

COUNCIL 9 JULY 2015 - AGENDA ITEM 8 – QUESTION TIME

Answers given at the meeting may have been a précis of the full answer which is set out below. In some cases additional information is also included. Where, due to time or other constraints, it was not possible for the question to be asked formally the written response is also included below.

QUESTION 1 – Mr R M Udall asked Mr A I Hardman:

“Will the Leader of the Council join me in congratulating Worcester Warriors for winning the British and Irish Cup, the English Rugby Championship and gaining promotion back to the Premiership? Also, will he join me in congratulating the Worcester Women’s Rugby Team for their significant success, for their national team call ups and their continuing membership of the England Rugby Women’s Premiership? Worcester now has two sides in the top flight of English Rugby, something Worcestershire should be really proud of. Does he agree that such sporting success is good for the entire county?”

Answer Given

I would be more than delighted to join Mr Udall in congratulating the Warriors in winning the British and Irish Cup and gaining promotion back to the Premiership. But my knowledge of Rugby is rather limited and hence I would be happy to take his word that not only are the Warriors doing extremely well but also the Women's Rugby Team. I would also expect him to join me in congratulating the County's Cricket Club in having a splendid season in the top flight of cricket in their 150th year; for which the Chairman unveiled a plaque. Yes this is a great boost for the county.

Supplementary Question

Mr Udall raised a supplementary question about the wider role of sport in building success, improving the local economy and helping health and wellbeing. The Leader referred to the good work being undertaken by the County Council, district council colleagues and other partners.

QUESTION 2 – Mr S R Peters had given written notice that he wished to ask Mr J H Smith:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways inform me what criteria are used when assessing requests for pelican crossings and how many such crossings does the County Council plan to install during the coming year?"

Written Answer

Thank you for your question. Requests received by the county from across the county are collated and added to a list for investigation when funding becomes available. At this point, a basic feasibility study is taken forward to ascertain whether the scheme is deliverable and whether it serves the general public with maximum benefit to all users.

The criteria which are used to ascertain whether a request for a pelican crossing is feasible are as follows:

1. Data monitoring is undertaken. This monitoring includes Speed data, pedestrian crossing data and Gap analysis. Speed data is used to ascertain which type of crossing would be applicable for the location. Examples are: a zebra crossing can be installed on a road where the 85% speeds are below 35mph. A Pelican crossing would be required if this figure is above 35mph.
2. Visibility Splays and Stopping Distances. There is a minimum visibility requirement for different locations and different types of crossings in relation to the speeds. This is DfT guidance which we adhere to, to ensure safety for all users crossing the road. There must be adequate visibility for drivers approaching the crossings and adequate stopping distance for a car to stop.

The Sustainable Schemes Team are not planning to deliver any crossings in this financial year however there are developments across the county which will be delivering a number of infrastructure improvements within their locality, some of which may be delivering controlled crossings.

QUESTION 3 – Mr A T Amos asked Mr J Campion:

"Would the Cabinet Member for Children and Families join with me in congratulating and encouraging Year 3 children at Oasis Academy Primary School in Warndon for their initiative in launching the Share A Book With Warndon curriculum project to enhance the local environment and community and which I am supporting through my Divisional Fund by paying for the book-inspired benches which the children will decorate and place within the local community?"

Answer Given

Mr Campion said he was delighted to join Mr Amos in congratulating pupils at Oasis Academy Primary School in Warndon. He added that it was never too early to instil a love of books and reading.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question Mr Campion agreed that youngsters should be encouraged to read whether that be on electronic media or through physical books.

QUESTION 4 – Mrs M A Rayner asked Mr J H Smith:

"In the light of current events would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways explain why we are finding that School Crossing Patrols are being axed without reference to the local members? Could he please explain why this policy has changed?"

Answer Given

Thank you for your question. Further to your meeting with officers on 24 June I believe progress has been made generally with the School Crossing Patrol (SCP) Service.

In terms of cutting SCP's without reference to Councillors, as you are aware the circumstances for the SCP staff member (I think) you are referring to were not straightforward and involved data protection issues. The decision to review the site is standard procedure and is adopted countywide.

I can confirm there has been no policy change with regard to liaising with members. However it is important that officers do communicate with local members when changes happen.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about the removal of a certain school crossing patrol and what criteria were being used Mr Smith confirmed that there was no wholesale removal of school crossing patrols and where a removal was contemplated this would be due to specific reasons at that particular crossing. He stated that whilst he could not give a definite guarantee that things wouldn't change as far as he was aware there were no plans at the moment to do away with school crossing patrols.

QUESTION 5 – Mr P M McDonald asked Mr J Campion:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families please inform me of how many posts are unfilled in the area of children's social services?"

Answer Given

As at 31 May 2015 there were 39 social work vacancies within Children's social care. This figure includes both front-line safeguarding social workers, and non-front line social workers such as those working in fostering and adoption. This represents 19% of the overall established workforce of 206.5 posts.

Within the frontline social work teams where there has been targeted activity to reduce the number of vacancies there are 21 vacancies against an established workforce of 141, which equates to 15% of posts vacant. This will fluctuate month-on-month.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question Mr Campion outlined other measures being used by the Council to recruit and retain social workers.

QUESTION 6 – Mr P M McDonald asked Mr J Campion:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families please inform me of the monies spent on agency and temporary staff in the area of children's social services area?"

Answer Given

Within the Assessment and Intervention Teams (front-line safeguarding teams) in the financial year 2014/15 there was a £2,518,000 spend on agency staffing from an overall spend of £9,644,000. This included posts such as front line social workers,

team managers and general managers. A further £310,000 was spent on temporary supernumerary posts to support the transformation of social care.

Within the Provider Services, from an overall spend of £7,718,000, a total of £1,183,000 was spent on agency workers, including social workers, team managers, general managers and temporary transformation posts.

From the overall social care spend on staffing of £17,362,000, a total of £4,011,000 equates to spend on agency workers equating to 23% of the overall spend. As the workforce becomes more stable and experienced we expect this to reduce.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about the possible use of staff banks as was the case in the Health Service, Mr Campion stated the Council would explore any option to achieve the appropriate level of service provision.

QUESTION 7 – Mr R C Lunn asked Mr A I Hardman:

"Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Finance tell Council how long is it taking on average for Service Level Agreement invoices to be sent to end users such as schools?"

Answer Given

The charging of Service Level Agreements to maintained schools and academies for this financial year will take on average 4 months. This is due in part to the process of coordinating the contracts for the services which are included in the HR/Finance commissioning programme. This is being undertaken by the Services to Schools Project Team.

Once all the contracts are received a journal will be processed for maintained schools by the end of July. Invoices for academies are also expected to be completed by the end of July.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about the effects of late invoicing Mr Hardman undertook to provide Mr Lunn with a written answer.

QUESTION 8 – Mr R C Lunn asked Mr J H Smith:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways please tell us how many outstanding Traffic Regulation Orders there are (e.g. putting in, or taking out of Parking Schemes)? What is the average time it is taking to complete them?"

Answer Given

Thank you for your question. Following on from our conversation I understand your question is more related to residents' parking orders.

As you may be aware, the Traffic Management Team (TMT) have successfully committed to dealing with one Resident Parking Scheme, along with the 100 live TROs at any one time. However, as the number of RPS requests increased along

with Member expectations, the Team agreed to carry out additional scheme analysis and implementation in addition to this which has helped to maintain the balance – this being known as the RPS Initiative.

In short, there are three separate processes the Team undertake,

- Firstly, the initial desktop survey/analysis (DTS) is carried out and this establishes whether the basic criteria for a scheme are met and can be taken forward. These basic criteria include available kerb space to meet the need for at least one car per household (0.8 in conservation areas), percentage of properties that have off-street parking spaces being less than 50% etc. The Local Member is advised if the area is suitable for further consideration and it is added to the RPS waiting list.
- The next stage is to formally survey those residents affected (within an area agreed with the elected member) to make them aware of the pros and cons of the scheme, the costs involved for those who purchase permits (approximately £40 per annum depending on which District is affected), the fact that we need at least 50% to respond, and of those responses, 80% need to be in favour of a scheme. The TMT then hand deliver these letters with pre-paid envelopes for response, normally within a three-week period. The responses are analysed and reported to the Member, with a recommendation based on criteria as to whether the RPS request can proceed to the formal TRO stage or not.
- If the survey yields a positive response, we then have to carry out the normal TRO process to implement a scheme

These processes apply to both new scheme requests and petitions for the removal of current RPS – the only difference being at least 50% of residents have to want a scheme removed before we will carry out the formal TRO process.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question Mr Smith confirmed that presently the time taken for such schemes was 6-9 months.

QUESTION 9 – Mr R M Udall asked Mr M L Bayliss:

"Will the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning confirm that all bidders for Council Contracts compete on a level playing field in order to provide goods and services to the County Council?"

Answer Given

Yes all procurement processes are robustly managed to provide a level playing field to a wide variety of potential bidders. It is easy for companies of any size to register on the council's eTendering portal to get access to all opportunities.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about tax avoidance Mr Bayliss undertook to investigate Mr Udall's claims on the production of evidence and said he would be pleased to meet the questioner to discuss it further.

QUESTION 10 – Mrs P Agar asked Mr J H Smith:

"Worcester city was recently paralysed by road works on four out of five arterial roads on the east side of the river. Would the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways agree that this is the kind of problem that arises out of commissioning work out of house, in particular, that you lose control of the work schedule to your contractor?"

Answer given

Thank you for your question. Whilst I wouldn't go as far as to say that Worcester was paralysed, there were traffic issues recently arising out of a safety critical gas main that needed attention on Newtown Road, and an unplanned gas escape on Bath Road. So, I would not agree that commissioning highways work means that we lose control of the work schedule. We work closely with our highways maintenance and improvements contractors to schedule works, and co-ordinate these with Utility works in the best possible way to minimise disruption.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about fine-tuning the process Mr Smith assured the questioner that the County Council worked hard with utility companies to improve working practices where possible.

QUESTION 11 – Mrs P Agar asked Mr J H Smith:

"Can the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways confirm that, in future, the Council is not planning to invest any money in bus transport, other than 106 money, and that you regard the provision of local bus services as a purely commercial matter?"

Answer Given

Thank you for your question I don't wish to rehearse the various debates on the bus consultation process where we had over 8000 responses. The main areas were:

- Open for Business – shopping etc.
- Children and families
- Environment
- Health and Well Being

At the same time, further fruitful discussions took place with bus and community transport operators regarding the extension of the commercial networks and the best way of providing competitively tendered subsidised transport services.

This resulted in a number of services being commercially operated, albeit sometimes at a reduced level of service, together with a proposed new tendered network which Cabinet approved in June 2014. The revised network of services was introduced on 1 September 2014. Inevitably the reduction in funding has seen a consequential reduction in patronage of local bus service in the county, but still substantial usage by residents travelling to work, for education and essential shopping.

This considerable usage of bus services by children, adults and pensioners living in urban and rural areas demonstrates the continuing need for the funding of bus

services. These are a lifeline in decreasing social exclusion and giving access to essential services as well as reducing congestion on the roads and contributing towards improved air quality.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about improvements to bus services Mr Smith outlined the Council's commitment to bus transport in the county.

QUESTION 12 – Mr G J Vickery asked Mr M J Hart:

"Following the Worcestershire Acute Hospital Trust's presentation at the last Health and Wellbeing Board meeting, now that the Care Quality Commission and the West Midlands Clinical Senate have reported on their concerns about the robustness of the Trust's reconfiguration proposals, Clinical Commissioning Groups, media and public concerns about capacity and sustainability, coupled with a 2015-2016 financial plan envisaging a £31million deficit, is it not time for the county's acute hospital services to be provided on a collaborative basis with neighbouring providers?"

Answer Given

The West Midlands Clinical Senate supported the proposed clinical model for surgery, gynaecology, obstetrics and paediatrics. This would see more planned surgery being undertaken at the Alexandra Hospital with emergency surgery being undertaken at the Worcestershire Royal Hospital. Overnight consultant-led births and children's acute hospital services would be provided from the Worcestershire Royal Hospital. The Clinical Senate noted that staff and the public would need a clear and common understanding about where to take children who require hospital treatment, and that the local NHS would need to confirm that there is sufficient capacity at Worcestershire Royal Hospital to manage the additional children.

For emergency medicine, the Clinical Senate supported the recommendation of the previous Independent Clinical Review to develop a major Accident and Emergency Department at the Worcestershire Royal Hospital site linked to a local Emergency Unit at the Alexandra Hospital able to receive and manage medically urgent cases 24 hours a day. The Clinical Senate asked that more work be carried out on the detail of this model, and this is now being led by the Future of Acute Hospital Services in Worcestershire Programme Board. All NHS organisations in Worcestershire support this work.

Neither the Clinical Senate nor the previous Independent Clinical Review supported the transfer of services at the Alexandra Hospital to an alternative provider.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question Mr Hart reiterated that the Council wished to see a safe, accessible and co-ordinated health service for all residents of the county.

QUESTION 13 – Mrs F M Oborski asked Mr J H Smith:

"In 2014 a greengrocers in Vicar Street, Kidderminster was successfully prosecuted and fined for trading on the highway and causing obstruction to pedestrians. That

trader is now continuing to commit those same offences. What steps can be taken to prevent this activity?"

Answer Given

The company and manager of this shop were convicted in 2014 of obstructing the highway. The latest complaints are being investigated. We cannot say more about the investigation at this stage in order to avoid prejudicing any legal proceedings.

Supplementary Question

In response to a supplementary question about the possibility of tackling repeat offenders by standard warning letter Mr Smith promised to give a written response.