

Public questions to Council – 25 September 2015

Question from Mrs V Wegg-Prosser, Breinton

Question 1

Understanding Herefordshire and the awaited Local Transport Plan

The Council's Local Transport Plan expired in March 2015 and its most recent LTP Progress Report covers the years 2012/13. The Travel Choice surveys on travel to primary and secondary schools have been discontinued. However, the most recent edition of 'Understanding Herefordshire, July 2015' reports that only 1 in 4 people in the County own a car. It also states (according to the notes presented to Cabinet on 23/7/15) that Herefordshire needs to ensure a 'system-level perspective on health and transport planning'. Can the Cabinet member responsible for transport planning please confirm that this emphasis on a system level perspective on health and transport planning will inform the new Local Transport Plan and that the Council's Integrated Public Transport Unit has adopted this perspective so that health and transport outcomes are related?

Answer from Councillor P Price cabinet member infrastructure

The council's local transport plan has not expired; in July 2014 Council agreed its extension to enable the core strategy to complete its journey to adoption.

The links between health and transport are well understood and have already guided investment in cycling and walking infrastructure and Choose How You Move campaign to encourage healthy travel. The health and wellbeing strategy which has recently been adopted makes clear the links between transport and public health outcomes. These links will also be reflected in the refreshed local transport plan which is being prepared for consideration by the council in early 2016. The integrated public transport unit plans services in the light of the demand for trips to health and social care opportunities and is currently working on a government funded Total Transport fund project to examine further the opportunities to plan transport in greater partnership with the health sector.

Supplementary question

Could Councillor Price confirm that when the next review of the LTP is finally undertaken it will chart how healthy outcome improvements have actually been achieved by the Council's health and wellbeing strategy?

Answer by the Leader of the Council

I will ask Councillor Price to provide a written reply.

Written Answer

The local transport plan (LTP) has and will continue to support a balanced strategy which includes active travel proposals (to support walking and cycling) as well as increasing capacity for vehicular traffic where this is required to address current problems and/or support growth proposals. The council monitors the delivery of both its LTP and health and wellbeing strategy through its corporate performance monitoring and annual progress reports.

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Question from Ms C Protherough, Clehonger

Question 2

Retention of highest grade agricultural land.

In view of the on-going consideration of the future of Herefordshire Council's small holdings estate, due to be decided on 5th November, what measures are likely to be taken to ensure that the highest grade of agricultural land for food production is retained and that young people are encouraged into this important sector of the local economy?

Answer from Councillor P Price cabinet member infrastructure

It would be wrong to pre-judge the outcome of the review. The core strategy, once adopted, will be the key land use document for the council and will inform future land use in the county.

Supplementary question

Will Herefordshire Council be able to ensure the continued integrity of their smallholdings in proximity of the proposed SLR or is it intended to make short term financial gains by selling them off for development?

Answer by Leader of the Council

The council needs to ensure assets are used to the best effect for the majority of the population. No decision has yet been taken on the future of the council's smallholdings estate. The interests of current tenants will be taken into account and everyone will be informed of any decisions in the normal way.

Question from Ms K Sharp, Hereford

Question 3

School travel plans and traffic reduction

On its website under 'School travel plans and sustainability', Herefordshire Council states that, "We're working to cut the number of car journeys to school and improve safety. We want to cut congestion and pollution, as well as allowing more pupils to get regular exercise by walking or cycling to school."

When "school run" traffic makes up over 50% of peak time vehicle movements in the City of Hereford, and when there is an increase in childhood obesity, could the Cabinet member please explain what progress has been made on delivering these excellent aims in the last 4 years?

Answer from Councillor P Rone cabinet member transport and roads

Since 2011 the council has delivered over 8km of new cycling and walking routes in Hereford. Over £115,000 in grants has been awarded to 18 schools to install measures such as cycle shelters,

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scooter shelters and other improvements. All Herefordshire schools have a school travel plan and are encouraged to regularly review it.

Schools have been supported to promote walking buses, Walk to School week, and to provide scooter and cycle skills training to over 1,600 pupils annually. In addition, over 1,000 year 6 pupils across Herefordshire undertake level 2 Bikeability cycle training each year. The council also provides pedestrian training to almost 5,000 Herefordshire pupils each year.

A range of highway improvements have also been delivered at schools across the county to address issues such as speeding and visibility. This has included provision of traffic calming and 20mph zones in the vicinity of schools. A recent example has been the 20 mph zone introduced along Venns Lane in Hereford for the St Francis Xavier's primary school and the Royal National College for the Blind.

Whilst, these measures are supporting these aims, a research project is being carried out by the transportation teams over the next few months to quantify the benefits of these measures to inform the development of the next local transport plan. However, traffic congestion in the city remains a significant concern. This underlines the need to take forward the proposals outlined in the draft core strategy for a further package of sustainable transport improvements alongside new road infrastructure, in the form of both the southern link road and the Hereford relief road.

Supplementary Question

The council's own evidence shows that 85% of traffic is local to Hereford – through traffic is not the problem, school traffic is the problem.

Could Councillor Rone please explain why, in the absence of the benefits outlined in his answer ever being quantified does he seek to promote the SLR as a way of reducing term-time traffic.

Answer by Councillor P Rone cabinet member transport and roads

Parents can choose where they send their children to school. I will provide a written answer.

Written answer

The southern link road (SLR) is being promoted to enable economic growth within Hereford while tackling specific problems in the South Wye area. The scheme is crucial for the long term vision for growth in Herefordshire, is a key part of the infrastructure requirements set out in the council's core strategy and is consistent with the objectives of the council's local transport plan.

It is however, only one element of the overall south wye transport package and will be complemented by a range of active travel measures in the South Wye which will support walking, cycling and public transport.

Highways crossed by the SLR are proposed to remain open for use by pedestrians and cyclists, including Grafton Lane, along which runs National Cycle Network (NCN) Route 46, where an underpass will enable connection to be retained. Connections on the existing PROW network are also retained, with diversions put in place where necessary.

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Question from Mrs E Morawiecka, Breinton

Question 4

Housing land supply

Herefordshire Council reports in continuing planning applications across the County that it still has no 5 year housing land supply. The Assistant Director – Economic, Environment and Cultural Services reported to the Planning Inspector admitted in March 2015 that a number of planning approvals had been omitted from the calculation of the 5 year housing land supply. In the continued absence of the Annual Monitoring Report for the planning department would the Cabinet member please confirm exactly how many new homes have been granted approval by for development since March 2014?

Answer from Councillor P Price cabinet member infrastructure

Mrs Morawiecka is correct that until the local plan has been adopted the county does not have a five year housing land supply. However the provision of such a supply is addressed in the emerging local plan and the questioner will recall the debates that took place at the February 2015 hearings on this matter.

The point to which the questioner refers in March 2015 is the statement which the council prepared on this matter and at the request of the Inspector. That statement was then subject to its own technical consultation. The statement indicated that the 2014 position had not included those applications with a resolution to grant permission but where the S106 agreement had not been signed prior to April 2014. On this basis those decisions had not been issued.

The annual monitoring report for 2014/15 is scheduled for publication by the end of the calendar year as required. In relation to the specific question raised on numbers there have been permissions for 2068 “gross” dwellings permitted during that period. However, there will need to be a significant element of analysis undertaken to determine the “net” completions total. This includes ensuring there is no double counting (with applications superseding existing permissions, reserved matters on outline sites) and ensuring that planning proposals involving the loss of housing are also taken into account (e.g. any conversions and change of use out of housing or demolitions). This work is on-going. It will not directly affect the Inspector’s report.

Supplementary question

The Council is meeting its 5 year housing land supply. However, if officers are unable to update the 5 year housing land supply calculations until the end of 2015 by continuing to maintain it has no 5 year housing land supply the Planning Department is allowing developers a free for all on many greenfield sites across the County. Why is the Council not taking control of the allocation of new housing? Is it because it is generating large sums in planning fees?

Answer by Leader of the Council

I refute the assertion that we do not take control of housing. The implication made in relation to planning fees is untrue. The local plan contains the detail on housing supply. I will supply a written answer.

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Written answer by Councillor Price

There is no direct relationship between the calculation of the five year land supply and the fees that are generated by the submission of planning applications for new dwellings.

The position on the calculation of the five year housing supply was fully rehearsed at the local plan hearings in February 2015. The position is comprehensively and definitively set out in paragraphs 46 to 51 of the inspector's report. Paragraph 51 in particular sets out that the now current five year supply is 'marginal but realistic' and highlights the need for ongoing monitoring against the agreed trajectory.

There has never been a 'free for all' on housing planning permissions in the county as suggested by the question. A wide range of environmental matters as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework have been assessed in the round both by the council and inspectors on appeal. Plainly however the adoption of the local plan puts the council in a far stronger place to resist inappropriate or unsustainable residential development.

Question from Mr D King, Tillington

Question 5

Government funding reductions

The Leader of the Council said, as recorded by the Council Minutes of 17 July 2015, that there were "financial pressures including an expected reduction in Government Grant, which was currently £35m pa to zero by 2020." As a consequence the Council is preparing service cuts which will impact on the residents of Herefordshire. What is the evidence that Government Grant will be reduced from £35m pa to zero by 2020?

Answer from Councillor A Johnson cabinet member corporate strategy and finance

The anticipated reductions in government funding to local authorities have been well documented. The summer budget confirmed local authorities can expect similar funding cuts in this parliament as experienced in the previous parliamentary term. Central government is planning to reduce its departmental expenditure by £20bn by 2010 whilst protecting the funding of health, defence and aid, and giving cash protection for education. This can only mean there is less funding remaining to other departments and will result in higher funding reductions to local authorities.

Bearing all this information in mind, and as any prudent organisation would do in light of that information, we are planning for a range of scenarios including a reduction in revenue support grant to zero by 2019/20. The position will become clearer following the comprehensive spending review in late November, but we cannot wait until then to consult on the options open to us.

Supplementary question

If the Local Government Association figures were applied to Herefordshire, the £35m per year central government grant would not reduce to zero, it would still be £28m by 2019/20 and I can provide evidence for that.

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So, will the Leader as Cabinet Member Corporate Strategy and Finance please investigate the assumptions which he has been given, replace them with the latest LGA forecasts and issue a public statement correcting this error because it impacts directly and adversely on the services which are provided to the residents of Herefordshire?

Answer by Leader of the Council

I accept that it is unlikely that our central grant will reduce to zero. The government's announced intentions are to ring-fence health, education, defence and foreign aid, but it will not raise VAT, income tax and National Insurance. It has also said that it will reduce the deficit to zero by 2020. Local authorities will be seen as a prime source of savings. I expect existing specific grants will be merged into the block grant and the block grant will be reduced. Total income will therefore reduce by 2020.

Question from Mr J Harrington, Herefordshire

Question 6

Alternatives to road building

In light of the documented offer made by the Highways Agency, to carry out a micro-simulation at no cost to Herefordshire Council (estimated at £30k), to assess whether or not traffic light removal from the Asda/Belmont junction (previously a roundabout) and other Highways Agency controlled junctions would reduce congestion by making maximum use of the existing road capacity (as it has in other UK towns and Cities), can the Cabinet and in particular, Cllr Phillip Price, tell me why in times of austerity this free offer was not accepted or progressed further, in line with DfT guidelines requesting authorities explore all sustainable alternatives to road building first?

Answer from Councillor P Price cabinet member infrastructure

The council has not turned down any offer of such work made by Highways England. Indeed we have worked closely with Highways England (formerly the Highways Agency) to develop a robust transport strategy for Hereford. Whilst the studies that Highways England choose to carry out is a matter for that organisation to determine, I am aware that they have assessed the impact of removing the traffic lights at the Asda/Belmont junction and concluded that such a change would not resolve the traffic problems.

Question from Mr R Palgrave, How Caple

Question 7

Southern link road

Council has failed to show that SLR provides best value for money compared to alternative measures for tackling road congestion in South Wye; and their consultant on this development, Parsons Brinkerhoff, has admitted that they wrongly claimed that SLR was necessary for the delivery of the Enterprise Zone.

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Given that Council is looking to make significant budget cuts and is currently paying over £16million in capital repayments and interest on loans, what justification is there to spend a further £600,000 of taxpayer's money with Parsons Brinkerhoff to try to make a case for the SLR?

Answer from Councillor P Price cabinet member infrastructure

The assertions made by the questioner are incorrect. The business case for the South Wye transport package (which includes the southern link road) clearly demonstrated that the proposals represent value for money; this has been recognised by the government in awarding £27m from the Growth Fund. In preparing the business case a range of alternative options were considered and it was concluded that the best way to achieve the package objectives of enabling full development of the Hereford Enterprise Zone, reducing congestion and delay, reducing traffic noise and accidents in the South Wye area as well as encouraging physical activity was by providing the southern link road alongside a range of active travel measures.