

COUNCIL 14 MAY 2015 - AGENDA ITEM 12 – 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 P M McDonald asked Mr M Bayliss:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning please inform me how much unpaid overtime is being carried out by County Council employees?"

Answer given

The County Council does not routinely record unpaid overtime nor does it have a mechanism for doing so. However, the County Council expects managers to take appropriate action if it becomes apparent that an employee is working excessive hours. This should be done for a number of reasons but perhaps most importantly, to help ensure the wellbeing of our employees and to help them strike a balance between work and their personal life. It is also worth noting that employees below chief officer level benefit from our Flexi-Time scheme which allows for additional hours worked to meet particular requirements of the job to be taken as flexi-leave.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about employees not being paid for work done Mr Campion asked the questioner to let him have evidence of any systematic non-payment.

QUESTION 2 – Mr P M McDonald asked Mr M Bayliss:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning please inform me of how many males and females are on zero-hours contracts and short-term contracts?"

Answer given

(a) zero hours

Worcestershire County Council currently employs 670 staff on a relief, casual or sessional basis (zero hours). Of the figure quoted, 491 (73%) are female and 179 (27%) are male – this proportion closely mirrors the overall gender profile of all Council employees (75% are female and 25% are male).

(b) Temporary Contracts

Worcestershire County Council currently employs 151 staff on temporary or fixed term contracts of 12 months or less. Of the figure quoted, 110 (73%) are female and 41 (27%) are male - this matches the male/female split of our zero hour staff and also closely mirrors the overall gender profile of all Council employees (75% are female and 25% are male).

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about whether the Council were discriminating against women Mr Campion refuted this and stated that any arrangements only mirrored the gender make-up of the Council's workforce as a whole.

QUESTION 3 – Mr R M Udall asked Mr J Campion:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families confirm what funding, help and support is provided for parents by the County Council for childcare and early education for two year old children?"

Answer given

Funding is available for children living in a household receiving any of these benefits:

- Income Support
- Jobseeker's Allowance
- Support through the Immigration and Asylum Act
- Pension, Child Tax or Working Tax Credits
- Disability Living Allowance.

Children are also eligible if they have an Education Health and Care Plan, are Looked After, adopted or on a Child Protection Plan.

Supplementary Question

In response to a question about some form of help for parents whose total family income exceeded £16,000 but who still fall below the county average Mr Campion outlined the County Council's approach to reducing dependency by increasing prosperity overall.

QUESTION 4 – Mr J W Parish asked Mr M J Hart:

"Given the serious situation being caused by bed blocking at NHS Worcestershire hospitals would the Cabinet Member with the Responsibility for Health and Well-being please inform me of how many 'step-down' and rehabilitation beds are available in the county?"

Answer given

I would have to say we do not wish to portray the vulnerable as "bed blockers". Most people who are discharged from the acute hospitals can go straight home to the care of their GP. For those people who require a period of rehabilitation or further assessment there are three pathways of care - people are allocated to the most appropriate pathway by the Patient Flow Centre:

1. Some can return to their own homes for rehabilitation with support – typically for up to 6 weeks. The CCGs and the Council commission 'Promoting Independence' services that can take around 8 people daily, expected to rise to around 10 people daily by June.
2. Some are discharged to community beds – these are available at:
 - (a) The 5 NHS community hospitals (Tenbury, Princess of Wales, Pershore, Evesham, Malvern) and the Kidderminster site. Collectively these have around 240 beds of which about half are used for general and specialist rehabilitation.
 - (b) One of the Council provided facilities: Timberdine (28 general and specialist stroke rehabilitation beds); Howbury (16 rehabilitation beds); and the Grange (28 rehabilitation beds currently).
 - (c) Worcester Intermediate Care Unit
3. Those who are likely to require long term residential or nursing care can be discharged initially for a period of assessment to beds commissioned from local care homes. The Council has contracts with 25 homes for this service and there are typically 10-12 beds available daily.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about historical levels of delayed discharge from hospital and the current level of provision Mr Hart reiterated his answer and the key statistics he had quoted.

QUESTION 5 – Mrs F M Oborski asked Mr J H Smith:

"Many members of the public in Kidderminster, whilst supporting the idea of switching off two out of three street lights at midnight, are appalled at the way this policy has been carried out. Specifically they are angry that there was no consultation with local County Councillors or residents about which individual lights are either on or off!

In some streets in my Division it means that lights which poke out through street trees are left on, giving very restricted light, whilst unobstructed lights are switched off. Similarly it means that the tree-lined foot way "Offmore Lane" which is used by shift workers walking into town and people leaving events at Kidderminster Cricket Club is in total darkness whilst nearby Wordsworth Crescent is brilliantly illuminated!

Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways assure me that a review will be held into the selection of lights to be switched off and that the detailed local knowledge of local Members will be utilised to ensure that public safety is not compromised?"

Answer given

Lights to be switched off are selected using a GIS map database so that the target 2 out of 3 side street lamps to be converted to part-night is achieved. Whilst this shows the best location of the lighting columns, it will not highlight the areas where columns may be affected by tree growth etc. Tree growth is dealt with through the established *noticing system* for tree owners to cut them back. Offmore Lane is currently being dealt with in that way.

Before we started this whole process I ensured each local councillor was invited to a member briefing session prior to the initiative being implemented in their area, and Kidderminster was no exception. There were consultation meetings on 16 June (25 June updated meeting) and 8 April (update). These were very poorly attended.

Plans showing the lighting columns to be converted to part-night, and ones to remain on, are published on the County Council's website.

After conversions are carried out, it is sometimes possible to arrange swaps provided the overall number of converted lamps remains the same and the distribution of lit lamps is consistent.

Initially, members of the part-night conversions team held a number of sessions in Tesco supermarkets with plans available to promote the initiative and field questions. However, as the take up was small, this is now being replaced with a newspaper campaign in each area shortly before the installation programme is set to commence which guides readers to where information can be found and how to make comments. The plans are also available at local libraries as soon as they have been published.

Wordsworth Crescent is lit with low-energy lamps that are excluded from conversion to part-night, which is why it contrasts with many surrounding streets.

There is an accessible parallel alternative route to Offmore Lane along Sheraton Drive that was taken into account when the part-night plans were drawn up. This was done so that other streets in the area can remain lit and still achieve the target for energy saving. I have this in plan form which I am happy to share with Mrs Oborski.

QUESTION 6 - Mrs F M Oborski asked Mr J Campion:

"School pupils, especially those in the primary phase, are extremely trusting of members of the teaching profession and really do believe everything their teacher tells them.

This puts a very great responsibility upon teachers; especially at election time, to maintain "professional standards" and not to seek to impose their personal political beliefs upon vulnerable, trusting young children.

During the recent election campaign: my 10-year old god daughter's homework consisted of Labour Party campaign literature on which she was asked to comment as to why her family should Vote Labour!

Her 8-year old brother came home, from the same school, and told his parents that "You must Vote Labour, they are the only Party that wants us to live!" The same child was also taught the "anti-Nick Clegg" "I'm sorry" song by his teacher!

Does he agree with me that these are examples of completely unacceptable, unprofessional actions by the teachers concerned?

What steps can he and senior officers of this Council take to ensure that appropriate action is taken to prevent this sort of behaviour by teachers in Council schools who are our employees?"

Answer given

During the recent General Election campaign the Council was made aware of one incident of a school using political material from outside that constituency to support a homework activity. In that case the teacher in question used material from a range of different sources to support the development of the children's understanding about, and use of, persuasive writing.

It is important for teachers to make the content of lessons relevant to the children they teach and making use of current events and raising awareness of topical issues is to be encouraged. However, it would appear from the examples given that in a very small number of cases teachers may be in danger of introducing personal bias into their lessons. The County Council will continue to work with schools to ensure Worcestershire children receive a balanced and quality education.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about guidance given to achieve a balance Mr Campion reassured Council that this was the approach used.

QUESTION 7 – Mrs E B Tucker asked Mr S E Geraghty:

"Infrastructure proposals for Pershore within the SWDP are very limited and planning guidance appears to tie the hands of Highway Development in what they can require of developers. How will the County Council work to prevent worsening of congestion and highways safety?"

Answer given

I would like to thank Liz for her question. The intention is to deliver identified improvements to the network as contributions are secured from the developer activity. The quantum of development proposed by SWDP for Pershore is, I believe, 823 new dwellings. The key development site (two phases) is Station Road/Wyre Road delivering a total of approximately 700 homes, with Phase 1 having being granted permission and is currently under construction.

The SWDP Infrastructure Delivery Plan identifies that contributions will be needed from development in Pershore for a number of local highways network improvement including:

- A4101/B4048 Worcester Road and Three Springs Road
- A4104/ B4083 Station Road, Worcester Road High Street and Wyre Road

Worcestershire County Council is working closely with the South Worcestershire Local Planning Authorities in order to receive the appropriate contributions from developers towards mitigating the effect their development has on the highway network. Developer contributions can only be secured to make a development acceptable in planning terms i.e. to directly offset the impact of their development. Any contributions requested from the developer need to be directly related to the impact of their proposals, and be fair in terms of extent and cost. In addition to highway improvements, there are also contributions to be sought for improvements to walking and cycling facilities at Pershore rail station, plus contributions towards improving public transport.

Whilst not part of the SWDP IDP, improvements to the wider network around Pershore are being considered as part of the transport package, including a new bridge and link road between the A44 and B4083. A business case is currently being developed to bid for external funding.

Supplementary Question

Mrs Tucker gave examples of individual congestion sites which were causing much concern in the town and sought reassurance that these concerns would be addressed. Mr Geraghty said he was happy to meet Mrs Tucker with Mr Smith (the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways) to gain an insight into the particular problems raised.