

COUNCIL 18 FEBRUARY 2021 - AGENDA ITEM 8 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Mr F M Oborski asked Alan Amos:

“All too frequently there are traffic collisions at the traffic lights at the A449/A448 crossroads outside King Charles 1 School Kidderminster. The accidents occur when vehicles coming up the A449 Chester Road South seeking to turn right onto the A448 towards Bromsgrove collide with vehicles coming straight down the A449. Collisions occur because there is no “Right turn only” phase at those lights. Please can the decision to refuse to allow the installation of a right turn phase for traffic coming up from Hoobrook be reconsidered?”

Answer

I thank Cllr Oborski for her question regarding the traffic lights at the A449/A448 junction, Kidderminster.

The introduction of a right turn filter on these lights was considered in 2014 as a proposed safety improvement. The traffic signal modelling showed a very high increase in AM peak delay per vehicle: 170% on Chester Road North and 194% on Comberton Road West. There are also significant increases in delay on other arms and during the PM peak, at 20-30%, not as dramatic.

Due to the impact on congestion and delay, the recommendation is not to implement a right turn filter. The manoeuvre in question does have road markings and a STOP line mid junction to remind right turn drivers they must give way. The introduction of very long delays such as those modelled do have safety consequences, with drivers becoming frustrated and then more likely to run a red light. As the implementation of a right turn filter requires a signal remodel at a cost of around £12,000, such a proposal is not recommended as a trial. However, I would stress that it is the negative impact on both congestion and safety, rather than cost, that is the main determining factor here.

There have been 2 casualty accidents recorded for the last 3 years 01/01/2018-31/12/20:

1. A vehicle ran a red light colliding with a vehicle mid junction; and
2. A right turn collision on the A448 Comberton Hill (West) turning into A449 Chester Rd (South)

Of course, I am happy to reconsider the matter if Cllr Oborski can give me some new compelling information which would affect this analysis.

Supplementary question

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways undertook to meet Fran Oborski and Tracy Onslow on site, when it was safe to do so, to look at the issues associated with the A449/A448 crossroads, Kidderminster.

QUESTION 2 – Mrs J A Brunner asked Alan Amos:

“Does the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways agree with me that replacing the old sodium lights with LED is good for the environment? Furthermore, can he tell this council how many LED columns have been installed since 2017 in:

- i. Arrow Valley East.
- ii. Redditch.
- iii. Worcestershire.”

Answer

LED (light-emitting diodes) have many benefits over the existing non-LED lamp sources, ranging from their longevity to their durability. Some of these benefits include:

- LED lights depreciate at a much slower rate than other alternative lamp sources;
- They are light-emitting diodes so they do not have filaments or burn out quickly, and have extremely long lives;
- They contain no toxic chemicals, unlike the sodium lamps that they are replacing;
- Reduced maintenance costs as they do not require regular bulk lamp changes as previous lamp sources required;
- The long life of the LEDs, particularly in areas where it is difficult for our street lighting contractor to access, such as divorced footpaths, will be hugely beneficial when these locations are converted;
- LED lanterns do not produce a lot of heat;
- They use significantly less energy and this is reducing the County Councils' overall energy consumption and carbon footprint;
- The light control of the modern LED lanterns being fitted is excellent and results in minimal light spill on to nearby properties and into the night sky;
- Much improved colour rendering as compared to sodium lighting;
- They are available in a range of different colours to suit a range of environments including a number of different “white” colour temperatures i.e. cool, neutral or warm. Red LEDs have been installed in areas where there are known populations of bats which are averse to white light sources so there can also be important ecological advantages by changing to LED.

As for how many LED columns have been installed since 2017, I can confirm the following:

- i. Arrow Valley East - We do not hold data by Division, but by town
- ii. Redditch - The latest figures show that we have installed 4,268 LED lanterns in Redditch, out of a total of approx. 9600 street lights.
- iii. Worcestershire - The roll-out of LEDs continues throughout the County, the latest total is 24,992.

QUESTION 3 – Mr R C Lunn asked Simon Geraghty:

"As this is the last meeting of the 2017 to 2021 Council, can the Leader tell us what his greatest regret is during that period?"

Answer

Firstly, can I thank Robin for his question. Looking back over this Council term I had anticipated we would have been able to make more progress in securing a national long term funding solution for Adult Social Care. As colleagues know protecting the most vulnerable in society is key priority of this Council and we have invested considerable sums over the lifetime of this Council to ensure we can meet this demand led service, now spending some 40% of our net budget on Adult Social Care. However, through the County Council Network we will continue to press this issue and I hope post Covid that this will be addressed by Government.

Supplementary question

In response to a query about the Government's response to funding issues associated with Adult Social Care, the Leader commented that Adult Social Care and its inter-relationship with health in terms of funding and eligibility was a complex matter. This Council would wish to see a long term funding solution for Adult Social Care and the Government was being lobbied through the CCN accordingly. He hoped to see progress in the next term of the Council.

QUESTION 4 – Mrs F M Oborski asked Andy Roberts:

"There have been a lot of reports nationally about a rise in children and young people coming into Care during Covid and a shortage of Foster Carers. Could the Cabinet Member tell me what, if any implications there are for Worcestershire County Council and Worcestershire Children First?"

Answer

Thank you for the question.

Some of the statistics surrounding the pandemic are confusing.

Nationally the first three months of 2020 saw numbers coming in to care drop by 6% but there was also a 10% decrease of children leaving care. Since then The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) are reporting increases across children services but, as yet, actual data hasn't been released.

By August the Research by the Women's Resource Centre found more babies were being taken into care. It was said that this was because of rising economic problems and a surge in cases of domestic abuse during the pandemic. Barnardo's cited a 44 per cent rise in demand for foster parents, while people looking to become foster parents halved.

ADCS (I think a very credible source) can see 'no evidence to suggest that levels of need will reduce'. It predicted more:

- Referrals to children's social care
- Children in need
- Section 47 enquiries (where a child comes into care because it is suspected to be suffering or at risk)
- Children subject to a child protection plan
- Children looked after

The ADCS [this is significant to the question] said demand will depend on 'the ability to stabilise and re-build early help, maintain strong leadership and system-wide approaches'.

Councillor Oborski will recognise this is what we have been doing for the last three years (in fact as the chair of scrutiny she has been part of the process).

For the benefit of all corporate parents I will give an outline of the local picture:

First children coming into care.

We have lower rates of children coming into care. This year (to date) we have received 135 new entrants, compared to 159 for the same period last year - so we have not seen an excessive demand for care during the pandemic.

However, we have seen a change in the ages of children coming into care. Our new starters reflect the national increase in care for babies (birth – 2yrs). At quarter three last year they comprised 29% care entrants, but this has risen to 39% this year.

The change for children coming into care aged over 11 was far less dramatic, 38% this year compared to 36%.

The numbers for our Section 20 young people (where children come into care with parental agreement) were significant. They are at a stable 12%, a low figure compared to our statistical neighbours' average of 21%.

Less within our control is the rise in Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. Based on quarter three this rose from 5% of the total in 19/20 to 12% in 20/21.

Turning to children leaving care.

We have a slightly better than average performance against our statistical neighbours for children leaving care, at 19.8 per 10k compared to our statistical neighbours at 18.7.

So, our number of children in care (presently 846 at February 2021) continues to rise and we remain above statistical neighbours and England averages. However, from the data it can be seen that because of the impacts of our 'edge of care and permanency planning' there are fewer children coming into care and more leaving. So, the gap should decrease.

I feel the data provides an early but tangible sign of the success of our 'Strengthening Families First' strategy. It won't be lost on councillors that Tina Russell, who is taking over the role of Director of Children's Services, has been at the forefront of its introduction. I should also mention this is complimented by the 'Troubled Families' Programme.

With an effective model, support from the budget and the contingency for additional care costs agreed today we have resilience. In the future we will not be able to avoid the pressures outlined by the ADCS or the Covid-19 aftermaths and the future of Troubled Families is uncertain, so there is a need for vigilance and no room for complacency.

QUESTION 5 – Mr R J Morris asked Alan Amos:

"Could the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways please advise on progress of the pedestrian crossing at Westland's roundabout in Droitwich please and the timeframes involved."

Answer

I thank Cllr Morris for his question and for his determination in pursuing this very important scheme with me.

An Options Assessment Report for the Westlands junction in Droitwich was completed in 2020 which considered different options for pedestrian crossings at Westlands Roundabout.

Several options were considered, all of which proposed pedestrian improvements via the use of toucan crossings, additional footways and / or signalisation of certain roundabout arms. The indicative cost of a scheme involving the provision of two toucan crossings, improvements to and upgrading of the footway to 3m shared width, lighting and drainage is approximately £465 000. This costing is an estimate only at this stage and would be confirmed as the scheme develops.

Options have been explored for funding a scheme, including existing funds such as the Worcestershire Network Efficiency Programme. However, as the roundabout does not experience congestion this funding is not available, so alternative sources of funding from local development will have to be sought.

The South Worcestershire Development Plan is currently being reviewed, with final sites selection subject to confirmation. I'm pleased to say that there are three proposed employment land allocations which could be linked to a scheme on the Westlands roundabout as an enhanced pedestrian route between the employment sites, residential areas and the town centre. (Two are new allocations and one is a reallocation from the current SWDP.) This will be linked to the transport modelling for the SWDP review which the County Council's consultants are currently carrying out to enable a Westland's scheme to be included within the SWDP review Infrastructure Delivery Plan. The SWDP2 is timetabled for adoption in 2023.

At the same time, other potential sources of funding will also be explored, and the Westlands scheme included in future delivery plans for other relevant documents as these are refreshed.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways indicated that every possible source of available funding including Active Travel would be considered to progress the pedestrian crossing at the Westlands roundabout.