

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 25 February 2021

Question 1

Mr A Lowther, Whitchurch

To: cabinet member, environment, economy and skills

The lack of space for businesses to expand in, or to move to, Ross has been a problem for many years. It has now reached a level not seen in decades; to the best of my knowledge there are no industrial units for sale or rent in Ross at all, and only one very small plot on difficult ground on which one could build.

We have hundreds of new houses being built in Ross, what provision is being made to provide land for businesses to start, to grow or to move to Ross so residents can work locally and businesses, who would prefer to remain local, do not have to set up or expand outside of the county?

Response

We recognise the critical contribution Ross one Wye and the other four market towns make to the county's economy as a whole, and are fully committed to supporting the growth of the towns. As you mention in your question, we need to ensure that within Ross on Wye, as with all of the towns, that we seek to achieve a balance between housing growth and employment growth enabling people to live and work locally, providing the conditions for existing businesses to develop as well attracting new investment.

To understand local needs and opportunities in each of the market towns the council has commissioned the development of Economic Development Investment Plans to support recovery from Covid 19 and enable their future growth. Through local consultation and engagement the development of the Ross on Wye Economic Development Investment Plan is considering the need/ demand for additional employment land in the area, including how council owned sites such as Model Farm could be utilised. The council has undertaken detailed investigations into the development of a phase one Enterprise Park on the Model Farm site, but the very significant costs of the proposed scheme do not represent value for money at this time. Therefore, part of the focus of the Economic Development Investment Plan is to consider alternative opportunities to develop this and/ or other sites in the town.

Question 2

Mr J Brechtmann, Kingland

To: cabinet member, environment, economy and skills

As the housing moratorium moves rapidly towards the two year landmark, and the catastrophic social and economic devastation caused by this becomes more evident do Herefordshire Council have any explicit plans to help support and protect the local highly skilled and valuable construction sector and its ancillary services?

Many good businesses, through no fault of their own, are missing many years worth of planning approvals with a significant loss of work and the consequent impact upon both jobs, skills and inward investment in Herefordshire. The economic development harm seems to have been overlooked but should be of grave concern to us all, not least the loss of section 106 monies, New Homes Bonus and potential investment in innovative green advances for homes - plus the diminishing housing delivery and vulnerability this creates for our communities.

Response

The council is very much aware of the very significant impact that the current restriction on planning approvals has had on the local economy for the past 16 months, and we agree that this is of grave concern. We very much value the local construction sector, and share the frustration of local construction businesses that they are having to bear the brunt of the costs of this problem, when the best available evidence shows the construction industry is contributing significantly less to the phosphate problem than other sectors.

Unfortunately no direct funding support is available to support affected businesses at this time, however we are urgently working with national government and numerous partners including the Environment Agency, Natural England, Welsh Water and the Wye & Usk Foundation Rivers Trust to identify solutions to reduce the level of phosphates in the river Lugg so that headroom can be created to allow development again. For example, and in addition to our joint efforts with partners on the Nutrient Management Board, the council is currently leading a £3m innovative project to establish a number of integrated wetlands in the River Lugg catchment area. These wetlands will further reduce phosphate levels in the special area of conservation and will lead towards easing of the restrictions. The council is also exploring the potential to purchase and repurpose land with high phosphate loads within in the river Lugg catchment area as a further solution to reduce phosphate levels.

Additionally the council is finalising a new interim phosphate delivery plan and will shortly be beginning work on a new Supplementary Planning Document on river pollution. The phosphate delivery plan will be published shortly and will include a new phosphate calculator to help calculate the phosphate loads of new developments, a suite of proposed mitigation measures to assist developers to help offset the phosphate load from developments, and also to develop a potential phosphate trading platform as a further and alternative solution to offsetting phosphate loads.

The Council has had to lead on these initiatives in the absence of more central support, whereas elsewhere in the UK where similar problems have arisen it has been the government agencies that have taken the lead. We continue to press for more action from regulatory partners, and more support from local MPs.

Supplementary Question

Thank you for your considered reply. We are aware of, and appreciate, the complex work that is taking place to create headroom for development, although we remain concerned about the slow pace and 'risk averse' approach to housing development - despite the apportionment evidence showing that new housing is responsible for less than 0.2% of the phosphate load annually. Construction is fundamentally important to the county for jobs, housing delivery, revenue, skills, innovation and investment.

Can the council please confirm a scheduled timetable for the removal of the moratorium on housing? This is desperately needed to enable local companies to plan ahead and potentially save jobs and businesses, many of which are already being lost or suffering under intolerable trading conditions not of their making.

Response

The cabinet member environment economy and skills responded that she appreciated the situation was having a very difficult impact on construction companies in the county and this was very much regretted. The cabinet member explained that it was difficult to set out a specific timetable because it depended on progress that the council could make on the measures it was taking in the absence of as much action from partners as the council would ideally like. She

assured the questioner that the council was working as hard as possible to press ahead with schemes such as integrated wetlands and a phosphate trading system. A written response with detail on the current timetable was promised.

The cabinet member infrastructure and transport also made a response stating that he understood the frustration but that the council did not have control of the agencies that were responsible for monitoring the phosphate levels and general health of the rivers. The council continued to lobby local MPs to push for more intervention from the government.