

COUNCIL 11 JANUARY 2024 - AGENDA ITEM 10 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below. There was insufficient time to answer Question 7 on the day.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Martin Allen will ask Cllr Marcus Hart:

“Twelve months ago, this council unanimously voted through the motion to provide commencing in April 2024 that members of the armed forces and veterans who reside in Worcestershire free bus travel in line with the current pensioners bus pass.

Will the Cabinet Member with responsibilities for this matter please tell me, is the Council ready to provide these bus passes and how will the council be advertising this country leading first to the brave men and woman who have served their country?”

Answer

As part of that debate 12 months ago we agreed to bring forward proposals that would form part of the budget process. Cabinet met on 10 January to consider its initial budget and the consultation has been kick-started. I can assure you that I am working very closely with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport, whose budget this actually sits in, as we are work through the cost to the Council taxpayers of Worcestershire to provide such passes.

I have to say that the latest costings are substantial and not insignificant which is important when one considers the budget perspective overall as the Cabinet highlighted that we still had a £20m funding gap. Therefore, a final decision had not been made on our proposals. Cabinet will be bringing their final proposals to the meeting in a months' time. Council will get to debate that financial allocation at full Council in February.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities undertook in liaison with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport to examine whether free buses passes for members of the armed forces and veterans could be extended to Worcestershire on-demand buses.

QUESTION 2 – Cllr Mel Allcott will ask Cllr Marc Bayliss:

“What is the timetable for LTP5 from development of the draft document, commencement of the stakeholder consultation to final Cabinet sign-off of the plan?”

Answer

The Department for Transport were due to publish some guidance on the development of future Local Transport Plans which has been considerably delayed. Once this is published we will develop our timetable to reflect the requirements.

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Adrian Hardman:

“How many cases has Worcestershire County Council had referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman in 22/23 and how many were upheld? How can local people access this information?”

Answer

Dear Cllr Denham,

Thank you for your question and for giving me the opportunity to provide a response. Whilst answering this question as CMR for Adult Social Care, complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) are made for the entirety of Worcestershire County Council functions.

In 2022/2023, a total of 24 complaints were made to LGSCO against WCC and 22 of those complaints were upheld.

Members of the public can access information on Worcestershire on the following link, which can be provided to you but is effectively the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's website where you can see all the complaints that have been made: [Worcestershire County Council - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)

Also the link to how someone can make a complaint via the County Council's complaint process is also included below for you.

<https://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/council-services/council-and-democracy/compliments-comments-or-complaints/complaints>

Every week, you can ask the Local Government Ombudsman to send a list of solely social care decisions by email because currently they do not separate them out as a matter of course.

Supplementary question

It was queried why the letter sent to the Head of Paid Service by the Ombudsman had not been made available to Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel or on the Council's website. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care responded that the availability of the information to scrutiny was a matter to raise with the Chairman of the Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman annual letter was available on the web site and the link would be sent to Cllr Denham.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Dan Boatright-Greene will ask Cllr Marc Bayliss:

“Is it time to start talking about the feasibility of a southern by-pass for Pershore?”

Answer

Proposals for significant new transport infrastructure will be considered as part of the development of future Local Transport Plans, and will have to be assessed against criteria from government including the environmental impact and the availability of funding.

The Department for Transport were due to publish some guidance on the development of future Local Transport Plans which has been considerably delayed. Once this is published we will develop our timetable to reflect the requirements.

Supplementary question

It was queried whether there was a possibility of a feasibility study being undertaken to look at ways to reduce the traffic flow through Pershore. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills responded that the Council had improved transport infrastructure around Pershore in recent years. The Council would continue to look at ways of improving traffic flows across the whole of the county.

QUESTION 5 – Cllr Dan Boatright-Greene will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“At the council meeting in January 2022 Cllr Hardman asked a question about the highways issues faced in Eckington with a developer repeatedly causing traffic congestion as they worked on the Highway. In the answer to the question the former cabinet member for Highways suggested the council was investigating the potential to charge companies for working on the Highway. After two years, can we get an update on whether this is feasible and when we might see some changes?”

Answer

Lane Rental is where an English Highways Authority charges for any registerable works carried out in the street for the time those works occupy the highway. Charges are focused on the very busiest streets at the busiest times. Charges apply to works promoted by both utility companies and highway authorities themselves. So our own schemes would fall for these charges as well.

The power for highways authorities to implement/operate a Lane Rental scheme is subject to approval by the Secretary of State who would need to see that the authority is running a well-run permit scheme, for example permit fees that are proportionate, discounts are offered for joint works, compliance with permitting regulations and guidance, schemes are fully supportive of the delivery of national infrastructure projects such as the A38 BREP improvements, broadband and full fibre toll out (which was controversial in some parts, particularly rural areas), and incentives for high quality performance (particularly the right first time reinstatements).

The charges are there for incentivising work outside peak hours but they are waived for any joint works. Caps are put in place for major works to install and replace apparatus so these works are not unfairly penalised and delayed. Schemes are trialled for a period of time before going live and then reviewed annually to ensure charges remain proportionate and are applied to the most congested roads. In the consultation and trial that they did in Kent, it was only 5% of the network, the busiest locations.

WCC have examined what is required to implement Lane Rental and we have been advised that an updated list of Traffic Sensitive Streets is one of the first requirements. Therefore, WCC are currently working on updating its list of Traffic Sensitive Streets. It is likely that the top 5% for sensitivity of these roads would be where lane rental charges would apply and these would exclusively be in the City of Worcester because that is where the congestion existed. The policy of Lane Rental would not be of benefit to you unless you lived in Worcester. Therefore the B4080 in Eckington would not be included in such a scheme should it be implemented in the future.

WCC are also awaiting Government changes to legislation announced in their Plan for Drivers (Oct 2023) suggesting changes that will ensure Lane Rental schemes are made more attractive to local highway authorities. Following the original legislation in 2012, only Surrey County Council and West Sussex County Council with their strong links to the TfL scheme, applied to Secretary of State for Lane Rental. The hesitancy across the rest of the UK appears to be due to the risks of increased costs to LHA's own works programmes and those costs then being distributed to the private sector utilities via the surplus pot through bids for technological advances to street works activity. There is an indication that changes will be made to legislation in near future that will allow LHA's to bid to the surplus pot for highway improvement works, thereby reducing the risk of net increased costs to LHA's.

In Eckington, poor works undertaken by L Healy Ltd in August 2021 and November 2021 on behalf of Spitfire Homes led to a suspension from working on the WCC network. L Healy Ltd have now served a suspension and have subsequently returned to work on the network and undertaken further works in Eckington to an improved standard with better organisation. WCC now issue warning letters and suspensions as standard practice to

improve compliance. WCC have also developed improvements to introduce standardised charges for developers to make a road space booking from March 2024 with major works being charged more than minor or standard works. WCC are also now seeking masterplans from developers as a way of viewing and reducing the number of incursions into the highway network.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport explained that for areas outside of Worcester, it was about the regime that was put in place whether through monitoring or getting tough on contractors. There was a lot of pressure to enable statutory works to be undertaken on the road network from Severn Trent Water, the gas companies, Broadband providers, electric improvements as well as the Council's own improvements to the highway. The Council needed local communities and councillors to work with the it to monitor the works taking place on the highway

QUESTION 6 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“Modeshift stars is an accreditation scheme supported by the Department for Transport and active travel England and funded by Worcestershire County Council. The scheme rewards schools over 5 levels, green, bronze, silver, gold and platinum for increasing the number of young people who regularly walk, wheel, cycle and use other forms of sustainable transport to get to and from school

What communication has there been with schools to promote the scheme?”

Answer

The Highways Development Management Team require schools to register with Modeshift Stars to create a suitable Travel Plan aimed at promoting sustainable modes of travel and reduce the use of cars which we are keen to promote. I have said at previous meetings that schools can be a real transport interchange hub if we get it right, improving active travel. It feeds into the work with BSIF, Active Travel and partnership works

Currently we are only working with schools that have submitted a planning application so not all schools may be aware of the initiative. I appreciate that not all schools were putting in planning applications all of the time. We are mindful that there is a lot of communications with schools specifically centred around education. We will liaise with our colleagues in Worcestershire Children First to ensure the service is promoted widely. However, resources to work with schools on travel planning are very limited. If the individual school sign up for Modeshift Stars they can take advantage of the resources on offer to promote travel planning and the benefits that this can bring. If you have got any schools that you think the scheme could work well for, speak to highways officers or myself and we can try and make sure that we specifically work with you and the local school. It was important that local councillors helped with this to enable schools and the community to give it the full attention.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport undertook to look into the possibility of: linking the Modeshift Stars Accreditation Scheme with the engagement already undertaken with schools on Bikeability; inviting school representatives to the Active Travel Stakeholder Forum; and improving access to the Modeshift Stars Accreditation Scheme on the Council's website.

QUESTION 7 – Cllr Mel Allcott will ask Cllr Simon Geraghty:

"How much of the Worcestershire Pension Fund is invested directly into fossil fuel companies?"

Answer

Firstly, I would thank Mel for her question.

The Pension Fund does not generally invest directly in companies. Our Investments are generally made through a fund manager. In some cases, we participate in "fund of funds" investments where the link to the investment asset itself is even more indirect. For that reason, therefore Fund does not have any direct investments in companies deemed to be "fossil fuel" companies.

The Fund has a primary fiduciary duty to its members. The Pension Fund primary investment objectives are to ensure that there are sufficient assets are available to meet liabilities as they fall due and to maximise returns at an acceptable level of risk. Responsible investment is a core part of that fiduciary duty.

The Fund places a high importance on Responsible Investment and ESG factors, evidenced by our long-standing successful signatory status to the Financial Reporting Council's UK Stewardship Code. In respect of climate change specifically, the Fund has developed a Climate Change Risk Strategy which is published on the Fund's website. Embedded within that strategy is a commitment to publish an annual Climate Risk Report together with Climate Related Financial Disclosures which illustrate the portfolio's impact on climate change. The most recent versions of these reports are currently being revised and are expected to be presented to Pensions Committee in early February before being published on the Fund's website.

I hope this information I helpful.