

COUNCIL 14 JULY 2016 - AGENDA ITEM 8 – 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 at the meeting the written response is also included below.

QUESTION 1 – Mr G J Vickery's printed question asked Mr J H Smith:

"According to the draft Health & Well-being Strategy 2016-2020, one of the key principles underpinning the strategy is "taking actions that we know will work." In the list of priorities is action to deal with alcohol abuse but there is no reference to drug abuse. Does this mean that we don't know what to do about drug abuse?"

Written Answer

- No.
- The list of priorities in the Health and Well-being Strategy is drawn up from selection criteria which include scale of the problem in Worcestershire. Far greater numbers of people abuse alcohol than misuse illicit drugs. For this reason, tackling alcohol misuse was given a higher priority in our Health and Well-being Strategy than was tackling drug misuse.
- We do, separately from the Health and Well-being Strategy itself, have a strategy to tackle the misuse of drugs together with partners and this includes commissioning a service from one key provider with an emphasis on prevention as well as on treatment of drug abuse. We work closely with the police and probation services to play our part in the implementation of a West Mercia drug strategy. I am pleased to note that numbers of clients referred into our commissioned specialist service have increased in recent months and that the percentage of adults who are referred on from criminal justice who are engaged in the service is now above the national target.

QUESTION 2 – Mr P M McDonald's printed question asked Mr A C Roberts:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning please inform me of how many apprentices this Council expects to employ over the next year?"

Written Answer

We currently have the following apprenticeships already in place:

- In a partnership arrangement between the County Council, Wyre Forest & Wychavon District Councils, West Mercia Police and the NHS we co-fund 3 apprentices in finance who rotate their placements between the organisations
- Highways have 2 civil engineering apprentices, based at their depots in Malvern and Lydiate Ash
- Libraries have 2 customer service apprentices in Kidderminster and Redditch Libraries

In addition to this as part of its Talent Programme, the Council are currently in the process of recruiting 10 new apprentices for the September 2016 intake.

QUESTION 3 – Mr P M McDonald asked Mr J H Smith:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-being for please inform me of how many school children are suffering from asthma throughout the county?"

Answer given

We do not have the figures for asthma prevalence broken down by age and therefore cannot give an accurate answer to the question. We have contacted the NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups and they are unable to give a breakdown by age. Asthma UK give the following statistics about asthma in children nationally:

- One in 11 children has asthma and it is the most common long-term medical condition.
- On average there are three children with asthma in every classroom in the UK.
- The UK has among the highest prevalence rates of asthma symptoms in children worldwide.

For Worcestershire there are an estimated 89,900 children aged 4-17, which if 1 in 11 have asthma symptoms would mean 8,200 children with asthma symptoms. There were 74,300 children on the latest local authority school census, which with the same prevalence would give 6,800 with asthma symptoms.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about monitoring methods for air pollution, a casual factor in some forms of asthma, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility stated that any means of reducing asthma levels would be assessed.

QUESTION 4 – Mr P Grove asked Mr M J Hart:

"The collapse of Eastham Bridge on Tuesday, 24 May was of a surprise to all. Eastham Bridge is vital to the rural community especially schools and also the economic viability of rural businesses. Communication with the local residents is vital for all concerned. Therefore would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways please give an update on progress to date, and the programme going forward?"

Answer given

The most important thing is that no one was hurt in this incident. The County Council acted quickly to make the site safe and to put the necessary diversions in place. Improved signage is also now in place.

Following the collapse, engineers were onsite to carry out the investigation to establish the cause of the collapse. As part of the overall investigation the remains of the bridge have been analysed and removed from the river, this required much of the remaining structure to be removed for safety purposes.

The Council is in regular contact with the community. This has included making arrangements for access to the site via the local member, official releases and indeed myself, attendance at public meetings and providing updates on matters via agreed communication channels.

In June, the Council confirmed that we will be building a temporary bridge on the site. Completion of the survey works, design of a temporary solution, securing the statutory approvals and completing the build is going to take approximately six months.

A number of partners have been consulted including the Environment Agency, the army and Historic England and also providers of temporary structures. Due to the complexity of this site, in that it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), it is likely to be the end of the summer before we have confirmed plans in place.

Survey work is well underway at both the existing alignment and the proposed location for a temporary structure. The information from this will be used to support securing of the necessary approvals and also to inform the design for both temporary and permanent solutions.

We continue to progress with our contractors and partners, including the approvals required for both temporary and permanent structures.

We do understand the frustrations that local people now face because of the diversions to their regular journeys and we will continue to work with the community about what could be done to minimise the disruption if we can.

QUESTION 5 – Mr J Baker's printed question asked Mr J H Smith:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-being, both present and past, recognise NOW the need to cage the bridge that goes over the A448 after yet another death from this bridge? Will they admit that they should no longer continue to ignore the need for action to be taken now to prevent more loss of life?"

was withdrawn at the meeting.

QUESTION 6 – Mr R M Udall asked Mr M J Hart:

"Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways confirm if he is satisfied with the service provided by the Council's highways maintenance provider Ringway?"

Answer given

Yes, absolutely.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question the Cabinet Member with Responsibility confirmed he was content that the Council's maintenance contractor was operating properly, efficiently and effectively but would look into any particular concerns members brought to his attention.

QUESTION 7 – Mr R C Lunn asked Mr S E Geraghty:

"What effect does the Leader of the Council think that the EU Referendum result will have on the County Council and its provision of services over the next 5 years?"

Answer given

Firstly, I would like to thank Mr Lunn for his question.

As members will know the outcome of the EU referendum has triggered a period of significant market instability and political change. Given the events of the last three weeks it is just too early in the process of leaving the EU to really assess the likely long-term impact on the UK, let alone this county.

To a certain extent the long-term impact will depend on how the UK and our global partners approach these changes and the success or otherwise in being able to trade and do business internationally outside the current EU arrangements.

In Worcestershire, it is my firm belief that we must continue to drive forward our ambitious plans to grow the Worcestershire economy by around a third in the period up to 2025, creating an extra 25,000 jobs and thousands of new homes as set out in the Strategic Economic Plan. Worcestershire is in the top four fastest growing local economies in the country for two successive years and the strong partnership we have forged through the Worcestershire LEP is making a very positive impact.

I'm therefore, very keen to see the County Council continue to press ahead with the major economy and infrastructure investments which will help continue to create economic growth, good quality jobs and tax revenues that will help to sustain the services we all wish to see continue.

In relation to EU funding, in the current 2014 - 2020 programme Worcestershire has received an indicative allocation of £57,052,034. The overall programme looks to support over 3,000 local businesses creating more than 500 jobs, training more than 13,000 participants and providing support to assist more than 8,000 unemployed people move towards employment. Worcestershire County Council has over the past 12 months submitted 13 bids for funding. The applications total a funding request of almost £15m.

Nationally DCLG have said that discussions are taking place between the ESIF Managing Authorities and relevant Government departments to agree and confirm the way that the Structural Fund Programmes will be operated in coming months and years. A formal communication will be issued by them as soon as they are in a position to provide correct and comprehensive information.

For the time being as far as ERDF is concerned, DCLG are working as far as possible on a 'business as usual' basis. Projects that have been approved are operating and assurances have been given that claims will be paid. Planning for future calls is continuing and call documentation is being prepared. There is a pause in issuing new funding agreements until the cross-government discussions have reached conclusions, although the Investment Decision group continues to meet, appraisals are being taken to sub-committees and funding agreements are being drafted.

The LGA, on behalf of Local Government, are also working to seek further assurances from Government over the future EU programme and how they will decide on replacements to EU laws affecting services.

Once we receive any further information on these matters, I will of course ensure members are appropriately updated.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about options to meet the challenges of the UK's changed status the Leader of the Council said it is too early to start second guessing what the Council might have to do but he was prepared to consider all options to safeguard the county's interests.

QUESTION 8 – Mr R C Lunn's printed question asked Mr A C Roberts:

"Does the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning agree that it makes sense for a person looking to contact the County Council online, to be able to use one general enquiry email address?"

Written Answer

I'm sure we're not talking about limiting the Worcestershire.gov addresses (like our personal contacts) so the short answer is; I agree that it makes sense for the public to have only one email contact.

However, our overriding aim is to see that we give a prompt and accurate response in a timely way.

Until December last year there was a general enquiry email that went to The Hub. The problem was that the first email was in a free text form, which sometimes had insufficient detail. This meant there had to be an exchange of emails before the query could be sent to the department best placed to make a response.

Now the public can use the 'Contact Us' access, which comes up when you search on Worcestershire County Council or can be found on the County Council Home page.

If you click on 'Contact Us' you are offered an enquiry form and a couple of choices from a drop-down menu. I've tried it and found very simple to use.

The advantage of the revised system is that the enquiry can be filtered automatically and directed straight to the right department. This means that there is less need for supplementary information and the person who knows the answer can oversee the response.

The old system wasn't withdrawn immediately, as that may have added to frustration, but the take-up of the new contact point has been very good (I have the data if you would like to see it). So I don't think it will be too long until the old contact can be withdrawn and have a single 'Contact Us' point.

QUESTION 9 – Mr J Baker asked Mr J H Smith:

"Could the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-being ensure that the pre-existing safe scheme initiative be promoted throughout the whole of Worcestershire as it is proving successful in the current areas where it is being run. This in turn will provide help and reassurance to those who may be feeling threatened by hate and racism."

Answer given

Thank you Councillor Baker for your question. The Safe Place Scheme will be established in all of the major towns of Worcestershire by the end of this year. The scheme exists in Kidderminster, Bewdley, Stourport, Bromsgrove, Redditch, Worcester City and Malvern with Evesham and Droitwich being launched between September and November of this year 2016.

The scheme was set up and is operated by Our Way Self Advocacy, a Kidderminster voluntary organisation that supports and advocates for people with learning disabilities. The scheme was originally established to provide places of safety for people with learning or physical disabilities so that they could identify safe shops and premises in town centres where they could seek help if needed or felt threatened in any way.

However, since the original concept the targeted audience has been widened to include anyone who feels they need assistance or feel threatened or overwhelmed in any way in the busy shopping areas and beyond.

Each district area has a group of volunteers that take responsibility for maintaining and monitoring the safe places premises and district directories of the various businesses that are signed up to the scheme can be found at www.ourway.org.uk/safe-place-scheme.

The scheme is heavily promoted and supported through various Worcestershire partnerships and organisations and the County Council has invited the Safe Place scheme to provide information stalls at events previously held at County Hall. We will continue to support the scheme at every opportunity and promote its excellent services, which are clearly of great benefit to individuals who feel at risk or anxious when in public places. This is a scheme that helps people within our communities feel safe and is an excellent example of partnership with local businesses."

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about the potential to expand the 'safety pins' scheme currently operating in the city of Worcester the Cabinet Member with Responsibility said he would look to facilitate this if the demand existed.

QUESTION 10 – Mr G J Vickery asked Mr M J Hart:

"The Government has announced a £60million fund for sustainable travel. Councils are invited to bid for a share of this money. Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways please tell us the content of this Council's bid?"

Answer given

Thank you for your question.

The bidding process was only announced formally last week and we have until 9 September to submit a bid. It is too early at this stage to say what our bid will entail but the current round of Local Transport Plan pre consultation events taking place with County and District Councils should help to inform this process, and I together with relevant colleagues and officers, will be working up a bid submission before the deadline.

QUESTION 11 – Mrs F M Oborski asked Mr S E Geraghty:

"Preparations for the Elected Mayor for the West Midlands Combined Authority are proceeding apace.

Can the Leader of the Council tell me:

(a) what relationship he expects Worcestershire County Council to have with the Combined Authority, and

(b) what prospects, if any, he sees for any devolved powers to Worcestershire?"

Answer given

I would like to thank Mrs Oborski for her question.

A very useful briefing on Devolution and the current position for Worcestershire was sent out to members in June and so there is little more at the current time that I can usefully add to that note. However, I'm happy to summarise in relation to these two specific questions.

At the current time Worcestershire has no plans to join the WMCA but will continue to work with partners through various partnerships, including the Midland Engine and Midlands Connect, on issues which need wider collaboration to achieve and which can secure outcomes that are in Worcestershire's best interest.

Worcestershire has been working on a set of devolution proposals which were the subject of discussions with Government in April. Partners are now reflecting on the feedback received and awaiting any changes that may emerge from a new Prime Minister and Cabinet over the summer months before considering this issue further in the autumn. We will continue to work with partners to advance proposals, with or without a formal Devolution Deal, where they make sense for Worcestershire residents and businesses.

It is difficult to be precise about what powers or responsibilities could be devolved under any arrangement at the current time.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about the appointment of a new Minister for Local Government and Communities the Cabinet Member with Responsibility stated that the MP for Bromsgrove would be very good for Worcestershire's aspirations and the work of the County Council in general.

QUESTION 12 – Mrs F M Oborski's printed question asked Mr M L Bayliss:

"Is the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families confident that the new arrangements within Children's Services Social Work Teams which will see, within the Early Help Service, only one Community Social Worker in a District, will be adequate to deal with necessary referrals from partner agencies in a timely manner so as to protect vulnerable children?"

Written Answer

In response to your question I can confirm that we are actually investing in 9 fte community social workers and 1 fte team manager. This obviously equates to more than one in each district. The allocation of this resource has been worked out based on some early testing of the community social worker role in Redditch. This testing included developing an understanding of referrals and the impact upon the community social workers' time.

The community social worker role is pivotal to building relationships with a wide range of services in local areas to improve their capability and confidence in identifying and managing risk in order to keep children safe. It is through these relationships and with all agencies playing their full part that we can collectively protect vulnerable children and improve their outcomes.

As with any new service, we will need to review its effectiveness, learn from practice and take stock on whether it is meeting need. This review will take place in October following the first three months of the role being operational.

QUESTION 13 – Mr A I Hardman asked Mr M J Hart:

"In view that the Eckington Bridge is at least twice as old as the Eastham Bridge and a vital link for Bredon Division road users, can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways reassure users it is safe, and state when it was last inspected by his bridge department?"

Answer given

The last inspection of the structure (a general inspection) was carried out on the 1 June 2016. A diving inspection is also planned for this year. At the point of the last inspection no issues were identified that would raise concern with regard to safety and overall structural stability of the bridge.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about the possibility of a weight limit for this particular bridge the Cabinet Member with Responsibility said that an assessment could be carried out.

QUESTION 14 – Mr A I Hardman's printed question asked Mr M J Hart:

"Kemerton Parish Council submitted its own traffic calming scheme last year to the County Council. Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways please ensure that a formal reply is sent to the Parish Council, which includes reasons for its non-compliance to County regulations and costs for the work?"

Written Answer

Thank you for your question. The County Council did indeed receive a copy of the Kemerton Parish Council report into traffic calming options last year. Comments were made at the time, including an offer to investigate the issues. I will ensure that the relevant officer makes contact with the Parish Council directly in order to review and discuss the issues raised.