

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 15 March 2018

**Question by Martin Whybrow to Roger Gough,
Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education**

What are the current average social worker case loads for specialist children's services and how and when will we achieve the Ofsted target case load of 18?

Answer

The average caseload for a social worker in the Children's Social Work Teams for February 2018 was 22.8, down from a peak of 23.7 in November 2017.

Ofsted do not set a target caseload figure. 18 is an internal, aspirational figure and represents a caseload at which social workers can do their very best work.

It is not possible to give a precise timeframe within which caseloads will reduce to this level because there are a number of significant uncertainties, notably regarding the pace at which the number of cases outstanding will be reduced and at which social workers will be recruited. However, we can be confident that the increase since last spring in assessments - and with that the overall number of cases - has peaked, numbers are already falling and will continue to do so, probably at an accelerating pace. At the same time, the £1.1 million budget increase committed for 2018-19 will allow for increased recruitment to social work teams.

Getting caseloads down is at the forefront of the Senior Management Team thinking and the following steps are being taken to assist with this and to extend the current reduction in caseloads:

- Specialist Children's Services (SCS) continues to recruit to vacant posts and, where appropriate, will fill social worker vacancies with experienced locum staff to alleviate caseloads across districts until a permanent appointment can be made.
- Since the Ofsted inspection in March 2017, work has been undertaken to reconfigure the Front Door so that only those referrals needing this level of intervention come to SCS and that should help to reduce caseloads longer-term. It is unlikely that the overall numbers of Children in Need will return to pre-Ofsted numbers and this has been reflected in the additional £1.1 m allocated to Specialist Children's services budget for 2018/19; however, the volume of assessments is expected to decline.
- The Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) that started with SCS in the second half of 2017 will be past their 6 months' probation by 1st April 2018 and managers will then be able to consider increasing their caseloads from the protected level they have as NQSWs. This will not reduce the average, but it will even out caseloads and reduce the burden on the more experienced staff. At the same time, new staff will be recruited and this will put downward pressure on the average caseloads.

In conclusion, we have every reason to expect further and significant reductions in caseloads and we have already made the investments necessary to achieve this.

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**Question by Ian Chittenden to Paul Carter,
Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Traded Services & Health Reform**

In November, the Secretary of State for Transport authorised a further one-year delay to the introduction of the long-awaited Thameslink rail service to Maidstone. He is now threatening to reduce the number of high-speed trains from Maidstone to London St Pancras or possibly replace them altogether with a stopping service to Abbey Wood. Does the Leader agree that the Department for Transport is failing to recognise that good rail links are vital for Maidstone's residents and businesses and what steps is he taking to ensure that the Secretary of State puts Kent's County Town back on the rail map?

Answer

I can assure Mr Chittenden that we have expressed our very strong concerns about the proposed change to the delivery of the Thameslink services in Kent. We have made clear that it is unacceptable that a "double-whammy" has been dealt to rail passengers in mid-Kent, with the new Maidstone East Thameslink service deferred by one year from December 2018 to December 2019 at the same time that the existing Thameslink service via Bat & Ball is being curtailed at Blackfriars for one year from May 2018 to May 2019. I wrote to the Minister with responsibility for rail on 14 December expressing Kent County Council's grave concern about the proposal to delay the introduction of Thameslink services to Maidstone until December 2019, and emphasised that this decision would blight businesses and residents throughout mid-Kent.

Mike Whiting and our officers have also made it clear, both to the Department for Transport and to the companies bidding for the new South Eastern franchise, that the proposed option to replace the High Speed service between Maidstone West and London St Pancras with a much slower service to Abbey Wood (where it could connect with the new Elizabeth Line service) is completely unacceptable. Such a proposal, which is considered in the options in the Train Service Requirement for the new franchise published by the Department for Transport, would result in a much slower and circuitous journey for Maidstone's rail passengers, and as such it should be rejected as an option for the new franchise.

Kent County Council will continue to work with the Department for Transport, and with the new franchise bidder when the award is announced later this year, to ensure that both rail routes serving Maidstone continue to provide the highest level of service, retaining High Speed from the West station and introducing Thameslink from the East station as soon as operationally possible.

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**Question by Rob Bird to Mike Whiting,
Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport & Waste**

Brexit is intended to take place in just over 12 months' time. On 1st March the Secretary of State for Transport assured Parliament that '... it is absolutely the intent of this Government to maintain a free-flowing border ...' at Dover and that the Government '... will have a solution in place for next March which keeps the M20 flowing in both directions and provides a solution if there is congestion at the ports...'

Will the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport provide the same assurances to the residents and businesses of Kent? In so doing, will he advise this Council what the technological solutions for maintaining a free-flowing border at Dover and free-flowing traffic through Kent will be, and what steps the Cabinet Member is taking to hold the Secretary of State to account?

Answer

I share your concerns Mr Bird. As you may know, Highways England has been tasked by Government to develop an interim solution to Operation Stack to be in place by March 2019 in time for Brexit. Highways England is developing a number of options that, while continuing to hold HGVs on the M20 in the event of delays at the ports, would also allow non-port traffic to continue to travel in both directions. Highways England is assessing different technologies ranging from steel barriers to moveable barrier systems, as well as the traffic management, including signing to get vehicles into the right lanes, that could be used to enable the safe separation of two-way flow from the queuing port traffic.

KCC is being consulted by Highways England on how these options could affect the local road network. I have already written to the Secretary of State insisting that the M20 must remain fully open for two-way traffic at all times enabling our residents and businesses to travel and there must be no impact on our local road network. I stressed to the Secretary of State that the County Council wants to avoid any repeat of the disruption in 2015 when Operation Stack was in place for 32 days at an estimated cost to the Kent economy of £1.45 million per day, and emphasised that maintaining traffic fluidity post-Brexit is a of paramount importance to Kent residents, businesses and the UK economy as a whole.

A final decision on which option to take forward will be made by Government early this year, with Highways England tasked to deliver by March 2019. The selected interim scheme could be announced alongside the public consultation on the options for a permanent solution to Operation Stack with a lorry park or parks, as the on-motorway scheme would only be temporary. KCC's response to this forthcoming consultation will be brought to the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee at the appropriate time.

Currently the short-term contingency plan for Operation Stack is to use Manston Airport to park HGVs during severe disruption. Manston can hold approximately 4,000 lorries and would be implemented if Operation Stack Stages 1 and 2 (M20 junctions 8 to 11 coast-bound) becomes full, thus preventing the need to use the London-bound carriageway as was the case in the summer of 2015. Port of Dover lorries would be routed along the A249, M2 and A299 to Manston and then released along the A256 to Dover.

Thankfully Operation Stack has not been called since the summer of 2015, so Manston has yet to be used. The introduction of the Dover TAP scheme which queues HGVs along the inside lane of the A20 between Dover and Folkestone when there are delays at the Port of Dover has also helped prevent the need for Stack on several occasions.

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**Question by Trudy Dean to Mike Whiting,
Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport & Waste**

We thank all those involved in helping with gritting and clearance in the recent snow emergency. We are aware many staff went well beyond their hours in extremely difficult conditions and thank them for it. However, with a view to possible improvements to the service, would the Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste provide an assessment of the recent snow emergency operation and in his answer, could he please say:

- A. *What proportion of secondary routes were treated with grit/salt?*
- B. *Were gritting lorries in use 24/7 and if not, what could be done to improve the period of operation to increase the network of roads treated?*
- C. *Why were salt bins not refilled during the emergency in order to maximise resident self help operations?*
- D. *What is the estimated cost of pothole repairs consequent upon the extreme conditions?*

Would he please also ensure that secondary routes and snow ploughing routes are available on the County Council website as well as principal routes?

Answer

I would like to echo Mrs Dean's thanks to our highways, emergency planning, wardens, adult social care, contact centre and many more staff who did a brilliant job during the snow emergency.

A. Regarding secondary routes in the county, in line with our agreed Winter Service Policy primary routes were the priority for gritting. Due to the severity of the weather during the week, including extensive snow drifts in different parts of the county, the gritter fleet was confined to keeping the primary routes clear therefore no secondary routes were run. However all of our 117 contracted farmers were deployed clearing snow in their area and all district councils, supplied with salt from KCC, assisted in clearing town centres and other designated areas in their district.

B. The winter service fleet consists of 57 gritter lorries with 3 spare lorries. All gritter lorries were fully utilised during the week. Primary routes were being cleared almost round the clock and on two nights the lorries were patrolling the network, i.e. driving the primary routes and ploughing snow and salting as necessary. Two sets of drivers were on 12 hour shifts to ensure that gritting could take place over a 24-hour period.

C. Salt bins are a valuable resource and much appreciated by the local communities and as Mrs Dean says, provides opportunity for self-help. There are over 2000 salt bins in place across the county and these were filled at the beginning of the winter season. During the week of 26 February enquiries were made to KCC for over 300 salt bins to be re filled.

A supply chain resource was found to do this work and refills were started during that week and continued into the following week.

D. The damage to the roads due to the winter weather is extensive and the recovery process has already started. Highways teams are fully engaged in assessing the damage and whilst the full cost is not yet exactly known it is expected to be around £4 million for the whole of the KCC highway network. Discussions on re-prioritisation of budgets are underway to address this damage.

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**Question by Antony Hook to Mike Whiting,
Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport & Waste**

Will the Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste please give an update on matters connected with the heavily congested Canterbury Road/London Road/Ospringe Street (the A2) in Faversham, in particular:

a) When does the Council expect Highways England to make changes to the Brenley Corner junction and what will those changes be,

b) At the junction with Ashford Road (A251) will the Council be creating traffic lights or a roundabout and when will this happen,

c) Will the Council support the delivery of an Ospringe by-pass from the Western Link roundabout to the M2 or A251 that was approved in 1986 but still waited for?

Answer

I will take each of your questions in turn:

Part (a)

As you will know we are continually pressing for improvements to Brenley Corner. Most recently, as part of our response to the Department for Transport's (DfT) consultation document 'Shaping the Future of England's Strategic Roads' KCC made the case for the enhancements needed to the Strategic Road Network in Kent, including Brenley Corner (M2 Junction 7). KCC's response was endorsed at the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee on 31 January 2018.

The DfT is analysing all responses received and in May 2018 will publish a summary of the responses together with an indication on how they will take them into account in the development of Road Investment Strategy 2. This is a statutory process, involving the DfT, Highways England and the Office of Road and Rail (ORR). DfT intends to announce the result of this process in 2019, and it is at this point that we will know if there is funding for improvements to Brenley Corner. If Brenley Corner is included in RIS2, Highways England will engage with interested parties, including KCC, on mobilisation and implementation, prior to the start of RIS2 on 1 April 2020. It is during this process that a scheme will be designed by Highways England, in consultation with KCC, and will then be taken through the public consultation and planning process. If a scheme is given the go-ahead, it would be delivered between 2020/21 and 2025/26.

Part (b)

We have been working with the Swale JTB on proposals for the A2/A251 junction. Kent County Council is pooling developer contributions from strategically allocated sites within Faversham to be used specifically for improvements to the A2/A251 junction. The receipt of those payments is directly linked to the occupations of those new homes to ensure that the delivery of a scheme is tied to the level of impacts made by the development. We are also exploring additional funding opportunities that would help deliver the scheme earlier.

We have previously undertaken initial traffic modelling and reported on potential schemes at the Swale JTB and members have debated the benefits, pitfalls and costs of both roundabouts and traffic signal solutions at this location. Before the item is reported again to the Swale JTB KCC has commissioned an update to the traffic modelling to further assist in determining the most appropriate scheme solution. This is especially important since additional development proposals have come forward since 2013 when the previously modelling was carried out.

We expect to report the scheme again to the JTB in July 2018.

Part (c)

Regarding an Ospringe by-pass there is currently no policy or funding available that would enable such a scheme to come forward. County officers are aware of representations made by the local community and are attempting to ensure that the current Perry Court development is designed in such a way that would not prejudice the future delivery of such a scheme. The viability of such a scheme would however be entirely reliant on further strategic housing allocations coming forward between Brogdale Road and the Western Link and we are currently unaware of any development interest in that area.

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**Question by Ida Linfield to Mike Whiting,
Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport & Waste**

Littlebourne Road (the A257) runs into Canterbury past the former Howe Barracks site, now home to the families rehoused by Redbridge. No developer contributions were available when the families moved in and so plans were not in place to accommodate a large increase in families crossing this road to the local primary school. The families have chosen to cross the road at the end of the path from the old barracks, exactly where the 40-mile limit changes to 30. Current criteria for a new crossing is based on crash data but I am certain no one in this council wants the death or serious injury of anyone therefore, can the Cabinet Member as a matter of urgency, explore options for an appropriate crossing at this point to ensure the safety of the children and their families?

Answer

I thank Mrs Linfield for her question and have asked the Schemes Project Manager for Canterbury to look into this further and to contact her directly in due course. I understand that she has already spoken with a number of officers relating to this issue and is to visit the local group to understand where a crossing would best be located for their needs. Once this has been established then further discussions as to whether a crossing is appropriate and how it can be funded would be required.