

## **COUNCIL 15 JANUARY 2015 - AGENDA ITEM 10 – QUESTION TIME**

***Answers given at the meeting may have been a précis of the full answer which is set out below. In some cases additional information is also included. Where, due to time or other constraints, it was not possible for the question to be asked formally the written response is also included below.***

**QUESTION 1** - Mr A T Amos asked Mrs E A Eyre:

*"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families encourage those secondary phase schools who want to have them to establish sixth forms on their premises, given the educational and other advantages of students being educated at this level in the surroundings of a school?"*

### **Answer given**

We currently have 23 out of 29 high schools with a sixth form. In addition to this, the Holy Trinity International School, which became a Free School in September 2014, provides 'all through' education and so has a sixth form. This means that, already, the majority of our schools have a sixth form.

Where a school wishes to expand to include sixth form provision, we work closely with that school to look at not only the needs of students in that particular school, but also our responsibility to ensure there are sufficient quality places available in the area, and that there is an appropriate range of provision available. Much of this may be provided by a school sixth form, but there are some courses – such as engineering – that are more appropriate to be provided by a large post 16 college. We have (and need) therefore a balance of provision for post 16 students both in schools and Further Education provision.

While it is appropriate and in the best interests of many students to stay on at school post 16, this is not always the case. Some learners mature into, and benefit from, the more adult environment of a college, giving them greater independence. As with all of this provision, it is about providing a range of options with relevant guidance to ensure students make the most appropriate choices.

### **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question Mrs Eyre reiterated that a school-based sixth form education did not suit all students and students leaving Year 11 should have a wide choice of learning options.

**QUESTION 2** – Mr R M Udall asked Mr John Smith:

*"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways confirm how many Worcestershire street lights are now turned off after midnight? Furthermore, can he confirm how many more will be switched off in 2015 and in what locations?"*

## Answer given

At the 5 January 2015 7,600 streetlights in side streets have been converted to switch off between midnight and 6.00 am. The programme includes all areas of Worcestershire where there are County Council street lights on estates and side roads. 17,000 lights in total will be converted.

## Supplementary Question

In response to a request to suspend the present policy of extinguishing lights at night Mr Smith reiterated that the Council had to find savings and reduce carbon emissions and so would continue with present plans and also the replacement of old lights with LED units.

## QUESTION 3 – Mr P M McDonald asked Mr J P Campion:

*"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning please inform me how many of the County Council's employees are not in receipt of the Living Wage?"*

## Answer given

96.96 FTE Council staff and 550.02 FTE School Staff receive between the minimum and living wage.

## Supplementary Question

Mr Campion answered a supplementary question about the living wage and confirmed there were no plans for its adoption.

## QUESTION 4 – Mr P M McDonald asked Mrs L C Hodgson:

*"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Localism and Communities please inform me of the total number of users of our libraries in 2010 and the current figure?"*

## Answer given

Year	2010	2014	2014 % +/- 2010
Visits	3,014,688	3,278,532	+8.8
Issues	3,035,900	3,072,992	+1.2

## Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question Mrs Hodgson confirmed that no libraries had been closed.

## QUESTION 5 – Ms P A Hill asked Mrs E A Eyre:

*"What is the view of the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families regarding the Government policy advocating more use of boarding schools for vulnerable pupils and does she intend to fund more places as this is likely to improve outcomes for these children?"*

## Answer given

Decisions need to be taken on a case-by-case basis through careful assessment of a child's needs and matching the right child with the right school. If outcomes can best be met in a boarding setting then it is an option that should be considered and followed up.

The Government published *Boarding Schools, An opportunity to improve outcomes for vulnerable children* in November 2014. [Boarding schools: improving outcomes for vulnerable children - Publications - GOV.UK](#). This is a guidance document in which the Government encourage local authorities to consider whether a boarding place could be a beneficial option for some vulnerable children. It is the case already that some young people are placed in boarding provision by this Council in order to best meet their needs and it is an option that we will continue to consider.

It is difficult to disagree with the comment in the introduction to the document which stresses that boarding provision will not be the right option for every child.

**QUESTION 6** - Mr R C Lunn asked Mr S E Geraghty:

*"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Skills and Infrastructure, state whether he thinks that there is enough freedom for small businesses selling meat and dairy products to exhibit their wares at Farmers' Markets? Is there enough freedom for new exhibitors? If not how does he suggest that this can be improved?"*

## Answer given

Firstly, can I thank Robin for his interesting question.

As a result of your question the Economic Development Team spoke to representatives from Worcestershire Farmers' Markets Group and the Teme Valley Farmers' Market.

I can update Council that currently markets are held once a month across a range of locations in Worcestershire:

- Droitwich (approx. 15 stalls)
- Kidderminster
- Webbs of Wychbold (18 stalls)
- Malvern (15 stalls)
- Worcester/Norton (8 stalls)
- Teme Valley at Knightwick (30 stalls)
- Also – County Hall

Markets feature a range of produce - plants/herbs, fish, meat, puddings, sweets, fruit and vegetables, bread and cakes, jams honey and preserves, beverages. Up to 25% of stalls sell crafts.

Applications for a stall from new exhibitors are subject to acceptance by the market committee and agreement to adhere to rules – including having public liability insurance and being registered with Environmental Health if relevant, for example. There is a limit to the number of stalls each market can and is willing to accommodate. If there are meat and dairy producers who wish to sell via a Farmers Market then there may be the demand for more markets/more often.

Successful markets are a part of the county's character and linked to our Open for Business theme. Therefore the County Council, working with our district councils, will continue to support the development of markets where there is proven demand for development. If there any particular issues that you are aware of in relation to the provision of farmer markets I would be happy to meet to discuss those with the relevant staff /organisations.

### **Supplementary Question**

In response to a question about potential difficulties with competing providers at some markets Mr Geraghty said he would provide a written answer.

### **QUESTION 7** - Mr P Denham asked Mrs E A Eyre:

*"It is now very clear that, as a direct consequence of 59 former county schools converting to academy status, the Department for Education has reduced Worcestershire's 2015/16 funding by £1.7 million more than we were actually spending on those schools before they became academies.*

*Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families please explain to Council the impact of this £1.7 million black hole in our education funding?"*

### **Answer given**

While levels of funding have decreased this has not been matched by a similar decline in educational outcomes.

The re-structure of Learning and Achievement Services in Worcestershire has also resulted in reduced levels of funding for some of the Council's services. This re-structure has been in response to, and looks ahead to, changes in the relationship between schools and settings, and the local authority. It is also in line with the future operating model of the Council.

During the last four years, at the same time as these changes have been taking place, educational outcomes for most pupils have improved. We have also maintained and enhanced many services for vulnerable learners, for example those identified as having special educational needs. While levels of funding have decreased, therefore, this has not been matched by a similar decline in educational outcomes.

### **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question Mrs Eyre explained and re-emphasised that educational outcomes were improving.

### **QUESTION 8** – Dr K Pollock asked Mr John Smith:

*"In the light of the extensive publicity given to the apparent cut in budget for gritting the roads across the county this winter, could the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways please advise me as to the real position, namely whether there have been any cuts in salt provision, vehicles available or staff on standby to man them?"*

### **Answer given**

Thank you for your question which gives me the opportunity to correct some misleading articles which have appeared recently in the press and also some untrue comments.

Contrary to the recent publicity about the Winter Maintenance Budget, the public and our members will be pleased to hear that no cuts have been made, and nor are any planned, to our salt supplies, gritting routes, gritter fleet or staff to crew them. As the public and members will have witnessed only in the last 2 days, our winter service remains as effective as ever, having started the season with the highest salt stock levels we have had. In fact we started this current winter season with over 15,000 tonnes of salt in our gritting depots. In addition, there are now over 1,200 yellow grit bins available for use by the travelling public and almost 300 green grit bins maintained by parish councils.

In summary, we will continue to provide an excellent winter maintenance service as necessary for whatever the elements may throw at us this winter season and would thank again the gritting teams for their incredible commitment.

**QUESTION 9** – Dr K Pollock asked Mr J P Campion:

*"Bearing in mind the recent press coverage of a substantial total of payments allegedly intended to buy silence from former employees, can the Cabinet Member Responsible for Transformation and Commissioning confirm to Council that this authority does not gag its staff?"*

**Answer given**

Notwithstanding the recent press coverage, I'm satisfied that the County Council's approach to settlement agreements is proportionate. The costs of going to court or tribunal can often be far higher than the payments made under a settlement agreement. Therefore, in some circumstances, avoiding claims through the responsible use of settlement agreements is both appropriate and cost effective. A view backed up by the comments of a trade union reported in the Worcester News.

Settlement agreements are subject to a robust internal approval process. The employee must have received independent advice from a relevant adviser and enters into the agreement of their own free will. Where a settlement agreement contains a confidentiality clause, it is not one that prevents "whistleblowing".

**QUESTION 10** – Mrs E B Tucker asked Mrs E A Eyre:

*"Given that consultation on a proposed change of age range is being conducted currently by Pershore High School, what steps will the Council take to ensure that the potential consequences for children's learning in the middle and first schools of the pyramid are fully analysed and explained to the Regional Commissioner? If the proposal is approved, what powers does the Council have to take action to ensure that children's learning is not disadvantaged prior to age 11 years?"*

**Answer given**

Pershore High School is an Academy. The Regional Schools Commissioner is the decision maker, but the Commissioner will take account of the DfE's steer and the clear view which is that any proposals should be aligned with strategic planning and mitigate against any proposal by an individual school without considering the rest of the pyramid. The Commissioner would take into account the views of the County Council and at this point I would make no apology for praising the leadership and co-ordination of the Head of Service, John Edwards, in respect of the four pyramid areas where he has done a massive amount of consultation and has worked with schools to encourage them to work together and has shown great leadership, as has the Directorate.

The Council recognises that proposals to change the age range of any school will have impact upon learners in other schools within an area and it is mindful of other aspects as it realises its duty to provide school places for all learners. The Council supports changes that are agreed by all schools within a pyramid which is what the Leader of the Council said earlier.

This is not necessarily the same as the maintenance of the current situation. We are responding fully in the timescale to all consultations by all schools in those four pyramids. We've done it for Redditch, we've done it for the Evesham pyramid, around Honeybourne and Bretforton and we are in regular communication with the decision maker communicating the Council's position and the quality of provision and the need to ensure sufficient places. Within this context if the proposal by a High School to admit Year 7 pupils, and that's the same for Pershore and Droitwich, is successful we would expect the education of these pupils at primary age to be fully taken into account.

### **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question Mrs Eyre explained and re-emphasised that where a governing body proposed a change in age range this had to comply with DfE rules; the importance of all parties working together to resolve any complications was also stressed.