

COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 25 June 2020

Question 1

Councillor Roger Phillips, Arrow Ward

To: cabinet member, commissioning, procurement and assets,

With Hereford, Leominster and Ross Household waste sites open can the cabinet member give us an update on her proposed timetable for the opening of all the other Herefordshire sites ?

Response

Thank you for your question Cllr Phillips. As you will be aware, the household recycling centres had to be restricted to only three locations to ensure that the costs were kept within scope, due to increased staffing expenditure to manage the social distancing and control measures required of them.

The waste team and I have been having weekly meetings to discuss when the likely open of the remaining sites will be. We had to wait to see how Ross on Wye went first with a booking system. I am pleased to say it has been a huge success and I would like to personally thank the residents of Ross on Wye and surrounding areas for their ability to make this system work.

I am delighted to inform that, as a result of the waste team's incredible hard work finalising plans which have taken some weeks, that we have now been able to confirm that the remaining sites will be open. We are tentatively looking at this starting week commencing 6th July. I say tentatively because we need to ensure that measures are in place to ensure the safety of staff and users. I hope to have a confirmed date within the next few days and I will, of course, keep residents and staff up to date through our communications. The sites will be operated by a booking system to manage the amount of users coming to the site. This system will be used until the initial rush of visitors decreases to a manageable level.

I would genuinely like to thank all of the residents who use these satellite sites for their patience and understanding whilst these plans have been worked up.

Supplemental question

Thank you very much for that reply as you know I've been in contact with officers to try and get these sites open. I am hopefully that they will be opened. My supplementary question is can the cabinet member confirm that the administration is committed to retaining all these sites open in the future?

Response

Yes. There are no intentions to close any of the sites

Question 2

Councillor Barry Durkin, Old Ward

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

This question relates to the cabinet decision on the reintroduction of car parking charges. The timing for resumption of charges, following the easing of opening of non-essential shops under COVID 19 regulations, is disappointing and not helpful to shopkeepers. The charges, being so promptly reintroduced, do not help or support shopkeepers and has the potential to be further damaging to their livelihood, especially the independent traders, and also potentially detrimental to the economy of Herefordshire. It must be recognised that businesses will potentially be struggling to maintain their viability after not trading for so many months during the pandemic; in addition to the increase in the trend of on-line purchasing. This help and support for shopkeepers has been recognised by Bromyard Town Council with their decision to maintain no charges in their controlled car parks.

Why is it that the temporary suspension of parking charges could not have been extended to assist shopkeepers with further time to recover?"

Response

Thank you Cllr Durkin for your question. I am sorry but I do not recall being lobbied directly by you prior to your public question. However, after listening to the concerns expressed by parish and town councils, by ward members and particularly those from businesses and Hereford BID, earlier this week I decided to reintroduce free parking for four weeks, on street and in council car parks from Saturday 27 June until Friday 24 July 2020. This will help give retailers and the hospitality trade a much-needed boost at this critical time. I will be looking at what incentives could be introduced in future to attract more people to visit, and to stay longer, in our historic towns and city and I am due to consider this and take a further decision regarding this before the end of this period of free parking.

Like every other council across the country we have parking charges for several good reasons. Charges help us to encourage people to travel in a different way, by walking or cycling for example. For those that want to or must drive, varying those charges allows us to encourage shoppers and other visitors to park outside the urban centres by charging them less for staying longer, whilst those that want to park right in the centres are expected to pay more. Charges keep spaces turning over especially in the City and town centres.

Ideally, I would love people to really think about travelling a different way in town, especially when you consider for example that over 50% of the residents of Hereford travel less than two miles to shop or commute to work. We have all been encouraged by the boost in walking and cycling lockdown brought and we intend to support those ambitions in any way we can whilst recognising some folks must travel in by car.

We have made a commitment to support local business, encourage people to visit our historic city and market towns, and buy locally. We cannot afford to provide free parking forever as we use this income to pay for the costs of transport services including public transport and school buses – austerity and Central Government cuts have left us with 30% less money per year to carry out our responsibilities. So, in the longer term we will be looking at other ways to encourage people to safely visit our wonderful city and historic market towns. There is an opportunity to look to do things in a different way while supporting local business.

Supplemental question

My supplemental question also relates to the further anxiety of shopkeepers. It concerns the current project of active travel measures following this statutory guidance on network management following Covid-19 and the proposed closure of county town centres. I understand the traders were notified on 20 June with a consultation ending on 23 June. There is a lot of concern, anxiety and anger about the proposal from shopkeepers across the county and from residents. The rurality of Herefordshire when its villages and hamlets are not easily linked to town centres and as such there is difficulty in traveling to town centres and depend on cars unlike Hereford city thus Herefordshire residents will be forced to not use town centres due to restrictions and may go to out of town shops. The government committee for climate change has called for the need to revive the economy and that has been repeated locally as well. There was great concern for the markets towns out of Herefordshire especially with this very short consultation time to try to deduce some confidence of how it may be demonstrated by the administration that measures are in place to ensure the consultation with every resident and shopkeeper is robust with comments having been recorded, considered and addressed with commentary and reasons. The alternative appears to be just forcing the active traffic measures through with the closing of town centers countywide thus adversely affected shopkeepers and independent traders.

Response

I'm happy to address all of Councillor Durkin's concerns and anxieties and those he's relaying on behalf of retailers. So the very first thing to understand is that legislation is not required under this emergency provision. We took the view that we should try and do as much consultation as possible in the shortest period of time as possible. Many authorities have not consulted and that is a matter for them. We are trying to do what we are required to do by government or they will come in and do it for us. So it comes down to that classic tension between trying to do something as quickly as possible in the best way possible against trying to please everyone. Now what I have made very clear to officers who are running this and trying to get it into place as soon as possible is that we will continue to talk to any traders and retailers that come forward and any parish councils that we consulted with and any ones that come forward at this stage. I have been speaking to many shopkeepers in Ledbury and Hereford throughout the last few days looking at what they are saying, specifically seeing what we can change to see if we can come to a compromise and some of those changes have and will be made so it is not a perfect situation. It is incumbent upon us to do this quickly and to make sure that we make the provision ultimately for the safety of people who will be using our streets but I absolutely assure you that we will continue to speak to traders and retailers and anyone else who has concerns.

Question 3

Councillor Nigel Shaw, Bromyard and Bringsty Ward

To: cabinet member, Infrastructure and transport

We've recently been consulted on ambitious plans to spend the Active Travel Emergency Fund (Covid-19) allocation. Given the initial allocation of £40,000, which I suggest will scarcely cover the consultancy and management charges of BBLP, will the Cabinet member now issue a statement to assure fellow councillors and residents that no funding from his other departmental budgets or council reserves will be diverted to satisfy this costly exercise and that no more planned schemes will be cut from the 2020-21 Annual Plan to cover up his departments inability to balance its budget in the current year? To lose one scheme may be regarded as misfortune, to lose two looks like carelessness, but now three! I refer to Haywood

Lane; Spine Road, Ross and Brierley Way – I suggest even Lady Bracknell had no comprehension of such a calamity.

Response

Thank you Cllr Shaw for your question and the much welcome levity. I seem to remember one of Lady Bracknell most famous lines was, “My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality” to which the reply came back, On the contrary, Aunt Augusta..I’ve now realised for the first time in my life the importance of being Earnest”. If Cllr Shaw and I were invited to audition to play these parts in a local am-dram production I am sure Cllr Shaw would be a natural shoe in for the role of Ernest – although a bearded Lady Bracknell would be distracting.

In relation to the crux of his question – we are required by legislation to carry out these changes and although, at present none has been identified, any need or desire to contribute to these measures from our transport budgets will be a matter for this administration and the public record.

The delaying of the three schemes you refer to is to ensure there is sufficient funding for the high priority scheme at Symonds Yat. The original budget allocated for the Symonds Yat project was based on a preliminary understanding and design of the scheme. Detailed investigations and design has enabled a more accurate works costs to be estimated and a shortfall has been identified. This work is considered high priority and the road here has been closed for a long period of time. The repair and reopening of the road must be progressed.

This variation of the annual plan is not linked to the delivery of emergency active travel measures that are proposed to facilitate social distancing in public spaces and provide viable alternatives to public transport and avoid excessive use of cars as lockdown restrictions are eased. The allocation of funding of £40,000 will enable a range of measures to be implemented following consultation with stakeholders in Hereford and the market towns and will not be spent solely on consultants’ fees as you suggest.

Supplemental question

I was delighted to read that the annual plan will not be adversely affected by any spending on the emergency travel measures. I earnestly hope too that the loss of four months parking income, that is ring-fenced for the public realm, will also have no injurious effect on the annual plan. To that end can the cabinet member explain whether his department was overfunded in its budget or what economies he is intending to make to cope with this loss of revenue?

Response

Thank you very much and it is a shame Councillor Shaw is not in the room, we could have carried on our Oscar Wilde Appreciation Society. First of all there will not be a loss of four months’ worth the parking income as after being lobbied by parish councils, Herefordshire councillors, including Councillor Durkin in a roundabout way, members of business groups and various other people, we have decided that a short-term boost was something that we were happy to try and provide for the traders and retailers in Herefordshire who are feeling very very anxious at the moment. As Councillor Durkin said and while numbers are still relatively low in terms of usage of the streets and the roads that we decided this would be a way of supporting them a little bit and we’re happy to do that. The second tranche of this measurement will be in relation to offering incentives to stay for longer, slightly on the outskirts of town as what we do not necessarily want (and the reason we have a parking regime) is people coming right into the centre of town, parking while they are shopping for half an hour or so and then leaving. What we would love them to do (but if they have to do that that’s fine) is let them into town and pay a premium. Those who are disabled can still have parking spaces

which, incidentally in relation to what Councillor Durkin said earlier, will still be provided in relation to the Covid-19 emergency travel measures designed for the town centres. So the second part will be a incentivised scheme so the losses will not be great, in fact the losses may actually be reduced or we might even make some money. This relates to the second part of this question because at the moment many of our slightly out of city centre car parks are underutilized, e.g. swimming baths at Ross and other places and therefore we think by offering an incentive to stay for longer on the perimeters of the towns and the city, people will come in and park, will get a good deal and will walk a short distance into town will spend much longer in town spending time in our shops, café, pubs, restaurants, hotels. Obviously obeying all the rules which are in place. Within the second stage of the parking review that was going on in terms of parking charges which will be happening in early next year, we will look to see if we do need to build in a recovery plan but it was a difficult decision as we have parking charges for a reason but I felt that in the circumstances and in replying to the concerns and the fears expressed to me that this was the right thing to do. If Cllr Shaw wants any more information, I'm quite happy for him to ring me directly to discuss it or email me directly, we do not always have to do this through public questions and that information can be in the public domain.

Question 4

Councillor Jeremy Milln, Central Ward

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

The past decade has seen a steep decline in the ecological health of our cherished rivers due largely, according to monitoring data, to diffuse phosphate nutrification from intensive stock rearing in the upper catchments. Soil degradation due to poor arable practices in areas prone to flooding is also contributory. 125 intensive poultry units have been approved by Powys since 2015 with another 27 awaiting determination and more in the planning pipeline. Four were approved by officer delegated powers only last week.

Now that we have all read the reports of the 'sickly River Wye' in the local and national press over the past couple of weeks, will Herefordshire Council leaders urge the UK government, through our MPs, to pull together and address this crisis as a matter of the utmost urgency? (It cannot be solved by Herefordshire Council alone!)

Response

Thank you for your question Cllr Milln and we share the same concerns. As you are aware we have been pressing the Environmental Agency, Natural Resources Wales, Natural England, Powys Council and other bodies to work with us to agree a satisfactory a new and more robust Nutrient Management Plan. The Leader of the Council and I have a meeting scheduled with Leader of Powys Council to discuss all the identified issues relating to the pollution of the Wye and Lugg. I will also arrange a meeting with our MPs to impress upon them our concerns. I have also asked officers to examine our own ability as an authority to influence good water quality, through our planning process and our capital programmes where we are able to influence land use practices. I am happy for members and representatives of the Wye and Usk Foundation and other interested parties to meet with me to discuss in more detail.

Supplemental Question

I am grateful to the Councillor Harrington for his response and I have no doubt the administration's concern accurately reflects that of the people of Herefordshire and those who have lobbied me in numbers, alarmed by the deteriorating condition of our rivers. Beefing up the Nutrient Management Plan is a welcome step and while it is easy to point the finger at

Powys and its performance with regard to the intensive poultry units it has allowed to proliferate, can I have his assurance that we will use all the tools at our disposal through government and the NGAs, to bring our own house in order by, where necessary, revision of our planning process and by acting against those whose practices damage aquatic environments such as through poor handling of farm waste or soil loss, now that we see, following the February floods, how vulnerable we are in a Climate and Ecological Emergency

Response

Yes and there is much we can still do within our own power and I welcome continued involvement at any stage