

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 25 July 2019

Question 1

Mr S Booth, Hereford

To: cabinet member, housing, regulatory services and community safety

In reply to my question at last week's Council meeting, I was referred to the Housing Strategy 2016-2020 and its scheduled renewal in the coming year. This document, unfortunately, is next to useless, as it lists the Council's 'responsibilities' for which they have no 'authority' to carry out their plan - having no housing stock as leverage. This is impacting on Homeless Prevention, who face a diminishing and very costly 'temporary housing' problem.

In view of the promotional funding programmes which are available, referred to in my previous question, should the Council, as a matter of urgency, review its position and have an imaginative strategy in place, with all its partners, to build and manage its own housing stock - which would ignite local interest to provide homes of the right type and in the right place?

Response

The council's Interim Housing Strategy 2016-2020 seeks to address a wide range of issues beyond the problem of Homeless Prevention, which is a nationwide challenge. The council has a separate Homelessness Prevention Strategy that sets out detailed actions to prevent and address homelessness in the county working jointly with a range of statutory and voluntary sector partners. This strategy is also due for review in the coming year.

As I mentioned in my response to your earlier question to Council, we will indeed ensure that the review of both the Housing and Homelessness Prevention strategies will look at how best to make use of the opportunities that exist to increase the delivery of new affordable homes in Herefordshire and the role of the council in doing so. We will look at all options to encourage the building of quality homes that meet the needs of our communities, and welcome any suggestions from the community about ways in which we can achieve this.

Question 2

Mrs E Morawiecka, Breinton

To: cabinet member, finance and corporate services

The Internal Auditors special investigation on the Blueschool House overspend, recommended that detailed budgets for large capital projects were to be prepared and regularly reviewed, and actual spend tracked and monitored closely to these budgets. Despite millions of pounds of taxpayers money spent, at the last Audit & Governance meeting it was reported that no major road projects were on the new capital monitoring system, nearly a year after these recommendations were made. In view of the large sums of public money that have been spent on such projects, would the Cabinet member responsible, confirm that instead of using out of date, outline budgets that the capital transport schemes are now being controlled and monitored in accordance with the internal audit recommendations?

Response

Yes. I can confirm that following a phased approach to moving projects from the corporate programme into a new project management system that began in October 2018, the major infrastructure projects of the council are now all established within the new system. This provides a level of detail for the monitoring of planned and actual expenditure against budgets

agreed by Cabinet that is sufficient to address the recommendations from the Blueschool House Refurbishment Special Investigation. Financial information within the new system means that Project Managers can ensure that Project Sponsors are fully aware of the financial requirements of projects and can take ownership of the project budget.

I should clarify that prior to the introduction of the new project management system, it was not the case that capital schemes were not being controlled and monitored or that out of date outline budgets were being used; rather there were inconsistent approaches to doing so.

It is part of the natural process of project development that projected costs will evolve during the feasibility and planning stages. A strong project management approach, such as that now being used by the council, ensures that if expected costs rise beyond the approved budget, a decision will be taken on whether the project should be terminated or whether additional money is allocated to the project. Regular capital programme budget reporting is included as part of the council's quarterly performance report.

Question 3

Ms J Tonge, Hereford

To: leader of the council

The corporate delivery plan makes no mention of the Climate Emergency that has been agreed by the council this spring.

Will the Climate Emergency declared by Herefordshire Council just be fine words, or will it form the basis for future decisions and actions and become part of the corporate delivery plan?

Response

Thank you for raising this important issue.

I can confirm that the declaration made by Council in March will not just be fine words. A declaration of itself, while an important statement, achieves little – it is our actions that will count. The council has already taken action to reduce its carbon footprint and improve flood management. However, this administration wishes to give a stronger focus to addressing the climate emergency. Following the resolution passed by Council in March, we have already provided a briefing to all councillors on carbon management, in preparation for a members' full day event in the autumn. The council also has a web page titled 'Climate' with more information about achievements to date and plans for further action, which will be kept updated as our plans develop.

The resolution passed by Council in March, after the current year's delivery plan was approved, made a number of specific recommendations and Cabinet will be considering how to take those forward at its meeting in September. As you will see from the Cabinet agenda today, we are beginning the process of reviewing the council's Corporate Plan, and will soon be seeking views on our future priorities, and how best to meet them. I very much hope that residents, businesses, and partners will help us to shape this vital plan, so that we can all play our part in responding to the climate emergency.

Question 4

Mr R Palgrave, How Caple

To: cabinet member, commissioning, procurement and assets

The documents submitted as part of the now approved planning application for the student accommodation in Station Approach Hereford (P183841/CD4) included an Energy Strategy written by consultants Ridge for Cityheart Partnerships. The strategy sets out possible options for space and water heating and for renewable energy in the building. To support the aspiration that Herefordshire should be zero carbon by 2030, will the Cabinet member consider making it a requirement that this building is designed and constructed to the highest BREEAM standard, i.e. "Outstanding", that no fossil fuels (e.g. natural gas) will be used for space and water heating, and that on-site electricity consumption will be supplied by solar PV panels on the building to the greatest extent possible?

Response

Thank you for raising this incredibly important issue.

The Energy Strategy Report submitted as part of the planning application for the student accommodation in Station Approach is, in part, a development specific assessment of the available renewable and sustainable technologies. The report also provided information on how we could achieve BREEAM Good/very good, which is the clients brief and normal for this type of accommodation.

A requirement for BREEAM "Outstanding" would be extremely challenging at this location due to financial and site constraints including (but not limited to):

- the very specific planning requirements for the pitched roofscape, (resulting in an orientation and a significant reduction in roof area on which to locate PV panels efficiently);
- lack of space for air source heat pumps on the site or roof to be economically viable; and
- the presence of a Welsh Water major infrastructure foul water sewer pipe located under the entire length of the site parallel to the Link Road, making ground source heat pumps prohibitive.

The Energy Strategy Report considers and assesses the suitability of all available technologies for the building and the specifics of the development before concluding which are the most appropriate ones to proceed with. These detailed findings are provided in the report and have been accepted by the Planning and Regulatory Committee in their assessment of the planning application.

There are significant financial implications associated with achieving "Outstanding", which only 1% of buildings achieve. In addition to the need to demonstrate value for money the resulting accommodation must be affordable for the students so a balance has to be struck so that with our partners we are able to deliver a viable development which is as energy efficient as possible on that site.

We are aiming to achieve BREEAM Very Good (rather than Good), which is itself a high standard. During the detailed design stage we are continuing to test whether we can achieve some benefit from photo-voltaics in order to reduce reliance on the grid.

You can be assured that any future projects such as this will have, at the forefront of any decision, the climate emergency resolution that was passed in March.

Question 5

Mr E Morfett, Hereford

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

Under the last administration employees of Balfour Beatty and WSP have spoken at various council meetings on the merits of designing large road schemes. They recommended expensive research and design work costing the local taxpayer millions of pounds, without ever declaring their conflict of interests in these matters.

Contracts for this work were awarded to Balfour Beatty and WSP without independent reviews and without competitive tenders.

Will this approach be continued under the new administration or can the public expect independent, non-prejudicial advice to be given to councillors on resolving transport issues in Hereford and across the wider county?

Response

Professional services associated with the design and development of major projects are commissioned and procured through the council's public realm contract and the council does not believe there is a conflict of interest as you suggest. BBLP provides professional design resource, within the terms and framework of our existing contract, to deliver these projects and provide a fee proposal for each design commission, which is scrutinised and challenged as part of the annual plan commissioning process. Annual fee proposals are reviewed and monitored prior to work commencing and are subjected to robust change control mechanisms.

This public realm contract was awarded to BBLP following a competitive OJEU procurement process in 2012/2013 and design professional services are within the scope of this contract. Going forward the new administration may consider all procurement options, so that value for money is ensured and we continue to get the best possible advice.

Question 6

Dr N Geeson, Hereford

To: cabinet member, finance and corporate services

The Corporate Plan Performance Metrics are to "Enable residents to live safe, healthy and independent lives; to Keep children and young people safe and give them a great start in life; to Support the growth of our economy; and to Secure better services, quality of life and value for money". Opportunities should be fully inclusive for young and old, so why is there focus on condition of roads but no mention of the vital roles of good public transport networks, cycling and walking; especially since these will improve fitness and health, and by reducing use of individual vehicles, help to address the Climate Emergency? Remember that in Hereford cycling can actually reduce journey times too!

Response

The corporate performance metrics associated with our four corporate plan priorities do not try to capture the entirety of our performance data.

There is a focus on the condition of roads because our residents have consistently told us that the condition of our roads as a key area for improvement. Additionally, highway condition is seen as a barrier to delivering good public transport networks, cycling and walking.

We hold extensive metrics for public transport patronage, cycling and walking, in addition to extensive data about the condition and usage and safety of our roads, bridges, footways and cycleways across Herefordshire, all of which informs how we plan and implement actions to deliver the corporate plan priorities.

Question 7

Mrs J Richards, Hereford

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

Many of the city, town and country roads are precarious, posing a risk to all road users. Will this new administration be seeking to continue the policy of the previous Council to divert millions of pounds from the Local Transport Plan maintenance budget and special pothole grants for paying professional advisors millions of pounds to develop new roads schemes instead?

Response

Between the implementation of a new asset management strategy in 2013 and 2018, and with additional investment of £20m during 2014 to 2016 the overall condition of our A, B and C roads has improved. While there is still work to do I cannot agree that many of the city, town and country roads are precarious and pose a risk to all road users.

It is not the council's policy to regularly divert funding from the maintenance of our road network; however the council reserves its right to invest funding that it receives through the Local Transport Plan integrated transport block allocation and maintenance block allocations, (and all other such funds, pothole fund and the like) in accordance with the conditions of the grant award, and in a way that will best secure the objectives that the council holds for Herefordshire.

The funding of these major transport projects has come from both external funding sources and council capital budgets which includes the annual LTP grant. Funding sources are set out in each project decision report during the delivery of these transport projects; if there are implications for service delivery associated with the use of LTP budgets this will also be set out.

As you may be aware I am due to take a decision this month in relation to the Hereford Transport and South Wye Transport package projects and the options as to whether to continue with progression of the schemes, pause and review the schemes or cancel them. The funding of any work following this decision will be set out clearly in any further decision reports.

Question 8

Mr T Geeson, Hereford

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

One of the Council's current performance metrics in Agenda Item 7 Appendix 5 is 'to improve average journey times in Hereford in the morning week-day period

In 2017 I asked the then Cabinet member if there has been recent and comprehensive traffic surveys before the opening of the City Link Road and would these repeated once the new road

was opened and would the results be published so we could all assess its impact. Were these surveys completed by the previous administration and if so, what do the results show?

Response

A range of surveys have been completed on the network surrounding the City Link Road following its opening at the end of 2017. The results of these surveys are currently being collated and analysed and will be reported in the autumn.

Question 9

Mrs V Wegg-Prosser, Breinton

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

Noting that Cabinet is responsible for developing and proposing a balanced budget to Council, and that Hereford's flagship endeavour, NMiTE, will welcome its first students this September, could the new Administration please ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to the completion of the Transport Hub at Hereford Railway Station so that the station's 'poor sense of arrival', (noted by Historic England) negatively affecting the aspirations of Hereford as a University City, can be transformed into a welcoming community space for public transport interchange, cycling and walking as soon as possible?

Response

Yes. This council is committed to delivering a high quality transport hub at the railway station along with public realm improvements on Commercial Road and Blueschool Street to transform this part of the city and ensure it becomes a welcoming entrance to the city centre for all visitors including those coming to study here. An allocation of £6m from the overall £40.6m Hereford City Centre Transport Package budget will enable us to deliver this. We are currently developing proposals for consultation later in this financial year.