

COUNCIL 24TH SEPTEMBER 2020

PUBLIC QUESTION REPORT

Question from Mr Rob Wilson

The footballer, Marcus Rashford, brought the issue of Free School Meals to national attention before the school summer holidays.

How many children in Shropshire are currently eligible for Free School Meals?

How has this number changed since last September?

What proportion of those eligible received assistance via the COVID Summer Food Fund?

Did all who sought assistance from the COVID Summer Food Fund receive it?

What plans are in place to help those in need over October Half Term, the Christmas Holiday and beyond?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

COUNCILLOR ED POTTER

How many children in Shropshire are currently eligible for Free School Meals?

As at 3 September 2020, the Council's IT system for managing free school meal applications shows that there were 4,883 children eligible for benefits-related free school meals at the beginning of the Autumn term 2020.

How has this number changed since last September?

The comparative figure for 3 September 2019 was 3,569 children eligible for benefits-related free school meals at the beginning of the Autumn term 2019.

What proportion of those eligible received assistance via the COVID Summer Food Fund?

The COVID Summer Food Fund provided a process for schools to order £90 vouchers for the 6-week summer holiday period for those pupils in their school eligible to receive a benefits-related free school meal. Orders for vouchers had to be placed by individual schools at least one week before the end of the summer term. The online portal for ordering vouchers was managed by a company called Edenred UK, who had been commissioned by the Department for Education to operate the free school meal voucher scheme in England. The COVID Summer Food Fund was a specific extension to the free school meal voucher scheme schools had been using during the majority of the Summer term.

The Council's IT system shows that there were 5,183 children eligible for benefits-related free school meals at the end of the Summer term, on 17 July 2020. However, as individual schools were required to submit orders for vouchers via the Edenred online portal, the Council does not have access to details on the numbers of vouchers ordered by schools individually or in aggregate. This information would be held by Edenred UK, who were responsible for administering the voucher scheme and processing the claims from individual English schools.

Did all who sought assistance from the COVID Summer Food Fund receive it?

Edenred will hold the data on how many vouchers were issued to Shropshire pupils eligible to receive a benefits-related free school meals for the summer holiday period, as well as details on how many of these were redeemed at the supermarkets supporting the scheme and accepting vouchers.

Shropshire Council supported some of the county's most vulnerable families with food parcels over the Easter holidays and Summer half-term periods.

What plans are in place to help those in need over October Half Term, the Christmas Holiday and beyond?

Shropshire Council officers have raised, in recent meetings with West Midlands Department for Education officials, whether the Government intends to reinstate the voucher scheme over the Autumn half-term and future school holiday periods. At the time of writing no decision has yet been taken.

Question from Graham Tate

'Residents of Frankwell and Porthill will welcome the report item 10 into the proposed 20mph speed restriction at entrances to Shropshire Schools as our two local schools, St. Georges and Woodfield infants are not presently protected in this way. The report makes disturbing reading. There have been 19 recorded casualties outside Shropshire primary schools in the three years to March 2020 outside primary schools alone.

At less than £3m to give all Shropshire schools this protection, why have residents waited 7 years since the measure was first adopted and an estimated 44 primary school children been injured, whilst this uncaring Conservative controlled council have failed to act?'

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Transport and Highways

CLLR DAVENPORT

The council has limited staffing and financial resources available for highway improvements with government providing the council only £1.6m a year for all highway improvements annually. Therefore, necessarily, we need to focus on utilising these resources on where the most accidents can be prevented.

Unfortunately, there have been many accident blackspot clusters across the county where accident analysis clearly demonstrates that engineering intervention will reduce the number and severity of accidents and therefore these have understandably had to take priority.

Whilst any injury is obviously regrettable, particularly when they involve children, there has been no discernible pattern that suggests a blanket roll out of 20mph zones in isolation would have prevented a significant number of accidents compared to those where resources have been invested. Whilst 11 accidents have been reported outside schools in the last 3 years only 6 of these happened at times when pupils would be expected to be starting and finishing school (i.e. 8-9am and 3-4pm) and of these, 2 involved already slow-moving vehicles and 2 where parking was considered the primary factor. In the one school in the county where a trend of accidents demonstrated that engineering measures would improve the risk to children, traffic calming has been put in place already. It is therefore of course appropriate that each school is considered on a case by case basis to consider the most appropriate measures to improve the safety of children in that vicinity as today's report proposes. Any such approach to implement a blanket 20mph zone outside schools would therefore have diverted funds away from areas where lives and injuries have been saved in the last 7 years. However, as the number of these sites where accident clusters occur reduces it is of course appropriate to now look at areas where we can consider more pre-emptive measures.

Question from Ms Claire Kirby

In December last year, the Council agreed a Climate Change Strategy Framework, with a draft timetable that included public consultation in spring 2020, adoption of a Climate Emergency Strategy in summer 2020, and a Climate Action Plan going "live" from summer 2020 onwards. Understandably there have been some delays due to crises such as the flooding in February and then COVID. However, as the climate and ecological crisis accelerates, there are likely to be more such "interruptions". What is the Council's revised timetable for the adoption of its Climate Emergency Strategy and for the Climate Action Plan going live? And how will the Council build resilience into this vital area of its work, ensuring that this work is properly resourced and able to continue despite the demands of any acute crises?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Services and Climate Change
COUNCILLOR DEAN CARROLL

The Council has adopted the principle outlined in the Strategy Framework of: "don't stop acting just because you're planning". Despite the challenges referred to, staff in the Climate Task Force have been able to continue work on a Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plan for consideration by elected members before the end of 2020, whilst also developing a range of specific projects to help reduce both the Council's and the wider county's carbon footprints. The Task Force has now been made a permanent part of the Council's staff structure and has been provided with a specific budget. The Task Force continues to be actively supported by an internal officer group drawn from across the range of Council services.

Question from Joanna Blackman

Scientists have warned that we have only a few years left to transform our economies and avoid catastrophic climate change. Decisions made now as part of Shropshire's Local Plan will have ramifications for decades, locking in future emissions. The Council has a legal responsibility to ensure that these decisions are consistent with national and international commitments to limit emissions, as well as a responsibility to Shropshire residents to ensure that the Local Plan has the Council's own Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plan at its heart. However, the latter are not yet agreed. Will the Council therefore delay the agreement of the Local Plan until after its Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plan have been finalised?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Strategic Planning
COUNCILLOR ROBERT MACY

The purpose of the Local Plan is establishing a positive framework for the delivery of sustainable development, incorporating the need to protect the environment as well as supporting appropriate housing and commercial growth. It is inherently a strategic document and should offer the opportunity through its policies to give consideration in decision making to other council strategies, including the emerging Climate Change Strategy. Indeed, draft policy SP3 (Climate Change) of the draft Local Plan, currently subject to public consultation to 30th September, makes specific reference to the key ways in which new development will seek to support the transition towards a zero-carbon economy, i.e. reducing carbon emissions; integrating on and off site renewable and low carbon energy; maximising carbon capture and storage; and mitigating and adaptation measures. This was informed by the Climate Change Strategy Framework approved by the Council on 19th December 2019, as well as discussions with officers from the Council's Climate Change Task Force. It

is anticipated the draft Climate Strategy and Action Plan will be discussed by Cabinet later in 2020 and will be subject to an annual review.

Question from Dr Jamie Russell

Last year Shropshire Council pledged to be net zero in its corporate activities by 2030 as part of its Climate Emergency declaration. The council's pension scheme, which is administered by the Shropshire County Pension Fund (SCPF), is part of this pledge.

However, a recent Freedom of Information request to Shropshire Council revealed that the council does not know the carbon footprint of the £2 billion fund, nor how much CO2 would be saved if SCPF agreed to divest as per the council's motion in July. The same FOI request revealed that the council also does not know what steps the fund needs to take in order for the council to meet its net zero pledge.

At the last Pension Fund Committee meeting on Friday 18 September, a much-anticipated Climate Risk Report was received. However, this report was not released to the public. It is my understanding that the report only examines the risk that the climate crisis poses to the fund's profits. It does not assess the carbon footprint of the fund, nor the damage being done to the climate by the council's pension scheme.

When does the council expect to have a full estimate of the carbon footprint of its pension scheme by? And what steps need to be taken to ensure that the pension scheme doesn't prevent the council from keeping its net zero pledge?

Response from the Leader

COUNCILLOR PETER NUTTING

The Climate Risk Report was commissioned on behalf of Shropshire County Pension Fund, at the Pensions Committee on the 18 September this was the first opportunity to see and consider the report.

The committee were disappointed that the detail of the report cannot be shared in public but understands that this is due to intellectual property and data licensing restrictions of the third-party data and analytics contained in the report.

In the exempt section of the meeting, the issues raised in the report generated significant discussion and reflection and identified a number of areas for action. The recommendations in the report were all approved by the committee and, furthermore, a specific request was made, and agreed, to commission a similar report that could be made public.

Upon reviewing the report, the committee agreed a timetable for actions and this will be published in due course.

Furthermore, the Pensions Committee agreed to adopt the key recommendation within the report, which was to develop a Climate Strategy for the Fund. This would be consistent with the TCFD recommendations and include a Climate Stewardship Plan, monitored regularly by the Pensions Fund Committee.