

COUNCIL 17 JANUARY 2019 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Mr A Kent will ask Ken Pollock:

"The successful Superfast Broadband roll out in Worcestershire continues to provide a clear message that Worcestershire is Open for Business. Can I ask the Cabinet Member with Responsibility to clarify the opportunities available to those communities, that haven't yet benefitted from the roll out of a Community Fibre Partnership assisted by their local County Councillor and Worcestershire County Councils officers?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Kent for his question

The availability of superfast broadband in the county has increased from 70% to 95% since the ongoing programme first began. I would encourage residents and businesses to check if they can already order superfast broadband or are expected to benefit from our deployment plans in 2019 first. As when the infrastructure is built you do still need to sign-up to new packages to benefit from the improvements. The monthly costs for superfast connectivity can often be lower than what people on long term existing contracts are already paying.

I would also like to remind Councillors that last year, we were successful in securing £1.5m of additional funding from Defra. We are currently working with Openreach to model where this funding will be deployed and we expect to announce further details soon.

For communities without access and not in current plans there is action they can take to proactively secure full fibre broadband through a number of schemes.

The Local Body Partnership Scheme (LBP) launched by the County Council in early 2018, has proven very popular and over 1,000 premises have been successful in securing a share of the £1m funding pot from Worcestershire County Council, this is augmented by communities contributing themselves, central government voucher schemes and Openreach. The fund is now fully allocated, and communities are encouraged to consider the national Gigabit voucher scheme and community schemes such as Openreach's Community Fibre Partnership (CFP) instead.

Central Government extended the **Gigabit Voucher scheme** nationally in May 2018. The Gigabit vouchers aim is to extend gigabit-capable connections, a gigabit is 1000Mbps, to small and medium-sized enterprises. Businesses are eligible for vouchers up to £2,500; vouchers can be used individually or pooled together to form a larger group and crucially for communities for every business in a 'community solution' up to 10 solely residential properties are also eligible for a voucher of up to £500. Any shortfall in the cost of the solution must then be met by the business or community. The Superfast Worcestershire team have been very active in supporting local communities, and already c. £300,000 worth of vouchers have been requested in Worcestershire

The Community Fibre Partnership (CFP) scheme is an Openreach initiative set up to work with groups of residents or businesses to find a superfast broadband solution for their area. Openreach covers the costs in line with its commercial model and the community

provides the remaining gap funding, it should be noted that Gigabit vouchers can be used by communities in conjunction with this scheme. We are aware of a number of communities following this route in Worcestershire, many with the financial assistance of the Gigabit voucher scheme.

For premises in the county that still cannot access 2Mbps, around 0.5%, the Better Broadband scheme remains open, offering £350 vouchers to support a solution.

I would encourage communities and councillors to visit and register with the superfastworcestershire.com website and get in touch with the Superfast Worcestershire team, who will explain the schemes in more detail and support the communities through the process.

Supplementary question

In response to a query about the potential broadband speeds available to county residents and businesses, Ken Pollock commented that speeds of up to 24mbps could be achieved through Superfast Broadband. Speeds of up to 350mbps could be achieved through the formation of a community fibre partnership. There were a limited number of spots within the county where no broadband coverage was available but these tended to be restricted to rural and remote areas. There was still a huge variation across the county but progress was being made to improve broadband speeds.

QUESTION 2 – Mr P M McDonald will ask Karen May:

"Would the Cabinet Member please inform me how much money over the last three years has been paid out regarding: Non-Disclosure Agreements/Settlement Agreements and the individual amounts?"

Answer

Thank you again to Cllr McDonald for asking a further question on this issue.

With reference to 'Non-Disclosure Agreements' (NDA), as I highlighted at November Council, it is important to note that this can have different meanings. An NDA sets out terms by which one or more parties agree not to disclose confidential information that they have shared with each other as a necessary part of doing business together and can cover commercial or staffing matters.

The Council does not routinely use NDAs for employees in relation to commercial matters and these do not give rise to any payment. In the context of staffing matters we do from time to time use Settlement Agreements (a type of NDA) which relate to where the employer and employee seek to reach a mutual agreement on the terms of an exit from the business. All proposed payments require approval by the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development (or nominated member of the HR Leadership Team) and involve advice from Legal Services before they are confirmed.

The total amount paid in Settlement Agreements in the last 3 years is £54,457.40.

I am unable to provide a breakdown on individual amounts as the numbers of individuals is very small which could bring forward a risk that an individual could be identified.

Supplementary question

This question related to the number of NDAs, not the names of those in receipt of an NDA and therefore there would not be a confidentiality breach. Karen May responded that under the Freedom of Information Act, the Council was permitted to refuse to disclose this information where a low number of NDAs could lead to the possible identification of an individual.

QUESTION 3 – Prof J W Raine will ask Simon Geraghty:

"I feel proud and grateful that our County of Worcestershire has made such a positive response over the past two years to the Government's call for local authorities to provide welcoming and safe resettlement for refugee families from war-torn Syria and surrounding countries. Indeed, against a background of unrelenting financial austerity, this Council's efforts to resettle fifty refugees in each of two years through the Home Office-led Syrian Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme has surely been one of its most worthwhile and heartening initiatives of recent years.

Sadly, of course, there remain many thousands more displaced refugee families waiting and hoping for their opportunity for resettlement in this country too. So will the Leader please commit this Council to continuing the good work and agreeing to accept and resettle a further fifty refugees in our County during the coming year 2019-20?"

Answer

Firstly, I would like to thank John for this question.

Worcestershire has worked with our 6 District Councils across the County in recent years, to co-ordinate our response to the Syrian resettlement programme through the Leaders Board.

Following the commitment made by Worcestershire Leaders last February, we have resettled a further 17 refugees in 2018/19 in addition to the 50 resettled previously.

A number of cases are being considered for the next scheduled charter flight in March, with a subsequent flight in June and possibly beyond, in order to fulfil our commitment to resettling a further up to 50 refugees.

The government programme is due to end in March 2020 and based on resettlement to date any additional commitments will likely go beyond the current programme. We are awaiting confirmation from the Home Office with regards any future programmes and associated funding arrangements.

Therefore, whilst fully committed to the existing programme and commitments made, it would be prudent to wait until future arrangements are known before a further decision is made by the Worcestershire Leaders' Board.

In the meantime, we will also continue to offer support to local communities who wish to consider becoming a community sponsor as successfully demonstrated in Malvern Hills and other communities.

QUESTION 4 – Mr R M Udall will ask Lucy Hodgson:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities provide an outline of any proposals she has for the Gypsy and Traveller Service for the 2019/20 financial year?"

Answer

The Gypsy Service Team manages 7 residential Gypsy sites (providing accommodation for 118 traveller families) across Worcestershire and it owns the freehold of all of these sites. It is important that social, affordable traveller plots are provided, as well as privately managed sites, to meet the needs of traveller families in Worcestershire.

The Team is also responsible for dealing with unauthorised encampments on County Council land in association with the client department e.g. Highways, Countryside, Education. There are around 20 encampments per year on County Council land in Worcestershire. The Joint Protocol for the Management of Unauthorised Encampments of Gypsies and Travellers on Local Authority Land is a policy signed up to by all 6 District Councils and the police in Worcestershire and all encampments on local authority land are dealt with under this policy.

These two areas of work provide the day to day focus of the Team's activities.

The Team is 100% self-financing through income that it generates through its tenancy agreements with residents.

The South Worcestershire Councils are currently in the process of producing a new Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment which will provide a comprehensive and up to date assessment of unmet current need and future needs for permanent and transit accommodation of all groups of Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Showpeople. The County Council's Gypsy Service Team is currently contributing to this process.

Supplementary question

What action was being taken to establish temporary stopping places to prevent illegal encampments as recommended under the Gypsy Roma Traveller Assessment published in 2014? Lucy Hodgson agreed to look into the arrangements for the provision of temporary stopping places for Gypsy Roma Travellers in the county and whether they have been included in the Development Plan.

QUESTION 5 – Mr R C Lunn will ask Marcus Hart:

"Can the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills inform Council how many portable classrooms are in the grounds of the remaining Local Authority controlled schools?"

Answer

There are 37 mobiles classrooms across 21 schools sites.

Supplementary question

What plans were there to remove temporary mobile classrooms and did they have up-to-date insurance on them? Marcus Hart advised that temporary mobile classrooms would only be removed where funding was available for permanent replacement build. He anticipated that temporary mobile classrooms would be covered by each individual school's overall insurance schedule.

QUESTION 6 – Ms C M Stalker will ask Marcus Hart:

"It has been a year now since we raised a motion asking Council to look at the possibility of helping to alleviate Period Poverty by agreeing to investigate the placing of sanitary products into schools, colleges and community centre's for all girls and young women aged up to 18 years old. This motion was rejected due to the perceived lack of need in Worcestershire. Period poverty is a real issue for many females and other local authorities - e.g. Bristol have agreed to provide products for those who need them. Sanitary products cost every female around £7 - £13 per month and for those on low income this is a significant amount of money, and with other pressures is hard for many to meet this cost; periods are not a choice, all females have to deal with this aspect of their lives. I hope that we in Worcestershire can make the decision to help in this matter very soon?"

Could the Cabinet Member with Responsibility please advise me of what has been done to look into this matter and what results have been found?"

Answer

Over the last 12 months I have undertaken a number of visits to schools meeting Head Teachers and the Chair of Governors none raised the matter of period poverty.

In addition we have contacted 51 secondary and high schools and received responses from 36. All 36 are aware of period poverty and supply sanitary products available free upon request, in some districts supplied by community and voluntary sector groups. Only five of the 36 schools recognised period poverty as an issue at their school.

Council last year did reject the Notice of Motion because they were not persuaded that this was such an issue as was being made out. Indeed the question makes reference to the cost of sanitary products costing every female around £7 - £13 per month. Thanks to people in my group who have assisted me in establishing some facts around the matter that the Radio 4 programme more or less investigated what they asserted were bogus figures and in fact some sanitary products can cost as little as £1.20 per month for budget products and approximately £2 - £3 per month for more branded premium products, a very different figure from the £7 - £13 per month as quoted. He met a lot of head teachers and chairs of school governors around the county and not one of them mentioned it as a real, cogent or serious issue.

QUESTION 7 – Mr C J Bloore will ask Alan Amos:

"The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways will know of the ongoing problems of speeding and dangerous driving on the Redditch Road in Bromsgrove because of emails and letters he has received from local residents and from Sajid Javid MP. Would he agree to meet with me and local residents on site to see the problems first-hand and plot an acceptable way forward?"

Draft Answer

I thank Cllr Bloore for his question.

Whilst I fully understand the residents' desire for a lower speed limit, this has to be balanced against the demands of this route being a key strategic route for the county and one on which we are currently proceeding with a package of major improvements with initial works commencing in Spring. There has been a temporary lower limit of 30mph during the Highway England works on the M5 but there are no speed related incidents or other factors along this section that would support a lower permanent limit and potentially reduce the effectiveness of this route as a strategic route. I have looked at this issue on at least two occasions and sought appropriate advice from a number of officers. Whilst I have no problem with overriding such advice, I would only do so if there are compelling reasons to do so, and I'm afraid there aren't in this case.

So, I'm afraid in this case I must disappoint Cllr Bloore. Whilst fully understanding and appreciating the residents' concerns, unless something significant changes, a site visit will only lead to false hope that there will be a different outcome.

Supplementary question

Mr Amos noted the concerns expressed by the questioner about the serious nature of the matter and the need to look to address the problem in other ways.

QUESTION 8 – Mr R C Lunn will ask Alan Amos:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways update Council as to how the pilot for residential 20mph zones progressing? Would he also consider extending the pilot to cover Smallwood and parts of Batchley in Redditch?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Lunn for his question.

The Rubery pilot is complete and the results and conclusions are informing our review and update of the traffic management policy on the subject, which I was very keen to get done, and which will be available this spring. Just to remind Council, this pilot involved the speed limit being introduced in Feb. 2014 after the first speed data was collected in August 2013 with the last speed data being collected in April 2016. Certainly, the areas proposed by Cllr Lunn can be considered against the new policy framework once approved.

QUESTION 9 – Mr C J Bloore will ask John Smith:

"Worcestershire County Council has a legal responsibility under Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to look to reduce crime against its residents when exercising its core duties. In recent years, this has included partnership work to help prevent forced marriages. In light of this responsibility and work on a local level, does the Cabinet Member with Responsibility agree with me it is unacceptable for victims of forced marriages to be charged by the Foreign Office for airline tickets to escape forced marriages and that some of the most vulnerable members of our society should not be 'paying for their protection'?"

Answer

Thank you to Councillor Bloore for his question.

The Council has safeguarding and community safety responsibilities in relation to forced marriages and procedures and processes in place to support any victims that are identified. The policy regarding the repayment of costs associated with repatriation is a matter for the Foreign Office, but I note that recent publicity in relation to this issue has led to a number of MP's highlighting their concerns about this practice and the Foreign Secretary has asked for the matter to be looked into by his officials.