

Date: 07 February 2024

County Council - Thursday 8th February 2024

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.

7. **Questions**

(Pages 3 - 16)

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

John Tradewell
Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Corporate Services



Question No. 1**County Council Meeting – 8th February 2024****Question to Councillor David Williams
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport****By Councillor Yates**

Question

Last week I came across a vehicle parked on Zig-zag lines adjacent to a pelican crossing on Biddulph High Street. This is an all too frequent occurrence. I took a photograph and logged the time and date in order to report it. Unfortunately, I could not find an appropriate reporting form on either the Staffordshire County Council or Staffordshire Police Website. On conducting an online search to ascertain how to proceed I was directed to "Fix My Street" which does have the reporting capability for such an offence. Unfortunately, Staffordshire County Council do not accept reports from this organisation – can the Cabinet Member please confirm the policy for accepting reports of Highways (and parking issues) from third party organisations and whether they will consider accepting reports from these "user friendly" options?

Reply

As part of the county council's digital strategy the ability to accept reports from third-party applications has previously been investigated and at that time was considered unsuitable. Whilst they do offer some advantages, such as nationwide application, there are also many added complications to these systems, including:

- Allowing users to report issues on private and unadopted roads.
- Limited customisation with no ability to provide users with further information about the issue, including self-help advice.
- Low user rating on both Apple and Google platforms; and
- Having significant set-up cost and ongoing operating costs, which at that time were up to £62,000 per year.

However, as part of the ongoing highways transformation programme a new Customer Relations Management (CRM) solution is currently being developed and as part of this work it is right that should review the case for accepting reports from third-party applications. This work will be conducted over the summer months with the findings available later in the year.

In the meantime, we will also review the front-end of the Report-It system to see if we can make it easier for users to navigate to the relevant parking report pages. The ability to report parking offences on pedestrian crossing zig-zag lines does exist on the county council's webpages for enforcement by our Civil Parking Enforcement officers, however enforcement of this offence by local Policing units allows endorsement with 3 penalty points.

County Council Meeting – 8th February 2024**Question to Councillor Simon Tagg
Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate
Change****By Councillor Sweeney**

Question

The noxious stink from Walleys Quarry Landfill in Newcastle under Lyme has been causing distress and concern to residents in my Division and beyond for a number of years. In recent months it has returned with a vengeance with complaints from residents numbering into the hundreds since November 2023.

Can the Portfolio Holder confirm that Staffordshire County Council stands shoulder to shoulder with Newcastle Borough Council and local residents in holding the Environment Agency and site operator to account for their failings over a long period? Does he also agree with me that the landfill should be closed down, capped off and restoration be carried out to the site?

Reply

From the outset Staffordshire County Council has been adamant that our communities should not have to suffer the consequences of the operator's failings at Walleys Quarry Landfill while the Environment Agency tried to find solutions in its role as statutory regulator.

In June 2021 this Council wrote to the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson calling for the Government to take immediate action, using emergency powers, if necessary, to intervene on residents' behalf.

The Environment Agency remains the body responsible for regulating the site's operation and closing it if necessary. Since 2021, the County Council has worked closely with partners, including Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and constituency MP Aaron Bell, to press for the Environment Agency and the Government to act and bring this problem under control if the operator could not.

In October 2023 the Leaders of both Staffordshire and Newcastle Councils wrote to then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs calling not only for a public inquiry into the Environment Agency's

performance at Walleys Quarry, but to investigate the wider issue of how landfill sites are managed, regulated and how the community may seek redress for the breaches.

That call remains and we continue to do all we can to support residents frustrated, disappointed, and angered by recent events.

As a local member I do agree with Cllr Sweeney that it is now well past time for the Environment Agency to issue a Closure Notice on Walleys Quarry Landfill.

County Council Meeting – 8th February 2024**Question to Councillor Mark Sutton
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People****By Councillor Charlotte Atkins**

Question

After the County Council's substantial investment in the Transformation of Children's Services, why have Children's Services been downgraded from good to requires improvement?

How much did the Transformation cost the Council, including the redundancy costs of all the senior managers?

Has the Transformation of Children's Services achieved the savings that were promised or have reinvestments been required to refill posts/re-establish posts deleted in the Transformation Plan?

How much is the Council paying in interim/agency/non-Staffordshire employed managers, social workers and support workers per month compared to before the Transformation?

Reply**Ofsted Outcome**

Staffordshire Children's Services was inspected by OFSTED in November 2023 and received an overall rating of requires improvement to be good:

- The quality and effectiveness of management oversight of contacts, referrals and assessments in the 'front door'.
- The effectiveness and impact of performance data and quality assurance to drive practice improvement.
- The effectiveness and oversight of allegations against those in positions of trust undertaken by the local authority designated officer (LADO) service.
- The effectiveness of partnership working, particularly with housing and health partners, to improve children's access to dentistry and for children in care with more complex health needs to get timely assessment and support and ensure that care leavers are not placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation.

Whilst the inspection outcome is not what we would have wanted there were many positives acknowledged including:

- Our arrangements to determine the suitability of elective home education (EHE) and to ensure children missing full-time education are able to access education as quickly as possible. The inspection concluded that these are well-considered, well-implemented and ably managed. As part of the overall transformation, additional resource was provided for EHE as this was identified as an area for improvement at the previous inspection.
- The effective partnership between education providers and our virtual school help children make good progress from their starting points. The inspection recognised that children in care attend school regularly.
- There were examples of excellent practice for UASC such as the Amity Hub which supports children with a broad range of skills and services for Children in Care which maintained good overall.
- The inspection recognised that no children were found to be unsafe in Staffordshire and the majority had their plans progressed in a timely manner, these are massive achievements given the scale of change that we have experienced.

Transformation

- The Children's Transformation was a significant change which we anticipated would take five years to embed. We recognise that we have more work to do and remain confident that the next inspection will demonstrate the scale of activity and staff commitment to get us to good.
- All of our District Leads and first-line managers in Social Care are now permanent (this was not the position prior to the transformation), the number of permanent social workers is increasing (this is different to the position across most local authorities in England), staff satisfaction rates are increasing, staff sickness rates are decreasing.
- For children and families, the district model of combining our social care and education offer reduces duplication and ensures we have a holistic approach to providing the right services and support which we remain committed to securing.
- Between 2016 and 2019 Cabinet received papers outlining proposed changes to the wider children's system to develop a whole system approach, bringing together children's social care, SEND and Inclusion, the Place Based Approach and commissioning. This approach was informed by best practice, an evidence base from outstanding local authorities, research and performance data.
- In order to facilitate that change, additional investment was required and provided for c £8.1m over the years 2019/20 – 2025/26.

- The majority of this was temporary short term funding front loaded for the initial years 2019/20 to 2022/23 for £6.3m that has now been removed; however, there is also an on-going amount of c £0.6m for the continuing provision of family group conferencing and additional support for virtual school.
- The savings were estimated to be £17 million based on reducing the number of children in care. During 2023 there has been a steady reduction however the anticipated financial impact is yet to be realised.
- This was exacerbated by covid and the significant change that followed the staffing restructure. The number of children in care have not reduced as initially intended, however as the changes we made have been embedded and staff retention has improved the number of children in our care has reduced over the past 12 months seeing a reduction virtually every month during 2023, as we are able to work more restoratively with families keeping them together and return more children to their families when it's safe to do so.

Redundancy Costs and Agency Staff

- 11 Senior managers (members of WLT or OMT) including associated actuarial strain was £1.3 million. None of these positions have since been reestablished.
- 10% of the current staff overall within Children's Services are agency staff.
- Nationally Children's Services have struggled with the recruitment and retention of Social Workers, Staffordshire comparatively performs well overall in the use of agency staff.
- In 2020/21 Childrens Service spent £3.8m on circa 70 temporary agency staff but in 2022/23 that had increased to £7.9m covering vacant positions within our structure this includes maternity and staff absence.
- This was recognised in the MTFS and significant additional resource brought into the budget this year (23/24) of £5.7m to address those concerns to provide for both additional resource and an increase in funding for social workers. The service has secured people within the majority of those roles and is actively recruiting to the remaining positions; however for the majority of this year Childrens services has continued to rely on more expensive agency support for essential service delivery.
- Whilst this has reduced from last year, the service continues to employ around 90 agency staff at present (includes c 20 staff for sickness/maternity cover) at a cost of c £0.5m / month. That is down from over 120 in the summer 2023 and we anticipate will reduce further over the next few months.

County Council Meeting – 8th February 2024

**Question to Councillor Mark Sutton
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People**

By Councillor Pardesi

Question

What are the MMR vaccination rates within Staffordshire? Have they declined in recent years? Are there any concerns about the increased incidence of measles among Staffordshire children?

Reply

As you probably know, the MMR vaccine is delivered as part of the routine childhood immunisation schedule. It is delivered in 2 doses: 1st dose at around 12 months, and 2nd dose around 3yrs 4 months (up to 5 yrs). One dose offers around 95% protection and 2 doses around 99% protection. Our uptake for dose one is pretty good, but we start to see this tail-off by the 2nd dose. (This trend is not specific to Staffordshire and in fact, coverage for MMR vaccine in the UK has fallen to its lowest level in a decade).

Staffordshire MMR coverage

Immunisation	Staffordshire 2022/23	Staffordshire 2021/22	Staffordshire 2020/21	West Midlands (22/23)	England (22/23)
MMR1 (1 st dose)	93.6%	93.8%	93.9%	88.9%	89.3%
MMR2 (2 nd dose)	89.3%	90.4%	90.6%	83.7%	84.5%

Coverage for MMR vaccine in Staffordshire is pretty good overall – above the regional and national average. The latest full year data we have is for 2022-23, which shows **Staffordshire coverage for MMR (2nd dose) at 89.3%** (compared to England at 84.5%). This figure has remained fairly static for a number of years (see above table). The World Health Organisation target is 95% to reach satisfactory levels of ‘herd immunity’.

However, there are pockets where we have much lower uptake, particularly in specific communities and populations. This is often seen in gypsy roma traveller communities, specific ethnic minority groups, children in care and

migrant populations. We are working with the Integrated Care Board to review GP patient data and school data to identify pockets of lowest uptake across Staffordshire for targeted action.

There are also sections of our population who haven't been vaccinated for other reasons, such as children under 12 months and people who have weaker immune systems. This means we have pockets of susceptible children and adults who will be more vulnerable to catching measles and the potential for outbreaks in unvaccinated communities/populations.

Are there concerns about the increase of measles among children in Staffordshire?

During 2023 there was a resurgence of measles in England. Cases have predominantly been in Birmingham with smaller numbers in other West Midlands local authority areas. In the last few weeks, there have been a small number of confirmed cases in Staffordshire (<5). However, we do not get notified of every new case and there is a small lag in the release of this information (about a week behind). We know that measles is *the* most infectious disease that is spread through the respiratory route, therefore although every precaution is taken to minimise any further spread, it is likely we will see further cases amongst susceptible populations. We are doing what we can to minimise this risk.

Local action

Having seen the rapid increase in cases in London and the West Midlands, over the last few months we have been working with partners across the local health system to identify where we have low vaccine coverage, understand potential barriers to coming forward for vaccination, and developing targeted community-driven messaging and alternative vaccine delivery mechanisms to overcome these barriers.

For now (as cases are still relatively low in Staffordshire), our focus is on increasing MMR uptake in low coverage populations as we know this is the most effective protective factor. Vaccines are our best line of defence against diseases like measles and help stop outbreaks occurring in the community. In addition, we are taking steps to ensure the local system is as prepared and resilient as it can be if we were to see a rapid increase in cases. For example, last week we carried out a multi-agency table-top exercise with various possible scenarios to test our local measles pathways and outbreak mitigation/management arrangements.

County Council Meeting – 8th February 2024**Question to Councillor David Williams
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport****By Councillor Hussain**

Question

There is a serious concern for the safety of pedestrians, especially schoolchildren, due to the road barriers being damaged on Evershed Way and Uxbridge Street. In addition, there have been ongoing issues with blocked gullies in several streets including Uxbridge Street, Broadway Street, Blackpool Street, Oak and South Oak Street, and South Broadway Street, as well as the surrounding areas.

Could the cabinet member provide assurance that they will conduct a comprehensive investigation to improve the safety of the street?

Reply

The safety of road users is taken extremely seriously and all damage to highway assets is prioritised for repair based on an assessment of the risk posed to the travelling public. Work to repair the guard rail at Evershed Way is planned and will be scheduled as soon as resources allow.

Extra resources are being brought in to undertake additional gully emptying as part of the increased investment into road maintenance. This work is planned using robust asset management criteria and the residential areas surrounding Uxbridge Street are routinely cleansed on a cyclical programme. The Community Highways team are available to work with the local Member to ensure areas are cleared of parked cars, when the cleansing takes place, and will ensure any isolated blockages are added to work schedules as necessary.

County Council Meeting – 8th February 2024**Question to Councillor David Williams
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport****By Councillor Afsar**

Question

It has become an all too common occurrence for our Highways Contractors Amey, to selectively fix a singular pothole while overlooking nearby ones, some of which are in equal or worse condition.

Considering the substantial disruption borne by the residents of Burton on Trent owing to recent concurrent roadworks, leading to considerable traffic snarls and commuter delays

Can the Cabinet Member for Highways please confirm that his much vaunted "whole place" approach to pothole repairs in a locality will actually be rolled out and when can we expect to see the benefits of such a policy.

Reply

Staffordshire county council has committed an extra £50m into local road maintenance over the next three years. Through this investment we will deliver an enhanced programme of capital maintenance schemes to replace sections of life-expired roads and carry out around 100 miles of pothole prevention surface treatments and 30,000 individual pothole repairs each year.

A 'whole place' approach is adopted when delivering our capital maintenance schemes. This means that other highway issues, such as drainage, barrier and signage repairs are also attended to at the same time.

Similarly, the extra investment is enabling larger repairs as part of our pothole hot-spot and pre-surface treatment patching programme. This means that it's not just the offending pothole that gets repaired, but also any surrounding area that has started to deteriorate and if left unchecked will later become a new pothole on its own.

Elsewhere, and in accordance with national codes of practice, individual pothole repairs are prioritised on a risk basis. Experienced county council highway inspectors identify and categorise each pothole defect, stipulating

its repair timescale and treatment type, which the scheduling team then group together for repair in the most efficient and effective way.

Complimenting this the dedicated £2m Member's pothole fund enables local Members to identify and prioritise particular local potholes for more urgent attention.

However, despite all these efforts there can still be many reasons why some pothole repairs are completed one-day and other nearby potholes have to left until a future return visit. These include things like:

- A number of emergencies, category 1 and category 2 defects in the local area are approaching the end of their statutory repair timescale and must be given priority.
- Different types of pothole repair treatment or traffic management is required – this is more common when adjacent pothole defects are located on or close to road junctions.
- The capacity of the attending repair crew has been reached e.g. all repair material has been used or spoil collected from earlier repairs needs tipping; and
- Changing weather conditions puts a halt to pothole repairs midway through the day.

The recent rainfall and freezing temperatures has seen a huge rise in high risk pothole defects this winter. Even with all our extra investment resources are finite and crews are pulling out all the stops to undertake holding repairs to the worst and most dangerous to help keep our roads as safe as possible. The main programme of road maintenance will then start in the spring when weather conditions are more favourable to creating long-lasting repairs.