West Sussex County Council – Written Questions

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14 October 2022

1. Written question from **Cllr Cornell** for reply by **Chairman of the County Council**

Question

The Governance Committee considers many matters of fundamental importance to ensure the effective and good governance of this County Council. If the meetings were webcast, this would be of public interest and would strengthen the transparency of the organisation. At six meetings a year, often less than two hours' long, this could be achieved with relatively little resource. Will the Chairman agree to reconsider the webcasting of the Governance Committee at the next meeting of that Committee, together with an outline of the likely costs involved?

Answer

The Governance Committee has, since the change to meeting arrangements in 2020, undertaken a regular review of meeting arrangements.

The Governance Committee decided in September last year to return to pre-pandemic webcasting arrangements which meant we stopped webcasting the Governance Committee. The position was again noted by the Committee at its meetings in November 2021 and in February 2022.

In May this year there was a request for this to be reviewed by the Governance Committee which was agreeing to extend webcasting to include the meetings of the Health and Wellbeing Board. The position of not webcasting Governance was restated in the report to the Committee on 6 June 2022 which reviewed virtual attendance at meetings with a recommendation that the position be noted. No proposal for the introduction of webcasting of the Governance Committee was raised at the meeting. The position agreed at that meeting as recorded in the minutes was:

'Members noted that meetings of the Governance Committee will only be webcast with the agreement of the Chairman if matters of significant public interest are to be discussed'

I therefore consider that the matter has already been fully aired at the Governance Committee and I believe that the position taken at the meeting in June addresses the point raised in the question.

2. Written question from **Cllr O'Kelly** for reply by **Leader**

Question

The County Council has been allocated £4.8m to deliver the Household Support Fund (HSF) between 1 October 2022 and 31 March 2023. Can the Leader confirm:

(a) How much of the fund is needed to provide vouchers during the school holidays for those children eligible for free school meals?

(b) How the remainder of that fund will be distributed?

(c) Whether there has been an increase in applications for free school meals (a) compared to last year and (b) over the past three months?

(d) Over the past three months how many residents have been referred by the community hub to (i) access food (ii) funding from the HSF (iii) debt advice, (iv) advice about homelessness and (v) how many individuals have been referred more than once?

(e) How the anticipated additional cost and demand pressures in many Council services as a result of the crisis will be funded.

Answer

(a) There are four weeks of school holidays during this period of funding. The cost to support 17,500 eligible children to receive a £15 voucher for four weeks is £1,050,000. This is an estimated cost as the amount of eligible children may vary.

(b) Household Support Fund will also be available through a range of different distribution methods including via district and borough councils, direct support through applications via the Community Hub and also distributed in partnership with other organisations with an initial £900,000 allocation to Citizens Advice to support residents with energy costs. Food banks and Fuel banks who are able to meet the data requirements from the Department for Work and Pension will be supported to provide locally available funds. The Communities Directorate are currently collating their returns from previous HSF to identify how much money to allocate to these community based organisations for this next round.

(c) September/October is always the busiest time for Free School Meals (FSM) applications as the County Council tends to notice that the new cohort of Reception parents do not apply for FSM until term has started and schools are keen to get students registered before the October census which captures Pupil Premium levels linked to each FSM child.

Therefore a better comparison to show any effects cost of living is having is to compare the three-month period 2021 vs 2022.

The headline is that the County Council has still seen a continual growth on the FSM eligible number over the last 12 months, but not an increase in applications from last year, generally speaking.

As it stands there are 9.5% more FSM entitled pupils in West Sussex at the end of this academic year, than we did this time last year. There may be a correlation with the number of Ukrainian children who are now resident within West Sussex.

Free School Meal applications Summer 2021 vs Summer 2022

Year	July	August	September	Total applications
2021	875	199	924	1,998
2022	792	487	742	2,021
Difference	Down 85	Up 288	Down 182	Up 23

Total entitled to free school meals:

As of 30 September 2021: 16,039

As of 30 September 2022: 17,567

This is an increase of 1,528 (or 9.5%) on 2021 for those eligible for free school meals

(d) It should be noted that the Community Hub is not the only route by which residents can access support from the Household Support Fund. However, the support offered is as follows:

(i) Over the past three months, 1,202 residents have been provided with food support from the Household Support Fund.

(ii) Over the past three months 1.468 residents have been supported by funding drawn from the Household Support Fund.

(iii) The Community Hub provides information, advice, guidance and signposting for a wide range of subject matters and often provides advice for more than one subject matter in a single contact. The way contacts are recorded does not specifically record debt advice as a separate category.

(iv) Similarly, to the previous answer, advice about homelessness is not recorded as a separate category. Given that district and borough councils have lead responsibility for housing and have access to Household Support Funds, it is likely the residents would have approached them directly rather than via the Community Hub.

(v) Over the past three months approximately 45 individuals have contacted the Community Hub more than once.

(e) Beyond the Household Support Fund, the County Council has no additional resources but is anticipating additional cost and demand pressures in many of our services, which we will need to manage to continue to protect and support our most vulnerable residents.

We are therefore focusing on working with the district and borough councils and other partners across the voluntary, community and social sectors, to refocus, co-ordinate and target the resources we have and to help those most in need to access the range of support that is available.

We are building on our experience of supporting communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. People can:

- Drop into any of our libraries, open six days a week, to find out about information, advice and support on a wide range of issues, get help online, join any of the free events and activities, or access direct support from a range of partners
- Call, email or fill in a webform to get information, advice and signposting to support through our Community Hub which is open seven days a week
- Find links to advice and support on our Cost-of-Living Support webpage (currently being created, will be shared later in October).

The County Council continues to promote other government initiatives, which support lower income households, including The Holiday Activity Fund and Warmer Homes Fund.

3. Written question from **Cllr Lord** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Adults Services**

Question

In light of the recent developments in the case of Tony Hickmott in neighbouring Brighton & Hove, can the Cabinet Member for Adults Services confirm:

(a) The number of West Sussex residents with learning disabilities and autism detained under Part 2 of the Mental Health Act (1983) during each year from 2015 to 2022.

(b) Of those currently detained, the number of people detained and the number designated 'fit for discharge' by length of detention as follows:

(i) Over six months

(ii) Over one year

(iii) Over five years

(c) The average time and longest time between a resident being considered 'fit for discharge' and moving back into a community setting since 2015, and comment on any trends over this time period.

Answer

It has not been possible to answer this question in the usual timescale, but Cllr Lord will receive a response as soon as practicable and the answer will be published in The Bulletin.

4. Written question from **Cllr Sharp** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Adults Services**

Question

(a) Please can you provide a list of comparative hourly costs throughout the county for social day care for residents whose carers need respite? Does this vary per district and borough, if so, why?

(b)

(i) How much extra money has the County Council made from the 'Fairer Charging Scheme' where vulnerable people were 're-assessed' to contribute more for care? How much is the per person average?

(ii) What extent will this saving be negated by extra costs falling to others e.g. NHS to combat the stress and mental anxiety caused to vulnerable people and carers?

(iii) Has the extra income from this policy covered the support needed for residents to navigate the system?

(iv) Some other councils have not charged this discretionary amount. Could West Sussex look to do likewise? If not, why?

(v) How will vulnerable residents be supported with rising fuel and food costs due to inflation?

Answer

(a) A range of services are provided for customers with care needs and for carers to support respite. In relation to day services commissioned for people with care needs, there are a range of services at a range of costs. The rate for the Council's own directly provided day services is £48.70 per day in all services across the county, excluding transport. Externally provided day service charges range significantly depending on the service offered, the organisation providing it as well as the location, but costs may be expected to be around £3 to £10 per session for some day activities to around £55 to £65 per day for provision offering personal care to individuals with an additional care need.

In addition, there are commissioned Carer Short Break services for carers of older people and/or people living with dementia. The investment in this area has encouraged and enabled the charitable sector to provide a range of services. Costs vary depending on the type of service, e.g. one-to-one (£8 per hour) or group provision (currently between £30 and £60 per day). Cost variation is due to the number of hours, whether or not meals and transport are provided or if the activity is centre based or out in the community. Customer charging enables more carer respite hours to be available. Without this additional income providers would have a much-reduced service offer and long waiting lists would be likely.

(b)

(i) The decision around the Minimum Income Guarantee was made in 2019 and the estimated amount of additional income contained in the report and considered by the Health and Adults Services Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet Member, was between £300 to £400,000 per annum.

Due to Covid-19 the reassessment of customers did not take place until 2021. The mix of customers who receive care now is different to when the original estimated amount was made and as financial assessments are carried out based on a means test that reflects individual circumstances as well as other factors, a set amount of additional income from the specific change to the charging scheme or an average per person increase, cannot be reliably calculated.

(ii) It is not possible to quantify if extra costs experienced by the NHS have any correlation to the change to the charging scheme.

(iii) Under the Care Act 2014, people who receive local authority-arranged care and support are required to pay a means-tested contribution towards the cost of that care, which is determined by a financial assessment. For this reason the County Council has a team of officers to support this process and additional resources have been provided to this team.

(iv) West Sussex is now in line with other authorities, removing the additional discretionary amount for those of working age. The change also brought equity between older people, who had historically received the statutory minimum of support. If the County Council was to reinstate a discretionary amount, then funding for this would need to be found from elsewhere in the Adult Social Care budget.

(v) The County Council will support residents in respect of rising inflation in areas within its control. For example, carers are being supported in a number of ways including benefits checks with specialist advisors, an on-line benefits toolkit, a cost of living toolkit, signposting to useful websites, grants that include the West Sussex Household Support Fund (hardship payments) and the Carer Health and Wellbeing Fund. There is also free counselling for carers who are struggling with the emotional aspects of cost of living/debt, etc.

5. Written question from **Cllr Smith** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Children and Young People**

Question

The latest Quarterly Report (Q1) and corporate risk register both highlight the particularly fragile employment market in the care sector. As the children's assessment and family safeguarding teams currently have significant vacancies of 23.12% compared with 13.63% across the service as of June 2022, how confident are we that we are meeting all of our safeguarding obligations to our West Sussex families and children? What is the County Council's strategy to try to address the vacancies in our children's services department?

Answer

The County Council has a number of 'grow your own' Social Worker approaches:

- Established Academy of Newly Qualified Social Workers employed each year
- Successful rolling Social Worker Apprentice programme, working in partnership with local Universities to provide learning placements

Thirty-six Social Workers are starting in January 2023 following the international recruitment project, with a thorough induction and training package, so they are supported to practice effectively to improve outcomes of our children and families.

There is a relentless focus on creative and new recruitment approaches including attending events nationally, regionally and locally. These events showcase work, providing learning for other Social Workers. Recent sessions have been on enabling culturally diverse practice and the benefits of the work of the Children's Mental and Emotional Health team.

There is a high level of scrutiny regarding caseload levels for social workers and the management of work coming into the teams including:

- Daily dashboards of new allocations
- Weekly reporting of caseloads at service, team and individual level

This provides assurance that there is sufficient capacity and proactive management identification of any specific areas of pressure. When frontline teams are identified as being under exceptional pressure, additional capacity is provided by deploying staff from non-frontline teams.

In allocating work, priority is given to those children who are particularly vulnerable, this always includes children identified as being at risk of significant harm or those entering, or needing to enter, our care. Timeliness of response to contacts and referrals remains at over 90%.

6. Written question from **Cllr Gibson** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Learning and Skills**

Question

(a) What are the latest figures for the percentages and numbers of households allocated their first, second, and third preference for primary school places? Separate figures for County and for the East Grinstead Schools Area alone, and for Reception and all Years 1 to 6 if available.

(b) What account, if any, is taken of the distance between a child's home and local schools when allocating school places? Is there a maximum distance above a place cannot be allocated? (if so, what is it)?

(c) How does the Council account for the transport-related carbon emissions arising from its school place allocations? Does the Council calculate the excess miles of the actual allocation above the mileage if all children attended their nearest school?

Answer

(a)

County

First preference - 91.2%
Second preference – 6%
Third preference – 1.5%
(Late applications result in this figure not equalling 100%)

East Grinstead

First preference – 93.39%
Second preference – 5.92%
Third preference – 0.23%
Local Authority allocated- 0.46%

In Year Applications (Years 1-6)

County

This information cannot be provided as it would take an excessive amount of officer time to collate the information'

East Grinstead – 16 in year applications

First preference – 7
Second preference – 5
No preference met – 3 (Local Authority Allocated)
Own admission authority school - 1

(b) When considering a school offer it is not just the distance that is considered it is the time and nature of the journey and whether that is deemed to be reasonable. There is not a maximum distance. However there is guidance regarding the complexity a journey to school it should be 45 minutes for primary (75 minutes for secondary).

(c) We do not calculate that detail.

7. Written question from **Cllr Sharp** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change (and Deputy Leader)**

Question

The Prime Minister has recently announced her intention to make oil and gas exploration easier. Any new oil or gas production locally will increase carbon emissions at the sites themselves and new oil and gas sources will increase emissions when they are burned.

(a) How does this fit with our Council Plan which has climate change and carbon reduction as an essential, cross-cutting theme?

(b) How does West Sussex's Joint Mineral Local Plan balance with our Council objectives to reduce carbon emissions?

(i) How many Petroleum Exploration and Development Licence (PEDL) licenses have been or are due to be issued in West Sussex?

(ii) How many sites have permission to drill or produce hydrocarbons to date?

(iii) How many sites do not have planning permission at present but are likely to make applications if present regulations are relaxed?

Answer

(a) The County Council, as a mineral planning authority, has a duty to determine applications for the exploration, appraisal, or production of onshore hydrocarbons on their merits, taking account of national and local planning policy and all other material considerations, including climate change impact.

(b) The County Council also has a duty to prepare a statutory Minerals Local Plan that includes proposals for the exploration, appraisal, and production of onshore hydrocarbons.

The County Council's 'objective to reduce carbon emissions' relates to the Authority's activities, not those of third parties (including oil and gas industries).

(i) A PEDL allows companies to pursue oil and gas exploration activities, subject to necessary drilling/development consents and planning permission. There are nine PEDLs that cover West Sussex (including within the South Downs National Park (SDNP)).

(ii) The British Geological Survey has confirmed that that the geology of the Weald Basin, which includes West Sussex, means that there is no significant shale gas potential. Accordingly, no sites are being hydraulically fractured ('fracked') in West Sussex and planning permission has not been issued for operators to do so. Furthermore, no operator has proposed hydraulically fracturing in West Sussex since concerns about the process were raised in 2011 (as a result of events in Lancashire).

There are three active sites in West Sussex where oil production is permitted: Storrington, Lidsey and Singleton (within the SDNP).

Temporary planning permission until March 2024 was granted in May 2022 allowing retention of the Woodbarn Farm, Broadford Bridge oil exploration site.

Temporary planning permission was refused in March 2021 at Lower Stumble, Balcombe for further exploration and appraisal of the existing hydrocarbon borehole. An appeal decision against the refusal is awaited.

(iii) Officers are not aware of any proposals for hydrocarbon-related development at other sites in West Sussex.

8. Written question from **Cllr Quinn** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport**

Question

This time last year, and also this year, I expressed concerns over dirty road signage obscured by vegetation.

I was promised that a programme for the following would be implemented;

- Replace worn, damaged, faded, or illegible signs
- Replace damaged or rusty signposts

- Clean and cut back vegetation around existing sign locations
- Maintain lamp posts covered with vegetation, where trees have grown so tall that lighting is very poor

On my recent travels around the county I am still seeing invisible road signs.

As you are aware, due to the long hot summer grass cutting was cut back. We were promised that the grass cutting contractor would be redeployed to other highway-related tasks, which included most of the above.

Can the Cabinet Member update me on the works that have been carried out, and the future programme.

Answer

Sign Cleaning

With the additional revenue budget allocated to Local Highway Operations for 2022/23, officers were able to dedicate funds to general sign cleaning. The works principally undertaken are sign cleaning, bollard cleaning and localised vegetation cut back so that existing sign faces are visible.

Grass cut 4 - replacement works

The reduction of urban grass cutting from five to four cuts enabled the County Council's grass cutting contractor to be diverted to cleaning signs and clearing vegetation where necessary.

As a result of the above, the contractor has attended to over 1,500 signs in a seven-week period.

Public Realm – sign and line Improvements

A programme of 'fence to fence' proactive sign/line maintenance and replacement focusing on:

- Replacement of worn, damaged, faded, illegible signs
- Replacement of damaged or rusty signposts
- Cleaning and cutting back localised vegetation around existing sign location
- Refreshing all road markings on the selected route, where this is required
- Replacing all road studs, where intervention is required, and they are present on the selected route
- Replacing black and white hazard marker posts, where present on the selected routes.

Twenty seven sites have been released to the contractor for delivery, which equates to a forecast cost of just under £1.5m.

The maintenance of lamp columns is managed by the County Council's provider, Enerveo, and therefore issues of obstructed columns should be reported to them in the first instance.

9. Written question from **Cllr Lord** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing**

Question

Can the Cabinet Member provide for each of the last five years:

(a) The number of children living in West Sussex receiving a new clinical diagnosis of eating disorders.

(b) The number of children living in West Sussex self-reporting that they may have an eating disorder or eating issues.

(c) The number of children living in West Sussex receiving care from CAMHS for an eating disorder.

(d) The number of children on the waiting list to receive CAMHS care for an eating disorder.

Please provide this by appropriate age group (for example under 11, 11 to 15, 16 to 18).

In addition, please can the Cabinet Member confirm the amount and scope of County Council investment in support within school or elsewhere for eating disorders (encompassing both clinical diagnoses and eating issues otherwise raising concern) over the last five years.

Answer

It has not been possible to answer this question in the usual timescale, but Cllr Lord will receive a response as soon as practicable and the answer will be published in The Bulletin.

10. Written question from **Cllr Turley** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Support Services and Economic Development**

Question

The Quarter 1 Quarterly Performance and Resources Report includes the following comment from the Director of Human Resources on page 172 (September Performance and Finance Select Committee):

"From a cultural perspective, there is significant ongoing work required in terms of equality and diversity."

This is very concerning. While acknowledging that this has been recognised and action is being taken, can the Cabinet Member for Support Services and Economic Development provide more detail on the nature of the issues which have led to this comment and the ongoing work.

Answer

There are a number of aspects to the ongoing work in relation to equality and diversity. Firstly, there is a need to continue to better understand the experiences of staff with protected characteristics in working at the County Council and to facilitate this, further develop the Equality Staff Networks.

Secondly, the need to implement a further four strands of the equality plan. These are:

- Increasing the number of staff that have self-declared their protected characteristics
- Implementing an approach to managing and reporting unacceptable customer behaviour and providing support to those who experience it
- Developing the disability inclusion approach and improving the workplace 'reasonable adjustments' process
- Further developing the Council's culture of dignity and respect