

## **COUNCIL 11 NOVEMBER 2021 - AGENDA ITEM 10 – QUESTION TIME**

**Questions and written responses provided below. Questions 8 - 10 were not asked on the day.**

**QUESTION 1** – Cllr Mel Allcott asked Marcus Hart:

*“Given that schools are now fully open without compulsory mask wearing or the operation of “bubbles”, even though the Covid virus is still prevalent in the community and at 27 September 2021, 40 schools had reported positive cases in staff or pupils. Could the Cabinet Member please tell me how many Schools in Worcestershire, both LA and Academies have now received the CO2 monitors promised by the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP?”*

### **Answer**

Worcestershire Children First are advised by the Department for Education that 32 schools should have received deliveries.

### **Supplementary Question**

Was the Council doing all it could to help schools keep pupils and staff safe during the pandemic? The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills gave an assurance that schools across the county were doing everything they could to educate children in these challenging times. He thanked all the schools and colleges in Worcestershire for ensuring as many pupils as possible could be educated in school.

**QUESTION 2** – Cllr Lynn Denham asked Alan Amos:

*“What is the current waiting time between approval of eligibility for a disabled parking space and delivery on the ground outside a person’s home?”*

### **Answer**

I thank Cllr Denham for her question.

Disabled Parking Spaces on the public highway must be supported by a legally enforceable Traffic Regulation Order (TRO). The statutory process for the implementation of a TRO takes, on average 6 months, assuming no objections are received when a proposal is advertised to the public. Receipt of objections requires further consultation and therefore a considerably longer process.

The time between the approval of a resident’s application and commencement of the statutory consultation process is currently approximately 5 months.

### **Supplementary question**

On receipt of further details from Cllr Denham, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport undertook to look into the reasons for the delay in the introduction of a disabled parking for one of her constituents.

**QUESTION 3** – Cllr Josh Robinson asked Alan Amos:

*"Following recent petitions and protests against the A38 Bromsgrove Route Enhancement Programme (BREP), does the Cabinet Member still have confidence that the plans are wanted by residents in Bromsgrove?"*

**Answer**

I thank Cllr Robinson for his Question

The A38 is one of the most important and busiest roads in the county which suffers from heavy congestion at peak times leading to prolonged and unreliable journey times with subsequent environmental impacts. If nothing is done to address these issues, the situation will get significantly worse leading to more congestion, declining air quality and the risk of considerable tail-backs onto the M42 which could lead to accidents. Failure to act will have an impact on economic growth in Bromsgrove as well as affecting the lives of local people and businesses.

However, let me get to the real purpose of Cllr Robinson's question as I am well aware of the on-going and widespread interest in and concern about two particular aspects of the BREP scheme, on which I have received a number of representations from other Divisional Members, as well as carrying out a site visit to see for myself, namely **Scheme F** which will involve changes to how School Lane is accessed from the A38 and **Scheme 3** which is a pedestrian and cycle bridge over the A38 linking the railway station with the town centre following the course of Old Station Road. I always promised to listen to what people had to say before arriving at any decision. And that is what I have done.

**On Scheme F**, the original proposal was to close the junction of School Lane and the A38. However, I have decided that we will instead keep School Lane open and not close the junction, and will instead only be prohibiting the right turn from the A38, given both the danger of vehicles trying to cross two lanes of fast moving traffic, and the need to keep traffic flowing and reduce congestion, which is the objective of this scheme. It is anticipated that most drivers unable to make the right turn into School Lane will continue their journey via the M42 roundabout to access Alcester Road, so we will be monitoring this once the scheme is implemented.

**On Scheme 3**, I am pleased to announce that I have decided to pause this scheme and undertake no further work on it while other alternatives are explored that could deliver the same objectives.

With these significant decisions, I am pleased to confirm that the Outline Business Case requesting the £49 million that is required to deliver BREP **will** be submitted to the Department for Transport in the next fortnight.

Supplementary question

In response to a request for further public consultation, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport explained that the bid had now been submitted to the Government and there was no time for further consultation.

**QUESTION 4** – Cllr Martin Allen asked Alan Amos:

*"At the last Council meeting I asked the Cabinet Member if he would instruct officers to carry out a review of speed limits from the M50 to the Ketch Round about on the A38 within 3 months of the A38/A4104 new roundabout being completed. He was very gracious and said that he would. Following on from that, may I ask the good councillor if he would therefore also agree to a similar review on the A4104 from Boughton Hill in the East up to and including Tunnel Hill in the west?"*

## Answer

I thank Cllr Allen for his Question, and I'm pleased to confirm that flattery does certainly pay off, at least in my case. So, the short answer is YES, we will carry out a review, as requested.

I can confirm that for the A38, measures are already in hand to investigate and assess current speed limits, as requested, including the gathering of injury collision data. The A4104, in the immediate vicinity of the A38 junction roundabout has been assessed and speed limit TRO proposals are currently being processed, and I'm happy to send Cllr Allen a copy of the proposal plan. The proposed roundabout will be greatly beneficial in reducing congestion at this junction, as well as reducing through speeds on the A38, currently the priority route.

County Highways takes guidance from the Department for Transport (DfT). 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 limit reflect changes in the road layout and environment. This ensures that speed limits are effective in the absence of enforcement. Roadside development and the occurrence of speed related injury collisions are also important factors to be considered as part of this process. The DfT states that "it is important that traffic authorities and police forces work together closely and from an early stage when considering any changes to speed limits". Unrealistically low speed limits are not likely to be respected by drivers and can lead to a worsening of the injury collision rate due to increased incidents of overtaking. So, the first stage of the review of the requested section of the A4104 is to investigate the road traffic accident records and discuss with the Police Traffic Management Team. As soon as that has been done, I will then be in a position to respond more fully.

## **QUESTION 5** – Cllr Matt Jenkins asked Alan Amos:

*"Worcestershire is behind many other parts of Great Britain with the pace of its EV charging point rollout. At a rate of 25 per 100,000 people, this is well below the UK average, of 39.*

*Worcestershire is moving at a slower pace than the national average when it comes to the installation of renewable heating systems. In Worcestershire over the past year installations have increased by 13%, whereas the national average is a 15% increase.*

*Can I ask the Cabinet Member with Responsibility what he is doing to increase the installations of both EV charge points and renewable heating systems in the county?"*

## Answer

I thank Cllr Jenkins for his Question.

However, as Council fully debated this issue only a few months ago on a Notice of Motion, I do not intend to rehearse all the same points again today.

Worcestershire County Council has installed a number of EV charging points across the County, including 26 fast charging points at Worcestershire Parkway station, at County Hall, and is committed to doing more in future developments such as Blakledown car park.

Charging points are also being provided by a number of other organisations including the City and District councils who have installed them in their car parks, such as St. Martin's Gate in the City where there is enormous spare capacity; as well as by the private sector, for example at motorway services and increasingly in private car parks such as Crowngate car park in Worcester.

Worcestershire County Council has a wider role in facilitating the delivery of EV charging points through its policy and guidance. The Streetscape Design Guide which I reviewed and updated recently, now requires the provision of charging points at 5% of spaces for non-residential development, which can be increased to a further 5% where necessary or on larger developments. The provision of EV charging points is also required on new residential development, including those with communal parking.

To strengthen this approach, as Local Plans are reviewed, we are working with the District/City/Borough councils to actively promote the delivery of EV charging provision in residential development.

But it is not the job of the County Council to be an EV charging point provider, any more than we own or manage petrol stations. The poor uptake of electric vehicles is not due to the availability of charging points since the capacity is already increasing to meet the demand, but rather the enormous cost of the vehicles, their range, and the sheer inconvenience of having to power vehicles in this way compared to fuel vehicles. The principle of *caveat emptor* applies to any potential EV purchaser to research their charging options in advance of purchase.

Renewable Heating Systems – I would not regard a difference of 2% between the levels of renewable heating systems installed in Worcestershire when compared to the national average as a statistically significant difference and would therefore conclude that our performance as broadly average.

#### Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport commented that the Council would endeavour to be in the top quartile performers for the roll out of EV charging points and the installation of Renewable Heating Systems.

#### **QUESTION 6** – Cllr Richard Udall asked Marcus Hart:

*"On Monday 1 November, a number of parents protested outside County Hall about the Special Education Needs provision and support in Worcestershire. They reported children with autism and anxiety being out of education for two or more years, they complained of a poor service and of shocking experiences, they suggested that statutory services were not being met. Does he believe they were right to protest and has he a message to the families concerned?"*

#### **Answer**

It is a matter of personal choice as to whether an individual chooses to exercise their democratic right to lawful protest and therefore that is not a matter for me to sit in judgement upon.

In respect of our SEND services, we welcomed our recent Local Area inspection by Ofsted/CQC who came to Worcestershire last week (1st – 3rd November). I would like to thank all of the parents who responded to the public survey that was made available by Ofsted and CQC and those that joined the open meeting and spoke directly with inspectors. I would also like to thank all of the children and young people who met with inspectors and shared their experiences and views. A formal outcome letter will be sent by the regulators to both the Clinical Commissioning Group and WCC and will then be available in the public domain. We anticipate that this will be in December subject to the regulator's quality assurance processes. We will use this feedback to take into account for our Strategy and planning going forward.

### Supplementary question

Further to allegations that had been made by service users, could the Cabinet Member confirm that the Council was compliant with all the statutory requirements in relation to SEN? The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills responded that he could not comment on individual cases but the CQC and Ofsted would be making representations to the Council if it was not fulfilling its statutory duties.

### **QUESTION 7** – Cllr Natalie McVey asked Tony Miller:

*"I was disgusted by the recent decision of all Worcestershire Conservative MP's to protect water companies, rather than Worcestershire's rivers, streams and brooks.*

*It comes after data released by the Environment Agency shows that water companies dumped raw sewage into England's waterways more than 400,000 times last year.*

*Campaigners have also raised concerns that only 14 per cent of rivers in England are rated in 'good' ecological health and none meet chemical standards.*

*When I was growing up, I distinctly remember the UK being known as the 'The Dirty Man of Europe' because of the appalling state of our rivers and beaches. Who would have thought that we would be back in that unenviable position?*

*My question for the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment is, what specifically he is doing to put pressure on the government and/or water companies to clean up their act?"*

### **Answer**

Thank you for your question. It was not the dumping of raw sewerage, it is partly untreated sewerage that is allowed to seep into the water course, only with extreme weather conditions. So when we get excessive rainfall, when our gullies and drains cannot take anymore, neither can Severn Trent's stations deal with this amount of water and sewerage and that is when there is a release of untreated sewerage.

The figure of 400 times of year will be given by the water companies themselves. When they do not treat all products, they register that information. It is an honest assessment of what the water companies can handle. Why does this happen? For example Droitwich have had two new large developments (1,500 houses), all impacting on a little sewerage plant in Ladywood. With extreme weather conditions, that releases into Salwarpe which then goes into the River Severn. If you look at the houses that were built in the 1800s that abut the riverbanks, you will find that their systems go directly into the watercourse and have done so for many years. When they are modified or brought up to date, that practice stops. There will be one or two properties that still release untreated products into the watercourse.

What are we doing? The Council works hand-in-hand with Severn Trent Flood Risk Management. We examine their practices and look at improving the quality of water. The quality of water is monitored by the EA. That is then detailed to produce a quality of water graph.

What has happened over the year? If you go back many years when weirs were put into different rivers that prevented certain fish life migrating upstream. That fish life cleaned the water up. That is happening again with the fish passes being installed. This will start to improve water quality. It will not stop what Severn Trent are doing at the moment but Severn Trent do recognise this problem and they are bringing their stations up to a standard that can deal with the appropriate number of houses.

In my role as Cabinet Member for Environment, I have been highlighting this unacceptable practice for quite some time now. Fortunately, in my role, I sit on the Coastal River and Floods Committee which hold Severn Trent and the EA to account for water quality. We have the opportunity to engage with Defra and Ministers on this subject and that is why you have recently see in the news that the water companies have been tasked with cleaning this problem up. We will continue to hold these people to account and if you have any more questions on that, please come and see me.

#### Supplementary question

What were the top 5 actions identified by the Cabinet Member to improve air and water quality and improve, enhance and protect nature biodiversity and how and when would these actions be delivered? The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment confirmed that progress was being made to improve water quality. The Council was part of the Severn Rivers Partnership which looked at the quality of watercourses.

#### **QUESTION 8** – Cllr Beverley Nielsen asked Marc Bayliss:

*"Malvern Hills College has been the subject of negotiations over the past year since Warwickshire College Group (WCG) decided to close and sell it. The Bransford Trust has made an offer, but to-date this has, very regrettably, not been accepted by WCG. Could the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economy and Skills let us know if Worcestershire County Council is prepared to step in to assist in securing the future of the College for Malvern Hills residents in the event that this deal is not secured and in particular if the County Council would be prepared to assist in achieving this, for example, by providing a public works loan to the community company seeking to run this 100-year old educational facility into the future?"*

#### **Answer**

Worcestershire County Council is supportive of the proposal from the Bransford Trust and in principle agrees that it is important to ensure that there remains the ability for adults to upskill, and impact positively their wellbeing in Malvern through learning. The Council currently through its Adult Learning Offer supports both a generalist arts and wellbeing learning curriculum that in light of the closure of WCG it will strengthen and embed further into the Malvern landscape.

Since the announcement of WCG's intention to close the campus, the Council both through its officers and members has extensively explored with WCG and other vested organisations how it could support the transition of the activity to either its own Adult Learning offer or other providers offer. The Council has also explored the potential to keep the site in Malvern as part of those conversations.

Councillor Nielsen can rest assured that WCC will support the Bransford trust to achieve its goals and as such would ask Councillor Nielsen in her role as a Malvern Hills Councillor to discuss further with Malvern Hills District Council, as such Worcestershire County Council would then be willing to explore a proposal with the District Council to match fund any contributions, they are able to make which can go towards securing the future of this site.

#### **QUESTION 9** – Cllr Martin Allen asked Alan Amos:

*"Following my communications to the Cabinet Member requesting that he considers if a Statue or Work of Art can be installed upon the new roundabout located on the A38/A4104 near Upton Upon Severn.*

*Could I please have an answer that I can relay back to Ripple Parish Council and Upton Town Council, both of whom are very keen to receive an answer?"*

## Answer

I thank Cllr Allen for his question.

I do support the installation of public art in appropriate locations, on or adjoining the Highway. They can enhance the environment and give focus to local communities by reflecting their history and culture. County Highways will consider such proposals where certain criteria can be met by the sponsor and we advise sponsors to contact us at the inception stage of any project.

Considerations for sponsors and the Council include:

- **Safety** to maintain visibility and not distract motorists, which is more likely to be achieved where the art is some distance from the carriageway and at locations where traffic speeds are lower. Where it is being proposed as part of a highway improvement scheme, the art should be suggested at concept or preliminary design stage so that it is included as part of the design and the Road Safety Audit process.
- **Cost:** The sponsor would normally need to cover procurement and installation costs including surveys, procurement, design, fabrication, installation, maintenance and the provision of any power/water supply.
- **Statutory requirements:** The sponsor would need to address any statutory requirements such as the need for ecological or archaeological consents and planning permission if required.
- **Design approval:** The County Council would need to approve the design of the art in terms of safety, engineering, maintainability and aesthetics. The scale, composition, design and materials used in the art should be in keeping with the surrounding urban scale, character and landscape setting.
- **Alternatives:** Where some of the criteria may not be achievable in the preferred location, it may be that they can be met elsewhere and, of course, it might be possible to modify aspects of the design such as height.

While this list may seem formidable, I would encourage sponsors to come forward with their ideas and not be put off. I have made it clear that we have a “can-do” approach with a default position of supporting any such proposal, not preventing it. Consequently, with regards to the new roundabout being constructed on the A38/A4104 near Upton-upon-Severn, I am pleased to confirm that the Project Team would be happy to meet with the sponsors to review their proposals and discuss the key considerations above.

I am pleased this proposal has been put forward and I wish it well.

**QUESTION 10** – Cllr Richard Udall asked Alan Amos:

*"Can the Cabinet Member confirm the last time, if ever, he has ever cycled on the highway through St John's, The Bull Ring, Tybridge Street and New Road?"*

## Answer

I thank Cllr Udall for his Question .

I cannot be too precise, but I think the last time I did so in the St. John's area would have been in early autumn 2017 when my route took me down London Road, through the City Centre, along New Road, up the Bullring when I dismounted, along Malvern Road, to Lower Wick, finishing at Bloomfield Road. Throughout my ride, I did not ride on the pavement or in any pedestrianized area, nor endanger any other person.

To pre-empt his supplementary, demanding more cycle lanes all over the place as he now desperately courts the Green vote following his narrow majority in May. In order to facilitate this, if he can tell me exactly what roads he wants to close, which lanes he wants to remove, and what residents parking he wants to take away, I will look into it and publicly report back so his constituents in Dines Green and elsewhere will see the traffic chaos and congestion that he wants to create.