

Member Questions

Council 26 September 2024

Question from Councillor Ed Potter

In recent weeks I have been approached by a number of parents who have raised concerns over the availability of state schools places in the Shropshire Council area. Some have made enquiries with Shropshire Council's admissions team as to what places are available should they move their children from their current provision in the private sector as a result of the potential charging of VAT on private schools fees as confirmed in the Kings Speech of 17th July 2024. I note the recent statistics which places Shropshire Council among the best in our region when it comes to school admissions, however, I would like to ask the portfolio holder

- Does Shropshire Council have an idea of how many additional school places might be required?
- What provision has been made should there be an influx of pupils requiring school places?
- Should places be available out of catchment what implications are there for school transport?

Response from Councillor Kirstie Hurst-Knight Portfolio Holder for Children and Education

Shropshire Council Admissions team has been collating any enquires regarding moving from the independent sector to monitor the situation over the last few months. Since the end of May we have received 19 applications, not all these applications have resulted in the places being taken up. It is also worth noting that in previous years we have seen similar numbers of children move from the independent sector.

The situation will continue to be monitored and with many independent schools considering absorbing the VAT and the length of notice parents must give to move from the independent sector we may not see more movement until later in the year.

What provision has been made should there be an influx of pupils requiring school places?

We have sufficient places in Shropshire, parents however may not be able to gain places at their preferred school if it is oversubscribed. All applications will be processed in the usual manner in accordance with the Schools Admissions Code.

Unsuccessful applicants will be made aware of their legal right to appeal. Where it can be demonstrated that reasonable measures have been taken to secure a school place through the usual in-year admissions process and this has not been successful, or where a school place has not been sought due to exceptional circumstances, a child may be eligible for referral to the Fair Access Protocol. The purpose of a Fair Access Protocol is to ensure that vulnerable children, and those who are having difficulty in securing a school place in-year, are allocated a school place as quickly as possible, minimising the time the child is out of school.

Should places be available out of catchment what implications are there for school transport?

Free school transport is normally provided to the nearest or catchment school where the distance criteria is met. However, free school transport to the next nearest school to the home address can be considered where the nearest or catchment school is full and where parents have made a formal but unsuccessful appeal for a place at such a school. Parents do not have to send their child to the nearest or catchment area school. However, if they exercise their preference and can be offered a place for their child at an out of catchment school, they will normally have to make their own travel arrangements

Question from Councillor Joyce Barrow

Since the ending of the delivery of school safety and active travel training through a commission with WSP, can the Portfolio Holder for Education please advise, what has been done as a local authority, to counteract this during this academic school year.

Can she outline, if possible, any future plans around this?

Response from Councillor Kirstie Hurst-Knight Portfolio Holder for Children and Education

When the new contract with WSP was tendered the decision was made to remove road safety and active travel training from the WSP and deliver it in house. The commission ended in July 2023 and the Sustainable Travel Team was created whose focus is on increasing the number of children walking, cycling, and wheeling to school and the subsequent wrap around activities alongside modernising our road safety education programme.

So far, the team has;

- engaged with 45 schools (out of 180 schools in Shropshire) on travel planning through Modeshift STARS to start to encourage more sustainable school journeys and work towards achieving Award status.
- 5 school streets have been introduced at Market Drayton Junior School, Woodside Primary School in Oswestry, Gobowen Primary School, Mereside Primary Academy in Shrewsbury and Whitchurch Junior School.
- Bikeability training - we are on track to hit the 80% target set by government with 2090 children trained between April and July 2024 compared to 3713 children from April 2023 to March 2024.
- Selected as a trial authority to take part in a pilot project from the Bikeability Trust to train school staff on how to deliver Balance Bike training directly. Interest for this pilot was overwhelming with 115 primary schools applying. We have trained 27 schools (54 teachers) and each school has received 6 balance bikes.
- Jointly funded a new Greenlight programme with West Mercia Police to be offered to all sixth forms and colleges.
- A total of 23 schools have been awarded grants from the £30,000 of Active Travel England's Capability and Ambition Fund where they were able to bid for up to £1,000 towards increasing their active travel to and from school.
- Provided scootability training to 346 children during the school holidays campaign week with additional training being organised for September within the school street schools.
- Produced 3 helpful toolkits for free access and use by schools to support and train on road safety and active travel measures.
- Developed a new Road Safety Programme to replace the previous Stepping Out programme.
- Produced a termly newsletter, with a fourth currently being developed, which is then circulated to all 180 schools giving schools updates and also celebrate the successes.

In addition, the team has worked with several individual schools on safety campaigns and improved signage measures, a superhero competition, has worked collaboratively with Public Health, School Nursing, WM Police, Shropshire Fire & Rescue and Energize Shropshire Telford & Wrekin.

I am pleased to confirm to Council that the redesign of the service resulted in a £20,000 annual saving to the council, while still funding 3 full time jobs and increased the offer to schools and the community. This is a great example of how working in a different way can be more cost effective and better suited for the needs of Shropshire

Question from Councillor Rob Wilson

My question concerns the cost of home to school transport to the Council in urban areas which should be served by high quality walking and cycling networks. For the academic year 2023-2024 what was the total cost of providing home to school transport from addresses in Shrewsbury to schools in Shrewsbury? What is the cost excluding young people with additional needs? If possible, please could you also include the costs for our other market towns?

Response from Councillor Kirstie Hurst-Knight Portfolio Holder for Children and Education

The Government has introduced targets where 50% of primary school children will be expected to walk, cycle or scoot to school, Shropshire Council is working to not only build walking and cycling infrastructure to support the culture change but also deliver training, campaigns and support to allow this change. To this end the Sustainable Travel Team was formed in Feb 2024 to support schools in encouraging, supporting, and promoting Active Travel to School.

The Sustainable Travel Team are launching a brand-new Road Safety Education programme, which focusses on walking and cycling to school. This programme will be available to schools from October 2024 and provides age-appropriate lessons and classes for children to promote safety and confidence for primary school children to actively travel to school.

Schools across the county have also had the opportunity to bid to Shropshire Council for up to £1000 in funding each to use on encouraging Active Travel to School; we were able to give each applicant their requested amount; there will be monitoring of this to see how successful it has been but we hope to repeat this if funding is available.

This month, schools in Shrewsbury will be offered the opportunity to participate in WOW- the walk to school challenge, where pupils get rewarded with badges for the number of active travel journeys they make to school. This programme is offered for the academic year and includes an officer doing regular assemblies on the importance and benefits of walking and cycling.

We also funded Scootability sessions which were held over the summer to teach younger children about safety scooting to school and feedback has been very positive. School Streets have been launched in 5 schools across Shropshire, and 4 Shrewsbury schools are on the list for the next round which will look at bringing that cultural change in walking and cycling, so far it seems these have been successful in bringing a change to the habits moving away from car use.

Our recently adopted Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) focusses on key routes which will support us in obtaining government funding to deliver safe walking and cycling routes.

In respect of the free school transport in Shropshire, this is generally provided to the nearest or catchment area school where the home address is over the statutory walking distance.

Within Shrewsbury and market towns within Shropshire, where pupils live within the statutory walking distance to their nearest school, no pupils without additional needs are recorded as receiving home to school transport from Shropshire Council for the academic year 2023/24.

For the academic year 2023/24 the cost of providing transport for pupils who live within Shrewsbury and receive travel assistance to specialist schools in Shrewsbury is £529,499. These pupils all have special education needs, complex and/or profound needs, disabilities, or mobility difficulties.

Question from Councillor Dan Thomas

Hundreds of Shropshire people are in urgent need of affordable housing. In my Much Wenlock division alone, more than 50 families with a local connection to the parish, are actively applying for homes on HomePoint, face several barriers, and are anxiously awaiting a solution.

Much Wenlock recently welcomed a development of 12 affordable low-energy homes in the town, which has helped address this need. Yet, using HomePoint to apply for these homes has been a constant source of distress for families in housing need. The system leaves families waiting far too long to learn the outcome of their applications, and it is generally perceived as being an impediment to users rather than being of assistance.

Would the portfolio holder please outline the measures being taken to develop the HomePoint system or, indeed, a replacement interface in such a way that it works better for the people of Much Wenlock and of Shropshire?

Response from Councillor Dean Carroll, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Assets

Shropshire HomePoint has over 7500 households registered as wanting accommodation. Approximately half of these are in Bands 1-5 meaning they have a housing need. This number has increased significantly since Covid.

The team have been operating with several vacancies which does impact on the time taken to process an application. However, regardless of this, households in housing need and to whom the council have a statutory duty are fast tracked so their application is registered as soon as possible.

We are committed to constantly improving the service for those who need to use it, at what we understand will be a very difficult time for many. As part of this, the Shropshire HomePoint IT system is in the process of being upgraded. Once completed this will enable households to access their application via a customer portal which will mean they are able to make changes themselves rather than having to wait for staff to make the changes as they do now. We are sure this will speed up the process and enable applications to be registered more quickly.

As agreed at February council, as part of the MTFs, we are also looking to close the housing register temporarily to anyone whom the council does not have a duty to house. This will mean that for this period, the team will be able to concentrate on delivering the system upgrade and catch up on outstanding applications and focus on those who are most in housing need.

Question from Councillor Rachel Connolly

Today's meeting marks almost 9 months since significant damage was caused to New Road in Bridgnorth as a result of a vehicle crashing through barriers and falling 50 m down an embankment before landing on the road below. Thankfully no one was injured. This is a well-used road and footpath connecting Low Town with High Town on a steep gradient.

Temporary barriers of up to 20m in length have been in place since then but are regularly knocked over making the area unsafe, requiring immediate attention.

The vehicle caused extensive damage to the original barriers, the barrier posts, and the barrier foundations. The vehicle further destroyed a street lighting asset and the associated cabling, which means at least 6 out of 8 streetlights have not been working since December 2023. It also damaged a brick wall further away from the immediate area at the top of a set of steps. I have been informed by a council officer that the impact of the damage on the foundation is significant and a full design and installation package will be needed to resolve the damage which will take considerable time and money.

The combination of temporary barriers often vandalised, and a lack of adequate lighting is causing significant concern from residents regarding their safety.

Given that it has been 9 months, a considerable time since the incident, please can I ask when this issue will be resolved, and the safety of this thoroughfare restored.

Response from Councillor Dan Morris, Portfolio Holder for Highways

In the latter part of 2023, on New Road in Bridgnorth, adjacent to the footbridge, a driver lost control of a vehicle and ploughed into fencing, railings, a street lighting column, a brick wall and a curved decorative brick pillar all owned by Shropshire Council. The driver absconded immediately. Shropshire Council has exhausted all its powers in its attempts to trace this particular driver or identify a means of recharging, without success.

Regretfully Shropshire Council will now need to carry the full cost of the replacement and renewal works, which exceed £25,000 in works alone. Temporary barriers installed on the night of the incident were later vandalised and were replaced with a second set, more firmly secured which remain in place.

Shropshire Council highways team will have the design and the bulk of the works completed by the end of this financial year.

Question from Councillor Duncan Kerr

The Cabinet made the decision to impose charges for Green waste at its meeting on the 7th July. I attended that meeting and stated that this action should be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment which was not included in the published report. After the meeting I wrote to the Chief Executive and Head of Legal and Governance and received a reply stating that they accepted that such an assessment is required. I was told that the assessment was then considered by the Cabinet member after the decision was made. I am sure that the Leader will agree with me that this does not meet the Council's legal obligations under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and that the Conservative group, and indeed the Labour Government, need to practice what they say about equality.

As has been reported in the press this rushed and ill thought out decision-making has been detrimental to the disabled and elderly. Impacts that were readily foreseeable and could have been avoided.

Given her opposition to long-term planning evidenced by her rejection of a motion calling for a Waste minimisation strategy in 2022 (ironically on the grounds that it might mean charging for green waste) what measures will the Leader be taking to ensure that all Cabinet members understand the importance of Equality Impact Assessments in making future decisions?

Response from Councillor Lezley Picton, Leader and Portfolio Holder For Policy And Strategy, Improvement and Communications

Thank you, Councillor Kerr, for your question.

An Environmental, Social and Health Impact Assessment had been completed for the Waste Report which came to Cabinet on the 17th of July (not the 7th as stated in your question) but did not appear in the published papers, which was regrettable but was a genuine oversight.

Soon after the Cabinet meeting this oversight was communicated to myself and Cabinet. I asked Cabinet Members to confirm that they had read the impact assessment, and I also asked them to confirm whether the document changed the way in which they would have voted. This was within the call-in period, before the decision had actually come into effect. I accept this was not an ideal situation and steps have been taken to ensure that this does not happen again.

I will point out that at no point during the debate on charging for Green Waste did you raise any concerns about the impact this may have on groups or individuals, what you said was and I quote "that you were not opposing the direction taken".

So, despite your comments regarding my inability to plan long term (oh that I wish we could) I do not have to reiterate to any of my cabinet colleagues how important impact assessments are when taking decisions. In fact, Cllr Kerr, the Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan for 2024-2028 is due to come to Cabinet on 16th October, not prompted by your question I hasten to add, and this will further reinforce our understanding of the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty.