

CABINET 18 October 2023
MEMBER QUESTIONS

Question from:	Rosemary Dartnall
Subject:	School Admissions
Portfolio Holder:	Kirstie Hurst-Knight Approved

Families of children attending Mereside Primary, Shrewsbury were invited to attend open days and apply for places at three Shrewsbury Secondary Schools, all within reasonable distance for an 11 year-old to travel. More than 10 Mereside families living in the South SUE were not offered a place at their first, second or third school choice. Instead they were offered Shrewsbury Academy, 4.7 miles away. All families appealed: some were successful, others not.

Column and Sutton division has many hundreds of new homes, and residents often express concern that their children will not have a school place when the time comes because they live in new homes and fear inadequate infrastructure is in place. This particular school year includes a high birth rate and therefore a statistical bump in numbers moving through education, but will this happen in subsequent years?

It is acknowledged that the September 2023 Year 7 cohort has put pressure on the capacity at the secondary entry level, however the forecast pupil numbers currently in the Shrewsbury primary schools indicate there is sufficient capacity for the next few years in the four Shrewsbury secondary schools, even allowing for housing development. As it stands today, all secondary applicants for the September 2023 cohort who reside in Shrewsbury have been allocated either one of their preferred schools (either in the town or rurally as per parental preference) or a school in Shrewsbury.

Whilst in overall terms there are sufficient places in Shrewsbury secondary schools for the 2024/25 academic year transfer group, there are areas of the town where there will be significant pressure on available school places which will have an impact on meeting parental preferences for certain schools.

Please clarify why there were not sufficient secondary school places available for all children living in the catchment for Priory, Meole and Belvidere Schools. Why were parents not warned that some children would need to be schooled further from home and given the opportunity to visit on open days and consider applying for a place at Shrewsbury Academy?

All the Shrewsbury secondary schools share one catchment area, there is no individual catchment area for the Priory, Belvidere or Meole Brace schools. Therefore, due to the nature and unpredictability of parental preference even though we aspire to meet these preferences it is not always possible.

The local authority has prepared for the increased demand for secondary school places for this exceptional year, incorporating actual and forecast changes in demand for places as a result of demographic shifts, emerging admissions patterns, housing developments and other factors. As a result of this a new teaching block was commissioned and built at Meole Brace School, who were able to increase their Published Admission Number (PAN) as a consequence. For September 2023 cohort The Priory School and Belvidere

School have been able to offer places over and above their PAN prior to National Offer Day on 1 March, which enabled as many on-time applicants to be offered a school place within as reasonable a distance from their home address as possible.

Whilst the local authority has planned as best we can for this large cohort for September 2023 through the provision of additional school places, until applications are received we have no way of knowing exactly how many applicants will state a preference for each school. Applicants that live in the Shrewsbury secondary school catchment area and apply for the Shrewsbury secondary school nearest to their home address (straight line measurement), will be ranked higher in the allocation list for that school than other applicants in-catchment. We write to parents to advise them how to apply and we recommend that they read the 'What to do now' information sheet along with the "Parents' Guide to Education in Shropshire" booklet, both of which are available on our website. The Parents' Guide to Education in Shropshire details the dates and times of the secondary school open days and explains the nearest school test for Shrewsbury secondary schools.

Will there be sufficient places available next academic year, and subsequent years, for pupils already in primary education in the South SUE and other parts of the catchment for Priory, Meole and Belvidere Schools?

As stated previously no school in Shrewsbury has its own catchment area – they all share one catchment area. Data shows that there are sufficient places in Shrewsbury for all Shrewsbury residents in the September 2024 cohort. A countywide school place planning review has been launched this summer on the impact on school places based on planned housing developments emerging from the Council's Local Plan through to 2038. This will result in the drawing up of a countywide 5 to 10 year strategic plan for the provision of additional school places to meet forecast increased demand in future years. The provision of additional secondary school places in Shrewsbury will feature in this plan, and discussions with senior leaders in the town's secondary schools have already been initiated.

Question from:	Julia Buckley	
Subject:	Training on Shropshire Council Policies	
Portfolio Holder:	Gwilym Butler	
1. Since becoming cabinet members and portfolio holders with responsibility for finances and corporate resources, and highways, could Cllr Gwilym Butler and Cllr Dan Morris confirm whether they have completed any training on the following Shropshire Council policies:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Financial Regulations• Roles of cabinet members and portfolio holders (found within the Constitution)• Members' code of conduct		
2. And if so, why did they not apply this knowledge and comply with Council's financial regulations and corporate governance protocols during the debate at Full Council on 21 September 2023?		
3. Should cabinet members who breach financial regulations and bring the Council into disrepute, resign from their position?		

Response to be provided by Gwilym at the meeting

Question from:	Pam Moseley	
Subject:	Floating Housing Support	
Portfolio Holder:	Dean Carroll	Approved

In June, Council tendered for “Floating Housing Support including Housing Advice and Prevention of Homelessness”. The contract with Sustain (staff from 4 Housing Associations) was to finish on 30 September.

The tender’s short description reads: Housing Support Services will support people whose needs are such that their ability to support a tenancy or remain independent in their home would be compromised without that support.

Current support workers deal with a list of around 100 clients across Shropshire, with a waiting list of 60-70 clients, typically working with clients for 3-6 months. They help tenants maintain tenancies, set up home, apply for benefits and grants, learn to budget, deal with debt, and can address other issues such as family problems, mental and physical ill health, mediation, safeguarding, property adaptations, hoarding, and cuckooing.

No bids for this contract were received by the Council. The contract with Sustain was initially extended to the end of October, and latterly until 31 December 2023. Without such assistance, there is a risk that some residents will not be able to sustain their tenancies, and not be able to continue living in their home; some will be evicted. Not only catastrophic for them, this will also have consequences for this Council – which has a duty to the homeless - and other public services, including the NHS.

With no new contract for floating housing support in place, what plans does Shropshire Council have to provide this very important function in the future?

The current Sustain Consortium, made up of local housing associations, did not bid for the proposed new support contract. However, one bid was submitted to Shropshire Council which initially we were unable to accept. We have engaged in contract negotiations with the same bidder and are pleased to advise the award letter is due to be issued this week. Further communications regarding the contract will be made with relevant agencies / organisations and officers.

The Floating Support Contract currently provided by the Sustain Consortium has been extended until 31.12.2023. This is to allow further time to work with the new provider regarding the setting up of referral processes, the smooth handover of services, and the TUPE of staff where relevant.

Question from:	Rob Wilson	
Subject:	Installation of Telegraph Poles for Broadband	
Portfolio Holder:	Robert Macey	Approved

On the Kingswood Estate in Copthorne, Shrewsbury, 148 residents have signed a petition against the proposed installation of telegraph poles for broadband. It states: "We, the undersigned residents of Kingswood Estate, Shrewsbury, object to, and emphatically do not want the unsightly poles and connected wires, which Fibre Heroes are apparently about to erect, having marked their locations throughout the estate, without any prior consultation with us the residents. Future installation of any fibre broadband or similar system should be placed underground."

105 households are represented in the petition, which is 64% of the estate.

It seems an entirely backward step to install telegraph poles in such an area in 2023. What will Shropshire Council do to support residents to maintain the visual amenity of their neighbourhood?

Government legislation entitles broadband infrastructure providers to build and install new telecommunications infrastructure (e.g. cabinets and poles) without the need to apply for planning permission, and Shropshire Council has no direct influence over these commercial decisions.

Companies that install broadband infrastructure have '[code powers](#)' granted by Ofcom under national legislation (the Electronic Communications Code as set out in Schedule 3 of the Communications Act 2003) to build telecommunication networks. Code powers are specifically in place to ensure telecommunication operators have the statutory entitlement to install, maintain, adjust, repair or alter apparatus on public and private land.

Wherever possible broadband infrastructure installers will re-use existing infrastructure (ducts and poles) because it's quicker, more cost-effective and less disruptive to local residents.

Before new telegraph poles are installed, Shropshire Council encourages broadband infrastructure providers to follow national best practice by:

- engaging with local elected members on pole deployment plans;
- sending letters to residents who may be impacted by new poles;
- erecting site notices indicating proposed new pole locations.

Question from:	Kate Halliday	
Subject:	Blue Badge Scheme	
Portfolio Holder:	Chris Schofield	Approved

The council average waiting times for the Blue Badge scheme have increased in recent months causing difficulties for those who wish to apply for or renew their Blue badge. The Blue Badge scheme provides a lifeline for residents with disabilities, enabling them/their carer to park as near as possible to essential amenities.

The council has communicated that they are attempting to improve the waiting times, however residents tell me that they are still being told they need to wait weeks for their applications to be dealt with. I have been informed by an applicant that the council used to send out reminders to existing Blue Badge holders and that they are no longer doing so.

Could the Portfolio Holder confirm:

1. The current average wait time for a Blue Badge Application, and the steps that are being taken to improve wait times.
 2. Confirm that the scheme is no longer issuing renewal notices to existing Blue Badge holders, and if so, consider re-introducing this in order to make the system more efficient for customers and the council.
- The Blue Badge Scheme is a central government - Department for Transport (DfT) – scheme.
 - The Council acts as the DfT's agent and we are required to apply the eligibility criteria laid down by the DfT; we have a responsibility to do that robustly and fairly.
 - Legally, we can only charge £10 per application; approximately half of this is spent on the cost of printing and posting the badge to the applicant, which is out of our control as it rests with a centrally agreed DfT contract. The remainder of the fee does not cover the cost of determining the application and, as a consequence, there is a burden on the local taxpayer.
 - Following recent personnel changes in the team co-ordinating and processing Blue Badge applications, it has become apparent that the approach previously taken when determining applications was somewhat more 'light-touch' than we would have wanted. This has come to light as we have a new Lead Officer taking on the service and finding issues that need resolving.
 - Whilst we should have identified this earlier, without the supervisory staffing capacity necessary this was overlooked. However, we have now had the opportunity to correct this, with a new Lead Officer now in training, and also currently helping to train a recently recruited Licensing Officer in their previous role.
 - Post Covid-19, there was a recognition that Blue Badge application numbers were increasing and for that reason there was an internal redesign (together with the parking enforcement appeals and challenges function) to improve resilience and marginally increase capacity to process Blue Badge applications.

Blue Badges applied for by year.

1/8/2019 – 31/7/2020 – 6761

1/8/2020 – 31/7/2021 - 6290

1/8/2021 – 31/7/2022 - 7455

1/8/2022 – 31/7/2023 – 8951

- The number of officers involved in processing Blue Badge applications has increased from 2 to 4; however, the full time equivalent roles have only increased marginally from 1.4 to 2.3. Nevertheless, we do have increased resilience as we now have the flexibility to move 4 rather than 2 officers into Blue Badge processing. We are doing this to address the backlog, but it should be understood that this will take time.
- Ongoing training of the new officers is adversely impacting processing efficiencies; however, this will gradually reverse as the new officers become more knowledgeable and skilled.
- Officers are taking a more robust position on applications, and this is particularly impacting applications relating to existing badge holders, in other words, 'renewal' applications. Applicants are being challenged to produce more robust evidence to demonstrate eligibility and this is taking more time than it previously did.
- We anticipate it will take 3 years to completely overhaul the process; this is because most Blue Badges last for 3 years and until we have processed all renewals under the 'new regime', we will encounter unsatisfactory applications and a level of dissatisfaction with the service as customers become familiar with our revised expectations.
- The Council is committed to the creation of a clearer Blue Badge policy and to improve the guidance and information available on the website, including making it clear that applications will be closed down if evidence is not provided to demonstrate eligibility criteria or if payment is not made within a set period. Work is progressing to decide what that period will be, but essentially the Council doesn't want applications sitting open on the system when all actions have been completed by officers, but without an applicant response.