

Minutes of the Council

Wychavon District Council (Civic Centre, Queen Elizabeth

Drive, Pershore, Worcestershire, WR10 1PT)

Thursday, 15 February 2024, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Kyle Daisley (Chairman), Cllr Alastair Adams, Cllr Mel Allcott, Cllr Alan Amos (Vice Chairman), Cllr Marc Bayliss, Cllr Dan Boatright-Greene, Cllr Bob Brookes, Cllr David Chambers, Cllr Andrew Cross, Cllr Lynn Denham, Cllr Nathan Desmond, Cllr Allah Ditta, Cllr Elizabeth Eyre, Cllr Andy Fry, Cllr Simon Geraghty, Cllr Laura Gretton, Cllr Karen Hanks, Cllr Ian Hardiman, Cllr Adrian Hardman, Cllr Paul Harrison, Cllr Marcus Hart, Cllr Bill Hopkins, Cllr Matt Jenkins, Cllr Adam Kent, Cllr Adrian Kriss, Cllr Steve Mackay, Cllr Emma Marshall, Cllr Karen May, Cllr Natalie McVey, Cllr Tony Miller, Cllr Jo Monk, Cllr Dan Morehead, Cllr Richard Morris, Cllr Beverley Nielsen, Cllr Tracey Onslow, Cllr Scott Richardson Brown, Cllr Josh Robinson, Cllr Linda Robinson, Cllr Chris Rogers, Cllr David Ross, Cllr Mike Rouse, Cllr James Stanley, Cllr Emma Stokes, Cllr Kit Taylor, Cllr Richard Udall, Cllr Malcolm Victory, Cllr Shirley Webb and Cllr Tom Wells

Available papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. 7 questions submitted to the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance (previously circulated); and
- C. The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2024 (previously circulated).

Statement by the Chairman of the Council

The Chairman of the Council read out a statement in relation to the findings of the Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review into the death of Alfie Steele.

2505 Apologies and Declaration of Interests (Agenda item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Salman Akbar, Martin Allen, Brandon Clayton, Matt Dormer, Aled Luckman, Luke Mallett, Tony Muir and Craig Warhurst.

Cllr Marcus Hart declared an interest on Agenda item 5 as a Non-Executive Director on the WCF Board in a non-remunerated role.

2506 Public Participation (Agenda item 2)

Alex Mace asked a question about establishing and supporting trial school streets for St George's Roman Catholic Primary School and Stanley Road Primary School in Worcester.

Alec Mackie asked a question about the findings of the Local Child Safeguarding Review into the death of Alfie Steele.

The Chairman thanked Alex and Alec for their contribution and said they would receive a written response from the relevant Cabinet Member or the relevant person.

2507 Minutes (Agenda item 3)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2024 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2508 Chairman's Announcements (Agenda item 4)

Noted.

2509 Reports of Cabinet- Matters requiring a decision by Council -2024/25 Proposed Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2025-2028 (Agenda item 5 (a))

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and commented that the last financial year had been challenging for the authority. In common with the majority of county councils and unitary authorities, the Council had experienced significant financial pressures as a result of increasing costs in Children's Social Care placements, Home to School Transport and Adult Social Care. These demand-led pressures continued and after mitigation measures during the year, left a projected £19m overspend at the year end. However, the underlying pressures totalled £35m (structural deficit). As these continued, they needed to be funded into the future. In addition, the Council needed to make reasonable provision for the likely pay and price inflation, further predicted demand in social care and the cost of delivering planned works projects and improvements which added a further £52m. When added to the structural deficit, these totalled £87m worth of pressures that needed to be addressed through the budget.

He stated further that the proposed budget would address the deficit through additional Government Grant, Council Tax, a savings and efficiencies

programme and the use of some reserves. The Council had worked with the CCN and local MPs to highlight these additional pressures to Government. These efforts had secured an extra £27.9m with £5m announced in recent weeks. The financial pressures were now recognised as needing national attention through funding and reform. He thanked Worcestershire MPs and the CCN for helping to secure this additional funding.

He added that it was proposed to increase Council Tax by 2.99% to fund the continuation of the investment programme to tackle issues that public had highlighted as important as well as 2% for Adult Social Care to protect the most vulnerable residents. Together with the changes in the base budget, this would generate an additional £19.6m. He did not take the decision lightly to raise Council Tax, recognising the many pressures facing local residents, but it would enable the Council to protect the most vulnerable members of society and continue to invest in the transport network, build the school places needed, grow the economy and protect the environment. The Council Tax payments in Worcestershire would remain amongst the lowest of comparable councils in the country, providing value for money.

Whilst Government funding and Council Tax was helping to grow the Council's income, costs were rising faster. The Council would therefore need to introduce a comprehensive savings and reform programme, review the size and shape of the authority, review costs by doing things differently, for example by seeking more foster carers and better value for money for placements. These proposed savings and efficiencies would total £37m. He thanked staff and management who had helped to develop these efficiency savings. Some reserves would still need to be used to achieve financial balance with an extra £2.3m proposed.

He concluded that the budget would put the Council on a sustainable financial footing, funding the demand-led pressures, protect the most vulnerable members of society whilst continuing to deliver a whole array of services and invest significantly in the future of the county through the capital programme. He thanked all members who had engaged in the budget-setting process through the numerous panels, the OSPB, staff, trade unions and stakeholders including town and parish councils and the business community. He commended the budget to Council.

The Leader of the Unity Group commented that the budget deficit facing the Council was a sad reflection of the lack of funding received from the Government over a number of years. The Council had not been given enough money or time to plan with single year settlements being introduced.

The Leader of the GAIA Group commented that local councils had faced a decade of cuts by the Government to local funding and consequently to services. The position had now been reached where it was impossible to avoid staff redundancies or reduction in services. Statutory services were struggling because of the lack of funding and increases in demand especially in children's services. Savings in children's services would be difficult to achieve and trying to attract foster carers had been an issue for a number of years. These demand-led pressures were increasing faster than Government funding. The current rate of the use of reserves was not sustainable. The High Needs

Dedicated Schools Grant budget deficit was predicted to be over £50m by the end of 2024/25. This funding was treated as a negative unusable reserve and if the Council was required to pay the funds back, it would go bust straight away. The Council could struggle to deliver a quality service under these financial pressures and the budget was not sustainable in the long-term. The budget also failed to include funding for bus passes for veterans or mention the climate emergency.

In the ensuing debate, the following points were made:

- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care welcomed the proposed increase in the funding for Adult Social Care. However, the budget report did not reflect the complexities of the challenges facing the service in this Council and nationally. He thanked staff for their efforts in difficult circumstances. The impact of the increase in demand, complexity of care and price inflation had had a considerable impact on the budget with a £5.9m forecast overspend this year. He was optimistic that the final figure would be lower than the forecast. The main cost increases were in nursing care and supportive living packages. The prevention agenda would provide the long-term solution to these demographic pressures
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills commented that the Government had increased council funding nationally but the costs of demand-led pressures were rising at a faster rate. Despite this, the Council continued to invest in major infrastructure projects
- In real terms, as a result of inflation, there had been a cut in Government funding to councils. It was not clear how much additional funding would be received from the Government for pot hole repairs and when that money would be received
- The budget failed to meet the needs of local residents and to deliver public services. The budget failed to refer to revenue consequences of the capital programme. There was no reference in the budget to the cost of the RAAC issues found at County Hall, Worcester. It was clear that the cost of the contractual arrangements that led to outsourcing of services was now impacting on the budget
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education commented that the budget continued to provide investment in schools, including a new secondary school in Worcester and Foxlydiate Primary School. There was also additional Government funding into Early Years places
- In addition to the core services and the major infrastructure projects, the Council also continued to provide a number of other important services to its residents, for example flood defences in Tenbury Wells
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families commented that despite the demand-led pressures in Children Social Care placements and Home to School Transport, Ofsted had rated WCF as good. Ofsted recognised the good work of staff, noting that social workers visited the majority of children on a regular basis, taking a sensitive approach which enabled the development of positive relationships. He recognised the importance of recruiting foster carers in addressing budgetary pressures going forward

- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-being emphasised the importance of the role of prevention in protecting the most vulnerable members of society. She thanked the public health team, in particular the work of the Integrated Care Team to achieve best outcomes. She encouraged councillors to do all they could to ensure local communities were connected and build on the asset-based community development. It was important to ensure people lived independent fully-fulfilled lives to avoid the need for adult social care. The actions taken in earlier life had a significant impact on the outcomes in older age. The Healthy Worcestershire programme aimed to improve activity and enablement to achieve better outcomes
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment outlined the work that the Council was taking in association with the EA and the English Severn and Wye Flood and Coastal Committee to address flooding issues support flood defence schemes. The Council would also be planting 150k trees in the county
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport commented that the Council took a holistic community-led approach to providing services. The budget for highways had increased in the last two years
- The budget did not reflect the neglect of infrastructure and maintenance of heritage assets, for example resulting in the partial collapse of Powick Bridge
- The Council's position with regard to the A38 in Bromsgrove which went against the views of local residents meant that it was not possible to support this budget
- The Council had a clear focus in supporting the most vulnerable members of society with extra funding provided over many years for Adult and Children's Social Care as well as investing in many other aspects of the Council's work
- There had been cuts to budgets and staffing reductions which would have consequences for Council services
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities commented that the proposed budget would increase Council Tax by circa £75 a year on a Band D property. However, it was important to use that Council Tax including the Adult Social Care levy to support the most vulnerable members of society. The Council had recognised in the budget the importance to residents of improvements to roads, pavements and bridges. This Council had had 20 years of sound financial management, balancing the books with a clear strategic plan to deliver key services. The library offer had been increased with no libraries closures or proposed closures
- The Leader of the council stressed the importance of delivering a sustainable budget to avoid the financial difficulties experienced by other councils. The capital and environmental consequences of the budgetary decisions had been factored in. He thanked all members for their involvement in the budget preparation and staff for their efforts throughout the year.

On a named vote RESOLVED that the budget be approved as follows:

- (a) **The Net Budget Requirement of £433.351 million set out in Appendix 1;**
- (b) **The Capital programme of £390 million as set out in Appendix 2;**
- (c) **The earmarked reserves schedule set out in Appendix 5;**
- (d) **That the Council Tax Band D equivalent for 2024/25 be set at £1,538.92 which includes £226.72 relating to the ring-fenced Adult Social Care precept, and the Council Tax Requirement be set at £335.762 million, which will increase the Council Tax Precept by 4.99% in relation to two parts:**
 - **2.99% to provide financial support for the delivery of outcomes in line with the Corporate Plan 'Shaping Worcestershire's Future' and the priorities identified by the public and business community; and**
 - **2.00% Adult Social Care Precept ring-fenced for Adult Social Care services, in order to contribute to existing cost pressures due to Worcestershire's ageing population;**
- (e) **The Treasury Management Strategy set out at Appendix 6; and**
- (f) **The Pay Policy Statement set out at Appendix 7.**

Those in favour of the motion were: Cllr Kyle Daisley, Cllr Alastair Adams, Cllr Allan Amos, Cllr Marc Bayliss, Cllr Bob Brookes, Cllr David Chambers, Cllr Nathan Desmond, Cllr Allah Ditta, Cllr Elizabeth Eyre, Cllr Simon Geraghty, Cllr Laura Gretton, Cllr Karen Hanks, Cllr Ian Hardiman, Cllr Adrian Hardman, Cllr Paul Harrison, Cllr Marcus Hart, Cllr Bill Hopkins, Cllr Adam Kent, Cllr Adrian Kriss, Cllr Steve Mackay, Cllr Emma D Marshall, Cllr Karen May, Cllr Tony Miller, Cllr Jo Monk, Cllr Dan Morehead, Cllr Richard Morris, Cllr Tracey Onslow, Cllr Scott Richardson Brown, Cllr Linda Robinson, Cllr Chris Rogers, Cllr David Ross, Cllr Mike Rouse, Cllr James Stanley, Cllr Emma Stokes, Cllr Kit Taylor, Cllr Malcolm Victory and Cllr Shirley Webb. (37)

Those against the motion were: Cllr Mel Allcott, Cllr Dan Boatright-Greene, Cllr Andrew Cross, Cllr Lynn Denham, Cllr Andy Fry, Cllr Matt Jenkins, Cllr Natalie McVey, Cllr Beverley Nielsen, Cllr Josh Robinson, Cllr Richard Udall and Cllr Tom Wells. (11).

2510 Reports of Cabinet- Matters requiring a decision by Council - Organisational Redesign Programme - Senior Management Review (Agenda item 5 (a))

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and commented that a streamlined and lean the management structure was proposed for the Council. It was recognised that the Council would be a slightly smaller organisation in the future, focussing the Council's resources on the core functions including protecting the most vulnerable children and adults, promoting the economy,

protecting the environment and maintaining roads and pavements. The Council would therefore require a smaller management team. He thanked the current management team for their work. The proposed management structure was based on three core areas, adults, children's and economy and infrastructure but supported by the statutory roles such as the Director of Public Health, the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Financial Officer and a combined role of HR, digital and communications. These changes delivered a substantial part of the £2m management savings.

In the ensuing debate, the following points were made:

- It was unfortunate that given the Council's financial circumstances that this re-organisation was necessary
- It was queried how many posts would be lost, whether managers would be made redundant and whether trade unions would be involved in the process
- The rationale for the decision to move libraries, archives and archaeology under public health and whether the move would include adult community health was queried
- The Leader of the Council explained that the chief officer posts (Tiers 1-3) would reduce from 22 posts to 17 posts and the Tier 2 posts would reduce from four to three. Subsequent management changes would be the responsibility of managers to undertake. The report set out the matching and slotting arrangements for the new structure and an Appointments Etc Panel would appoint as necessary. The work of Public Health concerned the community function and the prevention agenda, it was therefore considered appropriate that libraries, archives and archaeology would be a suitable fit.

RESOLVED that

- a) The Chief Executive's proposed revised Directorate structure and functional areas of responsibility be approved in principle, subject to consultation;**
- b) His proposals be supported, in principle subject to consultation, for the Chief Officer structure for Tiers 2 and 3 as set out in the report;**
- c) The Chief Executive be authorised to carry out all necessary staff consultations in relation to the proposed changes;**
- d) The Chief Executive be authorised, in consultation with the Leader, to finalise the detail of the management structure for Tier 2 and Tier 3 officers including the job and person specifications in accordance with the above Directorate structure;**
- e) The Appointments Etc Panel be authorised to take all appropriate decisions in relation to the proposals for Tier 2 and 3 posts to support the new Directorate structure (including any deletion of existing posts, creation of new posts and appointments to them, and designation of statutory posts), and reviewing them in the future as appropriate; and**

- f) **The indicative timescale set out in Appendix 12 be noted and the remaining Directorate restructure be agreed to be completed by September 2024 or an earlier date as the Chief Executive may determine having regard to the above processes.**

2511 Reports of Cabinet - Summary of Decisions Taken (Agenda item 5(b))

The Leader of the Council reported on the Worcestershire Children First - Contract Options.

2512 Electoral Boundaries Review - Response to Draft Recommendations (Agenda item 6)

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities introduced the report and thanked officers for their work in preparing the Council's response. The Boundary Commission was keen to keep distinct communities together especially in rural areas. The Council's response in relation to the Bromsgrove area was the main area of divergence from the Boundary Commission proposals, particularly in relation to two member divisions in Alvechurch and Wythall. Comments had also been made about Bromsgrove East and Bromsgrove South as well as Client Hills and Woodvale. There were minor proposed changes in Worcester City, particularly in respect of the name of the Warndon Parish Division and in relation to Evesham South. He encouraged members and communities to submit contributions before the closing date on 18 March.

In the ensuing debate, the following points were made:

- Although the proposed amendment to the Evesham South Division was minor, it represented a significant change to Evesham town's identity which was supported by Evesham Town Council
- If councillors or members of the public were concerned about any of the proposals that they could directly input into the Boundary Commission process
- Concern was expressed about the Boundary Commission proposals to change the boundary between the Warndon Parishes Division and the Nunnery Division which would result in them not being coterminous with either the City Ward boundary or the Warndon Villages boundary. If the proposals were agreed, it would create a third boundary and a third parish ward which did not comply with the Boundary Commission's technical guidance. Warndon Parish Council would be objecting to this change
- The Council's response to the Boundary Commission's draft recommendations was consistent and coherent
- It was important that the proposals for the Wythall Division were supported to ensure that the community was properly represented and the Division did not become unmanageable as was the case in the initial Boundary Commission proposals

- In relation to the Boundary Commission proposals for the Wythall/Alvechurch Divisions, it did not make sense to object to a two-member division on the basis of workload for local councillors given the lack of objections for the creation of two member divisions in Redditch
- It was likely that parish councils on the boundary of Wychavon District Council and Redditch Borough Council would be submitting a response to the Boundary Commission regarding their concerns about the impact of these proposals
- Barnt Green Parish Council were concerned that their parish would be moved into the Wythall/Alvechurch Division with representation by two county councillors
- It had not proved possible to make the numbers work to establish single councillor divisions in Redditch Borough. The main issue in Redditch Borough related to the proposed naming of divisions, particularly Arrow Valley West
- Communities and identities were far more important issues than councillor workload considerations.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The draft response to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's (LGBCE) draft recommendations be approved; and**
- b) Authority be delegated to the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance, in consultation with the Leaders of the political groups, to submit the agreed response to the LGBCE.**

2513 Notice of Motion 1 - Government Funding (Agenda item 7)

The Council had before it a Notice of Motion set out in the agenda papers standing in the names of Cllrs Matt Jenkins, Martin Allen, Tom Wells, Natalie McVey, Beverley Nielsen, Andrew Cross and Malcolm Victory.

The motion was moved by Cllr Matt Jenkins and seconded by Cllr Andrew Cross, who both spoke in favour of it, and Council agreed to deal with it on the day.

The following amendment was moved by Cllr Simon Geraghty and seconded by Cllr Marcus Hart:

“The Council’s budget for the current financial year continues to face demand and cost pressures in three key areas of service provision: Children’s Social Care placements, Home to School Travel and Adult Social Care.

These pressures are being experienced by most County Councils and upper-tier authorities across the country. Despite the welcome extra £500m funding for social care recently announced by the government, councils still face difficult decisions when setting their budgets for 2024/25.

We therefore call on the Chief Executive to:

- *Thank Worcestershire MPs for their efforts in lobbying to secure the extra £4.9m Government funding.*
- *Continue to work with the County Councils Network & our MPs to make the case for additional funding for future financial years.*
- *Lobby for a multi-year settlement to move away from the current year-to-year approach that is leaving Councils less able to plan.*
- *Seek a review of funding for Children’s Social Care placements and Home to School Travel, as these are the origin of the biggest cost pressures on the County Council.”*

The mover and seconder of the motion accepted the amendment and the motion as amended became the substantive motion. Members spoke in favour of the motion with the following points being made:

- The LGA had warned that councils in England faced a £4bn funding gap over the next two years. As well as addressing the additional funding needs of councils, the Government should consider moving to multi-year financial settlements to enable councils to plan for long-term service provision, tackle the climate emergency and enable levelling up. In particular, a review of Children’s Social Care placements and Home to School Travel was necessary because costs in these areas were unsustainable. The Government should commit to the Fair Funding Review to address the issues of fair, sufficient and long-term funding
- The Leader of the Council indicated that the Council should offer a genuine thanks to the local MPs for their lobbying efforts to secure the additional funds from the Government. It was the first time since 2016 that the Government had changed the settlement between the provisional and final settlement. The Council had lobbied and would continue to lobby the Government for additional funds through the CCN and with local MPs. It was important that multi-year local financial settlements were re-introduced to allow councils to plan with certainty. In addition the funding of Children’s Social Care placements and Home to School Travel should be considered as part of a Fair Funding Review because the current funding mechanisms were out of date and did not reflect funding pressures
- The amendment could not be supported because it included thanks to Worcestershire MPs who had supported a Government that had consistently cut funding to local councils
- Worcestershire MPs had conducted a concerted a special campaign to support the Council to make its case for additional funds
- It was disappointing that the Government did not understand the needs of local government and continued to provide late settlements which impacted on the council and its scrutiny processes
- The Leader of the Council confirmed that in the future he would continue to lobby local MPs of whatever political persuasion for further funding for Worcestershire
- Feedback from the Chief Executive on the outcome of the efforts to lobby the Government would be welcomed.

RESOLVED: “The Council’s budget for the current financial year continues to face demand and cost pressures in three key areas of service provision: Children’s Social Care placements, Home to School Travel and Adult Social Care.

These pressures are being experienced by most County Councils and upper-tier authorities across the country. Despite the welcome extra £500m funding for social care recently announced by the government, councils still face difficult decisions when setting their budgets for 2024/25.

We therefore call on the Chief Executive to:

- Thank Worcestershire MPs for their efforts in lobbying to secure the extra £4.9m Government funding.
- Continue to work with the County Councils Network & our MPs to make the case for additional funding for future financial years.
- Lobby for a multi-year settlement to move away from the current year-to-year approach that is leaving Councils less able to plan.
- Seek a review of funding for Children’s Social Care placements and Home to School Travel, as these are the origin of the biggest cost pressures on the County Council.”

2514 Report of the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills (Agenda item 8)

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills presented his report to Council which covered various topics. In particular, he thanked all officers for their work in supporting the services within his portfolio.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills answered a broad range of questions from members.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills for his report.

2515 Question Time (Agenda item 9)

Seven questions had been received by the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance and had been circulated in advance of the meeting. The answers to all the questions are attached in the Appendix

2516 Reports of Committees - Pensions Committee (Agenda item 10 (a))

The Chairman of the Pensions Committee indicated that Cllr Andrew Cross would be provided with a breakdown of the Pension Fund’s investments in oil and gas.

The Council received the report of the Pensions Committee containing a summary of the decisions taken.

2517 Reports of Committees - Standards and Ethics Committee (Agenda item 10 (b))

The Council received the report of the Standards and Ethics Committee containing a summary of the decisions taken.

The meeting was adjourned from 1.00pm to 1.40pm and ended at 2.30pm.

Chairman

COUNCIL 15 FEBRUARY 2024 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Josh Robinson will ask Cllr Karen May:

“With the concerning rise in cases in Measles in the West Midlands, what is the County Council doing to halt this alarming rise?”

Answer

Thanks for raising this important issue. Measles is a potentially serious illness, with complications including blindness, meningitis and death. As the question highlights, the West Midlands has seen a rapid rise in measles. In last couple of months we’ve seen over 50 cases a week – well above what we’ve seen in recent years. Measles is highly contagious. Far more infectious than COVID for example. But vaccination is very effective against it - two MMR doses gives you 99% protection.

As soon as the cases started to rise we put in place robust measures to protect Worcestershire. This included reviewing our outbreak response to ensure it’s ready to be launched at any time. The NHS and public health have recently run a masterclass for local GPs to ensure they are equipped to deal effectively with measles cases. We’ve also maximised vaccination uptake, including the provision of pop-up clinics in areas most at risk via our libraries. Our DPH and Consultant in Public Health have both been on the BBC and other media outlets promoting vaccination and ensuring people have the facts.

The UK Health Security Agency have given us great feedback on our local response and I’m pleased to say that it’s been effective so far. The latest data shows that we have the highest rate of two-dose MMR vaccination uptake in the region, and as things stand, there are no known cases of measles in our county. But I want to keep it that way. Areas that we border have seen hundreds of cases in recent weeks and we need to remain on our guard. I know that’s the view our Public Health team and I’d like to thank them and our NHS partners for their work.

QUESTION 2 – Cllr Richard Udall will ask Cllr Simon Geraghty:

“Can the Leader of the Council explain why is he proposing a 5.4% pay cut for 150 of our employees, including some of the lowest paid employees in the Council, which will undoubtedly cause stress, hardship and distress, with a significant risk of demotivation which could endanger productivity?”

Answer

Firstly, I would like to thank Richard for his question and the opportunity to outline the facts.

The Council back in 2011 introduced changes to working hours for all new employees based on a 35-hour contract for non-exempt posts. Existing staff remained on 37 hours.

The 35/37 hours disparity between employees has been regularly raised by staff & managers in recent years.

The recent consultation will enable consideration as to whether there remains sufficient rationale for this approach to continue with this cohort of staff, who, for over 10 years after initial implementation of the reduced working hours strategy, have continued to benefit from a 37 hour contract in a non-exempt 35 hour post.

The proposals cover c.150 employees which is less than 6% of the WCC workforce and impact staff across all grades including Chief Officers. Officers leading the consultation have been in dialogue with the Councils recognised trade unions both prior and throughout the consultation process and this is being done in accordance with the Councils policies.

The proposals are not in respect of a pay cut, hourly rate of pay remains the same, they are to reduce the working hours of those in scope from 37 hours to 35 hours as they continue to work in a 35 hour non-exempt post.

Those staff in scope of the consultation have all been offered 121 meetings with HR and have been invited to feedback comments on the proposals and it is important that officers are now able to fully consider all feedback as part of this exercise.

The Council remains committed to full and open and transparent consultation and always aims to achieve agreement to any proposals it makes. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage as the process is ongoing.

Supplementary question

It was queried how those employees subject to this proposal would feel about staff being recruited on 37 hour contracts and whether this proposed change would be implemented on a fire and rehire basis. The Leader responded that he could not rule out measures in the future however the outcome of the ongoing consultation was unknown at this stage. There were a separate group of exempt posts on 37 hour contracts and it was important to be able to recruit to those posts.

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Malcolm Victory will ask Cllr Adam Kent:

“With regard to Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete at County Hall, has a survey of the roof been completed, and when will the results be available to the Council?”

Answer

A number of surveys and other inspections by specialist RAAC Structural Engineers have been undertaken which have confirmed the extent of RAAC. Our final report will be with officers by the end of February.

This is a specialist area of engineering and I can assure Council we are taking appropriate advice. We will take no risks with the safety of employees and other users of the building, as we determine the best way to resolve the challenge of RAAC in County Hall.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication reiterated that it was not possible to know the impact on the budget of any necessary repairs to County Hall until the final report was submitted.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“In March 2023, Worcestershire County Council received funding through the LEVI (Local Electrical Vehicle Infrastructure) capability fund. How much money was received and how has it been spent to date?”

Answer

In March 2023 the council received an allocation of £96,000, around one-third of which has been spent so far on development of our upcoming EV Charging Strategy.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport indicated that the EV Charging Policy would be reported to Cabinet in September 2024.

QUESTION 5 – Cllr Natalie McVey will ask Cllr Steve Mackay:

“Members may, or may not, be aware of the failed procurement for a young people’s supported accommodation unit in Malvern, putting its future at risk. Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility tell me what Worcestershire Children First’s approach will be to prevent another failed procurement exercise?”

Answer

Councillor McVey’s question may be in reference to the Safebase contract which expired at the end of January 2024.

The contract was originally for 4 beds specifically to provide emergency accommodation for 16/17 year old young people facing immediate homelessness.

3 of the beds were provided by St Basils and 1 bed was provided by Platform Housing in Malvern.

Worcestershire Children First went out to tender for renewal of the contract in good time and included within its specification, the need for providers to register with Ofsted. This is in line with new regulations for all provisions providing support to young people aged 16/17 years to be registered with Ofsted.

No tenders were subsequently made and the previous providers commented that the associated work to become Ofsted compliant was not conducive to the relatively low contract value.

Consequently, Worcestershire Children First commissions internal and external semi independent provision in order to meet its statutory duties for this cohort of young people.

Supplementary question

The impact on care leavers of the closure of young people’s accommodation pathways was queried. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families responded that there would be an impact but numbers were not known at this stage. The Council would continue to commission internal and external accommodation to meet its statutory requirements.

QUESTION 6 – Cllr Josh Robinson will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“Is the Cabinet Member confident that the removal of weeds from our pavements, cycle ways and roads in Bromsgrove will be better this year than it was last year?”

Answer

The challenges we faced during the 2023 season, with its unpredictable weather patterns impacting the efficacy of herbicides, underscore the complexity of managing weed growth on our highways and byways. Unfortunately, predicting the weather is beyond our control, making it difficult to offer guarantees about the success of our weed control efforts this year.

It's important to acknowledge the shared responsibilities in this area; some aspects of clearance fall under the district council's purview. I would encourage those concerned to also engage with their district representatives on this matter.

Moreover, we're acutely aware of the diverse opinions surrounding herbicide use. There's a noticeable, if anecdotal, divide in community feedback: areas treated early in our schedule often raise concerns about environmental harm, while those attended to later voice frustrations over perceived neglect in weed control. This dichotomy highlights the subjective and often polarised nature of public sentiment on this issue, presenting a dilemma with no straightforward solution.

In navigating these challenges, our approach seeks to balance ecological considerations with public safety obligations. Where feasible, we employ nature strips as a more sustainable option and, when necessary, resort to manual weed removal to maintain the safety and accessibility of public highways.

Our commitment is to adapt and respond to these challenges thoughtfully, aiming to mitigate weed growth effectively while being mindful of environmental concerns and public safety.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport undertook to look at the possibility of providing evidence/reports back to local councillors to indicate that work had been completed on the removal of weeds from pavements, cycle ways and roads. Cllr Josh Robinson would be informed accordingly.

QUESTION 7 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Tracey Onslow:

"In March 2023 the government announced plans for reforms to childcare, increasing free access and funding. A new local funding formula for local authorities has been proposed and consulted on. How much does Worcestershire expect to receive and how many extra childcare places will there be from April 2024?"

Answer

The Dedicated Schools Grant (ring-fenced specific grant that supports Local Authority schools budget) includes an estimate for Early Years places for the financial year 2024/25 has increased from £36.27m for 2023/24 to £59.34m (The estimate allocation for 2024/25 is detailed in paragraph 91 and in table 19 in the 2024/24 Budget Report) . This is an increase of £23.07m.

Starting from April 2024, existing childcare support will be expanded in phases. From April 2024, eligible working parents of 2-year-olds will be able to access 15 hours childcare support. These hours can be used over 38 weeks of the year or up to 52 weeks if fewer are used than the total hours per week. Therefore if they were accessed from Monday to Friday in the morning and somebody else accessed that same place from Monday to Friday in the afternoon and then somebody else accessed for 38 weeks and somebody else accessed it, did that represent one place or four places? It was not simple to say the budget of £23m would buy this many places. The intention of this new support is to enable families to work. This increase in funding from April 2024 is expected in practice to support families that work and are accessing childcare already and funding the total cost themselves. For example if you wanted to go back to work when your child was two, you will already be accessing some of that support. We would not need additional places because you already had the place.

There are approximately 5,800 children who are 2 years old living in Worcestershire. Under the current scheme for 3 and 4 year olds we find approximately 60% of working families

take up the supported childcare offer. If we see a similar take up rate this will mean approximately 3,500 children that are 2 years old of working parents will be accessing childcare.

From September 2024 the availability of supported childcare places will increase as children from 9 months – 23 months of working families will have access to the equivalent of 15 hours a week (38 weeks a year). This is a new entitlement and will provide financial support to working families and may also increase the demand for childcare places as parents are able to access work due to this new support. We are currently undertaking an assessment of predicted numbers who may take up this support.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education undertook to provide Cllr Lynn Denham with details of the work being undertaken to reverse the reduction in pre-school provision for children with SEND.

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