

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 25 June 2020

Question 1

Mr R Palgrave, How Caple

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

The County All Party Parliamentary Group of MPs, supported by the County Councils Network (CCN), is investigating the decline of rural bus services and will make recommendations to government. They are inviting evidence from Councils. Their inquiry's terms of reference also seeks views on the immediate and long-term impact of Coronavirus on bus services. The deadline for responding is 31 July.

Re-vitalising bus services is a key part of the Local Transport Policy and will make a valuable contribution to addressing the climate emergency. Figures from CCN show that funding for rural bus services in the UK has almost halved since 2010.

It would be unfortunate if this opportunity to lobby central government for more financial support were missed. Is Herefordshire Council preparing a submission to this inquiry and if not will it now allocate resources to do so?

Response

Thank you for your question Mr Palgrave. Thank you for drawing attention to this important opportunity to provide evidence to the County Council's Network with a view to seeking a better deal for rural bus support from government. I can confirm that we will be making a submission and will provide our views on the issues raised which comprise:

- Funding for rural bus services
- Innovation
- The key issues we would like the National Bus Strategy to address, and
- Concerns regarding Covid 19 and longer term implications for rural bus services

We will be making a submission for the reasons outlined, collating the substantial evidence already held prior to the inclusion of Covid-19s after effects – and also on what so far limited and disjointed evidence we have on the further impacts since lockdown and re-emergence from lockdown. Public transport – particularly buses, particularly an ambition for electric buses – is a central theme to the transport policy of the new administration. Lobbying government to help them understand the huge advantages, social and economic, that public transport has in a semi-rural authority like ours is critical. We have already seen the effects of the partial disruption of our rather limited bus service on commuters and communities in the Golden Valley, it is essential we commit resource and focus on making sure good bus services are available within the County.

Supplemental Question

Will the evidence submitted by the Council be made public?

Response

Thank you sir. I see no reason why they shouldn't be as long as there is no matters that are outstanding in terms of necessary confidentiality but absolutely that is the ambition

Question 2

Anonymous, Hereford

To: cabinet member, finance and corporate services

I am an experienced event manager with a limited company who has been declined furlough due to being on annual payroll not monthly. I am unable to claim the Herefordshire Small Business Discretionary Grant Fund as I do not have a rateable value or licenced business premises as I work on site with clients, therefore I do not meet your criteria. All my future event work has been cancelled and I am currently living off savings. Is there any help available to support my business please?

Response

The small business and retail, hospitality and leisure grant schemes that council is operating on behalf of Government are aimed at businesses that operate out of properties that have a rateable value. The council has paid out over £55m in grants to more than 4,700 businesses. The council has also launched a discretionary grant scheme to support businesses such as yours that do not have their own business rates assessment. This is funded from Government, and Herefordshire has been allocated £3.2m in funding for this.

The scheme is aimed at small or micro businesses, charities and social enterprises with a turnover of not more than £10.2m and fewer than 50 staff that are in shared premises or other flexible working spaces.

As this is a discretionary scheme businesses need to apply via the council's website, the closing date for applications is midday on the 29th of June. I would encourage you to apply for the discretionary scheme.

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/discretionarygrant>

Supplemental Question

Thank you for your reply. However, as stated previously I am unable to claim from the Discretionary Business Grant because I do not pay business rates nor have business premises and the criteria clearly says:

Unfortunately, those in different circumstances to the above, such as businesses working from home or mobile-based businesses, are currently not eligible for this grant.

I am outside your criteria as I work from home then go on site with clients. Please can you advise what support is available to me, as I am not getting the furlough payments either?

Response

I would hesitate to answer that because I think the important thing is that we get the detail of this questioner's circumstances. If the governance support team could pass the contact details to the finance team, they will be able to see what we can try to do to better understand whether there is any grant funding that's available that they can be can qualify for.

Question 3

Ms M Setterfield, Hereford

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

From September many parents (and staff) could consider making their daily journeys to school by bicycle or on foot. More parents are likely to be working from home and others will be still furloughed, self-isolating or seeking employment and therefore more available to accompany children.

What progress has been made on the 20 action points of the 2017 Sustainable Modes of Travel to School Strategy given that the council is accepting funding for Pop-up active travel in Herefordshire?

As bus use and car-sharing are currently considered less safe we risk huge extra congestion if we cannot make roads and cycleways safe for our children and families to use ready for this September.

Response

Thank you Ms Setterfield for your question. We support the ambitions of the 2017 Sustainable Modes of Travel and there is no better time than to respond to the realities of our current environment than now.

The first tranche of emergency active travel measure funding announced will enable local authorities to implement immediate temporary (pop-up) measures to respond to the relaxation of lockdown measures and the re-opening of shops by making provisions for social distancing on the highway and providing facilities to improve walking and cycling access to city & town centres, schools and businesses. Herefordshire Council have been allocated a sum of £40,000 for these initial measures and a set of proposals have been developed and are being consulted on in readiness for introduction from early July. These include measures in Hereford and the market towns and comprise 20mph zones, footway widening, cycle lanes, one way streets and some street closures. It is anticipated that the next funding will support the introduction of further measures, including more permanent provisions to improve walking and cycling. In readiness for this Herefordshire Council has commenced a process to bring together walking and cycling measures developed across various programmes, including SMOTS, and this will form the basis of further measures subject to funding.

The funding we have received from government is not significant, based as it is on a local authority's public transport usage but it does allow us to plan, prepare and promote an increase in safe routes to schools for cyclists and pedestrians. The transport team will be happy to discuss this with you and others who have an interest in this in more detail – and we are always receptive to new and better approaches to our school run congestion issues. Covid-19 aside, it should be the ambition of this Council to make sure cycling and walking is the primary mode of transport to school and colleges wherever possible. And we need to put more effort into making more possible.

Supplemental Question

Thank you for your heartening reply. May I just follow up by asking exactly what new measures will be in place by September and where will they be?

Response

I cannot give you the detail yet as we are working on this at full pace. We know the money is coming as two tranches. Herefordshire does not qualify for a lot of the emergency funding as it is based on previous public transport capacity and Herefordshire's has not been very good. We have got in total about £200k - £50k to start the immediate measures and £150k to try and do things soon after. We are preparing for schools going back in September so the minute we have the detail, it will be shared. If anyone wishes to feed into the process, please send any ideas, queries etc to the transport team.