

**Date:** 18 July 2023

**County Council - Thursday 20th July 2023**

Dear Sir / Madam,

I have recently forwarded to you a copy of the agenda for the next meeting of the County Council.

I am now able to enclose a copy of the following reports that were unavailable when the agenda was circulated.

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11. **Questions**

(Pages 1 - 8)

Questions to be asked by Members of the County Council of the Leader of the Council, a Cabinet Member, or a Chairman of a Committee. The question will be answered by the relevant Member and the Member asking the question may then ask a follow up question which will also be answered.

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John Tradewell  
Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Corporate Services





**Question No. 1**

**County Council Meeting – 20 July 2023**

**Question to Councillor David Williams  
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport**

**By Councillor Nigel Yates**

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**Question**

Up until Autumn 2022, Staffordshire Moorlands District Council (SMDC) managed, under contract, the County section of NCR55 Biddulph Valley Way. When SMDC returned the contract due to transferring their countryside officer and associated country parks to the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, routine maintenance reverted to County, there is no evidence that any routine maintenance has been undertaken since. What is the County's position with conducting routine maintenance on this route, as I am aware of three interested and competent parties who would like to consider taking over this contract to manage this important national cycle route?

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**Reply**

The highways team have continued to inspect the sections of the Biddulph Valley Way that are the responsibility of the County Council throughout the period and where required have been arranging repairs.

Following the surrender of the lease by SMDC the county council's highways team have been in contact with the Wildlife Trust and are awaiting information on what they are able to offer in future.

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**County Council Meeting – 20 July 2023****Question to Councillor David Williams  
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport****By Councillor Arshad Afsar**

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**Question**

Is the cabinet member aware of the widespread dissatisfaction of residents with the urban grass verge cuts being reduced from ten to six and often these schedules not being met, resulting in rat infestations and other unpleasant circumstances in several parts of the county? Will he revisit the 10-times approach in collaboration with the district and borough?

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**Reply**

To start with a correction, the change in the number of grass cuts was from 8 to 6 cuts per season, which was introduced in 2020 to help support the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

A wide range of different highway grass cutting delivery arrangements exist across the County, including the use of private local contractors, 4 Borough and District councils and 17 Parish and Town Councils. One of the big benefits of local councils delivering highway grass cutting is that they have the flexibility to choose to provide additional cuts at their own cost at any time throughout the year.

All of the county council's delivery arrangements are closely monitored to ensure that the county council's highway grass cutting specification and minimum number of cuts is delivered and there have been no occasions when scheduled cuts have not been provided.

However, following changes to some historic delivery arrangements there has been a relatively small number of cases where grass that was previously cut by one of the local Borough or District Councils was not cut at the start of this season because it wasn't clear if it was part of the highway verge, an area of privately owned land or public open space that continues to be managed by the respective local Borough or District Council. We believe that all of these areas have now all been identified and interim mowing arrangements are in place whilst ongoing responsibility is resolved.

With regards to future grass cutting frequency and delivery arrangements, I'm pleased to confirm that a business case is currently being developed to allocate the resources needed to carry out a widescale review of highway verge management specifications. Starting later this year with digitisation and Quality Assurance of over 4.5 million sq.m of highway verge, the aim of this review is to enable more flexibility over local grass cutting specifications and delivery arrangements – meaning that they can be adapted to best meet the needs of local residents, maximise potential biodiversity, reduce CO2 emissions and improve their contribution to flood risk management.

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**County Council Meeting – 20 July 2023****Question to Councillor Jonathan Price  
Cabinet Member for Education (and SEND)****By Councillor Charlotte Atkins**

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**Question**

What is the current level of pupil absence in Staffordshire schools? How does that compare with pre Covid pandemic levels of absence? Are there areas where attendance is particularly poor or good? What impact does socio economic factors and pupil age have on attendance?

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**Reply**

Overall attendance in Staffordshire compares favourably with the national and regional averages. Although there is no current validated data to make comparisons, the DfE is publishing unvalidated data that can be used to compare Staffordshire attendance data. The latest information available indicates that attendance in the primary phase is 94.9% compared with the national average of 94%. In secondary schools the attendance rate is 90.5% compared with 87.9% nationally and in Staffordshire special schools the latest attendance rate is 90% compared with the national rate of 85.9%.

The current overall absence rate is 7.2%. Whilst attendance has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, it has improved since last year which was 7.6% and we continue to support schools where there are concerns about pupil absence.

As you will see from the above information, absence rates are higher in secondary schools.

In the latest published data (2022) Staffordshire is ranked in the second quartile for attendance with an absence rate in line with the national average and below both the regional and statistical neighbour averages.

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**County Council Meeting – 20 July 2023****Question to Councillor Mark Sutton  
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People****By Councillor Gillian Pardesi**

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**Question**

Ahead of the rollout of the Government's extension of 30 hours free childcare, how confident is the Council that it will meet the requirement when nine out of ten councils now fear that nursery closures this year will undermine capacity?

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**Reply**

In the Government's spring budget, the Chancellor announced transformative reforms to childcare for children and families. The new entitlements will be introduced in phases beginning in April 2024. From:

- April 2024, all working parents of 2-year-olds can access 15 hours funded childcare per week
- September 2024, all working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3-years-old can access 15 hours funded childcare per week
- September 2025, all working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3-years-old can access 30 hours funded childcare per week

This provides a significant challenge for local authorities due to the short timeframe from the announcement to implementation. Staffordshire are working at pace to prepare and plan for the extended entitlements, ensuring as many families as possible in Staffordshire will benefit.

The Childcare Act 2006, Section 6 places a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure there are enough childcare places available for families. The Early Years Team already work relentlessly, carrying out a variety of market management activities to ensure this statutory duty is met.

**Understanding the Childcare Market**

Our highly developed understanding of the childcare market is underpinned by the following activities:

- The Early Years Team consistently collates and analyse a range of data including places and vacancies data for each provider which is recorded by district and ward. This is used to inform future planning and priorities.
- Sufficiency monitoring provides a framework for action in each ward. For example, if a ward is identified as causing concern the team prepares actions plans to develop new provision or extend existing provision to meet demand.
- The team provides a range of consultancy support to the sector including advice regarding sustainability. This is available free of charge to all Staffordshire providers. This service is bespoke and supports settings to consider a variety of options/working models, therefore mitigating against potential closures.

This market management activity has been recognised as an example of effective practice by the Department for Education and Ofsted.

Staffordshire has seen some nursery closures, although a smaller number than originally expected following the pandemic. In a significant number of cases alternative childcare by another provider has been set up on the same sites. Where nurseries announce their intention to close, use of accurate data, the team's knowledge and excellent relationships with providers means the team respond quickly to scope out new opportunities to ensure families are able to access the places required.

### **Preparation for the Extended Offer**

In preparation for the implementation of the extended entitlements the Early Years Team have completed two pieces of work:

- A sufficiency audit to survey all Staffordshire providers who offer early education entitlements. The survey closed on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> July with a return rate of 99.5%.
- An analysis of datasets enabling estimation of the number of additional places required for two-year-olds in each district.

This information provides a firm foundation from which to develop detailed action plans to support future sufficiency planning.

The team has excellent relationships with its childcare providers; through its Early Years Reference Group and relationships, the team remains well informed about the challenges and needs of the early years sector and is supporting them to respond.