

COUNCIL 10 NOVEMBER 2022 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Richard Udall will ask Cllr Tracey Onslow:

“Dysgraphia is a neurological disorder of written expression that impairs writing ability and fine motor skills. It is a learning disability that affects children and adults, and interferes with practically all aspects of the writing process, including spelling, legibility, word spacing and sizing, drawing and expression. However, its mostly untreated and very few people have heard of the condition and most schools do not test for it. Can the Cabinet Member confirm the state of awareness in Worcestershire schools, how many children have Dysgraphia in Worcestershire, how many children receive help with their learning because of Dysgraphia and what advice and support is on offer to Worcestershire schools to ensure awareness of the disorder is improved?”

Answer

How aware are schools of Dysgraphia?

The specific use of the term dysgraphia in Worcestershire schools is limited but schools are aware of the impact that the sorts of difficulties described within an identification of Dysgraphia can have. There were 5 types of Dysgraphia: dyslexic, motor, spatial, phonological, and lexical dysgraphia.

How many children have Dysgraphia in Worcestershire?

The only specific learning difficulty that the inclusion teams currently formally identify is dyslexia. We informally use the terms dyscalculia, dyspraxia and dysgraphia but these are always in the general context of maths difficulties, movement difficulties and handwriting difficulties. Because it is not formally identified it is not known how many children in Worcestershire schools have this condition.

How many children receive help with their learning because of Dysgraphia?

When a pupil is identified as having traits associated with dysgraphia, they can be referred to the Inclusion Support Services for further specialist support. All of the pupils referred will then undergo an assessment that will look at their general learning skills along with the more specific areas that are affected by dysgraphia; fine motor difficulties, visual-spatial difficulties and handwriting issues. In addition, spelling problems, difficulty with word retrieval and verbal fluency, and language processing problems will be assessed. The assessments recommended by most organisations are regularly used by the Learning Support Team when completing an assessment: DASH, (Detailed assessment of speed of handwriting) Beery VMI (Beery-Buktenica developmental test of visual-motor integration), TOMAL 2 (Test of Memory and Learning) CTOPP 2 (Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing). These help to identify difficulties which will then be addressed by the specialist teacher with recommendations to help improve outcomes or mitigate the negative effects of such difficulties. This is presented in a written report including findings, strengths and needs, and targets.

What advice and support is on offer to Worcestershire schools to ensure awareness of the disorder is improved?

The physical difficulties associated with dysgraphia are very similar for a child with DCD (developmental coordination difficulties) often called dyspraxia. There has been recent

liaison between LST and the Paediatric Occupational Therapy team to ensure that each is aware of the roles and responsibilities of the other. It must be an OT or Paediatrician who diagnoses DCD, although LST can recommend strategies and resources to help with handwriting difficulties. A joint training package for schools is currently in development. The linguistic stage of writing, matching auditory and visual information into symbols for letters links closely with dyslexic type difficulties. Worcestershire has recently issued an updated Dyslexia Pathway which helps schools to correctly identify children and provide the support that will help them at school. Schools can request individualised training or attend centralised training such as the Dyslexia training for SENCOs being held this month. Schools can be provided with resources to help, from writing slopes, to access to software that reduces the burden of writing. They can also borrow recognised motor skills programme that help to develop fine and gross motor skills. Although schools are not routinely identifying dysgraphia, most are very aware of the approaches that can be used to help including the use of technology with speech to text software for example. We find this approach of helping the individual more helpful on a day-to-day basis than using a blanket term that can present itself in many different ways.

Supplementary question

In response to a query by Cllr Udall, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education undertook to look at what action could be taken to improve awareness and understanding of Dysgraphia in both children and adults and the possibility of a report being brought to Cabinet.

QUESTION 2 – Cllr Josh Robinson will ask Cllr Simon Geraghty:

“Is there anything from the Worcestershire County Council side that would be delaying the publication of the Bromsgrove district plan?”

Answer

Firstly can I thank the member for his question.

Bromsgrove District Council (BDC) released a statement on 17 September concerning the development of their plan. The full statement can be found on BDC’s website. Bromsgrove District Plan Review - bromsgrove.gov.uk

Worcestershire County Council are currently working closely with officers from Bromsgrove District Council on the works to progress their Local Plan.

I understand that we are about to commence transport modelling work utilising the new Countywide Model to assess the likely impacts across the transport network and identify in detail the required infrastructure necessary to support growth. Similarly Worcestershire Children First (WCF) is also undertaking work to assess the impact of school provision and places within all phases of education.

This current body of work will inform the Infrastructure Delivery Plan which will form one of the many documents supporting the plan once submitted to the Secretary of State for examination, once the plan has progressed through its initial phases.

I am advised that this work is additional to that required by Bromsgrove District Council for their Preferred Options Stage and reflects the desire as set in their statement to provide the “the highest levels of certainty in our plan-making”.

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“Yet again there are problems with school and college transport this academic year and the complaints are pouring in. By October half term there were still 600 students at Worcester

Sixth Form College who were awaiting bus passes, for example. In the meantime, parents who have already paid for these passes are having to buy ad hoc tickets for their children, which they are struggling to afford. There are also not enough buses so students are being left stranded at bus stops and unable to get into college to attend their classes.

What is the explanation for the County Council's failure to deliver on its statutory responsibility to enable children and young people to access an education and what plans are there to compensate families who are being left out of pocket?"

Answer

Can I thank Cllr Denham for her question and I am sorry that she is receiving so many complaints regarding school transport.

We received a significant increase in applications this year. There were 1,093 applications, 831 of which made the required post 16 contribution and passes were subsequently issued. The majority of passes were printed in August and September with 791 passes printed before October half term. There were only 40 passes outstanding at this point, due to late submissions, however I am pleased to report that these have all been printed and posted to parents.

There are only 8 Worcester Sixth Form College records still to be assessed, one of those contained inaccurate information and the remainder were received in the last week. These applications are assessed on a regular basis throughout the summer period and printed on receipt of the required contribution.

To specifically answer Cllr Denham's question regarding compensation and failure to comply with our statutory duties, we ensured all children could access transport for education, e.g. we suspended the requirement for a travel pass until October half term on WCC contracts. Where families have submitted eligible applications and use public transport they are being reimbursed accordingly. He invited the councillor to withdraw her accusation that the Council was failing to deliver its statutory duties and not to repeat it without sufficient evidence.

Supplementary question

The school age population in Worcestershire continued to grow. What plans were in place to avoid the issues that had been experienced this year with school transport? The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport recognised that there had been issues this year but he would be working alongside the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education to look at various adjustments to improve the service as well looking at resource issues. He emphasised that the Council had not failed in its statutory responsibilities to provide the service.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Dan Boatright will ask Cllr Marcus Hart:

"I have received several queries about the Household Support Fund and the fact that people cannot obtain help because there is a waiting list after 2300 families applied for help. Given that £900,000 was allocated in the first round, how much funding would have been needed to meet the demand of all applications? I have also been informed that in the first round of funding support through the Household Support Fund was fully allocated to residents in all categories except pensioners. Does the council know why the pensioner allocation remained unused?"

Answer

The energy support scheme through the Household Support Fund is operated by a third party on behalf of the council. The scheme which ran from April to September had to close

and was only able to accept applications to a waiting list due to having to provisionally ringfence funding for every application until the required eligibility is confirmed and the required evidence is submitted.

Average support was around £431 per household which equates to around £1.24 million if every application received in the previous scheme evidenced their eligibility for support. Each application has to be manually checked for eligibility and required evidence submitted and viewed by the managing organisation in order to manage fraud risk. Unfortunately the evidence is not being sent at the time the household submits the application and staff resource is required to follow up on missing evidence. This is being continually monitored and processes trialled to improve the speed at which applications can be considered.

Additional budget to allocate would not have increased the speed that applications were processed as there is a restriction set by government on maximum administration costs, and there would not have been sufficient additional management and administration costs to make an impact. There was also the very tight delivery timeframes which would impact on the ability to process all applications in the timeframe.

As per the national guidance, a third of the funding had to be ringfenced and spent only on pensioners. Through previous schemes, the council and the third-party provider knew that the uptake would be much lower from our residents of pension age, but in order to comply with the government grant criteria, that funding was unable to be used for other household compositions. The scheme remained open for pensioners and whilst it was committed by the end of the programme, we expect all pensioner household recipients to have received their support by the end of November at the very latest. As some of the support provided includes new heating systems, these can take a significant amount of time to reach completion due to scheduling works with external heating engineers.

The new scheme is now open for applications via this link <https://actonenergy.org.uk/project/worcestershire-household-support-fund/>, this will be communicated alongside the wider Household Support Fund programme in November, and updated on our dedicated webpage https://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/info/20241/warmer_worcestershire/2519/household_support_fund. Our third party provider have offered to run an online session to brief members on the scheme.

Supplementary question

In response to a concern about poor communication and the promptness of the distribution of funding, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities undertook to ensure that applications for support from the Household Support Fund to the local community were dealt with in a diligent and expeditious fashion.

QUESTION 5 – Cllr Josh Robinson will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“Can we have an update on the 144 and 144a bus services please?”

Answer

The 144A (previously the 144) is being considered as part of the strategic network review currently being conducted by Transport for West Midlands. In the interim we are engaging with the incumbent operator regarding potential improvements and integration for services, and I have also engaged with Transport for West Midlands and will be meeting with them again soon where I will continue to relay the feedback we are receiving from the users of this service, which I may add is only running today thanks to the intervention of this County Council to provide subsidy funding whilst passenger numbers were so low that the route became commercially non-viable. As Cabinet Member, along with the officer team who are

doing excellent work, we remain committed to continuously reviewing, enhancing and securing the future of bus travel for all of Worcestershire.

Supplementary question

In response to a query from Cllr Robinson, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport undertook to provide updates on the progress of discussions about the future of the 144 bus service and confirm the date of the next meeting of the Bromsgrove Passenger Task Force.

QUESTION 6 – Cllr Richard Udall will ask Cllr Tracey Onslow:

“How many Worcestershire Schools have temporary classrooms, how many temporary classrooms are used for education in Worcestershire schools and how many children, in a typical school week, receive lessons in a temporary classroom?”

Answer

There are 55 single temporary buildings across 24 schools. The reason the word classroom was not being used was they were not all used for educational purposes as some were used as offices or storage etc. Of the 36 temporary classrooms, 22 of them were in the Wyre Forest area and most of those would be negated following the building at the Lea Castle site. The remaining 14 temporary classrooms were outside the Wyre Forest area.

Due to timetabling, there was no way of knowing how many children in a typical school week received education in a temporary classroom.

Supplementary question

In response to a request to commit to the removal of all temporary classroom/buildings by 2030, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility indicated that this would be achieved by 2025.

QUESTION 7 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Karen May:

“I welcome the Worcestershire Joint Local Health & Wellbeing Strategy which Council has now adopted. I applaud the aspirations to improve health & wellbeing & reduce health inequalities. Given that it is reported that 80% of children & young people felt that Covid has had a negative impact on their emotional wellbeing & that the Health & Wellbeing Strategy aims to reduce crime & anti-social behaviour, does the Cabinet Member believe that the provision of Positive Activities for young people, which her department commissions is adequate to meet current need?”

Answer

Public Health currently fund 14 providers of youth services across the county from the Public Health Grant. These VCS organisations also receive funding for delivery from other sources. There are also many other uniformed and non-uniformed youth groups delivering support for young people within Worcestershire adding to the overall wider ‘youth offer’. We also fund an infrastructure organisation to support all youth providers, and which also helps them to access more funding and build capacity.

The National Youth Agency estimates a third of young people are likely to benefit from regular contact with youth provision. We do not have this information for all youth provision delivered in Worcestershire but can estimate the youth provision funded by WCC in 2021/22 was regularly accessed by 14,539 young people.

Going forward, working with Districts and youth providers we are implementing district youth networks to help coordinate, build capacity and increase the reach of the wider local youth offer in addition to the public health funded delivery.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-being undertook to liaise with Cllr Lynn Denham to discuss the additional funding and support being provided to young people to promote positive activities.