

CABINET 23 MARCH 2022

MEMBER QUESTIONS

1 From Cllr Julian Dean

On International Women's Day a local journalist highlighted the government figures for the gender pay gap at Shropshire Council in comparison with nearby authorities.

These show that the gap is considerably wider here than in our neighbours and well above the average for local government, with a mean difference in hourly rate between women and men of 16.4% compared to 5.2% in Telford and Wrekin and 6.5% in Herefordshire and with a national mean difference of around 5.5%.

What explanation is there for this? What strategies are in place to address this? Will the cabinet commit to targets for a significant reduction in the gender pay gap to levels comparable with our neighbouring authorities and national averages? Recognising that even the national average is still too much, will the cabinet commit to developing continuing strategies to eliminate the gender pay gap?

2 From Councillors Gerald Dakin, Peggy Mullock and Tom Biggins

As Whitchurch members we have really appreciated the commitment by the Portfolio Holder and indeed the whole of Cabinet to providing a new leisure facility for Whitchurch, despite these difficult financial times. We have also appreciated being involved in the overall process and are very much looking forward to the next stage.

Can the Portfolio holder confirm the date of the Cabinet meeting when the report on a new Whitchurch Swimming Pool comes up for decision and if that decision is positive, and everyone in Whitchurch are keeping their fingers crossed that it will be, when can the public have their say and what would be the likely timescale for the Pool's completion?

3 From Cllr Rosemary Dartnall

in relation to item 9 – Shropshire Enhanced Bus Partnership Scheme.

Shropshire residents urgently need improved public transport – the current offer is well-known to be unacceptable and as we face our responsibilities to mitigate for the climate emergency an integrated transport system is a keystone policy. This question arises because of concern for the success or otherwise of Shropshire Council's government funding bid for £98 mn for the Bus Service Improvement Plan under an

Enhanced Bus Partnership Scheme. Following bid submission in October 2021, the report for cabinet expects a response in 2022 to the bid by February (3.2), and March, but perhaps even April 2022 (2.6). We are fast approaching the end of March with no word, causing growing concern for public transport provision in Shropshire.

- When will a response be given and what is the plan B for essential and improved bus services in Shropshire should the funding bid be unsuccessful, or only partially delivered?
- As we come into a new financial year, what will be the impact on existing bus partnership service levels if BSIP funding is not forthcoming and how will this impact on the budget for 2022/23?
- How will the public be consulted in the event of a reduction in bus service provision, as a result of a failed government bid and how will the council authorise such a change in service?

4 From Councillor Tony Parsons

We support the key elements in Agenda item 8, Update to Private Rented Sector Housing Enforcement Policy, particularly the proposal of introducing stiffer penalties for rogue landlords which is very welcome given that this affects 17% of housing stock and often those with the lowest incomes. Given that fines can be as much as £30,000 and can only be spent (according to 5.1) on *"to further the delivery of the Council's statutory functions relating to the enforcement activities covering the private rented sector ... or paid into ... central Government.."* could the Cabinet member confirm that the authority plans to increase staffing resource within the private housing enforcement team to increase our capacity? After 12 years of austerity cuts our workforce has been cut to the bone, and this additional function must be supported with additional staff."

5 From Cllr Caroline Bagnall

Member question from Cllr Caroline Bagnall on agenda item 7, Shropshire Library Strategy.

It is interesting to note that the recent library consultation found that overall levels of satisfaction with the current library services are high. Over 900 people responded to the Draft Library Strategy consultation and "Customers view library staff as the most important aspect of the service. Opening times and the range/quality of stock are also very important."

So can the cabinet member please explain:

1. Why single staffing is being explored, thus ignoring the views of the public and the high value they place on the staff.
2. Why it is planned to install more self service machines in libraries, thus inevitably reducing the opportunities for the public to interact with and benefit from the knowledge of staff.
3. Noting the risk to staff in your report, could the cabinet member confirm on what date was written notification of the proposals sent to the trade unions to engage with them on staffing impact?
4. Can the cabinet member provide an assurance that there will be no staff redundancies from this proposal?
5. Can the cabinet member provide assurance that there will be no reduction in library opening hours or local provision for residents?

The consultation also found that "In terms of the future many people are keen for libraries to stay as they are. People argue strongly for the importance of libraries to individuals and communities."

So, can the cabinet member also please explain why it is proposed to reduce subsidies to community run libraries and to reset expectations about support?

6 From Cllr David Vasmer

What preparations are Shropshire Council making to welcome Ukrainian refugees? And what communications has Shropshire received from central government about Ukrainian refugees? How do preparations for Ukrainian refugees differ from those made for refugees from Afghanistan?