

COUNCIL 13 JULY 2023 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below. Questions 1 and 5 were not asked on the day.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Martin Allen asked Cllr Mike Rouse:

"The main road through Pershore has for some time now had a speed limit set to 20mph. Does the Cabinet Member with Responsibility and officers consider this to be a successful change or a failure?"

Answer

Pershore has had a 20mph speed set since 31 Oct 2008

Given that there has been no difference in the collision and casualty rates for this section of road following the introduction of the 20mph limit it is difficult to claim either success or failure from a strategic perspective. Therefore, I cannot provide an answer in the terms he has requested from my position and would have to defer to local opinion.

QUESTION 2 – Cllr Natalie McVey asked Cllr Andy Roberts:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility tell me how many unaccompanied child refugees are currently being accommodated in Worcestershire?"

Answer

The number of children accommodated who are unaccompanied changes week to week. Some children arrive through the National Transfer scheme and others turn up in our area having made, what on the face of it appears to be, their own journey. Others have been subsequently identified as having been placed incorrectly by the home office in Adult refugee hotels in our area.

As at end June 23 our data showed:

- UASC in our care on 30/06/2023 73
- UASC Care Leavers on 30/06/2023 100

And the following were new entrants in year:

- UASC new entries 2023/24 to date 8
- UASC new entries 2022/23 80

Supplementary question

The details of the information sharing protocol with district councils was queried specifically with regard to councillors' role as Corporate Parents? The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education responded that Corporate Parenting Board members received data about the numbers of Children who were looked after in each District and received reports about UASC. There were named representatives from each district council on the Corporate Parenting Board.

There was no separate information sharing protocol regarding UASC or Corporate Parenting. Data was anonymised and case information was shared with appropriate consents and on a need-to-know basis.

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Richard Udall asked Cllr Marcus Hart:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility confirm the plans and processes for the introduction of Libraires Unlocked at St John's Library? Can he confirm the timescales involved and the process for consultation which will take place with employees, volunteers, user groups and the general public?"

Answer

The County Council has reinvested a £150k as a result of the decision of the administration of Worcester City Council to remove the funding for the library in St John's. The library in St John's is under no threat from this administration and will expand.

He anticipated after full engagement with staff and we have to go through a process of implementation including full engagement with our service users, local residents and customers (with engagement sessions over the next 3+ months), by the end of the calendar year everything will be in place to expand and enhance the wonderful library at St John's to ensure that we are able to give an even greater library offer than we do already.

Supplementary question

Cllr Udall indicated that he had received a petition signed by 1,100 local residents opposing the changes to St John's library. He requested that the Cabinet Member met with Friends of St John's Library, attended a public meeting and kept an open mind on the issue. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities responded that he had confidence in the library staff and management team's ability to deal with the operational issues. Two members of staff would be retained at the library on 37 hour and 24-hour contracts. The introduction of Libraires Unlocked formed part of the Council's policy to expand library provision. He highlighted the positive response from library users in Stourport and Droitwich to the introduction of this scheme.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Matt Jenkins asked Cllr Richard Morris:

"Does the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment agree with me that limiting global warming to 1.5C will require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society?"

Answer

This global issue requires concerted action at all levels: international, national, local and individual. At COP 21, (Paris Agreement), 196 Nations and the EU committed to drawing up plans to cut emissions in order to limit global warming to 1.5oC. It's fair to say some countries are further forward than others in delivering on these commitments.

Nevertheless, we all have a responsibility, and we all need to look at what we can do. The County Council (as do all local authorities) has its own role to play and has set targets for carbon reduction from its own operations, (90% reduction in emissions from our buildings, fleet & street lighting by 2025/26 and net zero for all emissions by 2050).

No doubt Cllr Jenkins is aware of the work the Council has been undertaking on this for many years:

as well as cutting our own emissions, we are working with partners to deliver the Worcestershire Energy Strategy (target to halve county emissions by 2030) and are helping businesses and residents to cut their emissions and save money, supporting the

enhancement of local biodiversity etc.... You may know that the Council has recently been recognised for our work with the award of Council of the Year at the Regional Energy Efficiency Awards as well as being shortlisted in the LGC Awards for our work supporting local business.

Supplementary question

It was queried whether the carbon literacy training received by officers could be made available to members. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment responded that training for members would be looked at as part of the work of the MAG on carbon reduction and biodiversity. It was important that this training was made appropriate to the needs of members.

QUESTION 5 – Cllr Beverley Nielsen asked Cllr Mike Rouse:

"We welcome and fully support the rollout of Demand Response Transport (DRT) to Malvern Hills. How will the Council continue to improve this initiative and take any learning into further schemes? For example, do we feel our tendering and implementation approach enabled the optimum collaborative approach with the local community transport charities involved?"

Answer

With both Bromsgrove and now Malvern, we are understanding how DRT can be operated within the County. It is important that DRT is developed so that it can support both urban and rural communities by working in parallel with more traditional fixed bus services. As we have a vast amount of data from those that use or attempt to use the DRT services, we are able to learn and adapt the current schemes as well as develop future schemes with this improved understanding on what works.

A robust and fair tendering exercise was undertaken to award the contract and we do have two community transport operators who are operating one of the Malvern DRT vehicles. This allows us to understand how we can support these types of schemes in undertaking DRT services and how it can integrate with the valuable services that these operators provide.

QUESTION 6 – Cllr Richard Udall asked Cllr Mike Rouse:

"Worcester City recently won a purple flag award for its night time economy, rewarding entertainment venues in the city centre and encouraging greater public participation in a safe, flourishing and inclusive sector of the local economy. Is the Cabinet Member with Responsibility aware that little or no public transport provision exists in Worcester which can support the growing night-time economy in the city? No busses from most parts of my Division exist after 6:30pm. Making it difficult for people to gain employment in the sector, to visit the city centre and to get home safely.

The lack of public transport is holding back the success of the night-time economy and is causing harm to the entertainment and leisure industry. Can he consider a full review of support to night time public transport provision within the city, with the aim of attempting to improve provision?"

Answer

Can I thank Councillor Udall for his question. The bus industry in Worcester has seen a decline with a reduction in passenger numbers post pandemic and more recently with above inflation increases in fuel and driver wages. Worcestershire has invested in our bus

network to ensure that we can continue to provide bus services across the county, often seen as a lifeline to people in urban/rural areas.

It is fantastic news that Worcester City received the Purple Flag accreditation, recognising it as an area of excellence during the evening and we will continue to work with bus operators to create new opportunities to grow our public transport network and benefit our economy. The new Worcestershire Enhanced Partnership with operators will ensure that we continue to listen to our residents to meet their needs, but also to understand demand and to ensure that we direct our resources to the right place.

An additional £1.43m funding will be available from BSIP+ funding and this will enable us to demonstrate our commitment to improving public transport across the county, to improve journey times, increase reliability, and improve information to passengers.

The provision of additional public transport at night in Worcester City is something that we will continue to review.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport agreed to meet Cllr Richard Udall and the representatives of the Worcester Bid Purple Flag Scheme to discuss how public transport could be improved to support the night time economy in Worcester.

QUESTION 7 – Cllr Matt Jenkins asked Cllr Mike Rouse:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport confirm what the Council's policy is for introducing low traffic neighbourhoods?"

Answer

Whilst a number of councils introduced LTNs during the pandemic, with the support of funding from Active Travel England through the (then) Emergency Active Travel Fund, a number of schemes have been met with significant local opposition and/or were ineffective, and were removed as a response. One of the issues raised is the increased emissions at the boundary roads for an LTN for instance as drivers seek to avoid the zones by driving around them rather than abandoning the motor car for their journey. Figures from Islington, for example, have shown that the number of vehicles using the Blackstock Road, where there is a Primary School, has increased by 7,000 per day.

I note with interest the recent remarks by the Secretary of State for Transport regarding LTNs. I draw particular attention to his concerns that LTNs have radicalised groups of people against cyclists and risk increasing tensions between different road users. One LTN in London, for instance, resembled a scene from an apocalyptic film when local residents torched the infrastructure. As Cabinet Member, I will not take actions that could lead to similar outcomes here in Worcestershire.

LTNs are not the panacea some think they are, and that is perhaps why Whitehall is no longer going to fund any of them. WCC has been investing in a range of approaches to provide for travel choice, including investing in walking and cycling routes either through upgrades to existing provision to shared surfaces for walkers and cyclists, or completely new active travel routes, installing additional crossings for pedestrian and cyclists, dropped kerbs across the county. In specific locations, linked to new cycle routes, speed limits have been reduced to facilitate active travel.

We have a plan for investing further in active travel over the coming years, highlights include the delivery of Kepax and Hampton Bridges, delivery of the routes funded through

the Towns Fund and Levelling Up in Wyre Forest and Worcester City, in partnership with the districts, a project focussed on removal of barriers in the City which restrict cycling and pedestrians with buggies, pushchairs etc and the development of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans for the major settlements.

My focus as Cabinet Member, and the focus of this Council, is the development of schemes that deliver progress on our modal shift aims, without removing the reasonable choices that thousands of our residents make every day to help them get to work and keep our local economy growing. I will not extinguish the freedom of men and women across this county to choose how they move, but I will support them to make positive choices – and anyone who is serious about real long term modal shift should realise that communist-style diktaks are not the way to achieve lasting behavioural change.

Supplementary question

It was queried whether the Cabinet Member would give consideration to a request from a local councillor to introduce a low traffic neighbourhood? The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport responded that a policy of low traffic neighbourhoods would not be rolled out across Worcestershire. He would look at any issues or concerns raised by local councillors in their division on a case-by-case basis.