

Responses to budget consultation questions

A 'Question Time' event was held on 29 January 2014, where the Council's Executive answered questions from an audience comprised of members of the citizens' panel and from the online audience viewing the live webcast. Responses were provided to many of the questions on the night and these can be seen in the webcast. However, it was not possible to address all of the questions submitted in the time available, so written responses to each of these questions are provided below. The questions are grouped under the Directorates with responsibility for the service areas that the questions relate to.

Children and Young People Directorate

What happened to the youth centre in Ellesmere Port? No one has been told what happened to it and there is nowhere to go. What we currently have is run down (no heating etc.)

Historically the youth service in Ellesmere Port was delivered through the hub which was based at Whitby Road; however this was demolished to make way for the new Academy. This meant a refocusing of how we delivered our youth service on a geographical basis, utilising alternative premises including voluntary, community and faith sector groups.

The targets set by the service continue to address the well-being aspects of a young person's life and relates to young people's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing; their protection from harm and neglect; their education, training and recreation; their contribution to society; and their social and economic well-being.

The Young People's Service has not closed any provision since transfer, and has indeed developed new provision based on local need by maximising resources. This has been maximised through support to the voluntary, community and faith groups.

We continue to consult with young people on an on-going basis who utilise our provision to ensure their views are central to how we deliver services to meet their needs.

If charges are introduced for transport, won't the choice of school be taken away from low income families?

The local authority will make such travel arrangements as it considers necessary to enable '**eligible children**' within the Cheshire West and Chester area to attend the **nearest 'qualifying school'**. Such travel arrangements will be free of charge.

An **eligible child** is:

- Of 'compulsory school age' (age 4-16).

And

- Attending the nearest '**qualifying school**' or a place other than that 'school' whereby arrangements have been made for their attendance due to exclusion, illness or otherwise pursuant to Section 19 (1) of the Education Act 1996 ('the school').

And

- There is no other suitable home to educational establishment transport arrangement already in place.

And

Fulfils **one** of the following criteria:

- 'The school' is beyond the statutory walking distances of two miles for children below the age of eight and three miles for those aged eight and over
- 'The school' is within the statutory walking distance but the child cannot reasonably be expected to walk there because of their special educational needs (SEN), disability or mobility problems
- 'The school' is within the statutory walking distance but having regard to the nature of the route the child could reasonably be expected to take, accompanied as necessary, the child cannot be expected to walk to it
- The child has been excluded and 'the school' they are obliged to attend is outside the statutory walking distance
- The child is from a 'low income family' and aged 8-11 and lives more than two miles from 'the school'
- The child is from a 'low income family' and aged between 11-16 and 'the school' is between two and six miles from the child's home (provided there are not three or more nearer suitable qualifying schools)
- The child is from a 'low income family' and aged between 11-16 and 'the school' and attending their nearest school preferred on the grounds of religion or belief, between two and fifteen miles from home.

Pupils from low income families have legal entitlements to ensure that they are given choice when choosing a school.

- i) Pupils from low income families *** aged between 8 and 11 (school years 4 to 6) have a legal entitlement to free transport to the nearest qualifying school* if it is more than two miles walking distance** from home.
- ii) Pupils from low income families *** aged between 11 and 16 (school years 7 to 11) have a legal entitlement to free transport to one of the three nearest qualifying schools* if it is between two and six miles away, or the nearest school preferred by reason of a parent/carers, religion or belief if it is more than two miles by the shortest available walking route** and not more than 15 miles away.

*Nearest qualifying school – defined as the nearest local school that is deemed by the Council as suitable to a particular child's age and needs.

**Walking distance – principally two miles for primary pupils and three miles for secondary pupils. The two mile distance is as measured by the nearest available

walking route, whereas the upper six and 15 mile distances are not walking routes and should be measured along road routes suitable for a vehicle.

***Families with low income – The Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires local authorities to adopt a criterion for assessing families that are on low income or 'disadvantaged': Charges may be waived if you are in receipt of either; Free School Meals or are on the highest rate of Working Tax Credit.

Do you foresee any opportunities for residential accommodation at schools for vulnerable children?

The Local Authority is working with Schools currently providing residential accommodation to scope the need for residential accommodation and how this can be funded.

Growth and Prosperity Directorate

Concessionary fares – if the council is paying less to bus companies for the service, how can you say this will not affect the customers?

A revised scheme has been agreed with the majority of operators over the next two years. Potentially, a reduction in an Operator's concessionary fares settlement could make a marginally commercial service unviable. However, to date there is no indication that any services are actually at risk.

There is no mention of the Northgate Development – what risks are attached for the council?

Northgate, as a project, has a risk register which is reviewed through the Governance arrangements currently in place, which include the Cross Party Member Working Group. As the Scheme progresses into the detailed design development phase, the risk register will be updated on a regular basis and reported to that Member Working Group for review and discussion. The key categories of risks identified will be analysed regularly and thoroughly will include financial, construction, programme, stakeholder, political and reputational risks. Maintenance of the risk register is one element of the wider project management that is being undertaken. This includes regular reports to Executive and Council.

How can you justify spending more than £8 million on the Lion Salt Works Museum when at the same time the council is cutting frontline services?

The £8m scheme is a long standing scheme that was inherited by Cheshire West and Chester Council from the previous pre-unitary local authorities. £5m of the total cost consists of external funding that was successfully bid for from Heritage Lottery. The scheme is now nearing completion and will deliver significant economic and tourism benefits to Northwich, as well as bringing derelict land into commercial use and making safe an area of contaminated land.

Regarding the new theatre, is the money in place to complete that and when is it going to open?

The projected cost of the new theatre, cinema and library for Chester is £37.05 million. The Council has committed £29.55 million as part of its capital programme. It is intended to secure the remaining £7.5 million from a number of other sources and this is reflected in the Council submitting funding bids to the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. It is intended that work will commence on site in early 2015 and that the new theatre will open in 2016.

Should the future redevelopment of the Forum include reconstruction of the historic market hall frontage?

There is a statutory requirement through the relevant Chester Markets Acts that a market must be provided in Chester. A new market will therefore form part of the Northgate development as the detail is developed over the coming months. Consultation with market traders, residential businesses and local elected members will take place over the next six months about the design and form of the new market as an integral part of the Northgate Scheme.

How much over budget is the Memorial Court in Northwich, and why?

The approved budget for the Northwich Memorial Court scheme is £15.1 million, which reflects the most up to date expenditure profile and funding requirements as agreed by Council in March 2014.

As is common with large infrastructure projects of this nature, while the design specification is being developed and the necessary preparatory works are being completed, the overall budget provision is reviewed to ensure that the scheme continues to deliver the desired outcomes. The budget for the scheme has therefore been reviewed at regular intervals

throughout its development and has been purposefully increased to £15.1 million. This has enabled the inclusion of a flume, a spa and a moveable floor, as well as enabling additional works required to address ground conditions, removal and de-silting of an underground culvert, plus additional asbestos removal in the Magistrates Court.

The Council has a large and complex capital programme of which the Northwich Memorial Court scheme forms a part. The Council manages resources flexibly across all schemes. The additional budget allocated to the Northwich Memorial Court has therefore been found from within existing resources and it has not therefore meant any additional cost in the context of the wider capital programme or for the council tax payer.

Localities Directorate

A lot of houses have individual names and not numbers, which can cause problems for people trying to locate properties. Are there any proposals for having numbers instead of, or as well as, names?

The Council have adopted the public health act 1925 for street naming and numbering purposes and our policy states that new addresses will be given a number wherever possible. House names can also be used for single properties in existing streets where there is no numbering system e.g. in rural areas or where there are no existing gaps in numbering. At present there is no proposal in place to allocate a number to all existing properties that only have names. Further information can be found on our website at the following address:

<http://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=13257>

Can the council continue to make provision in the winter months for clearing leaves? Why is the service being stopped when this was not agreed as part of the original contract?

During the winter months the amount of green waste being collected reduces significantly. The Council has therefore taken the decision to suspend the green waste collection service from November to February from 2015/16 onwards.

Where residents identify an ongoing need during these months, the Council will be working with them to identify local solutions that enable them to dispose of green waste. Rather than providing a universal service across the borough that is not required by many residents, arrangements will be tailored to demand, delivering better value for money.

How much is the library book fund (as it is being reduced by £50,000)? Why is it being targeted, when the savings are relatively small, but could have a big impact?

The book fund for 2014/15 is £468,650. The fund covers not only books, but also other items including multimedia (DVDs, audio books etc.) which generate income, online subscriptions, daily newspapers. There are two elements to the book fund; one for lending stock and the other for reference.

Rather than providing hard copy reference books in multiple locations, it is proposed to make use of online resources instead, achieving savings of £11,000. Savings in the lending book fund will be achieved by decreasing expenditure on some multimedia formats, for which demand is reducing. From March, e-books are being offered, and it is anticipated that the demand for adult lending books will continue to decline.

Will you be protecting free access to libraries and museums for children?

Access to libraries, including access to one hour per day on the internet, will continue to be free to all. Borrowing books and e-books will be free to all (although there are overdue charges).

When are you going to improve roads throughout the borough, especially rural areas?

Improving the condition of the local road network is a key priority for the Council. In addition to the funding provided by central government, the Council has invested an additional £4.5 million a year since 2011 to maintain and improve the network. This investment is enhancing the condition of the roads in the borough, and the Council has achieved national recognition for its effectiveness in dealing with potholes.

The very cold and wet weather experienced during the last few winters has had a significant impact on our roads and footways, with the surfaces on older roads being most affected. The impact of the investments made to date mean that, despite the weather, the total number of reported enquiries is generally falling. With the exception of the severe winter (2012/13), the number of reported potholes is also falling.

Can the council consider increasing the annual spend on roads? The current condition is sub-standard and likely to increase accidents and insurance claims.

As highlighted above, the Council has significantly increased expenditure on road maintenance and this investment is having a positive impact on the condition of the roads. Setting aside the impact of the severe winter during 2012/13, there have been reductions in both the number of reported potholes and the number of third party claims made when compared to 2009/10.

Does the winter maintenance proposal mean a reduction in gritting? Will the proposals result in additional costs as a result of potholes etc?

This review's primary function is to look at the operations that ensure we deliver our statutory responsibility to maintain roads, to keep them free from snow and ice (Railway and Transport Act 2003 section 111) and that the current level of service is undertaken as efficiently as possible. The review will consider the gritting operations cost in the first instance.

Who decides when to grit the roads and why do we see them gritting when there is no severe cold weather?

The deployment of the gritting operations is decided by the duty officer. Their decision is triggered by forecasting information which is provided by the MetOffice, which use local weather stations operated by the council, the Highways Agency and other adjoining councils. These weather stations predict the temperature and dew point locally. The predicted time, when there will be dew on the ground, combined with temperatures below freezing, is used to determine when the roads need to be treated.

The gritters need to be mobilised to allow them time to treat the road before it freezes. Account also needs to be taken of the time taken to drive the routes. Most often the lowest temperatures are in the early hours of the morning, particularly on clear nights.

Other factors to consider when making the decision is if rain is predicted, if this is the case then the deployment of gritters is held back, but still allowing time to complete the routes. When there is no rain or other weather factors, then gritting is carried out early, minimising the impact on the work force the following day. Gritters go out when the weather forecast predicts freezing weather with moisture expected on the ground. Although at the time the gritters go out it may be warm in the early hours, it can be freezing and the duty in the Railway and Transport Act 2003 section 111 still applies.

There are no school crossings or school signs near to Ellesmere Port Academy. Will there be public funding to help secure a schools crossing and safe travel to school?

Ellesmere Port Academy benefits from a light controlled crossing, and where this is the case a school crossing is not normally provided as well. There are also opportunities to make use of other methods to improve road safety such as road safety education within the school, along with some checks by police colleagues at the appropriate times.

I've noticed LED lights in the Newton ward but these stop at the Upton ward boundary. Do you know if Upton will get LED lights?

The council has run a number of LED trial schemes for street lighting. LED lamps are a good future option for streetlamp replacement; where replacements are needed, LED lamps are being considered. LED lamps are not yet a technology that can replace all streetlamps, as they still do not meet some of the lamps' legally required technical specifications. However, the council is considering a business case for the roll out of LED lamps where possible across the borough.

Can we have a Park and Ride off the M53 on the A56?

The recommendation to locate a Park and Ride off the M53 on the A56 is one of the proposals set out in the Chester Transport Strategy. The study was approved by Executive on the 19th February 2014. A Member working group will now look at the options for the delivery of the scheme.

If you're pushing for people to use public transport, why are the fares so high? Why are bus routes so sporadic with how they serve rural areas?

Commercial operators set their own fares. However, where bus services are supported by the Council, fares are required to be below those specified in a maximum fare scale, to ensure they are affordable. Local fares are normally set at levels that are lower than these maximums.

Compared to other areas around the country, bus fares in Cheshire are very reasonable, particularly if day or weekly tickets are purchased. For example, the Chester and Ellesmere Port area Stagecoach Day Rider currently costs £3.70 (Adult) and £2.00 (Child) for unlimited travel.

The frequency of local bus services reflects local need. For example, the 41 service between Chester and Whitchurch runs half hourly between Chester and Waverton, then hourly on to Tattenhall, then two hourly on to Malpas and Whitchurch. This pattern of frequency is based on population density and demand for the service as it progresses from an urban area, through the commuter hinterland into deeper rural areas with lower population.

Resources Directorate

What is the council's view on IT relating to the use of expensive Microsoft Office software for basic administrative use? It is well known that significant savings have been made elsewhere by changing to alternatives such as Linux which is free.

The council has historically purchased licenses for Microsoft (MS) Office through nationally negotiated agreements for local government at significantly below the retail price. At the time, MS Office was an industry standard for the provision of desktop IT services, and supported the recognised formats for exchange of information between public sector organisations. A large number of people continue to use MS Office for their personal use, which makes it easier for the council to employ staff with the necessary skills reducing the cost of training.

As advances in alternative solutions have become available, the council has reviewed the software it uses and the cost associated with this. Last year it took the decision to cancel its licensing support arrangements with Microsoft for ~4500 desktops and laptops. By effective management of its 'perpetual' licenses, it is able to continue supporting staff on a current Microsoft platform, while delivering a significant cost saving to the council. There is currently no cost to the council for using MS Office on its existing equipment.

When the need arises to upgrade or replace this current platform, the council will consider alternative approaches including the move towards cloud based solutions, and possible alternatives to a Microsoft based desktop. However, it is important to understand that the purchase cost of a license is only a small part of the Total Cost of Ownership of a desktop device over a lifetime of 3 – 7 years.

Other elements include:

- hardware costs and support
- cost of converting several thousand devices to new software
- testing the many applications used by council staff to ensure they work in the new environment
- training both users of the new software and the staff who will support them during the period of transition and beyond.

It is not effective to convert only part of the council's estate to a new solution, as this compromises the ability of staff to work in a flexible and mobile way, increases the cost of support, and increases the complexity of the overall architecture.

The council is constantly monitoring its expenditure on technology to ensure it gets the best overall value from investment, taking account of the cost of the technology itself, the ability to promote the productivity of staff, and the need to maintain information standards and security.

Why should we believe these savings are going to make a difference this time, when it hasn't before historically?

The Council has a strong track record of achieving savings, which have had a significant positive impact over the five years since it was created. As highlighted in the 'Meeting the Challenge' document, by the end of the current financial year (March 2014) the Council will have achieved ongoing savings of £113 million a year. This has enabled £44 million to be reinvested into priority service areas, while at the same time achieving net savings of £69 million for local tax payers. This saving is equivalent to approximately £629 on the council tax for an average band D dwelling. The savings have therefore made a significant difference for local taxpayers and also benefitted residents by enabling resources to be focused on key local priorities and protecting frontline services.

How can the Council provide opportunities for local businesses to be involved in Cheshire West and Chester contracts?

The Council aims to support local businesses and Small and Medium Enterprises as much as possible within the law. Local suppliers are encouraged to tender for our business wherever possible, either directly or indirectly as subcontractors to larger companies. However, as a public body spending public money, we must ensure not only that we receive value for money from our purchases, but that we are able to demonstrate this and allow open and fair competition. Our tender processes are required to be fair to everybody without favouring any supplier.

The Council supports the development of links to suppliers around our local supply chain and have recently hosted two Meet the Buyer sessions with Wates Construction. Sub-contractors across Cheshire were given the opportunity to tender to become part of a regional supply chain to work on the delivery of two new leisure centres in Cheshire. The two 'Meet the Buyer' events sought to identify suppliers and sub-contractors for the £15 million Ellesmere Port Sport and Leisure Village and £14 million Northwich Memorial Court.

The Economic Development service offers support to develop local businesses and deliver a series of tender workshops. They also provide free advice and assistance on compliance with statutory requirements relating to trading laws, advertising and economic development.

Other ways we assist businesses include:

- providing a 'Selling to the Council' guide on our website, including the publication of tendering opportunities
- placing our tendering opportunities on an e-tendering portal entitled "The Chest"
- development of 'Find it' – a free and easy to use online business portal to help local businesses "find" information, advice, events, business support and opportunities around the lower value procurement opportunities (<£10,000)
- keeping the costs of tendering to a minimum (for example by minimising paperwork)
- offering constructive debriefing to all those who compete for contracts in order to help them to do better in the future.

Strategic Commissioning Directorate

Will there be any funding / support for young carers? We know of young people who have previously had no support whilst caring for a loved one.

A young carer is a child or young person aged 18 or under who provides regular and ongoing care or support to a family member who is ill, disabled, has mental health needs or substance misuse problems.

Today, young people are facing more complex caring responsibilities with a higher proportion having a family member with mental health or substance misuse issues or a combination of both.

When the level of caring becomes excessive it can make the young carer vulnerable requiring help and support from specialist services.

The council has recently commissioned a Young Carers Service to improve the life chances of youngsters fulfilling a caring role. The new service has twice the level of funding over the former contract to reflect the more detailed evidence on levels of need. This service began in October 2013 and will run until March 2017.

We have appointed a provider with extensive expertise and knowledge in supporting young carers and their families. Appropriately qualified workers will tailor packages of support to young carers based on practical support advice, information and activities to help them in their caring role.

Links with other specialist services (e.g. schools/colleges, the Integrated Early Support Team, safeguarding, NHS services) are an important part of a multi- agency approach to referral, assessment of need and help and support.

What makes Chester an attractive place for older people to live / move to? Can we as a borough afford the extra people moving in?

The population of people aged 65 and over will increase in the Borough as it will nationally. The 2001 census showed almost 53,000 people in this group which had risen to over 61,000 in 2011. The rise is mainly due to increased life expectancy rather than inward migration.

The area is clearly attractive with many facilities blending with a variety of quality housing and an attractive environment. The community survey in 2011 showed that 87% of our older residents were satisfied with their home and area they live in.

It should not be assumed that all new arrivals have any immediate levels of dependency. There will be those with skills, expertise and energy to offer.

Is there provision for a growth in BME (black and minority ethnic) numbers in West Cheshire?

The minority ethnic population in the borough has grown between the last two censuses from 3.5% to 5.3% of the total population. In 2011, around 17,500 people from a total population of some 330,000 were from this group. The largest groups are Asian/Asian British (including Chinese) and white communities other than British and white Irish.

The Council considers the impact of all of its policies, procedures and services on all parts of the community, including minority ethnic groups. Where that impact is likely to be significant, this would include an equality analysis to identify and address any relevant issues.

We also support cultural events and projects through for example the Equality and Diversity fund and help with the costs of the Unity Centre, which acts as a co-ordinating body for the interests of minority groups.