
ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING 14 February 2017

Answers to Written Questions

Agenda Item 10

1. By Councillor Danvers of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

'Given the comments at the Cabinet meeting about so-called fair funding for schools proposed by the Government, will the Cabinet Member publish a table of those schools that will gain and those that will lose because of the proposals?

Specifically will he publish in his answer the level of funding of the primary schools controlled by Essex in Harlow North Division?'

Reply

'The National Funding Formula phase 2 consultation was launched on 14 December 2016 with a closing date for responses of 22 March 2017. The proposed new formula is complex and therefore it is important to look beyond the headlines figures of winners and losers. I am pleased that overall Essex appears to be a net gainer with the proposed new funding formula indicating a £20.3m uplift on the overall budget for schools, which represents a 2.6% gain to Essex. However, firstly it needs to be recognised that the proposed National Funding Formula is aimed to create a fairer schools funding system but this is within the national budget for schools. Whilst this budget has been protected for the past 5 years schools have seen a number of inflationary pressures to their costs in relation to wages, national insurance etc.

In Essex the impact of the proposed national funding formula means that 377 schools will potentially gain but 142 schools will lose, with over 50% of secondary schools set to have a reduced budget as a result of the proposals. This is due to the fact that the DfE have not simply 'averaged' the formula principles of local authorities across the country. For example, Essex spends 77.8% of funding on the basic per-pupil funding (Average Weighted Pupil Unit(AWPU)), the national average is 76.6%, however the

proposed average in the DfE's consultation is 72.5%. This proposed change means a reduction in AWPU figures for all secondary schools in Essex. Another example is the lump sum where by Essex has a lump sum of £150,000 which is used to protect small schools; this equates to 10.3% of the budget. The national average is 8.2% but the proposed average under the new formula is 7.1% which will adversely impact on some small schools. The minimum funding guarantee remains -1.5% but due to the scale of changes, DfE feel it is insufficient and therefore a funding floor of -3% will be implemented and conversely no school will gain by more than 3% in year 1 rising to a cumulative 5.5% in year 2.

The DfE have published their indicative figures for all schools in the country. Given the formula is subject to consultation and further refinement and the impact of the minimum funding guarantee / cap on schools gaining it is very difficult at this stage to understand the actual implications for individual schools, however the DfE figures indicate for North Harlow primary schools the following:

	NFF Illustrative without protection			Year 1 protection	
	Allocation	Change	% Change	Allocation	% Change
Churchgate Primary	£761,000	£13,000	1.8%	£13,000	1.8%
Fawbert and Barnards	£852,000	+£29,000	3.5%	£844,000	2.5%
Harlowbury Primary	£838,000	+£42,000	5.2%	£816,000	2.5%
Freshwaters Primary	£1,291,000	+£113,000	9.6%	£1,210,000	2.7%
Cooks Spinney Primary	£1,897,000	+207,000	12.2%	£1,737,000	2.8%
The Downs Primary	£1,385,000	+£113,000	8.9%	£1,306,000	2.7%
St Alban's Primary	£857,000	+£20,000	2.5%	£857,000	2.5%
Tany's Dell Primary	£1,535,000	+£116,000	8.2%	£1,458,000	2.7%
Church Langley Primary	£1,836,000	+£122,000	7.1%	£1,760,000	2.7%

All other schools can be viewed on the DfE website.'

2. By Councillor Wood of the Cabinet Member for Health

‘Will the Cabinet Member make a statement on his assessment of how the Sustainability & Transformation Plans (STPs) covering Essex meet the criteria the Council approved at its meeting on 6 December 2016?’

Reply

‘The Sustainability and Transformation Plans (STPs) are five year plans up to March 2021 and are designed to pursue the triple NHS aims of better health, transformed quality of care delivery, and sustainable finances.

There are three plans that affect Essex County Council, covering Mid and South Essex (including Southend and Thurrock), West Essex and Hertfordshire, and North East Essex and Suffolk.

The plans are still at a fairly early stage and more details are expected later this year. Any significant proposals for service change will be subject to formal public consultation.

The County Council recognises the need for the NHS to make financial efficiencies but we are clear that the changes must satisfy the five criteria agreed by Council in December and we believe more information is needed to satisfy these.

(1) Are based on high quality care and improved clinical outcomes for Patients and not merely financial expediency

We want to see Essex performing much better than the national average on key indicators. Key issues are the quality and workforce issues in Colchester and within the Mid and South trusts, as well as the sustainability of Princess Alexandra Hospital (PAH). There is also recognition of the workforce pressures in primary care with an ageing GP workforce and a shortage of GPs in particular.

Much of the STP thinking still needs further development and we will be looking for the clinical evidence to support proposed service changes. We will also be looking for assurance that increased capacity in the community can occur before or at the same time as any changes to hospitals as there are similar pressures on community care as there are on acute care.

There are strong systems in place to ensure clinical leadership especially within Suffolk and North East and also within the Mid and South STP. The latter has also sought external clinical validation of proposals which was broadly supportive of the proposals but said there needed to be greater engagement with social care – a conclusion we support.

(2) Address the issues of accessibility for patients and their families

There is a strong desire in all three STPs to move services closer to the community with hospital as a last option and that is very much welcome. This will include alternatives to admission and more community outpatients. There is a drive in all sectors to seven-day working which will again improve accessibility. Technological solutions will also play a part in increasing accessibility of services.

However there are also proposals to rationalise services so that best outcomes, workforce and efficiencies can be achieved. Mid and South Essex is the furthest developed in its thinking and they are currently considering some options that could include the assignment of one hospital (Basildon, Broomfield or Southend) as the key emergency inpatient centre (although there will be A/E and assessment for emergencies on all sites) and also the possibility of having a single hospital dedicated to planned 'elective' admissions (which only Southend could be considered for). It is likely that similar models will feature in the other STPs as they develop.

We recognise there could be benefits from such proposals, including reduced cancellations of planned operations and better outcomes from concentrating specialisms. However, we also need to see the detailed proposals and understand:

- a) What offer would be available on each site
- b) The impacts on journey times
- c) The impacts on social care transport planning and costs
- d) The knock-on impacts between hospitals from any changes (for example, it is likely that any changes in Mid and South Essex would have impacts on Colchester and PAH hospitals by changing the destination patterns for residents in the north of the Mid Essex area)
- e) The transport options and accessibility for those in isolated areas and / or without access to a car.

(3) Take full account of the impact on both community and social care services

All STPs recognise an enhanced role for community services. There is a focus on primary care including best use of workforce and capacity to support a more community-based service joined up and structured around primary care. This is welcome.

However, a recent report by the National Audit Office has criticised the STP process for being NHS-led and NHS-focused and playing insufficient attention to social care.

We need to understand how community capacity is going to be increased to help support reduced demand on acutes. We also need to understand the implications of shifting demand from acutes to the community and the implications that has for social care capacity and costs. For example, there are capacity issues in the homecare market in parts of Essex and this needs to be properly understood.

In addition, the STPs also need to pay adequate attention to the workforce challenges in social care. For example, in Essex about one in five care jobs are vacant and the sector is finding it difficult to recruit and retain care workers.

Finally, all of the STPs are working with multiple social care authorities. We need to be satisfied that the STPs do not lead to a different social care experience for people living in different parts of Essex and this would not be acceptable to us.

(4) Give an equal importance and parity of esteem to Mental Health Services

We are not satisfied that mental health is afforded sufficiently high priority in the STPs or that mental health crisis care featured sufficiently. We are also not satisfied that all CCGs have met funding requirements on mental health in their 2016-17 plan. Research by the Health Foundation indicates that 4 of the 5 Essex CCGs have not met the requirement (Basildon and Brentwood, West, Castle Point & Rochford and North East). The STPs need to deliver a step change on this.

We also want assurance that funding for children's mental health is spent for the purpose it is intended for, rather than for helping meet wider NHS funding pressures.

We will also be seeking assurance that all Essex hospitals will have 24/7 mental health liaison services to ensure support is available.

We want to see the recommendations of the Mental Health Strategic Review for Essex implemented and the creation of an integrated pan-Essex approach to mental health.

(5) Contain a genuine commitment to focus on preventive health services

Our concern is that the STPs are largely focused on hospital activity. While prevention is seen as a key driver for STPs there is limited commitment to public health and the pressures the County Council faces. Prevention focusses on self-care to prevent deterioration in long-term conditions

although a wider agenda is discussed, notably in the North East Essex/Suffolk STP.

Conclusion

The County Council will continue to engage with the STPs as the plans develop to understand the implications. More detail is required and will be forthcoming as proposals become more concrete.

We will continue to press for there to be genuine consultation on any proposals and that patient need is put first, that decisions are taken in public and that appropriate joint governance arrangements are established.

There is also a clear role for HOSC to play in scrutinising the proposals, and I know HOSC held a detailed briefing session with the STP leads and NHS England in January.'

3. By Councillor Danvers of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

'Will the Cabinet Member please re-examine the case for a pedestrian crossing from the back entrance of Sainsbury's in Harlow across Fourth Avenue to the town centre post office car park?'

Reply

'As the Member may recall this was a scheme that was discussed at the Harlow Local Highways Panel of which he is a member, with the aim of discouraging the use of this informal crossing of a busy road rather than promoting it; the location - four-lanes of traffic and right next to a roundabout - meant that neither puffin or zebra crossings were deemed by the Panel as being a suitable solution.

If the Member would like the Harlow Local Highways Panel to revalidate this scheme, he is welcome to pursue this at the next Panel meeting.'

4. By Councillor Deakin of the Leader of the Council

‘Would the Leader please provide an update on the current condition of Shire Hall and when can it be expected to come back into use?’

Reply

‘Shire Hall is currently being maintained by Essex County Council through our partner MITIE whilst we work with Aquila, who are currently undertaking their detailed surveys and work to put together a planning application for the building, which will then be determined by Chelmsford City Council. All parties are working together to bring this iconic Chelmsford edifice back into use, although as you will appreciate, this is a complex building and it is important to get any application right.’

5. By Councillor Mackrory of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

‘You will be aware of the representations made by the Essex Secondary Heads to Essex MPs regarding cuts to school funding. This refers to year on year reductions in budget and not the changes to funding formula, the impact of which is yet to be seen. Schools have had to absorb increases in National Insurance, pensions, fuel costs and inflation. Now staffing levels are being cut and the curriculum restricted.

As the economic prosperity of Essex is very dependent on a highly-educated workforce, will the Cabinet Member make similar representations to Government so that our school children will not be disadvantaged in the years to come by inadequate budgets to our schools?’

Reply

‘The partnership between the County Council and the Professional Associations in Essex is very strong and at a recent meeting with MP’s the impact of inflationary pressures on schools budgets was raised along with some of the implications of the new National Funding Formula.

Nevertheless, I am aware of the Essex Secondary Headteacher campaign on the impact of inflationary pressures on school budgets so I would like to thank Councillor Mackrory for his question.

The national budget for schools has been protected by Parliament for the past five years and therefore it has not been cut as your question suggests, however due to inflationary pressures to costs in relation to wages, National

Insurance etc. it is recognised that there is a pressure on school budgets having to meet these rising costs.

It must be recognised that the new proposed National Funding Formula indicates an overall increase in funding to Essex of £20.3m, with 377 schools standing to gain funding as a result of the proposed formula compared to 142 schools whose funding is impacted.

It does however, need to be acknowledged that the proposed National Funding Formula is aimed to create a fairer schools funding system but this is within the national budget for schools.'

6. By Councillor Mackrory of the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste

'Given the recent disclosure that asbestos particles are present in the Tovi building at Basildon can the Cabinet Member give assurances on the following:

- Was the Health and Safety Executive alerted immediately this became apparent?
- What measures were in place to protect workers at the Waste Transfer Stations and the adjacent residential areas where they exist?
- What guarantees can he give that the policy of refusing DIY waste and small builders waste at recycling centres has not led to irresponsible people disposing of such waste in the domestic stream?'

Reply

'Essex County Council is under no legal requirement to inform the HSE of such matters, as we do not operate the facility. However, Essex County Council's Chief Executive wrote to the HSE on Friday 3 February to share the findings of the monitoring activity undertaken by the Authority, allowing the HSE to take any action they deem necessary.

As the waste transfer stations (WTS) do not process waste, but simply transfer it to larger vehicles for onward transport, there is no reason to suspect the presence of airborne asbestos within the WTS.

All site staff at the waste transfer stations have been trained in the identification and safe handling of asbestos to ensure that any asbestos visible in the delivered waste can be quarantined and handled appropriately.

With regard to the adjacent residential areas, as no waste processing takes place at the transfer stations and waste is handled within a closed

environment there is no known risk to residents in the surrounding area.

Asbestos has never been accepted at Essex recycling centres for household waste (RCHWs). Essex County Council provides a free-of-charge collection service for the disposal of small quantities of asbestos and can also arrange for the collection of larger quantities. This service is well publicised at the recycling centres and through the County Council's website. As a result, this well-used service has undertaken some 432 collections of asbestos in the last six months.

Individuals intent on disposing of and deliberately concealing dangerous substances in waste, be it at recycling centres or in black bags, are just as likely to have committed such a crime before any changes were implemented at the RCHWs'

7. By Councillor Kendall of the Cabinet Member for Finance, Housing and Planning

'How much has Essex County Council spent on hiring consultants and interim staff over the last four financial years? Please could I have a separate breakdown for each for each year?'

Reply

'The figures requested are shown in the table below. It will be helpful to note that consultancy covers a wide spectrum of activities ranging from provision of expert advice on specific topics to what is effectively the sub-contracting, or employment of specialists to aid implementation. Similarly agency spend covers interim staff to cover one-off activity to support projects and key roles, for example where there are roles that are difficult to fill, or gaps whilst recruitment is underway, it also has the benefit of allowing earlier implementation. The total spend in 2016/17 is forecast to represent under 1.8% of our gross expenditure (excluding schools).

Year	Consultancy £000	Agency £000
2016/17*	2,908	20,873
2015/16	4,124	24,698
2014/15	3,405	27,956
2013/14	3,683	28,831
2012/13	8,676	33,932

* forecast end of year spend'

8. By Councillor Kendall of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

‘What measures does Essex County Council have in place to ensure that every secondary school in the County is offering an excellent careers advice service to their pupils?’

How is the quality of the careers advice on offer in Essex being measured against the advice being given to pupils in other Counties like Kent and Hertfordshire?’

Reply

‘The Education Act 2011 removed the statutory responsibility for the provision of access to Careers Guidance from local authorities and gave it to schools, academies and colleges.

Schools are responsible for providing independent impartial Careers Guidance for pupils from Year 8 to Year 13.

Essex County Council’s Recognition of Quality Award (RoQA) is a nationally-validated award that enables and supports schools or colleges to deliver a high quality Careers Education and Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) programme.

- In Essex 57 schools and colleges have achieved or are progressing the RoQA.
- It is a voluntary award, although Statutory Guidance issued by the Government in March 2015 encourages schools to attain a nationally-validated Quality in Careers Award.
- The Award ensures that all schools provide Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) delivered by a Level 6-qualified Careers Guidance Professional.
- All Careers professionals are required to be registered with the Careers Development Institute and are therefore keeping up to date on 25 hours of Continuous Professional Development a year.
- All external providers of IAG are required by the County Council to provide staff who to hold the ‘Matrix Award’ as further accreditation. This is another measure to ensure that high quality Careers Advice is delivered.
- Through robust data-sharing policies with schools and colleges NEET and Destinations data are shared with education establishments. This data supports a school’s OFSTED Inspection and evaluation processes within their CEIAG Programme.

Essex County Council has sourced funding to support schools and IAG professionals in delivering a high quality service through the provision of the Essex Network 4 Careers, which is available for all schools to register and offers updates on changes to routes/careers and developments in the industry.

In addition Essex also supply information on the Local Labour Market (LMI) to ensure Careers Advisers are fully aware of the LMI and are able to promote the opportunities available.

Kent County Council no longer offers direct IAG services to all secondary schools, which is similar to the Essex model and therefore the responsibility of IAG falls to the schools. Hertfordshire continue to deliver and charge for IAG services to schools across the County, and these services will be monitored in terms of quality through the requirement to hold the 'Matrix' Award and therefore Hertfordshire would follow due process in relation to the quality of IAG delivery.

A review of Careers, Education Advice and Guidance is due to be published by the DfE, which I welcome as well as this being a focus of debate within Councillor Bentley's portfolio.'

9. By Councillor Durcan of the Cabinet Member for Health

'Could the Cabinet Member provide an update on what discussions if any have taken place with partners in Hertfordshire and West Essex around the proposed STP that includes West Essex.

Would he give assurance that all County Councillors in the West Essex corridor will be invited or kept updated on any progress on the STP going forward?'

Reply

'I can assure Councillor Durcan that all County Councillors will be kept updated on progress regarding their relevant STPs going forwards. I will also write to all STP leads and to NHS England to ensure that the STPs are clear on the need to do this.

In respect of West Essex, the Hertfordshire and West Essex STP was published in early December 2016 and this was sent by email to all County Councillors. I am also aware that the HOSC held a detailed evidence session in early January 2017 to receive updates from all STP leads and from NHS England.

I have met with colleagues from Hertfordshire County Council to agree the need for us to meet jointly with the STP lead on a regular basis so that we can provide regular updates to County Councillors and also to our respective health and wellbeing boards. I have held similar discussions with colleagues in Suffolk and in Southend and Thurrock.'

10. By Councillor Durcan of the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste

'Many months ago there was a discussion about the relocation of the recycling centre in Harlow to another larger and more suitable site.

Would it be possible for the Portfolio Holder to provide local County Councillors with an update and could this include sites that are under consideration and the likely time scales for any proposed transfer?'

Reply

'The size of the Recycling Centre for Household Waste (RCHW) in Harlow meets current operational needs and is located within an area providing good access for users.

Harlow is an area with extensive growth plans to deliver new jobs and drive economic growth. The RCHW is located within the Templefields Enterprise Zone which is a key component in enabling the wider regeneration of the town. Early conversations with Harlow District Council indicated that a relocation of the recycling centre was part of their broader development ambitions for the area.

Preliminary work with Harlow District Council and others to identify potential opportunities to relocate the RCHW to a nearby site, enabling the release of land within the Enterprise Zone for a more suitable use and to promote economic growth, is ongoing. As this work is at an early stage, and we have no preferred site identified, I am currently not in a position to provide any timescales for any future transfer of land. Any proposals to relocate the RCHW would be subject to public consultation and would only be taken if I am convinced that a replacement facility provides an improved offer to current users of the site.'

11. By Councillor Young of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

‘Could the Cabinet Member advise us on the number of classes in Essex that exceed 30 pupils?’

Reply

‘I thank Cllr Young for her question and absolutely recognise that class sizes are important for parents, children and schools.

The legal requirements on this issue relate only to infant classes where the law states that they shall not exceed 30 pupils (with one teacher) other than where certain permitted exceptions prevail.

The definition of an exception is where the school admits an “excepted pupil” and that would include children with a statement of special educational needs (or an Education, Health and Care Plan), looked after children, those admitted through independent appeal and children from multiple births e.g. twins and triplets.

Based upon data from the last available schools census of January 2016, there were 112 infant classes in Essex (out of more than 1,500 infant classes in total) with more than 30 children. It is incumbent on schools to record the permitted categories of ‘excepted pupil’ where a class entirely lawfully exceeds the 30 limit.’

12. By Councillor Young of the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste

‘Pellet fuels are heating fuels made from compressed biomass; it is a renewable energy and can be much cheaper than fossil fuels. In some cases you can even replace existing fuels without changing technology, for example using biogas in an existing boiler. This type of fuel would significantly reduce CO2 emissions from around 5.3 tonnes to 0.8 tonnes a year and would also save the Council money on landfill tax.

Suffolk County Council’s Wood Fuel Programme now produces a total heat output of 3.2 megawatts saving around 420 tonnes of CO2 each year and has created around 40 jobs in the local biomass industry.

Would the Portfolio Holder explore the use of this in this County and consider implementing something similar?’

Reply

'I am very keen to explore new ideas for using biomass as a fuel that can help to reduce CO2 emissions, promote economic growth and potentially save money. Some initial investigations have already been undertaken on the potential for the promotion of bio-fuels in Essex, and how the public estate can be used to support this. Officers will continue to explore these opportunities, including learning from best practice examples elsewhere, and I am committed to taking these forward where there is a compelling business case to do so.

An example of work already underway in this area is Place Services, through the Countryside Stewardship agreement, starting on a 5-year proactive management of our woodland estate. A recent contract award to a local company for woodland management includes provision for fire wood (potentially seasoned) to be sold at our country parks as one of the products of the management process. At this stage it is the domestic 'wood fuel market' which is being focused upon – rather than commercial wood chip or pellet production – as the domestic wood fuel market offers a better return and the County Council has readily available outlets in the Country Parks.'

13. By Councillor Clempner of the Cabinet Member for Finance, Housing and Planning

'The Essex Records Office is the one part of the County Council that enjoys an international reputation for excellence. There is no prospect of the ERO supporting itself financially or of breaking even, so its prospective closure (about which one of the archivists spoke to me some time ago) will be inevitable.

Could the Portfolio Holder let us know who took the decision to reduce the opening hours of the Essex Record Office, what cuts have been made, and when exactly this decision was made?'

Reply

'The decision to change the opening hours of the Searchroom facility was made following careful review of usage patterns and to align with the resources we have available to provide the service. Primarily it reflects the fact that the number of daily users has halved over the last 15 years and that this number is forecast to fall further. In that time we have increasingly seen people accessing our records online and engaging with the archives via

other channels with a forecast growth of 50% more people engaging through events, outreach, education etc. in 2016/17 than in 2015/16. The Searchroom will continue to be open for an average of 25 hours a week for those who prefer to use this facility to access the archive.

As an operational matter this was an officer decision made in January 2017, and as Portfolio Holder I was briefed.

I do not share your pessimism about the future but do share the view that ERO has an international reputation. We will, therefore, continue to adapt to meet changing patterns of demand, and to find new ways of promoting our services and our excellent exhibitions/outreach activities.

During February, we are inviting users to complete a short survey to sense-check opinion about the changes, as well as an opportunity to collect other suggestions, background, demographic and interest-related data that will be useful to us in designing future services. The new hours will take effect on 4 April 2017. More information is available here:

<http://www.essexrecordoffice.co.uk/visit-us/opening-hours/>

14. By Councillor Harris of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

'Would the Portfolio Holder agree to look at a resurface of roads round the Old Alderman Blaxill School on Paxman Avenue in my Division to ensure the proposed new school starts off as a 'fit for purpose' facility?'

Reply

'I am happy to investigate and provide a written response. All our roads are objectively assessed through a scanner which measures the road condition and it is this criteria of road condition that we use to assess whether the scheme should be a priority for the capital programme.'

15. By Councillor Harris of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

'Would the Portfolio Holder advise me as to whether the potholes in my Division will be repaired?'

Reply

'I am pleased to inform the Member that we continue to invest significant resources in this area. We continue to be transparent in publishing the numbers of defects both on our main and local roads.

The Member may also refer to the Report It Tool to check the status of the potholes in their Division. If there is a specific location that the Member is concerned about I would welcome him raising it at my weekly surgery here in County Hall.'

16. By Councillor Henderson of the Cabinet Member for Finance, Housing and Planning

'Would the portfolio holder give me a breakdown of charges for residents living in the Rosebank Park independent living scheme in Harwich?'

Reply

'A breakdown of the charges can be found online at <http://www.seasonhomes.co.uk/property/rosebank-park-harwich-2/>.

It is helpful to note that housing benefit covers the full rental cost and all but £9 of the service charge.

We have received positive reports back from people moving into the scheme and there are now around thirty residents who have moved in since it opened in January.'

17. By Councillor Aspinell of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

'Regarding numerous e-mails and communications by other means that have been made to the Highways department regarding street lighting columns, pedestrian refuges and zebra crossing defaults over the last six months, there is a half mile stretch of the A128, a priority one route, that has twelve unlit lamp columns, keep left signs and a zebra crossing beacon and spot light which remain unrepaired.

Can I have your assurance that this will be attended too as a priority if not sooner?'

Reply

'I would like to thank the Member for bringing this matter to my attention and can provide assurances that these will be attended to by engineers.

I can also happily assure the Member that this section of the A128 is known about and the lights are scheduled for repair by the end of the financial year.'

18. By Councillor Aspinell of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

'Regarding School Crossing Patrols, we are having problems with recruiting people for this position across the County. Would it be prudent to revisit the amount of recompense paid to the operatives?'

Reply

'In recognition of the need to encourage more applicants for school crossing patrol positions, we have been working very closely with our recruitment partners to advertise these positions to a wider audience. Where previously we focused heavily on online advertisements, we are now advertising at community buildings, community groups, schools, job centres and Parish Councils. I'm delighted to report that we've already seen an increase in applications at the start of the year since adopting this approach.

We've also had several individuals come forward from within schools to volunteer to fill gaps in service delivery which has worked really successfully and is something we'd like to explore further.

I'm therefore pleased to report that we are making good progress in recruitment without the need to re-assess what I believe to be a fair package for School Crossing Patrol Officers.'

19. By Councillor Clempner of the Cabinet Member for Finance, Housing and Planning

'I welcome the funding that Essex County Council has received to tackle homelessness. As individual local authority bids were unsuccessful due to the Essex-wide funding, how will Essex County Council ensure that this funding is targeted to those areas with the most pressing need?'

Reply

‘Joined up working to improve homelessness prevention across Essex is something to be celebrated in helping to tackle an issue that does not respect boundaries.

Following the successful homelessness trailblazer bid, a bid led by the County Council in collaboration with all district councils, we are currently embarking on a thorough consultation exercise with district/borough/city colleagues, the Essex Housing Officers Group and other key stakeholders. Indeed consultation has already begun at the recent Essex-wide housing and health forum. Through this process, aimed at achieving unanimous consensus, local intelligence will help to ensure that the resources of the 10 specialist homelessness mentors are deployed where they can be most effective across the County.

Further meetings and dialogue is currently ongoing with partners and the funders – the Department of Communities and Local Government – in order that the final design of the project maximises resources and meets local needs.’

20. By Councillor Abbott of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

‘Where an ECC-owned roadside public footway is partly or wholly obstructed by vegetation growing from ECC highway land, is there a legal obligation on ECC itself to ensure that the obstruction is removed?’

Reply

‘When Essex County Council receives a complaint regarding a potential obstruction caused by overgrown vegetation, an assessment is carried out to ascertain whether there is in fact total obstruction requiring action. Where this is the case action will be taken to remove the obstruction and uphold the Council’s duty as Highway Authority.

If there is a specific location that Councillor Abbott is aware of then I would welcome him raising it at my weekly surgery in County Hall.’

21. By Councillor Abbott of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

‘What criteria are used in assessing the extent to which an ECC-owned roadside public footway is obstructed by vegetation such that action is required to remedy that obstruction? Would criteria include (a) wheelchair access? (b) access for parents with young children? (c) whether the obstruction is likely to force someone to walk in the road?’

Reply

‘Our highways inspectors take account of a variety of risk factors when assessing a site. These do include wheelchair and pushchair access, as well as the extent of the obstruction.

I would encourage Cllr Abbott to attend my highways surgery if he has a particular location in mind.’

22. By Councillor Lodge of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

‘Essex policy is to provide school transport only to the nearest school even if the student is not permitted to go there. When previously challenged, the reasons given for this were that Essex consulted and that the policy has now been made clear to parents. These excuses do not answer the fundamental question, which is how does the Cabinet Member justify refusing to provide school transport to the only school to which a student can go?’

Reply

‘Councillor Lodge is inaccurate in his representation of the policy position.

Parents are permitted, in law, to apply for a place at any state school through the admissions process. The Council’s policy is clear in that transport is provided to the nearest available school, subject to the statutory distance criteria being met and Councillor Lodge should be well aware of this. It is entirely reasonable that the provision of taxpayer-assisted transport is based upon having maximised the opportunity to secure a place at the nearest school.

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) has recently issued a Final Decision statement which can be considered in the above context. This Ombudsman investigation found no fault on the part of the Council. I will

send Councillor Lodge a copy of the statement by separate cover.

The Council complies with legislation and remains wholly committed to supporting parents and children who are entitled to publically-funded transport.

Accordingly, the premise of Councillor Lodge's question is fundamentally flawed. Perhaps, once he has reviewed the LGO's decision statement, Councillor Lodge will reflect again on his comments on this issue.'