ultra-rapid chargers in a few strategic locations, referred to as charging stations or hubs, rather than pepper pot single Ultra-rapid chargers in separate locations. For the EV driver this gives the certainty of an easily accessible location where chargers are likely to be available for use; rather like a petrol station. For the chargepoint investor this also makes the cost of the extra electrical capacity required more economic.

Officers have had discussions with some chargepoint companies about the siting of ultra-rapid charging stations/hubs in Worcestershire, including on council owned land. Developers have shown interest in sites in two areas of Worcestershire, both close to motorways.

As far as officers are aware, to date no firm sites have been identified. A potential County Council owned site was discounted by a chargepoint company as not suitable owing to its topography. Another chargepoint company approached WCC to host an Ultra-rapid charging hub in a County Council owned car park. This was turned down; the developer required a large number of parking spaces, for which they would not have paid rent. They also wanted WCC to part fund electricity costs.

Supplementary question

Should all district council be encouraged to adopt an ultra-rapid charging strategy similar to Redditch Borough Council's approach? Tony Miller responded that he would hope to see similar strategies being adopted across the county subject to Western Power's network capacity. A trial was underway in Wales to introduce three phase electricity into a housing development. The outcome of this trial would be analysed in due course.

QUESTION 8 – Mr R M Udall will ask Karen May:

"To ask the Cabinet Member with Responsibility: What action can she take to help to improve the support the Council provides to staff who are experiencing domestic abuse?"

Answer

Thank you for raising this question. The Council has committed to a pledge against domestic abuse and sexual violence.

It is important to me that the Council supports staff who have experienced domestic abuse and it already has policies which provide time off with pay. Staff are encouraged to disclose issues with their line manager who can respond flexibly with support for time off. Enabling staff to be more confident about disclosing Domestic Abuse is important and this can be enhanced with clear signposting and an awareness campaign including posters and I have discussed the delivery of this with the Director of Commercial and Change.

Supplementary question

Would the Cabinet Member agree with UNISON's request for domestic abuse victims to be exempt from sickness and performance monitoring, managers to receive domestic abuse awareness training and for victims to be employed elsewhere in the Council discreetly if they so wished? Following Worcester City Council's decision to adopt the provision of 10 days paid leave for all domestic abuse victims, would this Council reconsider its approach? Karen May responded that no sweeping approach would be adopted but she gave an assurance that each individual case would be dealt with on its merits.

QUESTION 9 – Mr M E Jenkins will ask Marcus Hart:

"Can I ask the Cabinet Member with Responsibility how many schools in the county are registered as Ecoschools and how many schools have Green Flags? How have these numbers changed over the past 10 years?"

Answer

Keep Britain Tidy (who administer the UK Eco Schools scheme) say that **currently 268 schools in Worcestershire are registered as Eco schools, (this includes some non-state schools and nurseries), of which 223 are state schools 28 are Green Flag**, so more than 1 in 10 at Green Flag status.

In 2009 there were 219 Eco Schools and 37 Green Flag.

QUESTION 10 – Mr P Middlebrough will ask Alan Amos:

"Would the Cabinet Member not agree with me that the excellent report produced by Kempsey Parish Council, supported by the head teacher of Hanley Castle High school outlining the disadvantages of the current S238 road design at Elgar Park and Linden Home Sites at the southern gateway to Kempsey, with special regard to the pick-up and

drop off laybys for school buses carrying pupils to Hanley Castle High school should be to revise immediately the current S278 proposals on safety and congestion grounds?

Will the Cabinet Member immediately cancel the proposals to do away with the laybys on the A38 and to introduce central reservations on the A38?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Middlebrough for his question and for his helpful advice and comments during my site visit to the location on Monday.

As stated in the letters to both Hanley Castle High School and Kempsey Parish Council, in response to the Report, I am afraid that it is not within Worcestershire County Council's gift to revise the design of the highway improvements which received planning consent from Malvern District Council. Only the developers - Linden Homes and Taylor Wimpey - can amend their respective planning permissions. Furthermore, the County Council does not have independent discretion when it comes to implementing a S.278 once planning consent has been granted. We cannot reasonably withhold approval and implementation of the highway improvements conditioned as part of the planning approval.

Following my site visit with our Liaison Engineer on Monday to see the situation for myself, I must say that I find Malvern Hills' planning decision quite baffling and bizarre. I know they were given advice by Worcestershire County Council but it is properly for a Planning Committee or Department to accept that or reject it in the light of their own circumstances and judgement. By removing the bus laybys as part of these highways works, people but children in particular will now have to stand on the edge of the road to get on or off a bus rather than from the safety of a layby; busses stopping to pick up and drop off passengers will cause traffic disruption on a very busy main road; and the enormous amount of money that will be required to remove the laybys could have been spent on so many better things such as improving more footways. But, as I say, that is a judgement for Malvern Hills District Council to make, which I am sure Cllr Middlebrough may want to pursue in his own way.

QUESTION 11 – Mr P Denham will ask Alan Amos:

"Can the Cabinet Member responsible for the current public consultation on Passenger Transport please advise Council what is being done to ensure that residents who do not use the internet are made aware of the survey and can easily respond to it?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Denham for his question and strongly support the sentiment behind it.

I have always been very clear that, across *all* Council devices, we always need to make provision for those groups of people who do not use and/or do not have access to a computer. These tend to be, although not exclusively so, the elderly, people on lower incomes, and people from disadvantaged groups.

We have extensively promoted the Passenger Transport Consultation and have liaised with Local Members, District Councils, Parish Councils, schools and colleges, together with special interest groups. I can confirm that paper copies of the consultation and Strategy are available at all Libraries and Tourist Information Centres. We have circulated a leaflet throughout Worcestershire inviting all our residents to have their say and there has been some excellent social media and press coverage. We have a group of surveyors who will be visiting many of Worcestershire's towns to further promote the consultation and we have tried to organise these around market days, for example, which attract bigger crowds. We

are also attending various roadshows where people can come and have a chat. Our bus companies have displayed posters on their buses.

All of the information associated with the Strategy and Consultation is available in all formats. This is an inclusive exercise and if residents have difficulty accessing the internet, a telephone number has been widely publicised which is 01905 765765. This number can be used to phone for a hard copy of the documents and a paper consultation questionnaire. As of last week, we had received over 20 paper copies of the survey and we had distributed 500 paper copies at libraries, tourist information centres, and all of the staff who are promoting the consultation have paper copies with them at all of the events we are attending.

In addition, we are now attending events held by Fortis Living in Malvern on 26th July; Droitwich on 2nd August; and Worcester on 9th August. Information has also been provided to Sanctuary Housing and Abbeyfields Elderly Care Home

Along with my Cabinet colleague, we are monitoring the consultation exercise every week and we will certainly introduce any changes or improvements in this area if they become necessary. In that regard, I would ask colleagues and, indeed, anybody else to let me have any suggestions as to how we can increase the non-digital response rate, and we will implement them wherever we can.

QUESTION 12 – Mr R C Lunn will ask Lucy Hodgson:

“Does the Cabinet Member with Responsibility share my concerns about the closing of Post Offices particularly in the western part of the county, causing considerable inconvenience for residents and small businesses in these areas? How does she plan to improve the situation?”

Answer

As Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities I am responsible for a number of services, but the provision of Post Office services is not one of these. Therefore I cannot comment on the detail around post office service reductions. However, as part of wider library reforms we are in contact with post office services to see if there are opportunities to co-locate services together to provide a more sustainable offer to communities. We were pursuing options to co-locate a post office in a library in the north of the county, but an alternative (free) venue for the post office has been found instead. Nevertheless, we will continue to offer to work together with partners like Post Office services to try and find solutions.

Supplementary question

The provision of a premises for the relocation of the post office in Tenbury Wells was an issue. It had been suggested that the local library would be a suitable venue. Lucy Hodgson reported that an alternative venue had now been found for the post office within the town.

QUESTION 13 – Mr R M Udall will ask Lucy Hodgson:

“To ask the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities if she shares my concern about the removal of essential public and community services from deprived and rural communities in Worcestershire?”

Answer

As Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities I am responsible for a number of services that aim to enrich the lives of all Worcestershire residents. It is well documented

and debated that we have significant financial challenges, particularly given the increase in demand for both children's and adults social care services. Any reductions or removal of services are never easier decisions to make, but we need to continue to prioritise resources on achieving the ambition within our corporate plans and keeping both children and adults safe.

Part of the ambition within the Corporate Plan is to grow community capacity and enable individuals, families and communities to do more for themselves. This is why we have introduced a Community Solutions Fund. We are currently seeking applications to offer financial support to community organisations so they can help address local issues and increase community capacity in order to reduce future demand and avoids costs for the County Council.

So in short, yes I do share your concerns and will continue to work with my Cabinet colleagues and officers to find the necessary solutions.