

West Sussex County Council – Written Questions

1 April 2022

1. Written question from **Cllr Pudaloff** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Adults Services**

Question

The Council's Adult Social Care Strategy claimed the following co-design activities relating to service users and carers:

- (a) Focus group discussions: in-depth conversations with smaller groups of customers and carers, with more opportunity for personal stories to come through.
- (b) Six 1-1 interviews: more detailed dialogue with customers and carers who requested more personalised conversations.
- (c) Public survey: a survey for people who access care, their carers.

The Labour Group concern refers to activities falling short of co-production to work with voices of lived experience. Co-production means people are involved in planning and designing services from the very beginning and is distinct from general participation work or partnership working between organisations.

Does the Cabinet Member agree, what has been omitted from the Council's co-design strategy are the diverse range of voices of service users/carers and disabled person led organisations to sit down with Council staff to co-design and implement solutions?

Answer

The focus group discussions and the interviews were with people with lived experience, both those who access services as well as family and friend carers. Many who responded to the survey also had lived experience and thus the co-design activities included a diverse range of voices.

What they told us was directly reflected in the strategy priorities. The strategy was written using the words they used and the issues that they told us were important to them. This was much more than general participation work. It was genuine collaboration and co-design with people who use Council services, their carers, partners, Council staff and members of the public, which was used to build a strategy that reflects what they want from their care.

We have had feedback from several different people and groups saying that the voices of people with lived experience came through very strongly in the strategy.

The strategy sets out the priorities and 'we will' statements. These outline what we are trying to achieve, but not how to get there. As you rightly point out, we now need to sit down with people who access our services, together with carers, frontline staff and partners in order to co-produce the solutions that will help deliver on these

commitments. This is what we are starting to do now, and the outcome of this work will help inform the development of the Council's plan for 2023/24 onwards.

2. Written question from **Cllr Pudaloff** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Adults Services**

Question

Does the Cabinet Member agree with me that working-age social care service users living in the community, who have recently undergone a financial assessment, DRE (disability related expenses) should only be disallowed in very rare instances when the expense was manifestly not related and or did not ameliorate the consequences of an individual's disability?

Furthermore, does she think it is acceptable to allow those service users with a long-term disability to have their quality of life reduced significantly at the same time as saddling them with a long-term debt?

Answer

Disability related expenses (DRE) are considered on an individual basis and in line with the legislation. Where a customer's disability benefit is being taken into account, as part of the financial assessment, allowance is made to pay for DRE to meet the costs of needs not being met otherwise. This is in line with the statutory guidance.

The Council has a responsibility to ensure all customers making a financial contribution to the cost of their support are treated equitably and reasonably, in accordance with the legislation and guidance and irrespective of their age. The Council's approach follows the legislation. We have agreed that relevant policies will be reviewed on an ongoing basis, with the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee being updated on this work in September.

If any customers have any issues regarding their ability to contribute to the cost of their care the Council has advised that they contact the service so that their concerns can be discussed on an individual basis. This is, again, a fair and reasonable approach.

3. Written question from **Cllr Baxter** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Community Support, Fire and Rescue**

Question

I welcome the news that refugees, including from Afghanistan and Ukraine, are being supported to settling into life in West Sussex. I am pleased that this Council is supporting them through the following schemes: The UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), The Afghan Assistance and Relocation Policy (ARAP) and The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS).

As a community leader:

- (a) Is there anymore that the Council can do to help the local co-ordination of support for refugees, including voluntary support?
- (b) Is there anything more that the Council can do to identify more local accommodation for refugees?

- (c) Are arrangements in place to ensure that children get swift access to education?

Answer

- (a) The Resettlement Team are particularly keen to make best use of the skills and welcoming nature of those who wish to help support those families resettling in our area. Although we already work alongside a number of wonderful volunteer groups, we are always looking to recruit more support for our resettled families. We are especially interested in hearing from volunteers who:

- Have experience/interest in teaching English to speakers of other languages
- Have language skills in Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Uzbek or Ukrainian and would be interesting in befriending activities or supporting existing voluntary groups
- Are able to offer some work experience or employment opportunities to resettled families
- Could support families in accessing community-based activities

The collection, storage and distribution of physical donations can be difficult to process as we are a small team with limited storage space, so we are not asking for any objects to be donated at this time. However, the voluntary groups we work with are often looking to obtain bicycles (adults and children), scooters and good quality second-hand IT equipment. If you have any of these items, we would be happy to put you in touch with a voluntary group who could distribute it appropriately. They will, of course, also accept financial donations.

- (b) We are always looking to take on more self-contained accommodation for permanently resettling the ARAP/ACRS cohort, as detailed in the most recent update letter from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We are very interested in hearing from private landlords who are willing to let their properties in line with the Local Housing Allowance rates, to ensure the rent is affordable for the resettled families. If anyone is interested in discussing further details of renting their property via this route, they should contact the Resettlement Team directly. For those who do not have self-contained accommodation but would be interested in offering a room in their house, details of the Homes for Ukraine scheme can be found on the Resettlement Page of the Council website.

- (c) The Resettlement Team works closely with the admissions team to ensure that all students resettled within West Sussex are placed in school as swiftly as possible. We work closely with schools to arrange visits for the students before they start to help familiarise the family with the new school setting and give reassurance to both the students and the school about how they will settle in. We aim to ensure that schools feel supported in supporting the students by engaging with the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service and have set up teachers' forums for primary and secondary schools supporting resettled students. In addition to this, we are working alongside International Rescue Committee, who are currently developing an array of resources aimed specifically at support schools to best support students from a refugee background. We also provide tailored briefs to schools, written by a cultural advisor – for example we are sharing a brief on the context and practicalities of the upcoming month of Ramadan, to help those schools supporting our resettled Syrian and Afghan students who may be observing Ramadan.

4. Written question from **Cllr Cherry** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Community Support, Fire and Rescue**

Question

HSBC is closing its retail banking branches in Burgess Hill and East Grinstead, as part of a plan to close 69 Branches across the UK. This will be a heartfelt loss to both residential and business communities in both towns.

So, my question falls into three parts:

- (a) What is the cumulative impact of this; how many bank branches in West Sussex have closed in the past three years?
- (b) Although branch closures are commercial decisions made by the banks, lobbying bank leaders can often make a difference and be persuasive in moderating the banks' plans. So how many conversations has the Cabinet Member had with banks, MPs or other influencers about bank branch closures?
- (c) What further actions does the cabinet member plan to take on this matter?

Answer

As an Authority we have no commercial control over banks decisions to close branches, the local MP can be lobbied as can the bank directly.

National Picture

The location of bank branches is primarily a matter for the individual companies. The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) regulates the financial services industry in the UK. Its role includes protecting consumers, keeping the industry stable, and promoting healthy competition between financial service providers.

Since September 2020, the FCA has published [guidance](#) for firms on considering the of branch and ATM closures on their customers' everyday banking needs and consider the availability and provision of alternatives.

The guidance requires: "Firms should have carried out a robust analysis of the impact of a proposed closure or conversion on their customers, particularly in terms of lost access and potential harms to vulnerable consumers... They should also have analysed the services that the firm's customers can access at alternative sites, and how those compare to the services currently used at the site proposed for closure, as well as an analysis of new alternative access arrangements that the firm could reasonably put in place."

The FCA's data shows that most people currently have reasonable access to cash through a combination of bank, building society, or Post Office branches and ATMs.

The FCA's [Access to Cash Coverage in the UK Q3 2021](#) estimates that for access to any bank, building society, Post Office branch, or any ATM (either free or pay-to-use):

- 95.7% of the UK population are currently within 2km of a cash access point
- 99.7% of the UK population are currently within 5km of a cash access point

For free-to-use access points only:

- 95.5% of the UK population are currently within 2km of a cash access point
- 99.7% of the UK population are currently within 5km of a cash access point

These coverage estimates are unchanged from 2021 Q2. However, the types of available access points have changed between Q2 and Q3:

- The number of brick-and-mortar branches of the larger banks and building societies providing personal current accounts (PCA) continued to fall, as 224 (4%) ceased to do this. Coverage by these branches decreased from 60.1% to 59.6% of the UK population at 2km and from 87.5% to 87.4% at 5km.
- There was an increase in the availability of Post Office branches, which offset the reduction in branch coverage.
- The number of free-to-use ATMs declined, but the impact on coverage appears negligible.

In summer 2021, the Treasury [consulted](#) on establishing geographic requirements for the provision of cash withdrawal and deposit facilities, designating firms for meeting these requirements, and establishing further regulatory oversight of cash service provision. The outcome of this consultation is still awaited.

Local Picture

Across the county there has been a reduction in bank branches although we have no records as to the numbers involved, it is a commercial decision made by the banks and we as an Authority have not been involved in those decisions. The cost of providing bank branches in many areas of West Sussex are high and customer demand is diminishing. We have seen banks agree to provide ATM facilities for a period of two years post closure to enable residents to continue to access cash.

In recent years we have seen the growth in online banking, as an authority we promote safe use of online services, build resident confidence and regularly raise awareness of online scams especially when it relates to banking.

The banks offer mobile banking services in areas showing demand, they work with local communities to assist residents to build confidence in online and app services. Mobile banks utilise local assets, car parks, alongside libraries and fire stations to bring banking back to communities where geographic and access barriers exist.

The latest initiative in communities is pop-up banks in community venues that support basic banking demand and promote alternative ways to access banking services including telephone banking where people feel more confident speaking to a person.

The emergence of collaborative facilities in communities is also now supporting local residents and improving access, there is a growth in banking and post office facilities in convenience stores which are universal regardless of who you bank with.

Having read the [current article](#) relating to HSBC in East Grinstead, Uckfield and Burgess Hill, I note that while it a further loss of local branches, that HSBC are offering a range of modern day cost effective methods of accessing bank services that reflects the consequences of the pandemic and gives residents the opportunity to choose the way they bank in the future. They also appear to be putting in measures to assist customers who will be impacted by the loss of branches.

5. Written question from **Cllr Kerry-Bedell** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change**

Question

Given huge increases in energy costs due to wholesale gas price uplifts, the war in Ukraine, and increase in use of electric cars, does West Sussex County Council plan to expand the Halewick Lane, Sompting, battery storage plant facility and accelerate the integration of with local electricity supply or suitable local industrial estate facilities?

Answer

The recent volatility in gas prices has caused justified concern to the county's residents and business owners. The County Council's finances have been insulated from much of this price volatility so far due to the flexible procurement approach with LASER Energy Buying Group and the competitive prices secured for electricity generated from the County Council's solar farms.

Advice from LASER Energy Buying Group indicates that prices are likely to stay high for at least the next three years. As a result, the County Council's energy projects that generate electricity and help to provide resilience to the local and national grid have never been more important.

Through the County Council's solar farms and solar PV systems on corporate buildings and schools, the County Council continues to invest in energy assets that will allow a greater proportion of electricity used locally to be generated from renewables. The battery storage project at Halewick Lane will primarily provide resilience to the electricity grid and additional stability to enable more renewable energy generators to be integrated into the County Council's supply. Cabling work to connect the site to the electricity grid is underway and scheduled for completion in autumn 2022, by which point it is expected that a contractor will have been procured to install the batteries. Once complete, it is expected that there will be an opportunity to expand the site with some additional power generation.

The potential for additional solar and battery storage at other sites owned around the county is also being explored and some specialist consultancy advice (from industry experts Roadnight Taylor) has been brought in to ensure viable projects are identified and taken through feasibility and governance as quickly as possible.

Also being supported is the integration of renewable energy in local industrial estates through the LECSea project which is currently focused on the Manor Royal business district, but the model could be applied to other areas in the future. The project will drive investment in renewable energy and smart, local management to deliver low-cost energy to the business community there.

6. Written question from **Cllr Atkins** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Finance and Property**

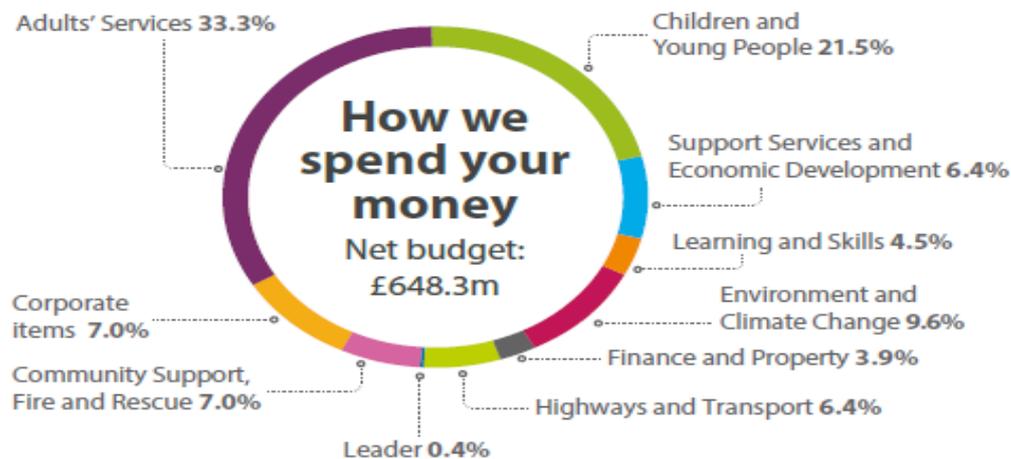
Question

The council tax increase sent out to the Worthing residents did not show the split from West Sussex County Council, only the total of £1,555.74.

Please could I have a breakdown of the split between West Sussex County Council services?

Answer

Although West Sussex County Council produces a tax leaflet this has, for some years, only been available online. However, a hard copy is available on request. Council Tax bills are sent out to residents by their district or borough council and these bills contain a web-link which will take you directly to the West Sussex leaflet - Your Council Tax Bill 2022/23. The [leaflet](#) (PDF, 458KB) contains a full breakdown of our Council tax spending for 2022/23 Our budget for 2022/23 is set out on page 3 of the leaflet, including a chart showing how we spend your money, as set out below.



7. Written question from **Cllr Cherry** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Finance and Property**

Question

At the beginning of this year around 30 of 43 West Sussex Children and Family Centres closed. The Council withdrew its services from these sites permanently. Many of these sites were shared with other services offering family support, such as midwifery.

Before the Council withdrawal from these sites, strong hopes were expressed that other community service suppliers would continue to operate from these locations.

Compared with last year, how many of these other community service providers are still operating from the places which they once shared with a now closed Children and Family Centre?

To put this question into context it would be helpful to know:

- How many of the now-closed Children and Family Centres operated from a site shared with another community service provider, prior to this year?
- How many of the now-closed Children and Family Centres operated from public libraries run by the Council?

Answer

(a) 30

(b) Three: Angmering Library, Findon Valley Library and East Grinstead Library.

The County Council's Property and Assets team has been working on the Early Help Asset plan since the consultation on the future of Early Help went live in March 2021. Extensive work was done in supporting organisations that were impacted by the closures. The Assets team registered all expressions of interest in the centres and were in discussion with interested parties throughout this time. Each local member has been kept up to date with the proposals regarding assets in their division.

Once the formal decision to re-design the service and declare a number of the assets surplus to requirements was taken in July 2021, (decision CAB2(21/22) refers) the Asset team carried out an appraisal and due diligence on all the options for the properties affected by the decision.

During the consultation period, Public Health identified that nine of the 30 centres due to close were in locations needed to continue to provide the Healthy Child Programme, commissioned from Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust (SCFT). These nine centres were reserved for that purpose and negotiations have been underway since to secure the properties.

Currently three of the nine centres are now in use by SCFT and the County Council continues to negotiate with SCFT to lease or agree shared use at a further six centres, subject to agreement of terms and in some cases, agreement of the Freeholders or other parties where premises are shared.

In addition to these nine centres, one further centre is now occupied by the Midwives Service.

Additionally, local hiring arrangements have been agreed at a number of the County Council's Libraries offering space to community service providers who were previously operating from the now closed Children and Family Centres.

Of the 12 Children and Family Centres retained following the decision to re-design the Early Help Service, all include space currently being used by other community service partners.

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

Question

Regarding grass verges in West Sussex, can the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport confirm:

- (a) How many miles of verge are part of the highways grass cutting contract;
- (b) How many miles of verge are classified as Community Road Verges;
- (c) How many miles of verge are in the trial of removing arisings that is being carried out in conjunction with the South Downs National Park Authority;

- (d) Whether the results of the pilot scheme to remove arisings will be available before the next five-year grass cutting contract is written and put out to tender; and
- (e) How will the Council make the right decision on the issue of removing arisings in the contract if the full results are not available by this time?

Answer

- (a) There are approximately 12 million square metres of highway verge throughout the county, split between rural and urban classification. Currently, the urban grass is cut five times per year in the growing season and rural grass is cut three times (1st cut visibility splays only, 2nd cut visibility splays and one-metre sideways swathe and 3rd cut the whole verge). Arisings from cutting are currently left on site, due to the prohibitive costs of collection and disposal.
- (b) There are 20 participating Community Road Verge locations consisting of 54 individual verges across the county, although they are not measured in miles. They range in size from small individual verges to large expanses of verge, and an estimation in terms of linear mileage would be less than two miles in total.
- (c) The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) pilot includes both urban and rural sites in the Park and runs for a period of three years (ends March 2024). There are 11 rural trial sites linked closely with existing Notable Road Verges and will involve a combination of less cutting and the removal of arisings. A baseline ecological survey has been completed by the SDNPA who will be monitoring the impact of the pilot on each site annually. The urban sites consist of all verges within the Midhurst Town area and involves collecting the arisings after each of the five cuts. There are approximately 30,000 sqm of grass included within the Midhurst area.
- (d) Officers are monitoring the volume of arisings after each cut, with the data feeding into future discussions around the service level provided. Similar pilots in other local authority areas have indicated that removing the arisings reduces the fertility of the soil and hence the grass grows less vigorously (measured by the volume of grass arising taken after each cut). This in turn has enabled both a reduction in the number of cuts required, and the opportunity for some wildflower species to flourish as soil fertility reduces.
- (e) The most significant barrier to a wholesale move to cut and collect throughout the county, is the disposal of arisings. Officers are working with colleagues in Waste Services to dispose of arisings associated with the current pilots, although this skip and compost-based method used would not be sustainable on a countywide basis.

Officers are already in contact with partners around the use of biodigesters, and these discussions continue. The ideal solution would be to feed arisings into digesters and use the fuel generated (bioethanol) to power the grass cutting fleet. It is likely that a combination of capital and grant funding will be required to progress a project of this scale.

The collective data captured for these pilots and ongoing discussions with partners will be used to inform options around what the future operating model could look like. Whilst pilot timings might not align exactly with contract

renewal dates, there is confidence that there will be enough information available at the time to understand the pros/cons of all options.

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

Question

I hope the Cabinet Member agrees with me that ensuring the safety of our roads should be a priority. I previously highlighted a number of road signs around the County that were defective or obscured and understood that a programme to address these was to take place. On my recent travels around the County, I am still seeing defective road signs.

The following were announced in August 2021:

- Replacing all faded and damaged signs;
- Replacing corroded signposts;
- Replacing damaged bollards;
- Replacing worn out coloured surfacing;
- With the extra £6m pounds added to this year's budget,

Can the Cabinet Member update me on the programme of works that was carried out and plans to address those signs that remain defective including those damaged in the recent storms?

Answer

There are approximately 60,000 road signs across the county.

The revenue budget for road sign maintenance in 2022/23 is £300,000. This provides the resource of a two-person-gang who will deliver approximately 1,500 jobs per annum. There may be scope to deliver more works than this, by providing short term additional resource, but it is dependent on the material costs within the financial year.

For 2022/23, there is an additional budget of £45,000 that will be used solely on sign cleaning and localised vegetation cut back immediately around identified signs. Traffic Engineers have identified 30 routes to be programmed for the start of the new financial year. Members are encouraged to send through suggested sites for dirty and obscured signs for consideration and future programming to the members' highways email address.

Some of the additional revenue funding secured for vegetation clearance will also be used to cut back vegetation around safety signs.

The list of bullet points referenced in the question above are associated with the Public Realm Project. This work stream has used capital funding to deliver road sign and road marking improvements on selected routes over the last two years. The sites have been a mixture of routes identified by the Road Safety Team, as well as key routes selected by each of the three Area Highway Teams.

In 2020/21, expenditure was approx. £1.5m and 113km of the highway network was treated.

In 2021/22, the treatment of 120km of highway network has been completed and the forecast is £1.4m of expenditure.

For 2022/23, there is a budget of approx. £1.1m and 30 roads are already identified which are currently with the County Council's contractor for assessment and pricing.

10. Written question from **Cllr Cornell** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Learning and Skills**

Question

I am aware that plans to increase our Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) capacity within mainstream schools are in place and underway with an important objective being to minimise our need for expensive out-of-county and/or independent placements. Can the Cabinet Member please tell me:

- (a) When he anticipates this authority will have adequate in-house provision to meet the needs of the vast majority of West Sussex students with an EHCP;
- (b) How he believes we found ourselves in a position of such under capacity and what assessment has been made of this to ensure we prevent the situation recurring;
- (c) What long term plans he has to increasing in-house provision for those students with complex needs; and
- (d) What assessment has been made of the impact this has had on our mainstream schools (in terms of capacity and workload) and special schools (in terms of space)?

Answer

- (a) The needs of the vast majority of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are already adequately provided for by in-house provision.
- (b) See answer to (a) above. In addition, we are currently progressing a programme of works to further increase County Council provision by expanding existing schools or exploring opportunities for new special schools.
- (c) There are plans for increasing capacity include the building of two new special schools to create 300 additional places and to utilise any suitable buildings to expand our current special schools, the majority of which have a 'Good' or 'Outstanding' Ofsted judgement. We are also creating additional Specialist Support Centre places attached to mainstream schools for children with social communication needs who require a higher level of support.
- (d) West Sussex has a lower proportion of pupils with EHCPs in mainstream schools than nationally and a higher proportion in specialist placements, including independent and non-maintained special schools. This indicates that there has been very limited impact on our mainstream schools.