

COUNCIL 9 NOVEMBER 2023 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below. Questions 1 and 7 were not asked on the day. Question two was withdrawn by the questioner at the meeting.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Richard Udall will ask Cllr Marc Bayliss:

“I have received a large number of residential concerns about Royal Mail service and delivery. It’s clear the postal service is in crisis, with many people complaining they no longer receive a daily delivery, this is despite a legal obligation for Royal Mail to deliver post daily to every property, six days a week. Residents have missed credit card payment deadlines, job offers and hospital appointments. Many small businesses still depend on royal mail postal deliveries for payment, invoices, statements and orders. Many concerns have been expressed that the service is prioritising the more profitable parcel delivery over essential letter delivery. Will he investigate the reliability and the service provision of Royal Mail in Worcestershire, and take any appropriate action to raise these concerns with Royal Mail management and to seek assurances of any plans or proposals to improve postal services within Worcestershire?”

Answer

We understand the impact that poor service by the Royal Mail can have on our residents, on initial investigation we have found that:

Ofcom launched an investigation in May 2023 which is still ongoing, as Royal Mail performance was poor nationally. Under Ofcoms rules, Royal Mail is required to meet specific performance targets across the year, excluding the Christmas period. Among other targets, Royal Mail must:

- deliver 93% of First Class mail within one working day of collection;
- deliver 98.5% of Second Class mail within three working days of collection; and
- complete 99.9% of delivery routes on each day that a delivery is required.

Royal Mail did not meet the above performance targets in 2022/23, as it:

- delivered 73.7% of First Class mail within one working day;
- delivered 90.7% of Second Class mail within three working days; and
- completed 89.35% of delivery routes for each day on which a delivery was required.

Issues such as staffing, recovery of operations following the Pandemic are exceptional circumstances have impacted the service, and with more suppliers entering the market place it is becoming much more competitive with businesses using alternative parcel/mail carriers.

The move the online banking

Businesses and consumers are moving to more online banking and delivery of financial services. YouGov report highlighted that usage of these services following the pandemic has doubled by the population.

Also the highest rise of using online web based banking was the over 55s with over 60% using this service. Under 35 are also more likely to use app based banking or phone payment systems. Nearly 50% of over 55s see this online service as value and essential to

their daily lives. The most successful companies all have one thing in common: they regularly test their digital journeys with real customers and use the insights gained to optimise and drive conversions, avoiding the trap of making decisions on a "hunch".

Possible responses based on the above are:

1. It is evident that the issue with the Royal Mail is a national one and we will therefore await with interest the conclusion of the Ofcom investigation and the recommendations for service improvements and how these will impact and improve the service for Worcestershire Businesses and residents.
OR
2. While it is evident that the issue with Royal Mail is a national one, we will investigate if the information we have obtained to date can be acquired at a county level, we would also welcome further details of the issues that have been raised with Cllr Udal and the number of businesses and residents who have expressed their concern, we will then consider if this issue should be passed to the scrutiny committee .

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Matt Jenkins will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

"In January 2021 the Council agreed to set up a cross-party group to review our 20mph policy. At the full council meeting in May this year, I asked about the lack of progress, as the review had not started. I was told by the Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Highways that a review was unnecessary, as a new method for councillors to request 20mph zones would be added to the member portal in July, with a review of this in November.

It is now November and there is no new 20mph policy or any way for councillors to request 20mph zones via the member portal, as was promised.

Can I ask the CMR for Highways when we will finally get to see the new 20mph policy and have a way to request a 20mph zones in our Divisions?"

Answer

Can I thank Cllr Jenkins for his question regarding 20mph policy.

Members can currently raise a 'Speed Issue Request' on the Member Portal. As part of the ongoing development and improvements of the Member Portal, we have requested that there is additional enquiry type 'Speed Limit Review Request' and a corresponding 'drop-down field'. It's here that Members will be able to request 20mph zones or conversely ask for an existing speed limit to be reviewed. I am told this may already be available.

As an aside, a detailed speed limit review took place from 2007-2012 on A and B classification roads which was funded by the Department for Transport. We continue to improve road safety through the casualty reduction capital programme which prioritises locations for improvement based on the potential to reduce casualty accidents.

Officers are finalising criteria and a prioritisation process in response to requests for speed limit reviews which will necessarily require support from the local member, including use of their devolved funds, as well as a successful consultation with any community affected. A Member Advisory Group was being arranged for the end of the month, pending confirmation of one final appointee for the group.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Josh Robinson will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“Whilst I recognise from time-to-time planned highways work can change date, but what more can be done to ensure local residents and members are kept up to date on when these changes are happening and for what reason?”

Answer

Our planned highways works are programmed to ensure efficiency in terms of use of our resources and also to co-ordinate schemes to avoid unnecessary disruption. Our smaller works tend to be planned at least 6 weeks ahead to allow for the necessary road space to be booked and permits raised. However, our larger works such as road and footway resurfacing scheme are usually programmed much further in advance as they often require road closures, which have a minimum 12-week lead in period. These works are co-ordinated by our streetworks team to ensure co-ordination with other works such as works by statutory undertakers. Whilst we publish and share our programmes of work, there are times where these have to change.

Changes to programmed work can be a result of a number of issues such as overrunning works elsewhere on the network, meaning that road space is no longer available. An example of this could be a new gas main being installed with an open trench at a busy location, where the works that are on the ground would usually take priority particularly if it would be more disruptive to close that site down temporarily only to have to reopen it again after the following work was completed or if there were customers without supply. Plant breakdown is also one of the key causes for last minute changes. The failure of an essential piece of machinery on site or the failure of a tarmac batching plant operated by a third party could also have a significant impact and cause a delay at short notice.

Without doubt the single most reason for change is the weather. We do plan our works so that temperature sensitive activities are undertaken during the spring and summer months, however rain has the biggest impact on our works and can occur at any time. The adverse impact of rain also impacts us in other way such as flooding both in terms of the impact on the network but also in terms of the impact on our workforce as it is sometimes necessary for us to suspend works to allow the use of the workforce resource as part of emergency flood response. Snow and freezing temperatures also affect us in similar ways during the winter months.

When we notify residents and business of any changes to the programme we endeavour to use the same method of communication used to contact the about the works in the first instance. We typically use range of channels to communicate with residents and businesses including letter drops, on-site signage as well as social media. In addition to this we also update the local member via the Liaison Officers. In most cases are able to notify residents, businesses and members of any changes as soon as we confirm that the programme has been impacted. These changes are communicated using a range of ways and to a range of recipients, depending on how far away from the start date the change occurs. Whilst we try to reduce disruption where possible, if last minute changes do occur it can sometimes be difficult to communicate these changes to residents before they have been impacted in some way.

We undertake to contact all affected parties related to programme changes as quickly as possible. In most cases delays are identified in sufficient time to allow effective communication however in certain circumstances, when delays to the programme happen at short notice (usually because of issues outside our control) we will continue to try and communicate these changes and quickly and effectively as possible.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport agreed to meet Cllr Josh Robinson to review the live highways work to see if more can be done to keep the local member and residents updated on events.

QUESTION 5 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Adam Kent:

“It was a shock to discover that County Hall is no longer safe due to RAAC (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete), the upper floors are blocked to access and people going to the Register Office to get married now have to enter via the Lakeview Restaurant entrance. When will we be able to return to our normal Council Chamber back in County Hall?”

Answer

County Hall is safe to be open. The measures we have taken in recent weeks are precautionary and temporary and have been done in accordance with the guidance issued by the Health and Safety Executive and Institution of Structural Engineers. These arrangements have been established in a manner that causes minimal disruption or change to operations, and ensures the complete safety of our staff and the general public. I'd like to thank the officers and the team for the speedy action that they've taken in terms of making sure that services are still provided from County Hall and that we can continue to operate with no adverse effects to our residents.

A project to undertake further surveys and investigations has commenced with a report to be produced outlining options, costs and timescales for possible remedial works. The findings of the report will be available by the end of calendar year. This will then allow a consideration of the options and for an informed decision to be made on next steps.

The temporary closure of the main entrances and the erection of fencing has been put in place due to the potential risk of RAAC boards failing in the balcony areas. The re-opening of the entrances and removal of fencing in this area is being prioritised and a date for when this will be done will be provided imminently. Once completed, this will allow people attending weddings to then access the Registrar Office using the usual entrances.

Supplementary question

In response to a request, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication undertook to ensure that councillors are provided with updates on the reopening of County Hall, following the discovery of RAAC.

QUESTION 6 – Cllr Natalie McVey will ask Cllr Mike Rouse

“Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility tell me, and the residents of Malvern Trinity Division, how we will benefit from the unceremonious scrapping of HS2?”

Answer

The Government published their Network North plan on 6 October which sets out both specific transport schemes and themes where additional funding will be made available following the decision on the Birmingham – Manchester HS2 route. The Birmingham to London Euston route is currently being delivered and will bring capacity and journey time benefits to the Midlands.

The full Network North document can be found at:

[Network North: Transforming British Transport \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

As we heard earlier in relation to the buses motion, we're already seeking clarification around an additional £3.2 million that we've received for buses that will benefit the bus network as I outlined around things like demand and responsive transport.

The following schemes will directly benefit Worcestershire:

1. Implementation of Midlands Rail Hub in full which will improve East / West connectivity across the Midlands and benefit Worcester, Malvern and Hereford through proposals for 2 trains per hour £1.75bn
2. Cross City Line rail routes to have 10 minutes frequency
3. Funding for local bus travel and bus on demand
4. Funding for smart ticketing and contactless ticketing on rail
5. Retention of the £2 bus fare until end of 2024
6. Additional funding for rail station accessibility
7. £650 million Midlands Road Fund
8. £2.2bn for potholes across the Midlands

Further Midlands schemes are funded but have not been included in the list above if there is not a direct benefit. We are working with Midlands Connect and other partners as further details of the themes develop and to bring benefits to Worcestershire.

QUESTION 7 – Cllr Richard Udall will ask Cllr Karen May:

“It’s a sad fact that most Worcestershire residents do not participate in any team sport once they leave school. Physical activity is not only good for the body but good for the mind, helping to also reduce social isolation and keeping people active. What action can she take to encourage participation in physical activity, especially for socially isolated individuals, who find it difficult to participate due to caring commitments?”

Answer

I agree that regular exercise is vital to maintaining our health, mental wellbeing and social connectedness. This is why increasing physical activity is a key aim in our Corporate Plan.

Our track record is impressive across all ages. For example, among young people, the latest data shows that four out of the six most physically active areas in the whole region are right here in Worcestershire. But we’re not complacent and new initiatives, such as our investment in a new junior parkrun in Worcester, show the level of our ambition. In addition, I’ve been working with Cllr Onslow on a very popular Public Health grant scheme into schools, which is already allowing schools to do so much more to keep children active.

The same is true for adults. The latest Sport England data shows a year on year increase in activity levels across Worcestershire. We provide free training and resources for local organisations to deliver strength and balance sessions and Public Health grants for a range of community driven physical activity projects.

In the near future, we’ll be investing a new community-based running project in collaboration with Cllr Kent, which will focus on accessibility and people just getting started on becoming more active.

Finally, Members may be aware that Cabinet recently approved the proposals from Cllr Hardman and myself for significant investment in the new Healthy Worcestershire programme. This will provide exercise sessions, alongside support for healthy living, community safety advice and help to reduce isolation, all together in one place in the heart of local communities. The focus will be on reaching those, such as carers, who are vulnerable to becoming socially isolated and, to that end, we’ll be offering grants on top of the core service to voluntary sector groups who can help us achieve that aim.

QUESTION 8 – Cllr Matt Jenkins will ask Cllr Simon Geraghty:

“Can I ask the Leader of the Council whether there are any plans for the Council to stop banking with Barclays Bank?”

Answer

The Council has used Barclays for its day-to-day banking arrangements since the current 5 year contract was entered into following a review in September 2020. This contract expires in August 2025 and has an option to extend for a period up to 3 years. As with all contracts we will assess nearer the time to ensure it meets the needs for the council's business and provides value for money.

Supplementary question

It was queried whether the Council would consider appointing a bank with a more ethically responsible approach to banking when the next contract was due for renewal. The Leader of the Council responded that the contract with Barclays ended in August 2025 with an option to extend it for a further 3 years. The Council had a duty to ensure that all contracts met the business needs of the Council and provided value for money.

QUESTION 9 – Cllr Josh Robinson will ask Cllr Richard Morris:

"With the recent flooding in Bromsgrove which affected Burcot Lane, Shenstone Close, Blackmore Lane, Alcester Road, Littleheath Lane and Ford Road amongst others in my county division, do you agree with me that more work needs to be done to prevent this and if so what will the County Council do to prevent this from happening again?"

Answer

All of the locations referred to are known to be at ongoing risk of flooding and they are covered by the Bromsgrove Flood Risk Management Plan. This document describes the flood risk at each location and articulates the actions already taken and still due to be taken by the range of organisations with a role. This includes: Environment Agency, Bromsgrove District Council (including through the North Worcestershire Water Management Team), Severn Trent Water and Worcestershire County Council.

The context of this recent, extremely unfortunate, flooding is record breaking rainfall in many parts of Worcestershire which simply overwhelmed the ability of the ground to hold the water, the drainage network to remove it and the network of small watercourses to receive it. At all of the locations referred to, initial investigations indicate that the flood impacts resulted from the networking of small watercourses overflowing and flooding the roads and properties.

However, the group of agencies focused on flood risk in and around Bromsgrove, very much including the County Council, will continue to strive to further reducing the risk of flooding at all of these locations by further:

- working with landowners to change land management practices in order to hold back and slow the flow of water on and from agricultural and other land;
- making further amendments and improvements to the drainage network;
- working with property owners to bring about property level protection improvements;
- working with impacted to communities to build local resilience;
- working with property owners to ensure the best warning and informing service;
- review and amend if necessary maintenance regimes;
- review and improve if possible flood response processes.

In the meantime, there is a strong ongoing multi-agency focus on flood recovery support, investigation and data gathering following the flood event. All of the findings will be fed into further development of the Flood Risk Management Plan and its action plan.

Cllrs Robinson's support for the flood response and subsequent recovery and investigation effort are very much appreciated.

Supplementary question

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for the Environment agreed to meet Cllr Josh Robinson to address flooding issues within his electoral division.

QUESTION 10 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Adrian Hardman:

"In September, the government announced a £600m package over the next 2 years to boost the capacity of the social care workforce in England. How much does Worcestershire expect to receive and when?"

Answer

Thank you for your question, Cllr Denham and for bringing this matter to full Council's attention.

The funding that you refer to is an increase to the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund (MSIF) of £600m nationally, which will now be allocated to Council's in the following way.

The announcement has now been clarified and consist of £570m nationally allocated over financial years 2023/24 & 2024/25, with Worcestershire expected to get its usual 1% allocation of national funding, giving a total for 2023/24 of £3,626,617, which has now been paid in full.

The allocation for Worcestershire in 2025/26 is expected to be our 1% share of £200m nationally, which means an allocation of £2,000,000 because it was front-loaded.

£30m of the original £600m had been held back by DHSC for an UEC ASC grant to fund Council's with Adult Care responsibility that are part of Tier 1 & Tier 2 challenged Integrated Care Systems. This Council was in Tier 2. Worcestershire awaits its response to a bid to this fund for a possible further £1,100,000.

The MSIF in 2023/24 has been used to fund additional assessment work up to the value of £0.6m and £3m used to fund increases in fee rates paid to ASC Providers. Both these options met with MSIF grant conditions.

The £2m in 2024/25 will likely be used for similar purposes. The good news is that yesterday the Council received notification that the bid has been successful and will be paid in full.

Supplementary question

It was queried whether any of the additional Government funding would be used to retain staff, ensuring that they are paid more than the minimum wage without the use on zero-hours contracts as well as providing access to training and qualifications. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care responded that £3m of the £3.6m additional funding had been directed to contractors and suppliers of these services who would be paying above the minimum wage.