

COUNCIL 13 JANUARY 2022 - AGENDA ITEM 10 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Josh Robinson asked Cllr Andy Roberts:

“Following the tragic murder of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, can I ask what lessons our council will learn from this?”

Answer

Thank you for the question. I know the whole Council was appalled by the fate of Arthur, but it is too soon to know all that can be learned from the tragedy. The way things will be managed in Solihull are very similar to how it would be done here, so I will cover our procedures. I can't give a short answer. I need to outline what safeguarding is, where legal responsibility lies and how such cases are reviewed.

‘Safeguarding’ refers to processes that are put in place to ensure that vulnerable children and young people don't experience abuse or neglect, including physically, emotionally or sexually. This duty is shared in the main by Health, the Police and local authorities (in particular social care and education) though district councils and public health have a role. To address this responsibility the Children Act 2004 requires every upper tier local authority to appoint a Director of Children's Services and designate a Lead Member. The Director has professional responsibility for children's services, including operational matters; the Lead Member has political responsibility.

Tina Russell is a dynamic and driven Director of Children's Services with a team of dedicated directors and staff. She has professional responsibility for the leadership as defined by Section 18 of the Act. As the County's DCS, she is responsible for securing the provision of services to address the needs of all children and young people, including the disadvantaged and vulnerable, and their families and carers. Section 19 of the Children Act 2004 also requires every top tier local authority to designate one of its members as Lead Member for Children's Services. In fulfilling this duty I am democratically accountable to communities, with a key role in defining the local vision and setting political priorities for children's services within the broader political context of the Council.

So, in that context, what happens if a tragedy occurs?

Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership is a strategic group with an independent chair. Tina Russell is a key member of the Partnership. Its three named Safeguarding Partners are the Local Authority, the Police and Health Clinical Commissioning Group. Collectively they are responsible for overseeing safeguarding work. The Partnership's Children Safeguarding Practice Review is a multi-agency subgroup having responsibility for reviewing and the management of all child safeguarding practice reviews [which we used to call Serious Case Reviews]. These include child deaths and incidents of very serious harm. Each case is reviewed through a multi-agency 'Rapid Review' to identify immediate learning. Then there can be either a local case review under an independent author, or the case may be referred to a National Panel for a Serious Case Review.

Both local and national case reviews bring together the records of all agencies that have had involvement with the child or family. An overview report is produced which provides a complete picture of events. This report contains analysis of contact with the child and family and decision making, it draws conclusions and makes recommendations on how agencies

have identified risk or harm and worked together to reduce and manage that risk and to promote the child's overall welfare and safety.

Reviews are referenced in the Partnership's annual report, which is considered by the County's Children and Families Scrutiny Committee and received by the Cabinet. If a case involves a child in care or a care leaver the outcomes are also considered by the Corporate Parenting Board.

The Director of Children's Services and myself, as the Lead Member, the Leader of the Council and my colleague Councillor Hart (who oversees education and early years) will learn from experiences, but it essential that every councillor shares the same commitment.

Supplementary question

The Cabinet Member confirmed that the lessons learned from the Arthur Labinjo-Hughes case would be reported to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel in due course.

QUESTION 2 – Cllr Adrian Hardman asked Cllr Alan Amos:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways use his executive powers to suspend Spitfire Homes statutory right of access to the Highway, and that of their contractor, Healey's? if they continue in the way they have been behaving; the damage to Eckington and surrounding area and it's businesses will be considerable. I would suggest a 2 year pause on the site to allow Eckington business's to recover."

Answer

I thank Cllr Hardman for his Question.

Can I say at the outset that if I did have the power he ascribed to me, I can assure him that his suggested ban of 2 years on that company would have been *at least* 2 years!

Unfortunately, County Highways do not have the power to suspend the developer, Spitfire Homes, from requesting activity on the network. Once planning permission is granted, WCC cannot reasonably hold back section 278 or section 50 works to connect the site and its required services to the public highway.

However, Cllr Hardman will be pleased to know that, following repeated failings and a previous warning, contractors L Healy Ltd *have* now been suspended from undertaking any new works on the Worcestershire highway network for a minimum of six months. They need to know that this may well be extended, depending on how well rectification works are completed on Pershore Road, Eckington and also on Main Road, Hallow. Rectification works are likely to be undertaken by a specialist surfacing company on Pershore Road, Eckington.

Officers are currently dealing with defective surfacing for section 50 works to install a sewer undertaken by L Healy Ltd on behalf of Spitfire Homes. Further to a WCC request, Spitfire Homes have agreed to set up a public engagement session in Eckington. They have agreed to both apologise and update businesses and the public on the recent failings and the future required works to take place.

Furthermore, I can confirm that WCC are also pursuing a future bond scheme for section 50 works, as is operated in Warwickshire, to help protect Worcestershire's highway asset further when section 50 works are undertaken by private contractors.

I hope that all contractors undertaking, or planning to undertake, works on our highway network will note the action in this case and will operate on the basis that we will not

tolerate shoddy work from any of them. I am sure that Cllr Hardman will want to put his considerable weight behind **our campaign to ensure that only the best is good enough for Worcestershire.**

Supplementary question

It should be noted that local businesses had been financially impacted by these street works as well as the covid pandemic, as they see it through no fault of their own. The Cabinet Member noted this concern and would take an overview of the issue and examine how processes could be further improved.

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Lynn Denham asked Cllr Marcus Hart:

"The government established a Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme for summer 2021. This was in response to Marcus Rashford's campaign to try and prevent children going hungry during school holidays. In a report to Worcestershire County Councillors in Autumn 2021, we were told that the summer HAF programme in Worcestershire reached '3,252 different children and young people'. Could the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Children and Families tell us what percentage of children eligible for free school meals participated in the summer programme? I would be grateful if he could be split by a) primary school age (Years 0 to 6) and b) senior school age (Year 7 and above)"

Answer

The percentage figure overall is 53.7% (42.5% for primary age children and 11.2% for secondary age children).

Supplementary question

It would appear from the data that 85% of children at secondary school age did not have access to free school meals in the summer holidays. In addition, recent figures had suggested that only £700k of the £1.5M Government funding had been allocated by the Council for the summer holiday programme, what happened to the other £800k? The Cabinet Member responded that just because parents did not take up the offer to partake in the holiday activities did not mean they had not been reached or given the opportunity to take part. There were clear mechanisms though the community and voluntary sector and schools to promote the voucher scheme for the HAF programme. The Government funding had totalled £1.6m and had been allocated to activities that had taken place across the summer, half-term and Christmas programmes.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Lyn Denham asked Cllr Alan Amos:

"Following my question to Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport at Council on 11 November 2021, we now know that people are having to wait a very long time to get a disabled parking space. He said there is a five month wait to even begin the TRO process which itself takes over six months. I have been told that demand for disabled persons parking spaces has increased and that there are a large number of TRO's waiting for consultation. How many disabled people are waiting across the county to get the parking space they are eligible for? How many people have waited more than 18 months from eligibility to installation?"

Answer

I thank Cllr Denham for her Question.

I fully accept the assumption behind it about the absolute importance that people place on owning and using a car and how dependent most people are on it for both their livelihood and leisure activities. I therefore completely agree how important it is for everybody, and disabled people in particular, to have ready use of their car and, in these cases, for there to

be adequate and convenient parking. That is why our policy is NOT to close roads, NOT to reduce road space, and NOT to remove residents parking, but rather to *increase* all three.

On Cllr Denham's particular point about numbers, I can confirm the following :

And in so doing I would advise that applications are added to the TRO waiting list as soon as they've been approved after meeting the eligibility criteria.

There are currently 4 active Disabled Parking Space proposals going through the TRO process of which :

- 1 was added to the TRO waiting list in March 2021, the TRO process commenced in July 2021; and is now due to be implemented;
- 1 was added to the TRO waiting list in June 2021, TRO process commenced in October 2021, and will be implemented next month;
- 1 was added to the TRO waiting list in July 2021 with the TRO process commencing last month; and
- one that was added to the TRO waiting list in November 2020 is now due to be implemented but that one was delayed by the change of Member in the May elections.

There are 13 Disabled Parking Space proposals awaiting the formal TRO process to start, of which

- 1 was added to the TRO waiting list in May 2021;
- 1 in June 2021;
- 2 in August 2021;
- 3 in September 2021;
- 3 in October 2021;
- 1 in November 2021;
- 1 in December 2021; and
- 1 this month.

Objections notwithstanding, it is highly unlikely that *any* of these will exceed 18 months between being added to the list and implementation.

And, of course, it's not just about the number of applications that meet the eligibility criteria that take up officer time but the total number of applications *received* as each one has to be fully considered and assessed, whether they turn out to be successful or not. For example, whilst last year 37% of completed applications were approved i.e. met the criteria, the other 63% also had to be assessed.

At the last Question, I did ask Cllr Denham to let me have details of any particular cases that were causing concern. Unfortunately, she declined to do so and whilst she was perfectly entitled to, it did mean that I could not establish whether any case or cases had been unreasonably held up. But on the above statistics, across the County of nearly 600,000 people, that certainly does not appear to be the case and there is no evidence of any systemic failure. On giving Disabled Parking Spaces TROs priority over other TROs, we need to remember that TROs (mainly yellow lines) are put down for safety reasons to prevent accidents and injuries taking place due to selfish or dangerous parking. So every TRO is important and we consequently treat them all equally and fairly. The number of TRO applications overall is increasing so we have increased staff resourcing in the Traffic Management Team by 15% to meet this growing demand.

Supplementary question

In response to a query about the criteria for the introduction of TROs and whether a Quality Impact Assessment had been undertaken, the Cabinet Member undertook to provide a copy of the relevant criteria to Cllr Lynn Denham.