

## **COUNCIL 10 NOVEMBER 2016 - AGENDA ITEM 10 – QUESTION TIME**

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

**QUESTION 1** – Mr P M McDonald asked Mr A C Roberts:

*"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning please inform me of the cost to this Council of workers suspended on full pay over the last two years?"*

### **Answer given**

The cost to the Council of workers suspended on full pay over the last two years is £165,000.

### **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question about actions being taken to reduce this figure the Cabinet Member with Responsibility outlined that the percentage of the total cost of suspensions against the pay bill in 2014/15 was 0.01% but officers were still trying to reduce this at every opportunity.

**QUESTION 2** – Mr P M McDonald's printed question asked Mr S E Geraghty:

*"Would the Leader of the Council agree with me that the Government should pull back from reducing the number of MP's, which is causing confusion throughout the county because of the likelihood that residents in the county of Worcestershire could find that their MP is from a neighbouring authority, district or metropolitan area. Would the Leader of the Council also agree with me that to save money the number of unelected peers should be reduced instead of elected Members of Parliament?"*

### **Written Answer**

Firstly, can I thank Peter for his question.

As the member highlights in his question a Parliamentary boundary review is now underway and initial proposals have been published setting out plans to reduce the number of MP's from 650 to 600 and to ensure that all Parliamentary constituencies have an electorate within 5% of the "electoral quota" of 74,769.

The Government is clearly committed to this review – a manifesto commitment - and legislation has already been passed to enable the review. It also must be right that the significant variations in the size of constituencies across the UK are addressed.

Given these factors it is inevitable that at least one constituency boundary will cross our county boundary and whilst local government boundaries were something the commission considered when formulating the proposals, it hasn't been possible for them to be coterminous with our county boundary. The initial proposals do however see Worcestershire retain the same number of Parliamentary constituencies as at present, although no constituencies retain their current boundary.

The initial consultation period is currently underway and will last until 5 December 2016. Representations may be made to the Boundary Commission for England either in writing or in person at a public hearing. So it is quite possible for any member or political group to comment should they wish to do so.

On the subject of the Lords, peers are now able to retire and I believe 50 have done so since the end of 2014 and the cost of the Lords has fallen by 14% since 2010.

**QUESTION 3** – Mr R C Lunn asked Mr M L Bayliss:

*"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families ask the officers to reconsider the date on which the school summer term ends in 2018? Most families take holidays from Saturday to Saturday, so ending the term on Friday 20 July 2018 is preferable to the current plan of Tuesday 24 July 2018? Would he agree that such a change is likely to improve school attendance because parents are less likely to remove their children from school?"*

**Answer given**

The Council in advance sets dates for the school term for some maintained schools (that is community, voluntary controlled and community special schools). Those independent of local authority control, e.g. academies, are able to set their own term dates. The Governing Bodies of foundation and voluntary aided schools are also able to set their own term dates.

We have found, however, that each year so far all schools have stayed in line with the dates proposed by the Council. Each year this is a result of consultation with schools and trade unions regarding preferred dates, and consideration of dates set by neighbouring authorities. Considering all of the factors, the published dates were those chosen. It is often necessary with the number of school holiday days, the timing of Easter, and the falling Christmas on different days of the week each year, to set 'split week' holidays. We do not have evidence that this has impacted negatively upon overall attendance figures. Schools also have some flexibility in being able to set some of the own training days at the beginning or end of a school term.

**Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question about the possibility of Friday being the 'default day' for the end of term in future the Cabinet Member with Responsibility said he was happy to raise the matter with officers.

**QUESTION 4** – Mr R C Lunn's printed question asked Mr M L Bayliss:

*"Can Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families confirm that £300,000 was taken out of the Learning Support Budget in 2016-17 due to a legal dispute about the*

*original contract between the Directorate and Babcock? How is taking £300,000 away from this budget going to improve "outcomes" for children assisted by the service?"*

## **Written Answer**

It is not correct to assert that this sum of money was removed from the Learning Support budget in 2016-17. Babcock has been commissioned by the Council to deliver many education services on its behalf. The value of the contract was agreed in advance of its commencement, and no change has been made to this agreed value. Within the overall allocation, it is for Babcock to determine how their resources are allocated in order to meet the Key Performance Indicators agreed with the Council. The Council, however, retains the overall responsibility for outcomes and so remains in close contact with Babcock concerning the development of its service. We can confirm that money was not taken from the Learning Support budget in 2016-17.

## **QUESTION 5** – Mrs F M Oborski asked Mr A C Roberts:

*"As part of its Local Plan Review Wyre Forest District Council Local Plans Review Panel, which I chair, is assessing the Five-Year Housing Land Supply in the District. Worcestershire County Council owns several sites in the District which would appear to be suitable for some housing provision, but which are currently not being released. Three within Kidderminster are: the former Stourminster School site on Comberton Road; the former Sladen School site on Hurcott Road and the now unused Naylor's Sports field off Rifle Range Road.*

*Every house which can be built within Kidderminster is one less house which has to be provided on greenfield sites outside existing settlement boundaries. Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning please tell me, for each of the above sites why there is a delay in releasing them for development, what constraints if any apply to each site and when they will be released?"*

## **Answer given**

The sites at the former Stourminster School site on Comberton Road and the former Sladen School site on Hurcott Road are identified for disposal for residential purposes under the Property Asset Strategy approved in March 2016.

Consent is being sought from the Department of Education to enable the disposal of the former Stourminster site. Marketing will commence on receipt of the approval with the expectation that the land will be sold in 2017/18. The Former Sladen School site has been identified for potential Extra Care and/or supporting living which is being explored prior to offering the sites for open marketing housing. The development of our own land to support long term demand in social care was a key aspect of the strategy signed off by cabinet. The sale of the site is subject to negotiations to lift restrictive covenants with the original owners of the land. The expectation is that the site will available for disposal in 2017/18.

Naylor's Field site has previously been promoted by the County Council for potential future residential development. The Council would welcome its inclusion in any future revision of the 5-year housing supply. There are a number of unauthorised residential accesses on the field which will require resolving prior to disposal.

**QUESTION 6** – Mr R M Udall's printed question asked Mr M J Hart:

*"Does the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways have any plans to visit my Worcester - St John Division?"*

**Written Answer**

I have no plans to visit your Division at the present time.

**QUESTION 7** – Mr R M Udall asked Mr A C Roberts:

*"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning please confirm details of the gender pay gap for employees of the County Council and for the county as a whole?"*

**Answer given**

In the absence of an established or recognised industry standard calculation for gender pay gap analysis the County Council does not report information on gender pay gap. The Government has been consulting at a national level on proposed regulations in respect of monitoring the gender pay gap, and we are awaiting publication of these regulations. There is also no data available in respect of the gender pay gap for the county as a whole.

The Council responded to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request earlier this year which requested: "the mean and median hourly earnings (excluding overtime) for full-time and part-time male employees and full-time and part time female employees", but the professional advice is that based on the variables in the data, length of service and sample size, there is no statistical significant difference between the pay of male and female employees at the Council.

FULL TIME EMPLOYEES		
Gender	Hourly Earnings	
	Mean	Median
Male	£15.26	£14.06
Female	£14.13	£13.63

PART-TIME TIME EMPLOYEES		
Gender	Hourly Earnings	
	Mean	Median
Male	£12.32	£10.23
Female	£11.31	£10.23

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about national levels of the pay gap the Cabinet Member with Responsibility said the County Council would monitor levels.

**QUESTION 8** – Mr P Denham asked Mr A C Roberts:

*"What is this Council's policy on allowing charities to raise funds in council buildings and do charities who sell items behind Reception in County Hall rent the space or is it free?"*

**Answer given**

The County Council does not have a formal policy for allowing charities to raise money at Council Premises. At County Hall each case is treated individually and approved by the Facilities Manager or Site Officer in charge, in conjunction with advice from Place Partnership. At other Council buildings such as Libraries we charge what is termed a 'community rate' for charities and community organisations. This rate is considerably less than our normal charge. Such an approach is common practice at Local Authorities across the country.

### Supplementary Question

In response to a specific question about the alleged refusal by a Council establishment to support a particular charity the Cabinet Member with Responsibility gave clarification of the details.

### **QUESTION 9** – Mr P A Tuthill asked Mrs L C Hodgson:

*"As part of the modernisation/digital update of library services the majority of magazines are now made available on line. What action is being taken to make users aware of this and guide them in access procedures, either at libraries or at home? Could the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Localism and Communities also explain to Council how the choice of on-line magazines was made and has she any recommendations for covering any gaps for specialist/minority groups?"*

### **Answer given**

Worcestershire Libraries' e-magazine collection has been put together to reflect community interests. The collection is reviewed each year to identify levels of usage for each title and Library Managers are given the opportunity to review the collection and propose new titles for which demand has been identified at their library. The next review date is December 2016.

Raising public awareness and participation in the libraries e-offer (including e-books and e-magazines) is an on-going service objective and a number of initiatives have been undertaken during 2016/17 to encourage and support increased usage of these services. Press releases and social media campaigns have been run throughout the year to highlight libraries' e-book and e-magazine offer and encourage the public to visit libraries for help getting online. Libraries & Learning web pages have also been updated to improve visibility and links to e-books and e-magazines. A service wide promotional campaign is planned for early 2017 following the award of a new e-books contract in January.

All libraries conduct an annual survey of their customers which tracks customer awareness and use of e-book and e magazines. Library Managers have implemented local promotions to raise profile in response to survey findings. These promotions include engagement with customers, displays of e-book resources and shelf markers which indicate books that are available as e-books. Children who took part in the Summer Reading Challenge at The Hive were sent email reminders that the books they read for the challenge could include e-books.

As part of the recent Get Online week in October a media and social media campaign was run to encourage the public to visit libraries to get online help. The Hive, Droitwich Library and Redditch Library all ran sessions specifically to help customers access libraries e-Books and e-Magazines collection.

In addition to these initiatives, Library staff have received supplier training to ensure that they are confident supporting customers to access e magazines and further training is planned for November/December 2016. Library staff have also received Society of Chief Libraries approved digital training to ensure that they are confident supporting customers to access digital services.

**QUESTION 10** – Mr P A Tuthill's printed question asked Dr K A Pollock:

"Putting on my anorak I went and had a look around the new Bromsgrove Railway Station. It looks as if there is a track still to be installed and at the easterly platform face - is this waiting electrification and what are the latest timescales?"

There has also been some publicity that the new station has to be closed for further work, can this be clarified please?"

### **Written Answer**

Bromsgrove Station reopened as planned on Monday (7 November) following scheduled works; all planned track work is now complete. The work was carried out as part of Network Rail's electrification programme and was extensively promoted to rail users for some time beforehand. Replacement buses were provided by London Midland during the 'blockade'.

Work to electrify the line between Bromsgrove and Barnt Green (therefore completing electrification between Bromsgrove and Birmingham) is due for completion in September 2017 enabling additional services to be introduced in May 2018. The new station was an essential precursor to the electrification of the line and we can be proud of the enabling role the County Council has played in providing this world-class facility.

**QUESTION 11** – Mrs F M Oborski's printed question asked Mr M L Bayliss:

*"Could the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families please tell the Council how many young, unaccompanied asylum-seeking young persons are now in the care of Worcestershire Social Services following the passing of the Dubs Amendment that allows unaccompanied refugee children from across Europe to have safe refuge in the UK under the care of local authorities?"*

*If there are no such unaccompanied refugee children in Worcestershire yet, would he tell us what the plans are for Worcestershire County Council to play its part in this on-going tragedy; how many he intends this Council to accept, and when?"*

*Could he also give us an update on the number of Syrian refugees now resettled in Worcestershire and what future plans are for hosting further families locally?"*

### **Written Answer**

As of the 6 November 2016, Worcestershire has 32 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (UASC), who currently make up 4.5% of our total Looked After Children. We currently have not yet accepted or agreed to take any UASC as a direct result of the Dubs Amendment. We continue to take responsibility for any UASC who are found in our area and whom we have a duty to accommodate under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. We have also been part of the Syrian Resettlement Programme to ensure Worcestershire plays

an important role in supporting refugee children and their families. In response to the second strand of your question:

***"If there are no such unaccompanied refugee children in Worcestershire yet, would he tell us what the plans are for Worcestershire County Council to play its part in this on-going tragedy; how many he intends this Council to accept, and when?"***

***Could he also give us an update on the number of Syrian refugees now resettled in Worcestershire and what future plans are for hosting further families locally?"***

Worcestershire has played an important role within the refugee crisis and has been part of the Syrian Resettlement Programme. 38 adult and child refugees have been resettled in Kidderminster, Redditch and Worcester since the end of June 2016.

The number of Syrian Refugees resettled by Worcestershire will total 50 following the acceptance of a further three families for arrival at the end of November. This fulfils the commitment that Worcestershire Leaders made back in January.

With regards to the National Transfer Scheme for UASC we are currently in discussions with the West Midlands Strategic Partnership, who are coordinating the regional response on behalf of the Home Office, about what support Worcestershire can provide to UASC through this scheme. We currently are not signed up to the scheme but continue to review our position in Worcestershire.

Outside the formal schemes Worcestershire has experienced a 160% increase in unscheduled unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children arriving in our area in the last 12 months. We remain committed to working with the Home Office and continue to play our part in supporting refugees.

**QUESTION 12** – Mr M E Jenkins asked Mr A N Blagg:

*"The Government is increasing the funding for local air quality management in England with £3m funding via the air quality grant for 2016/17 (after recent years of cuts). Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment tell me if we applied for some of this funding? If so, how much have we asked for? How much have we asked for over previous years?"*

### **Answer given**

The Government has indeed increased the funding to support air quality improvements. This funding goes to Worcestershire Regulatory Services, who operate on behalf of the Districts to monitor and report on air quality. The County Council therefore have not bid for or received funding through this Grant, but we do of course work closely with our colleagues in Worcestershire Regulatory Services to develop schemes to mitigate poor air quality. In addition, tackling air quality issues will feature very strongly in our refresh of the current Local Transport Plan which will be consulted on later this year.

### **Supplementary Question**

In response to a supplementary question the Cabinet Member with Responsibility promised a written response on how much Worcestershire Regulatory Services had applied for and how much of that money had been used for the purposes of clean air zones.

**QUESTION 13** – Mr M E Jenkins' printed question asked Mr M J Hart:

*"An amendment to the Bus Services Bill allowing all councils to gain franchising powers without central government approval was passed by the House of Lords recently, but the Bill will now have to pass through the Commons. Does the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways support local councils, such as ours, potentially having a greater say over how bus services are run? If so, will he ask the Government to accept this amendment?"*

**Written Answer**

Worcestershire County Council supports Transport Authorities having a greater say over the operation of bus services and would seek to do this through one of the partnership arrangements outlined in the Bill, for example the Enhanced Partnership. This would enable the Council to have a greater say on routes, timetables and ticketing arrangements and avoids the commercial risks associated with franchising, for example TUPE and profit and loss.

As Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways, I will support the amendment (the amendment simplifies the process for the franchising route) but I am mindful that there are significant commercial risks in a rural county like Worcestershire if the decision is made to opt for franchising. At this stage, the preferred option is the Enhanced Partnership.

Worcestershire County Council cannot make a definitive decision until the final Bill has been passed and the Secretary of State has issued guidance and regulations.

**QUESTION 14** – Mrs E B Tucker asked Mr M L Bayliss:

*"Now that the Babcock's contract has been in place for a full year, would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families please describe their approach and performance on school improvement in that time and the feedback received from schools so far?"*

**Answer given**

Babcock Prime has been working with Worcestershire schools to improve educational outcomes. The Council monitors this through an agreed set of Key Performance Indicators which are discussed, monitored and challenged on a monthly and quarterly basis.

I can confirm that 90% of Worcestershire schools are judged by Ofsted to be either 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. This is the highest percentage we have had.

Only four Worcestershire schools currently have an 'inadequate' rating and recent monitoring visits to these schools by Babcock have reported that they are making effective progress.

There has been improvement in 2016 in the number of schools below the government's floor standards, with only eight schools at Key Stage 2 and none at Key Stage 4.

Babcock has an 'Aiming for Outstanding' process in place and provides the following to maintained schools:



- Tailoring and brokering support for priority schools
- Monitoring the impact of support and progress to good
- Support for OFSTED inspection for priority schools
- Headteacher recruitment
- Moderation and Governor training

We recognise that Key Stage 2 results this summer have been disappointing and as such, Babcock is currently implementing an Improvement Plan to address these issues.

#### Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question on feedback from schools and why the contract with Babcock in Worcestershire varied from those in Surrey and Devon the Cabinet Member with Responsibility promised a written response.

#### **QUESTION 15** – Mr G J Vickery asked Mr J H Smith:

*“Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-Being deplore the secrecy with which the Sustainability and Transformation Plan for Health and Social Care is being developed and urge NHS England to make public the full state of development of the plan for Herefordshire and Worcestershire, as has been done for the residents of Shropshire and Birmingham?”*

#### **Answer given**

Thank you Cllr Vickery for your question. As I am sure you are aware this is a NHS plan not a County Council one. As Chairman of the Health and Well-being Board I have made sure regular discussions have taken place as the draft plan developed. The Board last discussed this at a public session last week which you attended. I also invited District Council representatives to the meeting and the draft Sustainability and Transformation Plan has now been submitted to NHS England for consideration. NHS communication and engagement will follow in due course and the County Council will support this as appropriate using our own communication channels.

#### Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about whether the County Council should have seen the Plan the Cabinet Member with Responsibility reiterated that this was an NHS Plan and the County Council had no control over its progress.

#### **QUESTION 16** – Ms P Agar's printed question asked Mr J H Smith:

*“It is my understanding that it can and is taking 25 months for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome to receive a diagnosis. Could the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-Being tell Council why this is?”*

#### **Written Answer**

The responsibility for commissioning diagnosis services, including Asperger's, rests with the NHS and the Clinical Commissioning Groups, and not with the Council. I am not therefore able to answer the specific question Ms Agar asks.

I would say however that the Council remains committed to improving the lives of people with autistic spectrum disorders, as set out in the "All Age Autism Strategy" agreed by the Health and Wellbeing Board.