

CABINET

17 APRIL 2024

Responses to Member Questions

URGENT QUESTION – Councillor Roger Evans

I have recently been informed by some residents that Shropshire Council is consulting on stopping the School Library Service (SLS). I am dismayed that elected members were once again ignored and not informed about this proposal.

I copy below sections from the messages received.

.....I am most concerned about the proposed closure of the SLS and the fact there is no public consultation about this. I seem to be bombarded with social media asking my views about green bins – but the decision to remove books from children is taken in private. I question why this is the case?

..... Schools buy into the Schools Library Service (SLS) as a way of getting up to date books about our topics and new fiction books.....

..... A couple of days ago I was in a class as they talked about their new topic books and the children were so excited! They may be a digital generation, but real books matter and research shows that real books help children's learning.....

..... Reading enjoyment is the most important factor for whether children will do well in school and exams. Having access to attractive books on a wide range of subjects is important for encouraging children to read.....

..... In school as we have SLS books, we can give all children access to lovely books regardless of the income of their family and how much cash is left to buy books.....

Does the cabinet member support this service being withdrawn.

Response -

PORTFOLIO HOLDER KIRSTIE HURST-KNIGHT

As the Cabinet Member for Children and Education, I am combining my response to the public and member questions raised by Mr Rob Davies and Cllr Roger Evans which have been accepted under the “urgency” provisions for member and public questions.

Both questions relate to the proposal to cease the non-mandatory School Library Service (SLS) operated by Shropshire Council from 1st September 2024.

Firstly, whilst I was aware that the Schools Library Service, which is a traded service, was operating at a loss, and we acknowledged that this situation could not continue, I was not made aware until 4th April that a decision by officers to proceed with a service review had been implemented which placed affected staff in a 45-day consultation period.

It is very regrettable that schools were not aware of the service review and no consultation with the schools had taken place.

I would like to reassure my Cabinet colleagues, members, and members of the public, that this is the very beginning of the process, and we will be formally consulting with schools to ascertain if a way to remove the deficit can be found.

We will invite all schools in Shropshire to respond to the consultation to capture ideas, including whether schools would be willing to pay more for the service, as suggested by the Headteacher from Cressage, and/or indeed subscribe to the service at all, given that 35% of Shropshire schools do not currently use the service and make alternative arrangements for this provision.

I would remind everyone that this is a non-mandatory service that the Council provides to support schools and to be very clear it is the school's responsibility to ensure children and young people have access to books and other suitable education materials necessary to learn the curriculum, with funding provided directly through central Government grants to do this.

Considering the financial challenge we face, we cannot continue to subsidise a traded service, but we will ensure that all possible options to continue the service are explored and we welcome all possible solutions.

We will bring a report to Cabinet detailing the consultation feedback alongside a suggested way forward. To be clear this could still require the cessation of the service if a solution cannot be found.

Councillor Ruth Houghton

In light of the recently approved Medium Term Financial Plan which includes the reduction from 5 to 3 Household Waste Recycling centres recycling will the Portfolio Holder please provide the following information:

1) For each of the five household recycling centres (HRCs) the annual tonnage of:

- a) metal recycled
- b) plastic recycled
- c) paper and cardboard recycled

d) green and food waste composted.

Shropshire Council HRC Tonnages															
	Battlefield HRC			Bridgnorth HRC			Craven Arms HRC			Oswestry HRC			Whitchurch HRC		
	21/22	22/23	23/24	21/22	22/23	23/24	21/22	22/23	23/24	21/22	22/23	23/24	21/22	22/23	23/24
Metal - Scrap	512.5	477.84	550.9	189.26	158.48	176.32	201.06	177.6	189.44	298.32	269.8	297.26	231.38	235.84	263.38
Plastic - Mixed	103.71	109.83	107.17	94.64	41.21	52.47	83.7	75.13	81.81	87.6	72.87	51.82	7.19	10.48	9.88
Paper & Cardboard	636.17	669.36	725.28	251.45	219.03	231.26	225.8	221.82	257.45	266.79	272.52	314.7	243.33	205.34	215.14
Green & Food	1405.6	1157.48	1444.9	634.4	545.36	672.86	798.43	783.88	769.59	719.47	860.46	1097.96	569.34	501.86	643.65

2) For each of the five former districts:

a) The tonnage of green waste (including each year)

Shropshire Council Organic Waste Tonnages		
	Green Waste (Oswestry and Bridgnorth)	Mixed Green and Food Waste (SABC, North and South Shrops)
21/22	12266.71	31052.87
22/23	10845.25	27010.41
23/24	12489.38	30954.61

b) an estimate of the number of households that present a green bin for collection at least one point in the year.

Exact participation is not recorded and changes week by week, depending upon presentation rates. There are c 138,000 individual properties in Shropshire (excluding HMOs and flats). We would expect at least 95% of such properties to present their green waste bin at least once a year - so c 131,000 households.

3) For each of the five HRCs:

a) The gross annual cost of running each HRC

b) The net annual costs of running each HRC allowing for costs of incinerating or landfilling non-recyclables and the income from recyclables.

We are unable to present the specific costs requested as HRCs are managed as part of the IWMFs, which include the waste transfer stations and are not separated. Such detail would be deemed commercially confidential

Response –

PORTFOLIO HOLDER IAN NELLINS

Councillor David Vasmer

Following the decision to close the University Centre in Shrewsbury

1) what plans does the Council have for the future use of student accommodation at Mardol House

There are no immediate plans for alternative uses for Mardol House, which continues to house a range of occupiers who benefit the local economy. The Council's student accommodation at Mardol House has been used to accommodate students and apprentices from a variety of courses and institutions for some time, not only for UCS students. Any future proposals for

alternative use would be subject to the normal consultation, and brought to Cabinet, or for planning approval, as necessary.

2) Given that this accommodation was solely built for students, is there any risk of legal action against the Council or any agreements that would result in a substantial loss to the Council when students are no longer based in Shrewsbury?

There are no agreements or funding in place which would prevent the Council from continuing to make this accommodation available more widely, in the way it has successfully been used for some time.

3) What plans are being made for existing students and staff who were based in Shrewsbury? Will these students finish their studies in Shrewsbury?

This is primarily a question for UCS, however Shropshire Council has previously offered support to UCS to find alternative accommodation. We understand The University Centre of Shrewsbury is currently looking at a range of options to ensure that students are able to complete their programme with a minimum of inconvenience. This includes options for teaching in and around Shrewsbury. They intend to write to all students by the end of April 2024 explaining these plans.

4) What is the total loss to the local economy if students and staff are no longer based in Shrewsbury?

This is difficult to appraise exactly until the number of students and staff who are no longer based in Shrewsbury are known. However as the numbers of students has been consistently lower than originally forecast by UCS the potential impact on the local economy is likely to be negligible.

5) What is the total investment made by the Council in the University Centre Shrewsbury since it was set up in the autumn of 2014? The figure should include any penalties or losses identified in Question 2 above, the running costs of Mardol House not covered by income from students, the loss of rental income as a result of the University Centre's free use of the Guildhall and Rowley's House.

There are no penalties or losses associated with question 2. Officers require more time to answer the remainder of this question. Councillor Vasmer shall be supplied with this information when the financial accounts for 2023/24 have been completed.

Response -

PORTFOLIO HOLDER DEAN CARROLL

Councillor Heather Kidd

Pothole filling has been slow and often not very efficient. When a claim for damage comes into the Council who pays? Is it the Council or Kier who have failed to fill the pothole in a timely manner?

Response -

PORTFOLIO HOLDER DAN MORRIS

Pothole filling has been slow and often not very efficient.

In 2023 we completed 41,629 repairs, 50% of which were completed in 5 days. This is a 46% increase from the previous year (2022) and was done at no additional cost, due to service efficiencies and our new "mixed economy" operating model. The "mixed economy" operating model includes delivering services through an evolving mixed economy, which includes self-delivery through a permanent and interim workforce, directly employed local sub-contractors through a new compliant framework and also through Kier. In addition, we are also working through a trial to support parishes who are working with us to develop a safe system of local self-delivery pothole repairs.

When a damage claim comes into the Council who pays is it the Council or Keir that pay if a pothole is not filled in on time.

All claims are handled and assessed by the insurance team, who make decisions based upon a range of factors and many claims are repudiated. The Council owns, funds or controls all the resources deployed in pursuit of highway maintenance in Shropshire. The Council believed it had created the facility within the Kier contract to transfer some liability to Kier in certain circumstances. The service has focused on improving performance, increasing productivity, creating a comprehensive range of wider interventions and getting the overall "mixed economy" repairs to below the national average cost. This has included significant investment in drainage renewals, as their failure gives rise to the conditions that create repeated potholes thereby treating the cause and creating service sustainability. Remarkably the average defect cost today on our network today is 66% lower than four years ago and with just 4,000 potholes at the end of a very operationally successful 2023. Around 70% of all potholes are now completed directly by Shropshire Council.

Additional Info

The Highways Service like all other council departments has to operate with the available budgets. The very wet and prolonged winter period has stretched resources and has impacted on our productivity, so the rate and speed of repair since the start of 2024 has reduced. Although this is a frustration for the service, it is a reality and is replicated right across the country. The water table is very high and many roads are in effect being used as rivers with water flowing off fields in rural areas. There is a massive piece of work to be done across the county engaging with landowners to mitigate drainage issues and reminders of riparian responsibilities where appropriate.

Councillor Alex Wagner

Rowley's House was used by the University Centre before being handed back to the Council who commissioned Arrol Architects and TDR Heritage in October last year to report on its management and future use. That report was promised in the Spring of this year so will it be published before the end of May?

Response -

PORTFOLIO HOLDER DEAN CARROLL

Work on the Conservation Management for Rowley's House and Mansion has been progressing well but it will not be completed by the end of May. Much of the history and significance of the building has been compiled and there is a Stakeholder workshop scheduled on 16th May with local Members and community interest groups and the output from this will feed into the recommendations. Work on assessing how the building may be made more accessible is also well advanced. The proposals for repairing and adapting the building are dependant on a number of detailed specialist surveys which the Council has commissioned from another third party and these must be completed before Arrols and DTR can complete their assignment. These surveys have included a detailed mapping of all the timber and structural elements of the building which has taken far longer than anticipated. This work is now nearing completion and has recommended that more detailed investigation is conducted on many of the timber beams and joints in the timber framed Rowley's House.

Members may not be fully aware, but last year the Council also commissioned and implemented a programme of work to the South East wing of Rowley's house to stabilise the structure which had become unsafe due to rotational subsidence. This work has been successful and is currently protected by the shuttering which has been put in place; but is only a temporary solution and significant repairs to the wing will be required before the building can be brought back into use which has necessitated these additional detailed surveys.

I've included some extracts from the latest survey to illustrate the intricacies of the building which we'd be happy to share with any Members who may be interested:

Councillor Andy Boddington

On 3 April 2024, Ludlow was gridlocked from early morning to late afternoon. The vital 722 park and ride bus service which is meant to run every 30 minutes, took an hour to complete its journey.

The problem occurred because roadworks, all within the control of Shropshire Council, were scheduled at the same time. Three-way lights control for traffic on Sheet Road and Foldgate Lane and the long standing single lane closure outside Ludlow rail station resumed after being lifted for Easter. The town traffic could cope

with these. However, the total closure of Henly Road for a minor resurfacing task halted traffic circulation. Traffic diverted onto the A49 Ludlow bypass where the council had decided to mow the verges with traffic lights in place to protect the crew.

The result, gridlock, chaos and damage to town trade.

My question to the portfolio holder for highways is:

1) What mechanisms does the council have in place to ensure that simultaneous roadworks do not cause excessive traffic delays, even gridlock?

Proposals for planned work are assessed via permit & TTRO/temporary traffic signal applications – identifying and assessing possible proliferation of works is part of the process and works promoters know to expect refusals on this basis.

2) Why was the non-urgent work on Henley Road and the A49 mowing scheduled at the same time as other traffic restrictions were in place?

The A49 verge mowing works was not notified or made visible by National Highways – the lack of coordination has been escalated by officers to National Highways.

3) Why was litter not collected from the A49 before mowing took place, leading shredded litter that will be difficult or impossible to collect?

Again, feedback from Street Scene officers confirms that the schedule for grass cutting along the A49 was not shared by National Highways on this occasion. Further liaison will take place in order to reasonably coordinate both future activities.

Response -

PORTFOLIO HOLDER DAN MORRIS

Councillor Tom Biggins

There have been detailed discussions over several years about the Community Asset Transfer of the Contractors Yard / Sherrymill Hill Car Park from Shropshire Council to Whitchurch Town Council.

No date has yet been assigned for the transfer. Shropshire Council in correspondence have made clear that they are willing to give and WTC have made clear that they are willing to receive this asset transfer.

Indeed, in an email of 4th January 2024, written by Shropshire Council, it is stated that a) the property team at Shropshire Council were being instructed to expedite the Community Asset Transfer of this site and b) it is recognised that helping enable WTC to take a longer term investment decision in this site will also help in the short term, through enabling WTC to review a broader range of options to develop further storage capacity within the site.

Three months later this has still not happened and local Members are concerned about any further delay.

For clarification please can we have a date, fixed now, identifying when the Community Asset Transfer of this site to be completed?

Response -

PORTFOLIO HOLDER DEAN CARROLL

Key matters relating to the Civic Centre and other assets which include Sherrymill Hill car park have been discussed by the Whitchurch Civic Centre Working Group. The group has been reviewing and clarifying how certain assets can best be used for the benefits of the town. The principle of a transfer of the car park was considered previously and remains supported. The future status as a car park was discussed at the working group earlier this month along with Whitchurch Town Council's request to use the contractor's yard for storage purposes. Shropshire Council's Highways team will be now prepare and prioritise a decision report for the transfer process that will be considered by the Executive Director of Place for approval.