

Agenda item no. 6 - Questions from members of the council

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
MQ 1	Councillor William Wilding, Penyard	<p>Having seen an article on the 'Your Hereford' website this week, which attracted overwhelmingly positive comments about the Beryl Bike scheme, it seems that it is a great success. As I'm sure you are aware, praise for a council scheme that involves behaviour change and action to combat the Climate Emergency is as rare as hens teeth.</p> <p>We must credit the previous administration, particularly Councillor Durkin, with getting this scheme started, and hope the coalition continues to improve on it by providing more safe cycle lanes to encourage even more take up.</p> <p>One area of concern which was highlighted by resident Carole Protherough on the 'Herefordshire Coalition' facebook page was how we might give consideration to a parallel system involving improved Shopmobility for older and disabled people.</p> <p>Have you any thoughts or plans as to how we could address this?</p>	Cabinet member infrastructure and transport
<p>Response:</p> <p>We welcome the support for the Beryl Bikes, which as you say have been a tremendous success since July 2019. Over this time we have seen over 8,000 residents use the scheme and between them cycling over 71,000 trips and totalling 180,000 kilometres.</p> <p>We will explore the suggestion to broaden and improve the scheme, however it is worth noting that we also have a separate bike hire offer at the Halo Bike Cabin which includes a variety of adaptive bikes. The Bike Cabin is located next to the tennis courts on Bishops Meadows although this is temporarily closed due to Covid-19.</p> <p>In terms of the Shopmobility service, this has been operated privately since prior to 2013 when Herefordshire Council handed the Hereford scheme to Services for Independent Living (S4IL), having not operated any of the market town schemes. The service is now operated by Mills Mobility on Harrow Road (as S4IL could not afford to keep It running). Whilst the council continue to offer its support, further development or council involvement is not currently planned due to the operating costs of providing a countywide service.</p>			
<p>Supplementary question:</p>			

It was felt that it would add to the success of the Beryl bike scheme if it was broadened to be more inclusive, perhaps the council could undertake some research to understand how this could be achieved.

Cabinet member's response:

Officers and Beryl would be approached with the idea.

Written response provided on 2 November

The team are currently working with Beryl on a proposal to add eBikes to the existing bike hire scheme. The eBikes would operate in the same fashion as the current fleet of bikes, they would be available across the city for all scheme users. The addition of eBikes to the scheme will enable people to go further than they would normally feel comfortable doing so and over more challenging terrain. We hope their addition would enable more people to try the bike share scheme and cycling who otherwise may not have had the confidence or ability to do so.

MQ 2	Councillor Bob Matthews, Credenhill	<p>On 12 June 2020 the council purchased a large block of retail property in Maylord Orchard, Hereford for the sum of £4.4 million.</p> <p>Can you inform members what your plans are for this property and assure us that the taxpayer will benefit financially from this substantiate outlay?</p> <p>I am sure you will have noted that most city centre property owners are experiencing great difficulty at present in finding suitable tenants.</p>	Leader
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Response:

As you say, in June this year the council made a strategic purchase of the long leasehold interest held in respect of the Maylord Shopping Centre in order to secure outright ownership and control of the asset. Prior to the council taking control of this key site as the heart of the city centre, elements of the shopping centre had started to fall into disrepair with the previous owners looking to sell their interest. There was a significant risk that a new owner may only look to asset strip with no regard to what was in the best interest of the City and County.

I am confident that the local tax payer will benefit from this outlay. At the time of the acquisition the running and financing costs were well covered by the income. Nobody has a crystal ball so we do not have knowledge of the future, but indications so far are that the position can be maintained and is likely to improve as empty units are let and footfall increased. This brings additional income from a mixture of rents, service charge and local taxes. There are other less direct benefits to the taxpayer through giving businesses an opportunity to set up, opportunities for employment and making the place a more attractive place to shop, meet, eat and be entertained. These create social value which is difficult to measure in pure economic terms.

Every town and city centre across the country needs to consider how it can adapt to changing market circumstances, creating new opportunities to support their local economy. I think change is inevitable. In securing the site the council can ensure that Hereford has control of a key asset and so is well placed to respond to these challenges. With this free hand (which we did not have before) we are reviewing a wide range of options to regenerate this site to the benefit of the city centre as a whole. These are being considered alongside the development of the Stronger Towns plan which is due to be submitted early next year and has the potential to secure significant Government funding to support regeneration projects across the city.

As you say Cllr Matthews, the plight of many businesses in the City is a cause of considerable concern to us all. This is so not only economically but also socially with so many businesses being owned by individuals known to us and by business people who have spent many years building up their businesses. The Council is trying to do all it can. I would encourage the community to support these businesses by buying local whenever we can.

Supplementary question:

Have units in Maylords Orchard been let at an appropriate market rate or has the rent had been reduced to ensure they were occupied by tenants?

Leader's response:

It was confirmed that the previous owners had struggled to let units at the market rate. Each individual case was looked into and the intention was to occupy the units to show a vibrant project. The information would be provided after the meeting. Each unit that was occupied ensured rent, rates and a service charge which assisted the financial viability of the project. The social value of initiatives seeking a unit was considered and those with a wider community benefit were treated favourably.

Written response provided on 2 November

We are predominantly agreeing peppercorn rents in respect of the new lettings at Maylord, albeit the new tenancies tend to be short term or with break options. The objective is largely to mitigate costs in the current economic environment by way of at least making sure tenants pay service charge and overheads i.e. utilities and business rates. This approach is likely to be limited to locally owned businesses which add social value, and increase footfall within the area.