

Members' questions at Council – 5 March 2016

Question from Councillor S Bowen

Smallholdings

Question 1

Can the cabinet member confirm?

- a) that he agrees that one of the recommendations of the general overview and scrutiny committee concerning the county smallholding estate was that every tenant was to be given the opportunity to buy their own smallholding, and if so, why has no tenant, so far, been given this opportunity?
- b) that all tenants be given the opportunity to buy their own smallholdings, and if not, why not?

Answer from Councillor H Bramer cabinet member contracts and assets

Answer to question 1

As the chairman of general overview and scrutiny, Councillor Bowen will recall that the specific recommendation made, and accepted, was: "That the council should, on a case by case basis, provide existing tenants with the opportunity to purchase their own holdings conditional upon the assessed impact upon the remainder of the identified estate for sale or retention and ensuring best value is achieved." It will be noted that this did not suggest that every tenant would have the opportunity to buy their own smallholding as there may be circumstances, such as land or buildings having development potential, when this would not achieve best value in line with the committee's recommendation.

Councillor Bowen will also recall that, in taking the decision to undertake a structured sale of the entire smallholdings estate, cabinet acknowledged the need to develop an overarching disposals plan and to ensure support was available to existing tenants. Tenants are being consulted on their support needs and work is underway to develop a disposals plan to inform a report to the executive; while this work is underway it would be inappropriate to progress sale opportunities with individual tenants.

Supplementary Question

I am fully aware of what was said at General Overview and Scrutiny but I was asked by some interested parties to specifically raise this question and I also ask if all tenants can receive regular updates on their ongoing situations regarding the sale of County Farms.

Answer from Councillor H Bramer, cabinet member contracts and assets

The disposal policy for council small holdings has yet to be finalised but tenants will be written to on a regular basis updating them on developments.

Members' questions at Council – 5 March 2016

Question from Councillor S Bowen

Hereford tramway

Question 2

Has full and proper consideration been given to the possible implementation and very large potential benefits of a Hereford light tramway system and if not, why not?

Answer from Councillor P Price, cabinet member infrastructure

Answer to question 2

Detailed studies have previously been carried out to assess the costs and benefits of the introduction of such a scheme in Hereford. Taking into account the constraints you would expect to be associated with delivering such a scheme in a historic city centre, the studies concluded that investment would represent poor value for money when compared to other investment in transport for the city. Although these studies were undertaken some years ago, nothing has happened in the intervening time to suggest a new study would produce a different result.

Supplementary Question

Can I ask that possibilities for radical transport solutions are considered?

Answer from Councillor P Price, cabinet member infrastructure

Radical transport solutions are considered in a proactive fashion however, tramways have been looked at but it is considered that they would not be a sustainable solution.

Question from Councillor K Guthrie

Investment in Herefordshire roads

Question 3

Would you please explain how such a low spend will safeguard the highways infrastructure when the recent injection of capital only improved a small fraction of the network, and those roads not improved will now have less money spent on them than they did before?

Answer from Councillor P Rone, cabinet member transport and roads

As a consequence of government recognition of the best practice approach adopted in Herefordshire we have secured 100% of the available funding for the county. That said, the level of investment in the coming year (£1.6m) is indeed considerably less than the £20m invested over the past two years. That investment really made a difference by improving 566 km of the road network

Members' questions at Council – 5 March 2016

It was recognised at the time the investment was agreed that this would not address the full scale of the backlog maintenance; to do this continued sustained investment in the highways network is needed. Given investment needs to 2020 are estimated as being in excess of £100m this is clearly not achievable through revenue budgets; capital funding opportunities will continue to be explored nationally and locally.

Following the usual prioritisation process a decision on the annual maintenance plan is scheduled for the beginning of April.

Supplementary Question

My concern isn't the comparison with the last two years, when exceptional amounts of money were spent on highways maintenance, but the comparison with normal spends since the creation of Herefordshire Council. The planned spend next year is significantly less than it has been historically. As I'm sure Cllr. Rone is aware resurfacing works not undertaken at the appropriate time will result in greater degradation of the highways network which will eventually cost even more to put right – well timed intervention is money well spent. Can he please tell me where this additional money will come from in future?

Answer from Councillor P Rone, cabinet member transport and roads

Money is allocated from central funds for resurfacing of the county roads. It will cost £80million to bring the road network in the county up to the required standard however funds from central government is insufficient and therefore resources need to be identified.

Question from Councillor R Matthews

Question 4

Merton Meadow flood alleviation

The Yazor Brook flood alleviation scheme was completed in March 2012 at an approximate cost of £5M, and diverts flood flows from the Yazor Brook at Credenhill into the River Wye.

We were assured at the time, by the leader of the council and local MP that the scheme would solve all of the flooding problems within the city so as to allow the Edgar Street Grid development to go ahead. We are now told in a written response from the council that in the area of the Merton Meadow raised ground levels will be required, at considerable cost, before any further development can take place, and for the new premises to remain flood - free. High water tables along the route of the new link road are also causing huge problems resulting in water frequently rising above the road surface. I imagine that it will cost many millions of pounds to rectify these very serious defects, so can members be informed of what you estimate the overall cost to the taxpayer will be, and in particular how much extra will the link road cost to develop?

Members' questions at Council – 5 March 2016

Answer from Councillor P Price, cabinet member infrastructure

Answer to question 4

There is nothing new or unforeseen on this site.

As Councillor Matthews is well aware, the Yazor Brook flood alleviation scheme (FAS) was designed as the first stage of a flood management scheme to enable development of the ESG area. By diverting a significant volume of flood water upstream of the site the FAS reduces the flooding at the ESG site and helps to minimise the impacts of the development. The second stage of the ESG drainage strategy was for further flood mitigation measures in the ESG area and potential flood mitigation measures for the full development were assessed as part of the link road flood risk assessment.

The known high groundwater table has been considered in the flood risk assessments completed to date and will continue to be considered in the assessments as future developments come forward and any necessary mitigation will be a requirement of any planning consent given and undertaken as part of those developments. They do not impact on the delivery of the link road or its costs.

Supplementary Question

Seek assurances that all problems listed would not cost the tax payers in the future.

Answer from Councillor P Price, cabinet member infrastructure

Issues would have to be addressed in any proposed development as they arise.

Question from Councillor C Chappell

Question 5

European Union referendum

In light of the government's confirmation that the EU referendum will be held on 23 June, can the leader say:

- a) If he has sought the views of officers, community leaders, Chamber of Commerce, the new university and others, on the effect on Herefordshire should there be a 'no' vote in the referendum in June?
- b) What he believes will be the effect of a 'no' vote on the economy of the county, the many county twinning associations, agriculture and plans for Rotherwas?
- c) What is the total financial value that comes, directly and indirectly, to the council from the European Community, and will he be making

Members' questions at Council – 5 March 2016

contingency plans if the advice is that there will be a negative effect for the council and county if there is a 'no' vote?

Answer from Councillor A Johnson, cabinet member corporate strategy and finance

Answer to question 5

- a) I have not.
- b) It is not possible to speculate on the basis of available information, and it is not the role of the council to seek to influence the outcome of the referendum by giving a view.
- c) It is not possible to give a total financial value given the range of funding streams and mechanisms for distribution of funding. The notional allocations for Herefordshire in the period 2014-2020 are in the region of £64m (covering ERDF, ESF, LEADER, and agri-environmental funding streams); however additional funding is also available to farmers and this information is not held by the council. As with all our development proposals we regularly review funding opportunities, and developments are prioritised accordingly to ensure available resources are invested in the best interests of the county

No Supplementary Question

Question from Councillor S Bowen

Housing land supply

Question 6

Can the cabinet member confirm:

- a) If he will write a strong letter to the Government, and in particular, to Greg Clerk MP regarding the malign effect of the current rules on the Council having a five year land supply?
- b) If the council is aware of the distortions this rule is making to planning inspectors' decisions and to the possible very detrimental effects that the five year land supply rules may have on neighbourhood plans?
- c) If he agrees that a reduction to a three year land supply would be better; and even better that the land supply rules be abolished altogether?

Answer from Councillor P Price cabinet member infrastructure

Answer to question 6

Members' questions at Council – 5 March 2016

- a) I will indeed be lobbying to secure a more balanced approach which follows the principles of devolution in passing greater control of local issues to local government.
- b) The council is aware of the impact of not having a five year land supply, therefore it is increasingly important that parishes continue to make good progress with their neighbourhood plans, identifying and allocating local housing sites which contribute to the overall housing targets within the core strategy. This will help support the council's evidence base in demonstrating a five year land supply and will reduce the potential for future appeal decisions to succeed on the basis of the council's failure to demonstrate a five year land supply. How the issue is addressed would be a matter for the minister but both suggestions would address the point.
- c) Shorter term (or zero) targets don't assist strategic planning; the issue appears to be one of interpretation at planning inquiries rather than of principle.

Supplementary Question

Is the Cabinet Member aware that the latest decision by a Planning Inspector - on the basis that we had a 5 year land supply, but only just and therefore allowed the appeal this could put in jeopardy all the neighbourhood plans so laboriously and lengthily worked on. Can we have further reassurance that neighbourhood plans will be effective and worth all the effort put into them and thus reassurance provided directly to all parishes undertaking a neighbourhood plan as many are becoming disillusioned with these plans. We need to assure parishes that neighbourhood plans are effective with an explanation as to how they might be effective.

Answer from Councillor P Price cabinet member infrastructure

The issue of neighbourhood plans are subject to reaching Regulation 16 stage. They will then carry some weight in relation to planning applications. Planning appeals will have to consider any related neighbourhood plans in place.

We will ensure that the message regarding neighbourhood plans is conveyed to all members.

Question from Councillor S Bowen

Members' questions at Council – 5 March 2016

Car parking charges

Question 7

Taking account of the prolific photographic evidence of near empty carparks in Hereford and Leominster:

- a) do you not think that the heavy and rigid increases in car parking charges might be having a detrimental effect upon trade and that many private houses are being incommoded by cars and their drivers trying to avoid the swingeing increases in parking costs?
- b) may I suggest that an urgent review of usage and receipts be undertaken, in the interests of fairness and economic benefit to the whole community?

Answer from Councillor P Rone cabinet member transport and roads

Answer to question 7

The new car park tariffs have only been in operation for just over one month, and that being February, rarely the busiest month of the year; it is far too early to properly assess any effects of the changes. There no evidence of any significant increase in the number of complaints from residents about inappropriate parking.

The use and revenues from car parks is regularly monitored by the service.

Supplementary Question

On behalf of Councillor Kenyon I would like to suggest that 10% of income gained from car parking charges in the county be put towards the upkeep of the county road.

Answer from Councillor P Rone cabinet member transport and roads

All car parking revenue goes into a central fund which was in turn allocated according to priorities.

Question from Councillor S Bowen

Highway maintenance

Question 8

Considering the parlous state of our county roads, in particular our B,C and U roads (which have all suffered heavily from the very wet winter and in places are more third world than first world) do you agree:

- a) that it would be sensible to use a portion of the £4.4 million recently given to the council to address some of the more egregious problems on our roads?

Members' questions at Council – 5 March 2016

- b) that some money spent wisely now will save us much more later on; on the principle of a stitch in time saves nine?

Answer from Councillor P Rone cabinet member transport and roads

Answer to question 8

I would refer Councillor Bowen to the answer given to question 3 above.

Given the broader risks in the medium term financial strategy it would not be sensible at this time to spend reserves.

Supplementary Question

Do you agree that it will cost a lot more in the future if we do not take action now? And if you do agree, can you please think again about using some of the £4.4million one off grant that now lies in our reserves to improve our battered and bumpy roads.

Answer from Councillor P Rone cabinet member transport and roads

The 4.4million is better kept in reserves and I would refer the member to the answer given to question 3 of member's questions.