

COUNCIL 16 FEBRUARY 2023 - AGENDA ITEM 8 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Richard Udall asked Cllr Andy Roberts:

"According to the Kinship Charity, Worcester City has 297 children in Kinship care, saving this local authority £11.88m in paying for looked after care. Is he aware that in a survey for the charity, 35% of Worcester Kinship Carers say they are worried about support they receive and claim they may have to stop caring for their child. 70% of Worcester Kinship Carers feel they do not get the support they need from their local authority. 58% are struggling to meet their Child's need due to the current financial pressures. Does he recognise these figures and statistics."

Answer

There are five questions contained in what is asked. I need to add some context before I try to address them.

Our 'Family and Friends policy' (updated in 2022) outlines how those children and young people unable to live with their parents can be cared for on a voluntary basis by "friends, family or connected persons". These are 'Kinship Carers' who have been assessed and approved as foster carers. It means the children are 'looked after children' and as councillors we are their corporate parents.

Financial support offered for kinship carers is in line with that of our mainstream foster carers, based on the age of the child. With it comes access to training, support, and special payments. A foster carer may also be entitled to claim benefits and tax credits.

Our aim is to strengthen families, rather than break them apart. However, when it is best for the child to be cared for elsewhere (and that is a devilishly difficult decision) the wider family is explored first. If this is not viable, a foster carer is sought. I've explained that Kinship carers are foster carers and receive similar support.

I can't properly verify the source of the data in the question. I couldn't find any reference to the 'Kinship Charity' (as cited). Though I am very familiar with the excellent work of 'Kinship Carers UK' (whose CEO is a Worcestershire resident). I'm also aware of 'Kinship' which is the leading Kinship charity in the UK, as well as Grandparents Plus. Nevertheless, I've correlated the data presented with the results of a survey of our foster carers and kinship carers.

I don't recognise the £11.8m saved by the Council. The value of foster carers cannot be exaggerated. All foster carers change lives, but kinship carers offer a "unique" family relationship. I give this absolute assurance: It is our duty to consider a kinship arrangement first, and it is what is best for the child. The option is not preferred for financial reasons.

We currently have 146 approved kinships foster carer households looking after 215 children, rather than the 297 cited in the question. This represents 22% of our children in foster care (a recent slight drop).

The question suggests that a third of kinship carers may have to stop caring for their child. Following my meetings with Kinship Carers UK, we now extend financial support to families who move from kinship care to special guardianship arrangements (which gives the family greater independence). If this accounts for the recent 1% drop in the proportion of kinship carers, it is welcomed.

Regarding the suggestion that 70% of Worcester kinship carers feel they do not get the support they need. The local survey showed 100% of carers answered that they felt 'supported by their supervising social worker'.

The question states that 35% of Worcester Kinship Carers say they are worried about support. The local survey found that 97% of carers feel they have a good relationship with their social worker.

Regarding the cost of living. Families are finding things difficult, but Councillors can be reassured that 96% of our kinship and foster carers find our social worker's regular supervision is helpful in supporting children's needs. The question suggests that 58% of our kinship carers are having financial difficulties. This compares with 90% of all families, according to a recent national survey. I think the 58% suggested should be disregarded. There is no room for complacency. We, as corporate parents, and our dedicated staff, must remain committed to supporting families and extended families through these difficult times.

Sometimes children live within an extended family through an informal arrangement. This doesn't involve assessment. The child is not a 'looked after child' so we are not their corporate parent.

I'll be happy to answer any supplementary question, but I would be grateful if it could be made clear whether it refers to kinship carers (where we are corporate parents) or to arrangements made outside the sphere of children and family social services.

Supplementary question

In response to a request, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families undertook to provide Cllr Richard Udall with details of the payments received by Kinship Carers.

QUESTION 2 – Cllr Beverley Nielsen asked Cllr Mike Rouse:

“Could the Cabinet member for Highways and Transport produce the latest cycle routes across Worcestershire with timetables for implementation and proposed sources of funding? If priorities are allocated to certain routes can this also be provided so we know which routes are due for early development?”

Answer

Worcestershire County Council are currently working to prepare Local Cycling Walking and Infrastructure plans (LCWIP's) for key towns across the County. The LCWIP's will set out our strategic approach to walking and cycling.

In the interim we continue to deliver, the current programme includes:

| Name of ATC | Location | Funding | Outline of Works | Completion Due |
|------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Kidderminster canal towpath | St Mary's Ringway to Falling Sands Bridge | Wyre Forest Levelling Up fund | Works comprise localised widening, and resurfacing of the towpath. Also | Autumn 2023 |

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| | | | links to earlier works between St Mary's Ringway to Oxbow Way (delivered 2022) | |
| Worcester canal towpath | Blackpole and Sixways, | Worcester Towns Fund | Works comprise of localised widening, signing and resurfacing of the towpath. This links into earlier works undertaken between Friesland Close (bridge 16) and Blackpole Road (bridge 19) | Autumn 2023 |
| Worcester Riverside | St Marks Close and Dace Road | PROW | Works comprise of resurfacing of existing footpath to between 2.5m and 1.5m | Summer 2023 |
| Worcester Riverside | Diglis Bridge to St Peters | Worcester Towns Fund and s106 | Works comprise resurfacing of newly created PROW, installation of the first parallel crossing in Worcestershire, and removal of barriers to active travel along the route and signing and waymarking. | Summer 2024 |
| Ronkswood Routes | Spetchley Road and Lyppard Grange (Warndon) | Worcester Towns Fund | Work comprise of upgrading rights of way for cycling use, localised widening along the route, installation of a toucan crossing and signing and waymarking. | Summer 2024 |
| BREP A38 – Scheme 3 | Rail Station to Town Centre | Bromsgrove Route Enhancement Programme (BREP) | Scheme proposes a shared use facility with improved crossing points, upgraded lighting, signing and waymarking. | 2024/25 TBC |
| BREP A38 – Scheme 9 | Harvington Road/Fordhouse Road | Bromsgrove Route Enhancement Programme (BREP) | Scheme proposes a mix of shared use and on-road cycle facilities, traffic calming, improved crossing points, upgraded lighting, | Autumn 2023 |

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport commented that the Council was committed to delivering the Worcester to Malvern cycle route subject to funding opportunities. Active Travel England had allocated a small sum which allowed the Council to develop the LCWIP and this included Malvern Hills. Developing the LCWIP would then allow the Council to pursue further funding opportunities.

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Matt Jenkins asked Cllr Mike Rouse:

"What is the county council's strategy for rolling out EV charge points on the highway?"

Answer

Worcestershire County Council recognises the importance of developing a comprehensive strategy that addresses the various factors involved in the rollout of EV charge points, including the locations and types of charging points, the impact on local communities and businesses, and the funding and procurement mechanisms required to implement such a strategy.

Our current strategy for this issue will be reviewed and developed further as part of the Local Transport Plan 5, preparations for which will start soon. Local Transport Plan 4 identified the need to support the development of EV charging infrastructure, and this will continue to be a priority in LTP5.

We will continue to engage with stakeholders and consult on our proposals to ensure that we deliver a strategy that meets the needs of the county and supports the transition to more sustainable transport solutions.

Supplementary question

It was queried how residents without off-road parking could be helped to access EV charging points. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport responded that there was a whole range of issues that needed to be considered with respect of the roll out of EV charging points but every effort would be made to make them available throughout Worcestershire.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Natalie McVey asked Cllr Tracey Onslow:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility tell me whether there is a forum, or any support network, to assist teachers and pastoral staff in their education of Ukrainian children and young people in Worcestershire schools?"

Answer

To assist teachers in the education of Ukrainian children, WCF utilises existing forums and communication structures to share information and resources to support Ukraine arrivals.

Most commonly this would be through:

- The regular education bulletins that go to all schools in Worcestershire which include updates and links to resources to support Ukraine pupils. In addition, we issued a 'special edition' of this bulletin in May 2022 that was entirely focused on the support to schools for these children.
- Termly Phase Meetings where Headteacher representatives from each school phase (including First, Primary, Middle, Secondary, High, Special and Alternative Provision)

meet with WCF senior leaders to discuss challenges and strategic support. As part of these meetings, the support for Ukraine pupils has been discussed.

Advice and signposting referred to in Education bulletins include:

- Free Training to become a Trauma Informed and Attachment Aware Setting;
- Transport Assistance where eligible;
- Language support, through the WCF Learning Support Team;
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for post-16 and adult learning, community based with funding support;
- Early Help Offer;
- Access to Oak National Academy, who have rolled out an auto-translate function across all 10,000 of its online lessons;
- Free School Meals for all Ukraine arrivals;
- Ukraine Culture Briefing Sessions for schools;
- Support to access remote education during the pandemic that has been extended to those Ukrainian pupils who need laptops.
- Access to Ukrainian learning materials and the Ukrainian curriculum to compliment Ukrainian pupils' education;
- Ukrainian Educational Materials to support both pupils and families;
- Access to Twinkl, English/Ukrainian language resources.
- Starting Well Partnership events for Ukrainian families living in Worcestershire

On a related note, where families from the Ukraine enter the UK under the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme there is additional funding available to support the education of children. The Secretary of State for Education lays down the terms and conditions on which assistance is given in relation to the Homes for Ukraine scheme's education.

WCF are currently undertaking a check of school aged children that District Councils have recorded as entering the UK under the Home for Ukraine scheme against school admission information to ensure that all children have a school place, and that schools have received the appropriate funding.

Supplementary question

It was queried whether this information was being communicated to schools and families because there appeared to be a lack of awareness. In addition, Ukrainian children were receiving remote school lessons from their homeland which could be prove excessive. On receipt of information from Cllr Natalie McVey, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education undertook to look into how details of the support available to teachers and pastoral staff in the education of Ukrainian children and young people could be better communicated. She added that it was important that the Ukrainian children were able to keep in touch with their own curriculum.

QUESTION 5 – Cllr Dan Boatright asked Cllr Adam Kent:

"I have recently requested information on the various bids for the new school in Worcester. I was informed this was commercially confidential. It would be very easy to release the information without names and institutions. Given this is taxpayers money, a publicly owned school and in the public interest, why is there no mechanism to allow public scrutiny?"

Answer

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication undertook to arrange a meeting with Cllr Dan Boatright to discuss the answer to his question.

QUESTION 6 – Cllr Richard Udall asked Cllr Karen May:

"A Worcestershire MP, who also happens to be a former Health Secretary, has suggested the introduction of payments for patients attending GP appointments and for making a trip to A&E. Does she share my view that this would be an extremely bad idea and would further damage relationships between Doctors and their patients and could increase health inequalities in Worcestershire, will she join me in calling upon all Worcestershire Members of Parliament to oppose such a suggestion?"

Answer

The fundamental principle of the NHS is that it delivers free care at the point of need, for all. The concept of charging patients to access services would not incentivise people to visit their GP, or to attend Accident and Emergency in urgent situations. Such approach could exacerbate already worsening health disparities for those unable to pay and undermine trust between doctors and patients.

We continue to recognise and communicate the importance of preventative care and encourage people to attend GP appointments or access urgent care services in serious or life-threatening situations.

I feel there is no necessity to call upon Worcestershire MPs on this matter.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-being did not agree with the sentiment that the employment of GPs should be nationalised. She did believe that the employment contracts for GPs should be re-examined, particularly regarding pension contributions to encourage GPs to continue in work longer.