

CABINET 23 MARCH 2022
Member Questions

Question from:	Julian Dean	
Subject:	Gender Pay Gap	
Portfolio Holder:	Gwilym Butler	

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?

Response

Shropshire Council is an organisation made up of extremely diverse roles. Almost a quarter of our entire workforce, however, are within Shire Services in cleaning and catering positions, and 87% of our staff in Shire Services are women. This alone has a profound impact on the overall Gender Pay Gap figure for Shropshire Council. In addition, the Gender Pay Gap widens across the Country for those over the age of 40 due to unequal sharing of caring responsibilities which contributes to a higher proportion of women in part time roles. Over 70% of Shropshire Council’s workforce is over the age of 40 and almost 56% of our workforce are women over the age of 40.

Shropshire Council is committed to equality across all strands not just Gender equality. Our flexible working policy supports all employees to be able to request flexible working supporting our employees’ work life balance. In addition, more gender specific initiatives include the support offered to our employees around the Menopause, with training for Managers, raising awareness of the Menopause across the organisation and peer groups to support our employees.

Shropshire Council is committed to equal pay for all, and whilst our Gender Pay Gap figure is higher than some other authorities, this does

not represent a position of Shropshire Council paying men more than women for working in the same position but instead is merely a reflection of the diversity of roles and role types across the organisation.

Question from:	Gerald Dakin, Peggy Mullock, Tom Biggins
Subject:	Whitchurch Swimming Pool
Portfolio Holder:	Cecilia Motley

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?

Response:

The future provision of Whitchurch Swimming Pool and Fitness Centre is a priority for Shropshire Council.

It was unfortunate that the old facility had to close but this decision was taken in light of the findings of an independent structural engineer who advised the Council that repairs were not a viable option.

A new swimming and fitness centre will require significant capital investment from the Council and therefore a Feasibility Study was commissioned to a firm of design specialists (chartered architects) to provide us with the evidence and insight on which to base our decision on the provision of a new facility. We have moved the feasibility study at pace to aid our decision making.

Current capital investment requirement is estimated to be between £11.5m to £12.1m, dependant on the inclusion of a moveable floor to half the pool, which would add greater flexibility to the use of the facility. The costs take account of the high levels of construction inflation costs currently being experienced.

We are currently undertaking an initial key stakeholder engagement exercise to input into the feasibility stage.

Cabinet will be considering the Feasibility Study at a meeting in the near future to agree the next steps for the provision of a new facility and, subject to Cabinet agreement a formal public consultation exercise will follow.

Our current high-level programme, subject to Cabinet and Council agreement and, the planning application process could see us on site in the Autumn of 2023 and a new facility could be open in the summer of 2025.

I do understand Whitchurch resident's frustration at the pool being closed but we do need to ensure that the new facility proposals are sustainable both in terms of the financial position and our climate change agenda.

Question from:	Rosemary Dartnall
Subject:	Shropshire Enhanced Bus Partnership Scheme
Portfolio Holder:	Cecilia Motley

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?

Response

The Council are still awaiting news on the outcome of its Bus Service Improvement Plan funding submission, announcements on BSIP's across the country have been delayed and the latest news from the

Department of Transport is that we may hear the outcome by the end of April. Officers are working with bus operators to understand what the impact on the network ambitions will be should a funding award be either limited or not forthcoming.

The current Enhanced Bus Partnership is not dependent upon BISP funding, with the option to vary this plan once any funding award is made.

We need to wait for the outcome of the BSIP bid, but should any award not reflect the ambitions of our BSIP, then a public consultation will be included as part of any next steps.

Question from:	Tony Parsons	
Subject:	Private Rented Sector Housing Enforcement Policy	
Portfolio Holder:	Simon P Jones	Approved
<p>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 <i>“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..”</i> 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.”</p> <p>Response:</p>		

The Council welcomes the support expressed for the key elements, including the proposed introduction of stiffer financial penalties for rogue landlords, which are included in the updated Private Rented Sector Housing Enforcement Policy ('the Policy'). It is correct that the proceeds from any financial penalties referred to in the Policy may only be retained by the Council if they are spent on housing enforcement activities covering the private rented sector and if there is any unused surplus then this must be paid to central Government.

Whilst it is much welcomed that is set out in law to permit Councils to retain the proceeds of financial penalties, it is unrealistic in Shropshire, to expect this to sustainably fund additional staffing resources that would increase the Council's capacity to undertake housing enforcement work on a permanent basis.

There are significant reputational and financial risks associated with funding statutory services from financial penalties. Were the Council's enforcement ethos driven by income targets derived from achieving a certain level of enforcement related financial penalties, landlords and property management businesses might regard the Council as using enforcement as a 'cash cow', with the behaviour of those whose roles depend on this income driven by the need to achieve a financial target. Fundamentally, financial penalties are not an income generating tool; they are an enforcement tool and must be used in a reasonable and proportionate manner, in line with the principles of good regulation (as set out in the Council's Better Regulation and Enforcement Policy), for the purposes of securing compliance and long-standing behaviour change across the private rented sector.

Furthermore, it does not necessarily follow that because a financial penalty has been imposed that it will actually be paid. Any non-payment becomes a civil debt and must be pursued through the Council's debt recovery process, which, in itself, incurs additional costs both in terms of officer time and financial payments, and ultimately may have to be written off as a bad debt.

It is very much the desire of the Council to engage with landlords and property management businesses to encourage them to spend money on achieving compliance, i.e., to improve the safety standards and energy efficiency of accommodation, rather than pursuing them for a financial penalty debt. There will be no hesitancy in using the financial penalty powers where this is required, but this will generally be a 'last resort'. For this reason, they will be used infrequently and will not lead to a significant or permanent increase in available funds. In practice, any financial penalty that is issued will support the Council's financial position on an ad hoc basis rather than creating a basis upon which to

increase capacity to fund the delivery of private rented sector housing enforcement.

Nevertheless, in October 2021, a restructure moved the housing enforcement function from Public Health to Homes & Communities in the Place Directorate, with a new Assistant Director and a new Head of Service. As part of this restructure, it was recognised that the staffing resources available to properly deliver the housing enforcement function were inadequate and for this reason it was agreed, as part of the restructure consultation, that the staffing resource would be increased from 2.3 fte to 3.3 fte.

This, however, reduced the staffing available to undertake environmental protection functions and has therefore increased the risks in this other area. The increased resource in housing enforcement has been welcomed but is still insufficient to proactively address all the risks that are associated with the housing enforcement function. As a result, managers are continuing to explore options to move budgets to further increase the staffing resource for this function, as the only way in which the Council can fund this work. If successful, this will permanently and sustainably provide additional staffing resources to enable greater proactive housing enforcement work to be undertaken. However, it will unfortunately be balanced by increased pressure and risk in other areas of statutory responsibility.

Question from:	Caroline Bagnall	
Subject:	Shropshire Library Strategy	
Portfolio Holder:	Cecilia Motley	

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?

Response:

It is correct to say that the recent library consultation found that overall levels of satisfaction with library services are high and we want to maintain this satisfaction within the changed circumstances brought about by the pandemic and public sector financial pressures.

However, whilst 900 people responded to the libraries survey the vast majority of these were current users and over 60 years old, and the response from those not using the services currently, and the 30 and under age group was very low. One of our aims is to make libraries and the facilities therein more attractive and available to new users, including younger age groups, as well as the core group of library users.

Single staffing has been embraced by Shropshire Libraries for many years at our smaller sites, as part of the network of sites we maintain. The purpose of this strategy is not to reduce front-line services and staff, but rather to streamline delivery and encourage much greater use of the service.

Many authorities have introduced self-service machines and it is not intended that this will lead to redundancies amongst the front-line staff. If anything, their roles will be enhanced by the introduction of the self-service machines because it will free them up to develop services further and give our team greater freedom to engage with communities allowing them to benefit from our knowledgeable, friendly, informative staff.

These proposed changes also give us the opportunity to consider changing opening hours. This could include increasing hours, alongside expanding the range of services delivered by libraries and by other services within the library setting. Any changes to opening hours will be subject to consultation.

The Shropshire Libraries team is preparing several consultations as part of the delivery of the Draft Library Strategy, subject to approval by Cabinet on the 23rd March. It is planned to deliver public and staff consultations, including Union representation, to ensure inclusivity of our staff as we develop proposals for the transformation of the service. Changes at individual branches will be part of the delivery of the strategy and will be subject to community engagement locally.

These are challenging times, and Shropshire Council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy has set out savings across the Council, including within the library service. Any savings depend upon approval of the Draft Library Strategy 2022 -2027, followed by the development of specific proposals for local library services. Impacts on individual library provision arising from this would be subject to further public consultation, collaborative community discussions and political scrutiny. Community run libraries will be considered as part of this.

We see this Strategy as a positive step towards ensuring that Shropshire Library Service is fit for the 21st Century. The pandemic has highlighted a change in how the public wishes to engage with Councils digitally and physically. The Library Service is an integral part of this change and with this in mind the service is transforming itself to respond.

The draft Library Strategy 2022 – 2027 cannot be predetermined and we feel that consultation and community collaboration is key to delivering the best Library Service for Shropshire. Front line services for residents and local provision that is responsive to community need is the priority.

Question from:	David Vasmer
Subject:	Ukrainian Refugees
Portfolio Holder:	Simon P Jones Approved

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?

Response:

The UK government announced the [Homes for Ukraine – Homes for Ukraine – Local Sponsorship Scheme for Ukraine \(campaign.gov.uk\)](https://www.campaign.gov.uk/) scheme on 14.03.2022. The scheme encourages people who are happy to offer a room in their home to a Ukrainian family for 6+ months to

register their details. To date there has been over 100,000 registrations on the site.

The scheme aims to 'match' families and hosts together and offers a £350pcm payment to hosts as a 'good will' gesture. Phase 1 is focused on households who are aware of named Ukrainian families. We have no details of Phase 2 yet. Government have stated there is no impact on benefits income or Council Tax single supplement for anyone receiving this payment / agreeing to resettle families. The £350pcm paid to the hosts is not expected to pay for any costs associated with the Ukrainian families as they will have access to benefits / employment for items such as food / clothing etc

On 18.03.2022 the government released 'Homes for Ukraine: guidance for councils'.

The Local Authority will have the following responsibilities:

6. In-person visit to check suitability of accommodation being offered before or shortly after the family move in;
7. Check suitability of households offering accommodation to ensure no serious safeguarding or welfare concerns;
8. Undertake basic DBS checks on all adults in the sponsor household. Where incoming arrivals are children and/or vulnerable adults, an enhanced DBS check with barred lists check will be required for all adults in the sponsor household.
9. Provide wrap around support for the households resettled in the UK;
10. Provide an interim payment of £200 per guest for subsistence costs, which does not need to be repaid.
11. Provide school places for children of school age for which additional funding will be provided.
12. Statutory Homelessness Assistance will apply in cases where the sponsor/guest relationship breaks down and the guest is homeless or at risk of homelessness.
13. Administer the £350 per month 'thank you payment' to sponsors following the completion of all property checks.

The government have announced they will fund Local Authorities £10,500 per individual resettled in their area for 12 months. The government will then review funding for future years in due course.

We are in contact with Shropshire Supports Refugees (SSR) who are regularly in conversation with local Ukrainian and Polish support groups. SSR are keen to be involved but need to understand the funding available which I have advised I will update on as soon as I can.

For information the 2021 census data relating to 'country of birth' for those living in Shropshire for Ukraine and neighbouring countries is below:

Area	Belarus	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Moldova	Poland	Russia	Ukraine
Shropshire	-	-	200	190	110	1,600	100	70

The difference in settling Ukrainian families to those we have settled from Syria and Afghanistan is primarily the predicted number of households / people we are expecting as well as the fact they will primarily be going into family homes rather than independent homes. However further to this it is important to note that the majority of families will be Mums with children and the elderly as the men have remained in Ukraine to fight.

Key actions:

- Regular press releases to ensure up to date information
- Setting up of dedicated Shropshire Council website page
- Regular contact with West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership
- Set up working group for key people / agencies
- Direct all requests received to date regarding accommodation to the Government scheme

