

ELECTED MEMBER QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 29 November 2023

1) Question from Councillor E Fordham to Councillor C Renwick, Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Environment

“With the cancellation of the midlands leg of HS2, will the Council stand by all of its financial obligations of support to reconnect and complete the Chesterfield Canal restoration in the same timeframe?”

Response:

“Thank you, Councillor Fordham. Whilst the construction of HS2 through Derbyshire has indeed been cancelled the chosen route remains safeguarded. In planning terms, therefore, the implications of this decision for sections of Chesterfield Canal adjacent to the HS2 route have yet to be determined.”

2) Question from Councillor E Fordham to Councillor C Cupit, Cabinet Member for Highways Assets and Transport

“What monitoring does the Council undertake of badger deaths in and across Derbyshire and particularly how many dead badgers have been found and removed from roads, footpaths and highways by DCC for each year since 2017?”

Response:

“Thank you, for your question. We don’t monitor badger deaths because the removal of deceased animals from the highway is primarily the responsibility of Districts and Boroughs but just in terms of the jobs primarily on highway safety grounds where we have removed a dead badger off the highway since 2017 it is an average of 20 per year. I can provide you with the yearly breakdown at the end, if needed, or I can do it now if everybody is desperate for me to?”

3) Question from Councillor E Fordham to Councillor A Dale, Cabinet Member for Education

“Will the Council take new and additional measures to monitor and support schools in the face of reported increases in incidents of homophobia, transphobia and associated hate actions towards members of the LGBT+ communities in Derbyshire?”

Response:

“Thank you. I think the question relates to Home Office statistics which show a concerted increase in hate crime relating to transgender issues in particular, I

think a rise of about 11% which absolutely is very concerning and we need to be very clear that that has no place within Derbyshire schools.

I am pleased to report though having had quite a few discussions with various different officers of the Council dealing with schools in various different ways from HR to School Improvement advisors and the like that at least anecdotally we aren't seeing a significant increase or an increase at all really in terms of requests for support from schools.

I would advise it is very firmly a school responsibility in terms of having the right policies and the right procedures in place as part of a relationship to education and they should also be dealing with all forms of discrimination and have the right policies in place to deal with that. That said we do support and we always would support any school that asked us for any additional support or help or advice or guidance and we do support on these issues as part of our regular briefing to schools things like our PHSE Leadership briefing where we were sharing best practice of a really good example school.

We have the sex education Building Effective Relationships Together awards. Sorry I have got 'BERT' written down I just had to work out what it stands for, the BERT Awards which encourages education around LGBT issues and obviously schools are encouraged to participate in those. We also do have a monitoring procedure for schools to report any incidents through to the Derby and Derbyshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership.

I think in terms of the rise in reports I do wonder the degree to which they are influenced by the greater awareness of these issues that we are seeing, you know the greater discussion of them culturally, nationally in the media and on social media. Greater awareness might mean that there are greater reportings of it. I think if that is the case the actual number of issues may itself not be increasing but people are feeling more confident about coming forward which in itself is actually quite a good thing and obviously people are more akin now to spotting incidents of homophobia and transphobia and should rightly feel confident in coming forward so that schools and the local authority can deal with them.

I would say also as a final point that I fear the question to a certain degree is losing sight of the bigger picture which from my perspective is that our schools' system now is so much more tolerant, so much more inclusive than it certainly was when I went to school 20 years ago or so. I go into schools regularly now. I have two young children and the degree to which schools go above and beyond to really demonstrate that difference is important and is a good thing and we should be tolerant of each other I think is a really positive step, so I agree that the increase is concerning but I think we just have to consider the bigger picture as well that schools are already doing a huge amount on this topic."

Supplementary question:

"I hear that and I completely accept if the schools you attended 20 years ago, trust me 30 years before it was worse. I help coordinate Derbyshire LGBT+ the Derby Charity for these issues, the National Day of Remembrance of Trans Rights in Chesterfield. We tried it last year, we tried it the year before and it didn't really work, not many people came. This year they came. They came in numbers and seeing children, children reading out the list of their friends who have been attacked, reading out the list of the dead is really quite a difficult event to sit through and work through.

I hear what schools are doing and I agree they are more inclusive than ever before but the point at which those children leave that school gate, the point at which they leave that school things can change dramatically. I think we can always do more.

My question is we will now do a National Day of Remembrance in all of the major towns of Derbyshire next year. We just did Derby and Chesterfield this year but the demand is outweighing our ability to organise it through the work I do with the charity. Can I ask you as portfolio holder will you join us and help us in organising those vigils? It raises awareness. It provides comfort and I think it is a serious issue to-date.

Response:

"Thank you, Councillor Fordham is absolutely right, when making the point that they are more inclusive now than ever before I neglected to say at the end of that that actually we could always do more and I would absolutely agree with the point. I am very happy to discuss with him separately the work that he does through his chosen charity. I am sorry I didn't catch the name of that but I will speak to him separately outside and see how together with the support of officers we can build greater awareness of the work that you are doing and ensure that children are aware of the ability to come forward.

4) Question from Councillor E Fordham to Councillor B Lewis, Leader of the Council

"Does the Leader of the Council regret reporting 'nothing' to the last meeting of Council under the verbal 'Report from the Leader and questions from councillors?' was withdrawn at the meeting.

5) Question from Councillor G Kinsella to Councillor B Lewis, Cabinet Member for Strategic Leadership, Culture, Tourism and Climate Change

“Following Storm Babet, over 100 Duffield homes were flooded. The Ecclesbourne River flooded in the heart of the village for the first time since flood defences were installed in the seventies. Evidence shows that extreme weather events are increasing in frequency because of human-induced climate change.

Derbyshire are conducting a County-wide Section 19 Flooding Investigation, but this will not report for approximately 12 months. This broad countywide approach will not provide the level of detail required to protect Duffield residents against flooding and residents fear that there may be another flood before the report is published.

Will Cllr Lewis and the relevant officers agree to meet with me and members of Duffield Parish Council to discuss what more can be done and, whilst I understand the difficult financial position of the Council, can he provide assurances that real terms spending on adaptation and resilience will increase?”

Response:

“Thank you very much indeed, Councillor Kinsella. Yes, I really feel for the residents of Duffield. As you mentioned over 100 properties were affected by that recent storm.

I can tell you that your local MP, Pauline Latham, has been very much on the front foot with regard to this issue and the flooding that was caused by Storm Babet. As I mentioned earlier it was the most widespread event that we have seen in recent memory. Many hundreds of properties right across the county were affected. Officers and members worked tirelessly to develop that response to the floods and continue, as I said earlier, to do so now.

As noted we will be carrying out a statutory section 19 enquiry into the flooding on a county-wide basis given the widespread nature of the floods. At the moment we are in the sort of scoping phase of that and the delivery of that as an investigation has yet to be set but they are working on that programme at the moment with a view to delivering that as soon as possible. Obviously gathering the information from right across the county is a significant exercise and as a priority we will ensure that the basic legislative requirements for a section 19 flooding investigation are met as well.

The Government has also initiated some funding and a range of support for residents and businesses impacted by that flooding and in terms of adaptation and resilience there is the Property Flood Resilience Repair Grant Scheme whereby properties which have been flooded internally can claim monies of up to £5,000 to make their home more resilient to flooding, so flood door barriers, pumps, that sort of thing. We are managing this scheme and further details as to how residents can apply will be communicated quite soon.

In particular regard to your specific questions the officers of the County Council have met with partners such as the Environment Agency; Amber Valley Borough Council; the Fire Service and Severn Trent at a meeting hosted by Pauline Latham held on the 1 November to discuss the impact of the flooding and agreed on a number of actions in response to that.

The Council is, as I mentioned earlier, also getting a large number of requests from right across the county to attend flooding meetings, meetings of this very nature in fact that you are requesting in the instance of Duffield, and given that we have already met with a number of representatives local to Duffield and a very limited number of officers to attend these meetings I am at this moment going to decline that invitation for the reasons I have just expressed.

In terms of spending on adaptation and resilience, apart from what I have just mentioned that recent Government announcement £170m of funding has been made available to Derbyshire for highways' maintenance related investment over the next ten years and that is in addition to Local Transport Plan funding of £27m per annum. That funding will be used in part to address flood prevention, adaptation and repair."

Supplementary question:

"It is disappointing that we can't meet with officers. I attended a meeting after the floods. There must have been about 50 or 60 residents obviously very frustrated, very angry. There were a lot of complimentary comments made about the officers and the work that they had done, particularly the Highways Teams. It was more about how to prevent floods going forward.

I have emailed the Project Engineer responsible for flood management. I emailed him three weeks ago and I have still not had a reply. Duffield Parish Council have also written a letter to Derbyshire County Council over two weeks ago and they have still not had a reply. I wonder whether the Leader could accelerate at least responses to those questions that have been asked?"

Response:

"I am happy to check on those responses to those letters that Councillor Kinsella mentions.

6) Question from Councillor G Kinsella to Councillor B Lewis, Cabinet Member for Strategic Leadership, Culture, Tourism and Climate Change

"Derbyshire ranked 17 out of 21 county councils in the recently published Climate Action Scorecard. This was an independent national benchmarking exercise which, to the Council's credit, was fully engaged with.

Cllr Lewis has said “we are making great strides on our Journey to Net Zero”. Given the information in this report, isn’t it the case far from making great strides we are only making baby steps and how does the Council intend use the scorecard information to improve?”

Response:

“Thank you very much indeed Councillor Kinsella for your question. There is a long answer and there is a short answer and I am always in favour of giving the shorter answer.

I disagree with your assertion in your question around “making baby steps”. I do believe we are making significant strides. I am certainly not going to let something like this, a particular scorecard get in the way of our good progress with regard to that and I will point to actually a comment that was made locally by the Local Government Association very recently in response to scorecards being announced on the 18 October because there are a lot of limitations in the methodology that is being applied with regard to these scorecards. It says:

“As leaders of their communities local government has a fundamental role to play in tackling climate change. Net zero is a complex transition bringing very unique and interconnected challenges and opportunities to every place. We don’t support league tables as they often face a two dimensional picture of the context that Councils are working within and unfairly compare Councils with different challenges. Councils are already leading the way in transitioning to net zero and are ambitious to do more. Government needs to empower local climate action that hit targets, mobilise support and deliver on the evidence showing local approaches can save hundreds of billions.”

I broadly agree with the approach that is described in there and certainly big strides have been made and pointed straightaway to a 71% reduction in its emissions since the 2009-10 baseline, including 14% over the last year. That is pretty significant, so we may not tick every box of every scorecard in the way we do this but overall we are heading in the right direction and notwithstanding those challenges I mentioned earlier, which I am more than happy to talk to you about, we are doing our utmost and very best to try to get to net zero by 2032 or sooner.”

Supplementary question:

“I agree, I think there is some legitimacy around the methodology of comparisons but I still think there are lessons to be learnt from that exercise and I hope the officers do take that offer up.

Also we have talked a lot about collaboration, we have talked a lot in previous discussions particularly around finance, we have talked about finding solutions so I wonder whether the Leader will consider reinstating me to the Climate Change Committee given my collaborative and solution focused approach?"

Response:

"All I can say is nice try!"

7) Question from Councillor J Nelson to Councillor A Dale, Cabinet Member for Education

"Will the Cabinet Member please provide an update on the Council's efforts to ensure the continuity of education for the children of Duffield Meadows Primary School following the devastating flooding last month?"

Response:

"Yes, thank you very much Councillor Nelson for the question. Just in terms of the flood itself I went to the school about a week or so after and got to speak to the head teacher about how it all happened and the sort of shock of a situation where they could see water coming across the playing field, within a matter of minutes it was at the door and within sort of 45 minutes from start to finish the school itself was flooded; dealing with the issues of what they do with the children. Do they keep them inside? Do they put them on tables? Do they take them outside in the pouring rain? Just a horrendous, horrendous situation for anyone to have to deal with and not least those school staff and the school leadership who did they did it very well and they did it to the best of their ability. They have an emergency plan which they put straight into place and dealt with the flooding itself at the time.

Obviously as soon as we became aware of the impact on the school our officers jumped in to try and help in terms of sourcing alternative accommodation. It quite quickly became apparent that the school was going to be out of action for a period of time. We had the loss adjusters on the site to assess the damage and as I say it became apparent that we were going to need alternative accommodation and remote education. Learning from home if you like wasn't going to cut it.

We have hosted two public meetings so far with the parents and we have another one shortly to follow. Our initial solution it is fair to say didn't go down brilliantly well with the Parent Committee which was to try and bus the children to the John Hadfield House site here in Matlock. Obviously it is a twelve mile journey. We were acutely aware it was not ideal but it was the best we had at that moment in time. We had a meeting with the parents that evening so we had to give them some sort of news that would avoid a continuation of remote

learning. I think everyone, parents/school and ourselves were keen to ensure that we ended remote education as soon as possible but anyway within a couple of days we obviously ruled out John Hadfield House and managed to get the Whitemoor Centre in Belper which is only a few miles away, much better solution, and the parents it is fair to say were much much happier in the second meeting.

It is not without its complications. We are still having to bus the kids up there and back at the end of the day. That is interrupting to a degree in the learning day so in the full extent of their learning hours, which is regrettable, but obviously there has to be some compromises and some give in this scenario. There will always be teething issues with situations where you are having to bus the whole school up the road effectively.

I just want to say a few pretty huge thank yous, firstly to the parent community who have been absolutely tremendous in supporting the County Council and supporting the school to get on with the job and in terms of offering that support to their own children through dealing with what has been a very you know quite traumatic experience and then an uncertain experience, so a big thank you to the parent community.

A huge huge thank you to Mrs Novak-Lemmings the head teacher and all the school staff who have been absolutely incredible in terms of both the leadership that the head teacher showed and also coming together and supporting each other. I think if there were any awards going out for Head Teacher of the Year then I think Mrs Novak-Lemmings is definitely a very good candidate for that.

I want to thank in particular a couple of our officers as well. Jenny Webster and Fiona Mosley from the Development section who have been working absolutely flat out to make this happen, get moving and get the kids back into school. They really are completely on it in terms of that and have been doing a marvellous job despite the huge number of competing challenges on their time as well.

Finally, to our Director of Education who on the last day before the Whitemoor Centre was open donned his scruffs and went and did a day's joinery because one of the Property Team couldn't make it in that day, so it really has been everyone rolling up their sleeves, getting in trying to help and get the situation moving forward so that the kids could be back in school.

Finally, one person I have forgotten to thank is Robert Turner from the Property Service who has also been fantastic with his team and the Property Services Team who have been in the school doing all the work to get the Whitemoor Centre up and running.

As I say a great piece of partnership working, really fantastic response from lots of different people involved. I just want to say a huge thank you to all of them."

Supplementary question:

“Could I ask what action has been taken for the school to reopen again as there are a lot of Chinese whispers going round about this school. All I need is assurances that the work is carrying on and is being done as soon as possible to get the kids back to school because it is imperative that the children are not disrupted any more than is necessary?”

Response:

“Thank you Councillor Nelson again for the supplementary question. There will be a communication going to parents very shortly hopefully which will really spell this out. I think some of the rumours is people have been walking past the old school site and not seeing a huge amount of activity but it is regrettably just the nature of flood restoration work. There is an inordinate amount of time spent drying the property out but I can confirm that action is being taken. On most days there are a couple of workmen there. It is not high staff intensive work as I say because of the drying out time but they have removed the flooring to expose the concrete bases to help them dry out. We are imminently about to get a specialist company in to remove the asbestos on the remaining parts of the floor and following that there will be a period of intensive drying, so they seal the school up, dry it out for a couple of weeks or so and then after that hopefully it should get signed off probably we think around the early part of the New Year and then we will be back in, redecoration, skirting boards back on, plastering up where we need to and trying to get it open as soon as possible within the New Year. We are eminently confident we will meet the six months’ timescale that we originally set out. There is no reason to doubt that at the moment but as I say I know there are some fairly bizarre rumours within the community around the fact that we are going to sell the site off or we are going to knock down the school and rebuild it.

On the latter point the insurance company are very clear that this is a repairable school so they are not going to support us to knock it down and rebuild it unfortunately, much as it would be nice to have a new school, and on the former point we are not going to sell the school site because we are statutorily obliged to provide school places to meet the needs of the local population so the idea of us selling it is pretty strange as well. I can put those rumours to bed and assure the community in Duffield that we are absolutely on this and we are motoring through to try and get it open as quickly as possible.”

8) Question from Councillor J Siddle to Councillor C Hart, Cabinet Member for Health and Communities

“Will the Cabinet Member please update the Council on the support that is being put in place for children and families, across Derbyshire, who may be struggling or facing financial hardship this winter?”

Response:

“Yes, it should have been altered to say Councillor Patten. We did inform Council twice to do this and it has obviously not been done.

However, thank you Councillor Siddle for the question. This support that we offer it stretches over three portfolios: Children’s, Education and Health and therefore my response will reflect this, Chair.

The Household Support Fund helps with the cost of living pressures and can be applied for through the Derbyshire Discretionary Fund. The Derbyshire Discretionary Fund provides two types of support: emergency payments for Derbyshire residents struggling with food or heating and exceptional grants to support households for more general things like furniture or household items. There is further support for families and foster families with grocery vouchers for those families who are in receipt of free school meals and care experience young people aged up to 21 which again will be issued in January 2024. This follows a previous payment to 31,841 eligible children in June 2023.

The Holiday Activity and Food Programme funded by the Department for Education to provide free nutritious and tasty food and fund physical activity sessions for children and families in Derbyshire.

The Winter Programme is in its final stages of development. However, we have already confirmed 126 clubs which will offer food and activities. As part of the programme we received 11 applications from organisations wishing to provide local food boxes. This equates to 860 food boxes in addition to the 600 food boxes and 550 activity packs which we will be providing direct into the homes of young people where they might find it difficult to attend a face-to-face club.

On top of the targeted support I have already mentioned there is further support such as welfare and benefit advice; housing advice on issues such as rent arrears and residents can obtain advice and practical tips of how to stay warm and cut energy usage.”

Supplementary question:

“I also notice we are doing quite a bit of work with warm hubs and warm spaces. Could you give me more details on that as well please?”

Response:

“Well last year the Council provided grants up to £1,000 for communities and they have been extremely successful. We have several all around, well several, we have many or many many all around the county and I have some in my patch as well. They have been really successful offering a nice warm space not only for older people, which you automatically always think about, but people who are probably on their own, single people that also need somewhere just to go and have a chitchat during the winter months which can be quite isolating for a lot of people.

I am really pleased to confirm that we are offering the grant again this year so you can bid up to £1,000 if you wish to start a community hub, a warm space. It could be anywhere. It is a fantastic scheme we are offering and I would encourage all members in the Council to speak within their communities; speak to your local Parish Councils or anyone, the churches or anybody who might want to start one of these schemes up because it is invaluable at this time of year when people can feel very isolated and very alone.”