

COUNCIL 12 FEBRUARY 2015 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – 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 R M Udall asked Mr S E Geraghty:

"Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Skills and Infrastructure confirm the importance of food and agriculture to the Worcestershire economy and outline how these industries have been supported by the County Council?"

Answer given

Firstly, I would like to thank Richard for his question and the opportunity it gives me to update Council on the work that we are doing to support the rural economy.

There are over 1,650 agricultural/forestry business across Worcestershire which makes up 15% of our rural economy; this equated to around £180m GVA in 2012. Despite the fact that over the last ten years the value of GVA for the country's agricultural sector has slightly decreased by 0.7%, agriculture is as a key sector for Worcestershire, as identified in Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnerships Strategic Economic Plan and the Counties Local Development Plan (LEADER 2015-2020).

Key geographical areas for this activity include - The Vale of Evesham in Wychavon which is one of the most important areas for growing and agri-tech in the country. Pershore College, a Centre of Horticultural Excellence is located in Worcestershire, along with the Three Counties Showground, which provides vibrant, innovative events throughout the year. Agriculture is therefore a key feature of Worcestershire's economy and forms a part of our growth strategies for the future.

Food and drink production is identified in WLEP's SEP as a key growth area for Worcestershire, with significant opportunities in the areas of the Vale of Evesham for commercial horticulture, with increasing opportunities for growth, including food production and processing facilities; the Wyre Forest and surrounding area for development of smaller scale food production and Teme Valley and the South for commercial fruit production.

Recent consultation for the LEADER program highlighted growth areas in this sector; these included support to increase the added value of food and drink production and for the establishment of local food and drinks brand identities. Strengthening links across local food supply chains and encourage usage of local food and drink could also help to support the food and drink sector. The county has strong local food networks, including Growing Worcestershire, which would be an asset in the development of supply chains.

Flooding - Worcestershire is well known for the flooding issues it experienced, particularly in 2007 and more recently in 2014. Flooding has had a significant impact on local agricultural and horticultural businesses as demonstrated by the high volume

of applications received from the area for the Farm Flood Recovery Fund and the Council-run Flood Affected Business Grant.

Local Support:

Worcestershire County Council has been directly and indirectly supporting Agriculture and Food Production, activities include:

- Supporting Agriculture and Horticulture Businesses via our Skills Support for the Workforce Program. This offers local businesses a chance to train their staff in a formal qualification free of charge.
- The Council has a farm management team who lease land to local farmers.
- The Council also runs Women2Web a free digital training scheme aimed at Women in Worcestershire. The project is linked to the roll out of Superfast Broadband in rural areas and has worked with a number of land owners and rural craft industries and farm diversifications.
- Destination Worcestershire which is linked to the Council promotes food based festivals including the popular Plum Festival and Asparagus Festival as well as supporting sustainable rural tourism.
- Flood affected farms who were not able to access DEFRA's Farm Recovery funding were able to be supported by the Council's Flood Recovery Fund for Flood Affected Business.
- Signposting to national provisions and grants via DEFRA and the Rural services Network.
- Agri-tech industries are eligible for all ERDF Programs which means they can access support and grants via our host of ERDF funded programs including Proof of Concept and Enterprising Worcestershire.
- The roll out of Superfast Broadband will be extended to cover 95% of the county following a successful bid to BDUK and monies allocated as part of the LEP's Local Growth Fund This is having a massive impact on rural businesses including agriculture.
- It is also important to note the work the Council does to maintain rural infrastructure to keep business moving through the county and we have continued to invest in the highway network and flood mitigation schemes.

As outlined above, the importance of Agriculture and Food has been highlighted in both the Local Enterprise Partnerships ESIF and SEP Strategies that have both been formally adopted by the Government. It has also been highlighted in our Rural Economic Development Strategy (LEADER) which will be run locally on behalf of DEFRA until 2020. Both strategies have funding attached to them so the offer the Council will have to support this growing sector over the coming years is set to increase.

I hope this further information helps reassure the member about the work the Council is supporting to help the rural economy.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question in which the questioner invited the Cabinet Member to consider initiating an awards system/ceremony to celebrate Worcestershire Farming and Food and reward local efforts in this sector, Mr Geraghty said he would consider the proposal.

QUESTION 2 – *was withdrawn at the meeting by the questioner.*

QUESTION 3 – Mr P M McDonald asked Mr John Smith:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways please inform me how many road works/repairs have not started on the proposed date?"

Answer given

The Council do not maintain figures for how many road works or repairs do not start on the proposed date. Street works legislation means that contractors don't have to start on the first day of their planned works, so we wouldn't be able to say whether the start date was delayed or not. Informal feedback does suggest that most schemes do start on time. What I can tell the Council is that during the first 6 months of 2014/2015, 88% of road works that required notification to the Street Authority were completed within the planned duration for the works.

Our records show that all programmed highway maintenance works bar two have commenced on the start dates specified on their individual road booking applications or on notified revised dates required under the Traffic Management Act.

The two works that have not started on their proposed dates are the Shrawley and Broadway Drainage schemes due to existing utility apparatus having to be redirected, new commencement dates will be requested once the utility work has been completed.

All highway reactive safety repairs (potholes) have been repaired within the specified response times laid down by the Highway Inspectors.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question Mr Smith outlined the respective responsibilities of the Council and contractors with regard to notification of road works and repairs.

QUESTION 4 – Mr P M McDonald asked Mrs Sheila Blagg:

"Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care please inform me how she is ensuring that contracted home carers are being paid between visits to clients and not having to pay their own petrol?"

Answer given

It is always the case that our contracts comply with legislation. Contractually providers are required to pay at least the national minimum wage, and we have set our average minimum payment rate based on this including travel time. We followed the United Kingdom Home Care Association (UKHCA) formula for calculating this.

The rates that the Council pays to providers in rural areas are higher reflecting the greater cost of travel time and mileage. Tiered arrangements exist to accommodate this.

Commissioners check the operational records periodically and at least annually to see that sufficient time is allowed between calls, but do not check that travel time has been paid.

Contract monitoring is outcome based on quality of care and outcomes for service users. I receive monthly performance and budget reports from officers on all commissioned services, which includes complaints handling, inspections, random visits and at the other extreme serious case reviews.

As a commissioner of services we cannot interfere with provider employment practices other than stipulating that these must comply with legislation. Officers cannot micro manage the employment packages of each worker on a weekly basis but they do stipulate the contract requirements in renewal notices and act upon complaints from staff or family careers where care quality or health issues have been raised.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question, in which the questioner made general comments about private sector care providers trying to avoid paying the minimum wage to care workers employed on Council-commissioned contracts. Mrs Blagg stated that if such practices existed she would not condone them. She asked the questioner to provide evidence of specific examples in Worcestershire, if he knew of any; any so notified would be investigated.

QUESTION 5 – Mr G J Vickery asked Mrs S L Blagg:

"Worcestershire Acute Hospitals Trust has reported in the context of its £28 million forecast budget deficit, an £8 million cost of delayed discharges. Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care say how much of that is the fault of the County Council?"

Answer given

The County Council does not recognise the Acute Trust's figures. The County Council operates on the basis of figures provided by the Department of Health.

Officers will continue to work with the Acute Trust to understand why they differ from official published data.

Official Department of Health data show a total of 695 delayed discharges from acute hospital beds for Worcestershire residents during the April to December period that were the sole responsibility of adult social care. The cost to the local NHS of this would be around £230,000.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question Mrs Blagg gave an explanation of how money might be reclaimed from the County Council for delayed discharges.

QUESTION 6 - Mr G J Vickery asked Mr J-P Campion:

"82 Councils in England are paying, or committed to pay, their staff the living wage, including Worcester City Council, Bromsgrove District Council, Redditch Borough Council and Wyre Forest District Council. In addition all 32 councils in Scotland are now Living-Wage employers, paying their staff at least the living wage. Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Change say whether the County Council intends to be a Living-Wage employer?"

Answer given

As this is a departure from the printed question I trust that the questioner will allow me a little leeway in my answer.

Of course we want to pay our staff a living wage, but this ambition has to be balanced against the resources we have available to us. This Administration has a very clear aim that we want to ensure that people can survive on the wages they are paid and that means in all senses reforming those on lower grades. However, because of the nature of our particular business – including social care and schools, it cannot be done as quickly as we would like. We will be doing it by reform and by progression. I don't necessarily buy into this arbitrary limit and whether it would be appropriate for Worcestershire – it might be higher, it might be lower and to compare some areas in the south of England with Worcestershire is absolutely ridiculous; expenses which make up an individual's outgoings are likely to be very different, rents, travel and so on. I would rather see a rate appropriate for our local area rather than an arbitrary figure which happens to fit very well on election posters.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question Mr Campion repeated that any adoption of the Living Wage could not be achieved at the present time but remained a future aspiration for this Council.

QUESTION 7 – Mr R C Lunn asked Mrs E A Eyre:

"Does the Cabinet Member for Children and Families agree with the comments of Councillor David Simmonds, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People's Board, that 'Councils are best placed to ensure oversight of all schools is effective and any action needed can be taken quickly'."

Answer given

The Council has the responsibility to oversee standards in all tax-payer funded schools. This therefore includes Academies and free schools, as well as those maintained by the Council. The relationship between schools and the Council has been changing for several years, moving away from direct intervention by the Council, to a model where support and challenge is provided by a range of partners, for example other schools, the DfE and Ofsted. In Worcestershire we work closely with our schools and maintain the oversight of standards for all learners. We work proactively with Academies and free schools as well as with maintained schools, and where intervention is appropriate this will be either directly by the Council, or through other agencies such as the DfE.

As a Council we are proud of the improvements that schools have led in recent years. In 2014 we recorded our best ever Key Stage 2 results, and Key Stage 4 results are above both national and statistical neighbour levels. 89% of our schools are currently judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding, the highest proportion in the West Midlands.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about support and challenge for local schools the Cabinet Member made reference to the changing relationship between the Council and schools and how this seemed to be providing better outcomes.

QUESTION 8 – Mrs F M Oborski asked Mrs Liz Eyre:

*"Could the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families tell me:
- what percentage of Key Stage 1 pupils across the county have taken up the Free School Meal Offer?
- what assistance the Council is giving to encourage take up?"*

Answer given

1) What percentage of Key Stage 1 pupils across the county have taken up the Free School Meal Offer?

Provisional take-up of Universal Infant Free School Meals, taken from the January Census is 89% (this includes children eligible for Free School Meals due to low income). This compares to 91% for the Autumn Term. This relates to LA Maintained Schools only – the DfE has chosen not to share Academy data. (The January Census doesn't close for amendment until 20 March and the Census team expect some minor variation in the final figure following further data cleaning.)

2) What assistance the Council is giving to encourage take up?

The Council supported all schools involved with the introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meal initiative to bid for available capital money to support the delivery of meals. The first round of bids took place in April 2014, the Council allocated all of its £1.2m to schools. During the second round of bids the Council encouraged schools who met the DfE criteria to bid, thirty five schools bid for additional capital funding and one was successful.

From the start of this initiative the Council has provided information and advice to schools to ensure they are aware of the additional support available. The Council developed a generic application form for schools to use to ensure as many families as possible take up the UIFSM offer. The Council continues to inform schools of the support available from the Children's Food Trust, Food for Life Partnership and Change for Life partnerships.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question the Cabinet Member undertook to make a list available to all members with take-up figures for all county schools.

QUESTION 9 – Mr P J Bridle asked Mr Marcus Hart:

"This winter it is predicted that the death toll of vulnerable pensioners will be the highest since the decade 1999 -2009 when the influenza toll was 36,450. It is predicted that this figure will be exceeded by 3,000 to 4,000 this winter. According to the Office for National Statistics, there were 8,800 more deaths than the average of 25,000 in the short time between early December 2014 and 16 January this year. The reportedly useless 'flu vaccine issued this winter and the appalling fuel costs, boosted by the pointless environmental charges have condemned our precious elderly citizens to death by hypothermia or cold induced sickness in their own homes.

Have we any comparative statistics for Worcestershire?"

Answer given

- There were an estimated 400 excess winter deaths across Worcestershire in 2012/13 - this is the number of deaths during November to March compared to the summer months.
- The main reasons for excess winter deaths are cold weather, which increases the risk of heart attack and stroke, as well as respiratory infections, including influenza.
- Injury which includes falls, slips and trips, account for a very small number of excess winter deaths.
- The risks of increased deaths among our most vulnerable populations in winter are of great concern, and there are many initiatives across Worcestershire to reduce these risks. We work in partnership with the health economy and others to make sure that people at greatest risk are identified and that the right help is available.
- The number of excess winter deaths in Worcestershire shows a similar pattern to England as a whole and other similar areas.
- 2012/13 is the most recent year for which data is currently available – we expect to have figures for 2013/14 and 2014/15 later this year.
- There are a number of initiatives locally to prevent excess winter deaths, including the Warmer Worcestershire programme.
- Flu vaccination has unfortunately not been as effective as usual this year due to changes in one of the circulating strains of flu – however it should still offer protection against other strains and people at risk should take the opportunity to be vaccinated.

QUESTION 10 – Mr P J Bridle asked Mr Marcus Hart:

"The practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is barbaric and appalls any right-minded citizen. I notice that not one case of this is reported in our county, let alone any charge or conviction of a perpetrator. The law is clear and holds anyone and everyone accountable who performs such an act or conceals such an act. Surely we must be seen to take this matter extremely seriously and not just pay it lip service. Are we giving a woman so violated every opportunity to report her ordeal and to protect her identity so that investigation can take place with her safety and confidentiality paramount?"

It is difficult to believe that this dreadful practice is not going on in our county. There isn't even the lowest of drum beats from the authorities or the afflicted.

Why? Are we being complacent or far too politically correct? Are we doing too little to empower these poor women to come forward? What reports are available from our GPs and hospital maternity wards?"

Answer given

When you say 'we' I will assume that you are referring to Worcestershire County Council. I can assure Cllr Bridle and all Members of this Chamber that health and social care services takes this issue very seriously. All women who are identified are referred to a consultant for review. Information is collected by the maternity services and data is returned to the Department of Health. Numbers are too small to be reported, to protect the identity of individuals. Health services have recently started rolling out training to staff and are developing guidelines and protocols to follow. We

will be liaising with health service providers to ensure that the training and protocols are aligned across the health and social care workforce.

QUESTION 11 – Mr A T Amos asked Mr John Smith:

"Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways ensure that, where relevant and appropriate, local members are in future consulted on proposals to install speed cameras in their electoral divisions?"

Answer given

The requirement, placement, and enforcement of speed cameras is managed by the Safer Roads Partnership. The criteria they use to locate cameras are based upon personal injury accidents and 85th percentile speeds and is not open to consultation. When we are made aware of new speed cameras we will ensure local members are informed. So in short we have no control over the positioning of such cameras at all.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question the Cabinet Member undertook to investigate the operation of a particular concealed traffic speed camera in the Worcester area.