

COUNCIL 13 SEPTEMBER 2018 - AGENDA ITEM 8 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Mr R M Udall will ask Simon Geraghty:

"Can the Leader of the Council confirm if he is satisfied or has any concerns about staff morale among employees of the County Council?"

Answer

Thank you Richard for your question and the opportunity it gives me to thank staff for the work they do in delivering services and helping us achieve the ambitious plan we have set out for our County, especially in the challenging financial environment in which we all operate.

As part of our commitment to engage with our workforce, we undertake an annual staff survey and this gives employees the chance to voice their opinions anonymously. This helps us track views on a range of issues and these are summarised each year and presented back to the organisation. I'm pleased to note a high response rate of 52% - up from 28% in 2013 – and whilst overall engagement levels were average when compared with the scores of other organisations using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, there were a range of very positive results for wanting to participate in activities to improve my service, good working relationship with colleagues and pride in the work they do. One area I would like to see us improve is in relation to creating a culture that encourages new ideas and solutions.

Alongside the annual staff surveys, we do hold regular staff briefings including those delivered by myself and the Chief Executive, as well as spending time with staff across the organisation to ensure we understand the challenges they face and help address any issues. I am however always open to suggestions as to how we can improve our engagement and ensure staff feel valued.

Supplementary question

In response to a request to support a national campaign to increase the number of public holidays for staff, Simon Geraghty commented that this was a matter for the Government to determine.

QUESTION 2 – Mr R C Lunn will ask Alan Amos:

"Due to the 2017 legislative changes which appear to prohibit County Councils from running their own bus services, can the Cabinet Member tell us what would happen if a bus company withdrew from an area of the county and no other appropriate company wanted to replace them?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Lunn for his question.

The County Council has statutory minimum duties in accordance with Section 63 of the Transport Act 1985. Whilst there is no duty under the Act to provide bus subsidies, the Council does have a duty to consider the public passenger transport needs of its area with specific duties in relation to the elderly and disabled and provide transport arrangements that are appropriate to their needs. If the Council deemed the withdrawal of a service or bus company from an area meant that it had that statutory duty in that area and that no alternative, such as community transport, was available or appropriate and it had been unable to tender that work to a commercial operator, regardless of financial cost (i.e. not being able to afford the cost is not a reasonable excuse) then it may be possible for the Council to operate services for a limited period only until alternative provision can be found.

QUESTION 3 – Mrs A T Hingley will ask Alan Amos:

"What proposals are being put forward to fulfil the statutory duty of WCC to deliver a Public Transport Service to the residents of Habberley Estate (900 properties) in light of the decline in the commercial services delivered by Diamond Buses in Wyre Forest?"

Answer

I thank Mrs Hingley for her question

The Bus Services Act 2017 prohibits Local Authorities from operating their own bus services.

We have considered the implications of the withdrawal of the number 2 from Habberley in relation to the Transport Act 1985. We have assessed the detriment of the changes and this does not contravene our statutory duties. For example, the maximum distance from a discontinued stop to a stop with a regular service is 800m. The area is also currently served by two Community Transport scheme operators that can assist residents who are unable to access public transport due to mobility issues.

I fully understand the concerns raised by Cllr Hingley and I commend her for her hard and persistent work to ensure that a suitable bus provision remains available. Therefore, I am pleased to confirm that officers are currently meeting with interested parties and engaged in serious discussions to find a solution. The negotiations are at a very sensitive stage so it would be unwise of me to comment any further at the moment or give any firm commitment at this point. But, certainly, every effort is being made to bring them to a satisfactory conclusion and I hope there can be an announcement very shortly.

Supplementary question

In response to a request that the matter be treated as a high priority, Alan Amos promised that every effort would be made to find a solution and Mrs Hingley would be kept informed of developments on the provision of a bus service for the residents of Habberley, Kidderminster.

QUESTION 4 – Mrs F M Oborski will ask Lucy Hodgson:

"I am, of course, delighted that a reprieve has been granted to School Crossing Patrols on Zebra Crossings.

We were originally told that ceasing to operate 15 Crossing Patrols would equate to saving £45,000 pa which would seem to imply that each patrol costs £3,000.

Could she please tell us: when the actual cost per Patrol will be available and how long Community Groups will be given to arrange sponsorship?"

Answer

Work is currently taking place on identifying the expected charge for sponsoring a school crossing patrol. This charge will need to cover other on-cost such as the management of staff and their equipment. The charge will therefore be more than just the salary of the Patrol. This work is due to be completed and communicated to schools and relevant community groups by the end of September and a response will be required by the middle of November (16th) so all new arrangements can be formalised by the start of the spring term (January 2019).

Supplementary question

Could the Cabinet Member liaise with the Safer Roads Partnership and possibly the Police and Crime Commissioner to educate motorists about safe driving, particularly outside schools? Lucy Hodgson acknowledged the problem and the suggestion of working with the Safer Roads Partnership. She indicated that work was already taking place to address this issue for example, Operation Lollipop in the Bromsgrove area which involved community guardianship in relation to the behaviour of motorists outside schools.

QUESTION 5 – Mr P M McDonald will ask Karen May:

"Would the relevant Cabinet Member with Responsibility please inform me of the number of temporary and casual workers employed between 2016 and 2017 and the total cost?"

Answer

The Council uses a variety of employment types including permanent, temporary and casual.

During 2016/17, excluding school and permanent staff on secondment, the Council directly employed 295 staff on a temporary contract at an approximate salary cost of £3,273,683. The Council also had 683 Casual Workers registered and approved to be able to work.

The Council is not currently able to split out salary costs for casual workers but the new Mercury functionality across HR and Finance will allow greater insight into this type of spend for the future.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility is happy discuss with the member the specific nature of his question to provide further information.

QUESTION 6 – Mr R C Lunn will ask Simon Geraghty:

"Can the Leader of the Council set out what risks he sees from the proposed switch in our revenue receipts from central government funding to keeping our local business rates from 2020. Does he perceive this to be dangerous at a time of extreme high street retail pressure?"

Answer

Firstly I would like to thank Robin for his question on an important aspect of our funding.

Business rates account for the second most important element of our funding of the net revenue budget after Council Tax receipts. The Government signalled a move towards the localisation of Business Rates some while ago with an initial aim of moving towards 100% retention now revised to 75%. In principle policies that incentivise Councils to focus on economic as well as housing growth is in my view a good move. In Worcestershire we have worked with our LEP to develop an ambitious Strategic Economic Plan and secure

significant funding for projects on the back of that plan to improve our infrastructure and help to businesses to grow. We now have one of the fastest growing local economies in the country so anything which links economic growth to our funding should in theory be a good thing.

However, the details of how the changes to Business Rates will operate are still unclear especially as in a two tier environment where tier split will be an important aspect and a revised Funding Formula will be needed to distribute the remaining monies. That is why we are working with CCN and the Society of County Treasurers to make the case for Counties and the vital role we perform both in delivering demand led services and supporting economic growth through our economic and transport roles. Until the details of the new Funding Formula are published and the precise nature of how the new 75% Business Rates retention will operate are known it is difficult to assess the benefits and risks. However, we will continue to lobby on this issue and I would be more than willing to engage with Robin and other group leaders on this work.

In terms of the impact of localisation of Business Rates on the high Street, as the current plans do not include changes to the actual rates paid by businesses the current plans are unlikely to have any direct effect on businesses. If such changes were proposed this would be a separate matter from the current debate around how the income is divided up.

Supplementary question

Would the Leader support the idea of a pilot project nationally to see how the revenue receipts funding process would work in practice and for the Government to introduce a tapered safety net? Simon Geraghty responded that the Council had submitted an application to take part in the Government's business rate pilot scheme. The Council's proposition (with the support of district councils) was to pool some of the gains through the 75% proposition to support Adult Social Care. This depended on the bid being successful this year.

QUESTION 7 – Mrs F M Oborski will ask Marcus Hart:

"Last term there was a predicted shortfall in the County in Special School Places for this term. Can the Cabinet Member please tell me: How many pupils with EHC Plans were without appropriate in County SEND School places on the first day of term this September? How many have had to be placed out of County? How many are without any school place at all?"

Answer

Six children did not have a school place on the first day of term, of which three moved into the County in the latter half of the summer term or in the holiday period. There is a plan for each of the six children that is being actively progressed by officers, in each case an alternative is available.

There have been 19 new out of county placements for September in non-maintained and independent special schools and 20 new placements in independent specialist colleges. There are 173 out of county education placements.