

COUNCIL 9 SEPTEMBER 2021 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Martin Allen asked Alan Amos:

"The County Council is currently constructing a new roundabout on the A38/A4104 near Holly Green, I am pleased to see this infrastructure going forward, clearly it will be a great help to motorists and makes a dangerous junction much safer. I thank all those concerned in its design and construction. As Cllr Alan Amos is the nicest member of the Cabinet would he please pass on my thanks to all those concerned and also would he please agree to a speed review of the whole length of the A38 from the M50 junction to the A38 Ketch Roundabout within three months of the completion of the new roundabout? I should add that each of my Parish Councils in my division have raised this matter and are all very concerned."

Answer

I thank Cllr Allen for his maiden question and for the very perceptive comment about me. He is certainly the nicest new Member for Croome.

As someone who was involved in the genesis of this project, I will certainly be very happy to pass on his kind comments to all the team who have worked so hard to make it a reality.

On the speeding issue, Worcestershire County Council takes guidance on such matters from the Department for Transport. One of the key aims, when setting local speed limits, is to provide a consistent message between road geometry and environment, so that changes in speed limits reflect changes in the road layout and environment. This ensures that, in the absence of enforcement, speed limits are the most effective. It is not envisaged that the A38/ A4104 roundabout scheme will have an adverse effect on vehicle speeds and no changes to the current speed limit, on the A38, are proposed.

As part of the planning process, consideration is always given to changes in speed limits due to any significant, planned development. Accordingly, this situation is continually monitored. In addition to new development, speed related injury collisions are also a key factor when considering changes to speed limits.

Nonetheless, and in view of the changing nature of the A38 in terms of its strategic significance and the increasing volume of traffic using it, and without wishing to unfairly raise expectations, I will in good spirit agree to Cllr Allen's request to review the section to which he refers, but I will take advice about whether 3 months is the ideal timespan to do it.

QUESTION 2 – Cllr Richard Udall asked Andy Roberts:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families confirm how many children from Worcestershire have been taken into care during the current financial year?"

Answer

74 children have been received into care since the start of this financial year – and gives us a total Looked After population of 876 as at 25 July.

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Lynn Denham asked Alan Amos:

"What is the membership of the Network Efficiency Board and how often does it meet?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Denham for her question.

The Network Efficiency Board is an officer board that exists for the overall governance and management of the County Council's programme of works to reduce congestion, as a Congestion Programme Board. The Board includes officer representation from the Economy and Infrastructure Directorate with further support as required. The membership evolves depending on the make-up of the projects within the programme. It meets monthly.

Supplementary Question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member undertook to establish the legal position with regard to the public access to information rights associated with meetings of the Network Efficiency Board.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Matt Jenkins asked Alan Amos:

"Given the recent Department for Transport Announcement that funding from the Capability Fund, originally allocated to Worcestershire County Council to support infrastructure plans and behaviour change initiatives in relation to walking and cycling, has been 'halted' until the DfT can be sure of a commitment to active travel.

Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport change his current view that 'no loss of road space will be accepted', which is incompatible with Government policy, in order to receive this and future funding?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Jenkins for his question.

Unfortunately, the assumption in it is untrue and misleading. The decision on these bids to the DfT are, and always have been, expected this month. We submitted our application to the DfT Capability Fund in April 2021. The bid was for £198,722 primarily for the production of 4 Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) and for the promotion of behavioural change activity in relation to walking and cycling. The proposed locations for these 4 LCWIPs are Droitwich, Malvern, Redditch and Kidderminster. These documents will enhance the aspirations for active travel as set out in the Local Transport Plan 4, LTP4, by developing the network of routes to be implemented subject to funding being available.

In July 2021 we were one of 15 authorities, including our neighbouring counties of Gloucestershire and Shropshire, who were asked to provide further clarification on their bid, absolutely nothing unusual or exceptional about that, and no conspiracy or plot involved. The information requested included further detail of the 4 towns proposed for the LCWIPs with an indicative cost breakdown for producing the documents.

This information was duly submitted to the DfT in August, and we continue to expect a decision later this month.

As for road space, politicians rarely get credit for what they do, and never get credit for what they don't do. We have not gone down the route of closing roads, taking away lanes, and removing people's parking spaces all over the place. So, unlike many other authorities throughout the country, we are not now in the unfortunate position of having to engage in costly defensive legal action, or wasting time and money undoing ill-thought out schemes that were imposed on communities. Our policy is very clear that we support all forms of travel to the detriment of none so we will not be advancing one form at the expense of another. We believe in choice, namely that people know best what form of travel to choose for their own needs and circumstances. We do not believe in the confrontation so beloved of some people pitting one form of travel against another. As I have said, I will not bring the City or any other place in the County to a standstill by implementing daft schemes designed to increase disruption and create chaos whose intention seems to be to make driving such an unpleasant experience in the absurd belief that people will then abandon their cars for cycling. Most car journeys are undertaken for essential reasons such as going to work or doing the weekly shop. Unlike others, Conservatives are not anti-car and we do not demonize drivers. Road traffic has been at pre-Covid levels for months now and, of course, there is an on-going extra demand on our roads from the enormous increase in food deliveries for elderly and other people following recent lockdowns. More than most people, however, I want to get people out of their cars and onto other forms of transport, but by encouragement and persuasion, not by diktat and draconian undemocratic measures. We have and are implementing an exciting new bus strategy, as part of the Government's recently announced National Bus Strategy, and WCC will be an Enhanced Partnership next spring building on the 13% of people who currently rely on bus travel. This County has introduced more new cycle provision in the past 4 years than ever before, with much more coming and in the pipeline, and we have done it without adding to traffic disruption and creating chaos anywhere. In other words, not either/or but both/and; complementary provision, not confrontation. And that's what the people of Worcestershire very clearly voted for overwhelmingly just a few months ago. So I challenge Cllr Jenkins to tell me now what specific roads he wants to close in the City; what roads will have to take the significant amount of displaced cars and heavy vehicles; and which quiet residential roads are now to become busy rat-runs?

Supplementary Question

The Government had stated that wider funding to councils who were not doing enough to promote cycling and walking through Active Travel would be cut. In light of the change in the Government's approach, assurance was sought that the Cabinet Member's approach to Active Travel would be more positive than previously. The Cabinet Member responded that the Government had not cut funding to the Council and he emphasised that this Council had provided more cycling provision than ever before. The work undertaken had been achieved without impacting on congestion and supported all forms of transport.

QUESTION 5 – Cllr Richard Udall will asked Matt Dormer:

"The University of Worcester have today taken the decision to no longer offer Archaeology as a discipline with effect from the end of the 2021/22 academic year.

This is despite repeated outstanding figures for student satisfaction and graduate opportunities in the National Student Survey. The University of Worcester has consistently attracted the highest number of admissions to Archaeology in the West Midlands. Over the last four years, between 50-80% of UW graduates have gone on to employment in the historic environment sector or further study, compared to the standard (2001) benchmark of 15%. Archaeology graduates from the University of Worcester are placed in a number of strategic positions within the historic environment sector, both locally and nationally. The degree at the University of Worcester is also committed to making archaeology and heritage open to all and is one of few programmes with an impressive track record of inclusion.

Lecturers and staff have been told that now they face redundancy and there is no option to appeal.

The Worcestershire County Council Archaeology Service is a successful and important part of his portfolio, we will continue to require home grown graduates and the demand for our service is likely to increase not decrease. The decision to close these courses could have an impact on our ability to recruit future staff.

The decision undermines our attempt to promote a World Class Worcestershire and will tarnish the academic and historical reputation of the county. Investment and growth could be at risk and new archaeological opportunities for research and development within the county could be lost or sacrificed.

What action will he take to persuade the Vice Chancellor and the UEB to reconsider their decision."

Answer

We are aware of the decision made by University of Worcester to no longer offer Archaeology as a discipline with effect from the end of the 2021/22 academic year. We understand that this decision is based on the impact of low course take up on its financial viability.

Worcestershire's archaeology service is a predominantly commercial, self-funded service and while it has recruited from the University of Worcester Archaeology graduate pool, it also recruits widely from a range of universities and other archaeology practices and we expect this to continue.

The archaeology service also offers NVQ based traineeships and has a successful track record of recruiting trainee archaeologists through this route.