

COUNCIL 15 FEBRUARY 2024 - AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTION TIME

Questions and written responses provided below.

QUESTION 1 – Cllr Josh Robinson will ask Cllr Karen May:

“With the concerning rise in cases in Measles in the West Midlands, what is the County Council doing to halt this alarming rise?”

Answer

Thanks for raising this important issue. Measles is a potentially serious illness, with complications including blindness, meningitis and death. As the question highlights, the West Midlands has seen a rapid rise in measles. In last couple of months we’ve seen over 50 cases a week – well above what we’ve seen in recent years. Measles is highly contagious. Far more infectious than COVID for example. But vaccination is very effective against it - two MMR doses gives you 99% protection.

As soon as the cases started to rise we put in place robust measures to protect Worcestershire. This included reviewing our outbreak response to ensure it’s ready to be launched at any time. The NHS and public health have recently run a masterclass for local GPs to ensure they are equipped to deal effectively with measles cases. We’ve also maximised vaccination uptake, including the provision of pop-up clinics in areas most at risk via our libraries. Our DPH and Consultant in Public Health have both been on the BBC and other media outlets promoting vaccination and ensuring people have the facts.

The UK Health Security Agency have given us great feedback on our local response and I’m pleased to say that it’s been effective so far. The latest data shows that we have the highest rate of two-dose MMR vaccination uptake in the region, and as things stand, there are no known cases of measles in our county. But I want to keep it that way. Areas that we border have seen hundreds of cases in recent weeks and we need to remain on our guard. I know that’s the view our Public Health team and I’d like to thank them and our NHS partners for their work.

QUESTION 2 – Cllr Richard Udall will ask Cllr Simon Geraghty:

“Can the Leader of the Council explain why is he proposing a 5.4% pay cut for 150 of our employees, including some of the lowest paid employees in the Council, which will undoubtedly cause stress, hardship and distress, with a significant risk of demotivation which could endanger productivity?”

Answer

Firstly, I would like to thank Richard for his question and the opportunity to outline the facts.

The Council back in 2011 introduced changes to working hours for all new employees based on a 35-hour contract for non-exempt posts. Existing staff remained on 37 hours.

The 35/37 hours disparity between employees has been regularly raised by staff & managers in recent years.

The recent consultation will enable consideration as to whether there remains sufficient rationale for this approach to continue with this cohort of staff, who, for over 10 years after initial implementation of the reduced working hours strategy, have continued to benefit from a 37 hour contract in a non-exempt 35 hour post.

The proposals cover c.150 employees which is less than 6% of the WCC workforce and impact staff across all grades including Chief Officers. Officers leading the consultation have been in dialogue with the Councils recognised trade unions both prior and throughout the consultation process and this is being done in accordance with the Councils policies.

The proposals are not in respect of a pay cut, hourly rate of pay remains the same, they are to reduce the working hours of those in scope from 37 hours to 35 hours as they continue to work in a 35 hour non-exempt post.

Those staff in scope of the consultation have all been offered 121 meetings with HR and have been invited to feedback comments on the proposals and it is important that officers are now able to fully consider all feedback as part of this exercise.

The Council remains committed to full and open and transparent consultation and always aims to achieve agreement to any proposals it makes. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage as the process is ongoing.

Supplementary question

It was queried how those employees subject to this proposal would feel about staff being recruited on 37 hour contracts and whether this proposed change would be implemented on a fire and rehire basis. The Leader responded that he could not rule out measures in the future however the outcome of the ongoing consultation was unknown at this stage. There were a separate group of exempt posts on 37 hour contracts and it was important to be able to recruit to those posts.

QUESTION 3 – Cllr Malcolm Victory will ask Cllr Adam Kent:

“With regard to Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete at County Hall, has a survey of the roof been completed, and when will the results be available to the Council?”

Answer

A number of surveys and other inspections by specialist RAAC Structural Engineers have been undertaken which have confirmed the extent of RAAC. Our final report will be with officers by the end of February.

This is a specialist area of engineering and I can assure Council we are taking appropriate advice. We will take no risks with the safety of employees and other users of the building, as we determine the best way to resolve the challenge of RAAC in County Hall.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication reiterated that it was not possible to know the impact on the budget of any necessary repairs to County Hall until the final report was submitted.

QUESTION 4 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“In March 2023, Worcestershire County Council received funding through the LEVI (Local Electrical Vehicle Infrastructure) capability fund. How much money was received and how has it been spent to date?”

Answer

In March 2023 the council received an allocation of £96,000, around one-third of which has been spent so far on development of our upcoming EV Charging Strategy.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport indicated that the EV Charging Policy would be reported to Cabinet in September 2024.

QUESTION 5 – Cllr Natalie McVey will ask Cllr Steve Mackay:

“Members may, or may not, be aware of the failed procurement for a young people’s supported accommodation unit in Malvern, putting its future at risk. Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility tell me what Worcestershire Children First’s approach will be to prevent another failed procurement exercise?”

Answer

Councillor McVey’s question may be in reference to the Safebase contract which expired at the end of January 2024.

The contract was originally for 4 beds specifically to provide emergency accommodation for 16/17 year old young people facing immediate homelessness.

3 of the beds were provided by St Basils and 1 bed was provided by Platform Housing in Malvern.

Worcestershire Children First went out to tender for renewal of the contract in good time and included within its specification, the need for providers to register with Ofsted. This is in line with new regulations for all provisions providing support to young people aged 16/17 years to be registered with Ofsted.

No tenders were subsequently made and the previous providers commented that the associated work to become Ofsted compliant was not conducive to the relatively low contract value.

Consequently, Worcestershire Children First commissions internal and external semi independent provision in order to meet its statutory duties for this cohort of young people.

Supplementary question

The impact on care leavers of the closure of young people’s accommodation pathways was queried. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families responded that there would be an impact but numbers were not known at this stage. The Council would continue to commission internal and external accommodation to meet its statutory requirements.

QUESTION 6 – Cllr Josh Robinson will ask Cllr Mike Rouse:

“Is the Cabinet Member confident that the removal of weeds from our pavements, cycle ways and roads in Bromsgrove will be better this year than it was last year?”

Answer

The challenges we faced during the 2023 season, with its unpredictable weather patterns impacting the efficacy of herbicides, underscore the complexity of managing weed growth on our highways and byways. Unfortunately, predicting the weather is beyond our control, making it difficult to offer guarantees about the success of our weed control efforts this year.

It's important to acknowledge the shared responsibilities in this area; some aspects of clearance fall under the district council's purview. I would encourage those concerned to also engage with their district representatives on this matter.

Moreover, we're acutely aware of the diverse opinions surrounding herbicide use. There's a noticeable, if anecdotal, divide in community feedback: areas treated early in our schedule often raise concerns about environmental harm, while those attended to later voice frustrations over perceived neglect in weed control. This dichotomy highlights the subjective and often polarised nature of public sentiment on this issue, presenting a dilemma with no straightforward solution.

In navigating these challenges, our approach seeks to balance ecological considerations with public safety obligations. Where feasible, we employ nature strips as a more sustainable option and, when necessary, resort to manual weed removal to maintain the safety and accessibility of public highways.

Our commitment is to adapt and respond to these challenges thoughtfully, aiming to mitigate weed growth effectively while being mindful of environmental concerns and public safety.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport undertook to look at the possibility of providing evidence/reports back to local councillors to indicate that work had been completed on the removal of weeds from pavements, cycle ways and roads. Cllr Josh Robinson would be informed accordingly.

QUESTION 7 – Cllr Lynn Denham will ask Cllr Tracey Onslow:

"In March 2023 the government announced plans for reforms to childcare, increasing free access and funding. A new local funding formula for local authorities has been proposed and consulted on. How much does Worcestershire expect to receive and how many extra childcare places will there be from April 2024?"

Answer

The Dedicated Schools Grant (ring-fenced specific grant that supports Local Authority schools budget) includes an estimate for Early Years places for the financial year 2024/25 has increased from £36.27m for 2023/24 to £59.34m (The estimate allocation for 2024/25 is detailed in paragraph 91 and in table 19 in the 2024/24 Budget Report) . This is an increase of £23.07m.

Starting from April 2024, existing childcare support will be expanded in phases. From April 2024, eligible working parents of 2-year-olds will be able to access 15 hours childcare support. These hours can be used over 38 weeks of the year or up to 52 weeks if fewer are used than the total hours per week. Therefore if they were accessed from Monday to Friday in the morning and somebody else accessed that same place from Monday to Friday in the afternoon and then somebody else accessed for 38 weeks and somebody else accessed it, did that represent one place or four places? It was not simple to say the budget of £23m would buy this many places. The intention of this new support is to enable families to work. This increase in funding from April 2024 is expected in practice to support families that work and are accessing childcare already and funding the total cost themselves. For example if you wanted to go back to work when your child was two, you will already be accessing some of that support. We would not need additional places because you already had the place.

There are approximately 5,800 children who are 2 years old living in Worcestershire. Under the current scheme for 3 and 4 year olds we find approximately 60% of working families

take up the supported childcare offer. If we see a similar take up rate this will mean approximately 3,500 children that are 2 years old of working parents will be accessing childcare.

From September 2024 the availability of supported childcare places will increase as children from 9 months – 23 months of working families will have access to the equivalent of 15 hours a week (38 weeks a year). This is a new entitlement and will provide financial support to working families and may also increase the demand for childcare places as parents are able to access work due to this new support. We are currently undertaking an assessment of predicted numbers who may take up this support.

Supplementary question

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education undertook to provide Cllr Lynn Denham with details of the work being undertaken to reverse the reduction in pre-school provision for children with SEND.