

## COUNCIL 10 SEPTEMBER 2020 - AGENDA ITEM 8 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

**QUESTION 1** – Mr P Middlebrough will ask Alan Amos:

*“There is a great deal of concern in Upton upon Severn that Old Street is a road, with a narrow carriage way and narrow footways, that has the inappropriate designation as the A4104. Listed and historic buildings, both residential and commercial front onto the road and given the size of modern HGV’s there is concern that their fabric is being damaged by the trundling and rumbling of traffic.*

*What advice can the Cabinet Member give to the residents of Upton upon Severn to achieve the downgrading of the A4104 to a B road through the town, by redesignating parts of the B4211, B4209 and B4208 as the new route of the A4104?”*

**Answer**

I thank Cllr Middlebrough for his question and for his time in meeting with me to discuss the situation in more detail.

This is clearly an issue which merits investigation in the light of the concerns from residents’ and others. I would suggest that the best way forward is for me to facilitate a meeting for him with highways officers to review the situation and consider the alternatives, and possible options.

The A4104 forms part of the primary route linking Upton and Ledbury. Questions to be discussed could therefore include the diversion of HGVs, the impact on historic buildings and road surface, the implementation of a weight restriction, the number of HGV-related injury collisions, police injury collision data, and the consequences of any diversion route.

So, there is the basis for a constructive investigation with officers and myself as Cabinet Member working with Cllr Middlebrough as the local Member, although given the massive workload of the Department at the moment, there may be a slight delay in setting this up immediately.

**QUESTION 2** – Mr R M Bennett will ask Marcus Hart:

*“Can the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills advise me why some Schools in the North of the County are being allowed to sign up to single source arrangements for School Uniforms in contravention of the guidelines laid down by the Competition Markets Authority?”*

**Answer**

The broad issue has been raised by the Competition and Markets Authority in 2015 and in 2019.

In summary, currently there is no specific law against it (although one is making its way through parliament) and it’s a decision taken by individual schools (not the Council).

Schools have a legal obligation to not distort competition and even when they sign a deal with a single shop, they should ensure that the prices are not excessive.

See below:

2019

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-andrew-tyrie-to-the-secretary-of-state-for-education>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/468358/School\\_uniform\\_open\\_letter.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/468358/School_uniform_open_letter.pdf)

2015

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-the-cma-to-schools-and-school-uniform-suppliers-on-competition-law>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/468358/School\\_uniform\\_open\\_letter.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/468358/School_uniform_open_letter.pdf)

There is a draft new law which had start to make its way through parliament in March this year but stalled because of coronavirus and there isn't a date for next stage yet:

*"The Secretary of State must issue guidance to the appropriate authorities of relevant schools in England about the costs aspects of school uniform policies."*

<https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2019-21/educationguidanceaboutcostsofschooluniforms.html>

This draft law amends the Education Act to include a new requirement on the DfE to issue guidance on school uniform supply and costs which schools would then legally have to comply with.

We will issue a reminder to schools of their legal obligations via the Worcestershire Association of School Business Managers reminding schools of this and the avoidance of negative impact for families experiencing financial challenges.

#### Supplementary question

In response to a request to write all schools, particularly in Redditch to ask them to review their policy, the Cabinet Member repeated his assurance that all schools in Worcestershire would be reminded verbally and in writing of their legal obligations via the Worcestershire Association of School Business Managers.

#### **QUESTION 3** – Mr P Denham will ask Alan Amos:

*"During the 2nd week of August, a copy of a slide used in a county council meeting was leaked to BBC Hereford & Worcester.*

*It was headed "Active Travel" and stated that Worcestershire County Council Leadership had set down "red lines" which would support Active Travel schemes where there was:*

- *No loss of car parking spaces and*
- *No loss of road space*

*This appears to be in conflict with the government's current advice.*

*Can the Cabinet Member please confirm or deny that this is indeed the Cabinet's policy?"*

## Answer

I thank Cllr Denham for his question and welcome his support for Government policy, and assume this will extend to other aspects of Government policy.

However, rather than fussing about an alleged leak involving some false slide, it would be much more productive, exciting, and interesting to be discussing the current biggest-ever investment in our road network, record spending on pavements, footways, gully cleaning, and street lighting because I know how keen the BBC is - in its impartiality - to report good news. Clearly, I can't comment whilst an investigation is under way except to deplore the irresponsible behaviour of those who encourage and applaud the gross misconduct of officers. Unlike the anti-car and anti-business policies of the Labour Party - which wants to ban vehicles from city and town centres and remove thousands of car parking spaces creating motoring chaos across the county - this administration's policy is to support all forms of travel to the detriment of none. He will know that as we came out of lockdown, County Highways had put in place a network in which our Liaison Engineers led and worked with a dedicated team of District/City/Borough officers to look at requests to temporarily readjust road space to accommodate the new situation for active travel and social distancing, a large number of which were met and particular pinch-points eased. At the same time, this Highways Department took its own initiative to allow businesses to use pavements where practical to trade to ensure that shops could reopen whilst preserving the need for social distancing. So our policy was and remains practical, sensible, flexible, balanced, and fair to all forms of travel – including the 1% of commuters who cycle – at a time when road traffic is now back to over 92% of pre-Covid levels even with many people still not back at their workplace, and the Government is urging us to reopen the economy. Consequently, and precisely because of our policy, Worcestershire Highways do not now have to waste time and resources undoing a whole host of unnecessary temporary measures which other councils across the country are now having to do at great expense after having created considerable local outrage and opposition to them. So, unfortunately for Cllr Denham – all so terribly keen to support Conservative Government policy – that false slide did not reflect the council's actual policy, as I have explained. Cllr Denham should know by now that our Active Travel policy, containing 34 schemes, is actually set out in LTP4 in sections WC1 – WC7 which, having been adopted in 2017, will have given him 3 years to have read it, if he had wanted to.

### Supplementary question

Were all public highways, with a few exceptions such as motorways, designated as shared space for the use of cyclists, pedestrians and motorists with no priority given to motorised transport above other forms of transport? The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Highways responded that as the Council came out of lockdown, highways space was readjusted and pinch points were addressed to meet the needs of all forms of travel. There was no discrimination against any form of travel.

### **QUESTION 4** – Mr R M Udall will ask Simon Geraghty:

*"Can the Leader of the County Council confirm if he has had any recent discussions with the BBC regarding any issues within Worcestershire?"*

## Answer

I would firstly thank Richard for his question.

As he would no doubt expect, I along with colleagues do engage with all media organisations including the BBC to help ensure residents and businesses are informed about the work of the Council and the services we provide. These vary in nature from purely local matters to more strategic issues facing this Council or the County.

### Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Leader of the Council undertook to liaise with the BBC to discuss a possible link to Worcestershire as part of the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Archers radio show.

### **QUESTION 5** – Mr R C Lunn will ask Simon Geraghty:

*"Would the leader of the Council join with me in expressing support for the Bullivant media employees at the Redditch Standard and other titles across the county in their campaign to be treated fairly and properly consulted by their employer. Would he also agree with me that a vibrant local media is vital for the health of Worcestershire democracy?"*

### **Answer**

Firstly, I would like to thank Robin for his question.

I would very much agree that a vibrant local media is good for local democracy. We support and work closely with all local media organisations, newspaper groups, local radio and the emerging online news organisations. Newspapers along with many parts of the media are undergoing significant change as the way people access and consume news is changing. Covid 19 has also had an impact as it has done with many sectors of the economy. These changes inevitably impact on those dedicated staff that work in the industry and in restructuring we would all I'm sure wish to see staff treated fairly and sensitively in making any changes required.

### Supplementary question

There was a concern that many media reporting outlets were now based nationally and therefore the local perspective was being lost and which had a consequential impact local reporting. The Leader of the Council recognised the need for a vibrant local media. He would wish to retain jobs locally but recognised the constantly evolving approach to news production nationally and internationally.

### **QUESTION 6** – Mr R C Lunn will ask Ken Pollock:

*"Can the Cabinet Member explain what actions the Council will be taking in assisting retail and other businesses in the lead up to the vital Christmas period, mindful of the impact of Covid 19?"*

### **Answer**

As part of the work we are undertaking on the Economic Recovery Plan, the Town Centres are one of our seven key priorities, the district councils are leading this workstream, they all have clear plans in place and are utilising the additional European funding to support promotion of the town centres reinforcing the open for business, staying safe and healthy message to give confidence to visitors.

On 1 April 2020 the County Council took responsibility for running Visit Worcestershire, it is now operated by the County's Growth and Investment Team. Visit Worcestershire is running a long standing 'Staycation Campaign' – with the focus on Escape, Explore, Enjoy. This encapsulates selling the best Worcestershire has to offer by way of attractions, its natural assets as well as accommodation and food and drink offerings. This campaign runs into the new year, moving with the seasons and we are developing the Christmas content currently which will have a focus on 'buy local'. The campaign actively promotes businesses to our 24,000 social media followers as well as being featured on the website which sees

approximately 50,000 unique visitors each month. Members can find further details of the campaigns on the Visit Worcestershire website <https://www.visitworcestershire.org/>

Our buy local Christmas campaign will also tie into the national Small Business Saturday campaign which is 5th December. This will be coordinated with the local Districts and BIDs to support the High Street.

Visit Worcestershire is also actively working with One Worcestershire and the Local Enterprise Partnership to promote – Make it Worcestershire. The focus is on Worcestershire produce and helping residents and visitors understand where their food comes from. Worcestershire is one of the UKs largest producers of food and drink – but how often do we think about this when out shopping? Twenty Farm shops have started promoting the initiative which see's point of sale signage on local produce and 'Make it Worcestershire' logos on a range of products, such as Pershore College Apple Juice. Visit Worcestershire have been promoting the various producers and participating Farm Shops via its Foodie Friday campaign and plans are afoot to further develop this work stream directly with Worcestershire Food and Drink Association – supporting several outdoor Foodie events across the County, starting at Halloween.

In addition, the County Council is working in partnership with the Worcestershire Growth Hub, (Worcestershire Business Central) and the Worcestershire LEP in the delivery of the Kickstarting Recovery Grant Programme which will launch in late September 2020. The County Council is the accountable body for the programme which is fully funded by the European Regional Development Fund. The programme which will provide two revenue grants, providing funding of up to £3,000 per business (100% funded); for companies in the visitor economy and for small businesses. The grants will be focused on revenue based activities with a focus on 1-2-1 specialist advice which businesses can call on to address their immediate needs in response to the impact of COVID 19 e.g. HR, marketing, accountants, legal, financial, H&S, IT / digital or sector specialists etc. Further details will be available once the programme has launched.

The County Council has also launched the Here2Help Business programme. This programme includes one to one business support for all sectors. The various strands of support have been developed following a survey of the impact of Covid 19 on Worcestershire business. 3 elements of the support have already been commissioned: business planning and finance, new technology and adaptation and support with marketing and digital content. This support will be made available to businesses across Worcestershire in late September. Further details will be made available on our website <http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/here2helpbusiness>