

Supplement to the agenda for

Council

Friday 9 February 2024

10.00 am

**Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4
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Agenda item no. 5 - Questions from members of the public

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
PQ 1	Ms Banks, Hereford	<p>A comment from central government, published by the Guardian Newspaper on January 30 stated that:</p> <p>“Ministers plan to push cash-strapped English councils to sell assets.”</p> <p>What is the position of Herefordshire Council regarding this proposal?</p>	Cabinet member finance and corporate services
<p>Response: A balanced revenue budget is proposed for 2024/25. The proposal does not include plans to sell council assets to support the revenue budget in 2024/25.</p>			
PQ 2	Mr Banks, Hereford	<p>While there are significant reductions proposed for vacant posts across directorates, the plans are silent on executive pay. With the Chief Finance Officer highlighting 'unprecedented economic conditions' putting pressure on finances, what is being done to control senior management costs at the top? Is this being considered alongside frontline cuts?</p>	Cabinet member finance and corporate services
<p>Response: The 2024/25 budget recognises that the council will need to transform as an organisation to ensure the future sustainability of the council and the services it delivers and this will require a review of the size and shape of the workforce to create a lean and resilient council for the future. The proposed savings, at Appendix B, reflect these transformation plans. In addition to removal of vacant posts across Directorates, the council-wide savings include additional measures: S1 Mutual Early Resignation Scheme 2024 and S3: Transformation (Target Operating Model). These proposals include a review of the council’s management structure, corporate services and business support functions across the council.</p>			
PQ 3	Ms Russell, Hereford	<p>Residents raised the importance of protecting community facilities and spaces, especially for vulnerable groups like the elderly. If any sale or change of use of current Council properties, such as community centres, is under consideration to raise capital, how would you ensure equivalent spaces and accessibility remains for those residents reliant on these services?</p>	Cabinet member adults, health and wellbeing

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Response:

Thank you for your question. I can confirm that the council does not directly own or operate any community centres.

Developing and protecting community facilities and spaces is very important. The council's Talk Community service works closely with local communities to ensure that local needs are met through a wide variety of assets and settings, including using existing facilities to provide warm spaces. The community capital grants scheme which will be launched in 2024-2025 will be a further means through which the council will support investment in community facilities, as well as the direct investment it is making in the new library and learning centre in Hereford.

Herefordshire Council continues to keep under review the properties it owns or uses to ensure that they remain aligned with the needs of the council and its communities.

PQ 4	Mr McGeown, Weobley	<p>The Hereford Times has recently reported that the "Revised Draft City Master Plan" is to be submitted for public consultation early this year.</p> <p>I can not find a dedicated entry for it in the public reports pack.</p> <p>So where is it and more importantly what amount has been budgeted to resource this most important consultation?</p> <p>Will the consultation methods be of sufficient breadth and adequately financed so they will satisfy the council constitution?</p> <p>Article 3 – Citizens and the council</p> <p>2.3.2 Citizens have the right:</p> <p>(d) to be consulted or in some other way participate in council decision making in accordance with the arrangements the council has for such consultation and participation;</p> <p>5.8.67 Consultations</p> <p>5.8.68 The council encourages as many people as possible to give their views on decisions which affect them.</p>	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
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Response:

The development of the Hereford City Masterplan has been paused, to allow for the Local Plan, the New Hereford Road Strategy and the Local Transport Plan to be progressed. Once this work is complete, the council will be in a position to review the City Masterplan, ensuring Hereford is well placed to play its critical role in realising the ambitions of the county wider strategies. Further information will be available in due course on the process and timescales for stakeholder consultation and public engagement for the Hereford City Centre Masterplan.

PQ 5

Mr Pugh,
Leominster

Is it not a breach of council duty and ethics (Section 149 Equalities ACT 2010 general duties Section A) to discriminate against second property or private property owners by implementation of any fiscal penalty that actively discriminates against them as a group, solely because they are deemed by council, or any others, to be "vacant" property owners.

Cabinet
member
finance and
corporate
services**Response:**

The Equality Act 2010 provides protection against discrimination on the basis of protected characteristics. Property owners (as a group) are not protected by the Equality Act 2010.

The discretion given to councils to charge a premium is intended to be used as part of a wider strategy to encourage homeowners to bring their properties back into use for the benefit of the local community and economy.

PQ 6

Mrs Pugh,
Leominster

It is noted in the council budget breakdown the expenditure allotted to repair and refurbish both roads and pavements in Herefordshire.
Bearing in mind the number of Herefordshire inhabitants that have been injured on uneven dangerous pavements or suffered physical injury or damage on private or commercial transports of all types because of the appalling surfaces of our largely neglected pavements and highways is the budget sufficient to achieve better results and avoid accelerating the present neglect?

Cabinet
member
roads and
regulatory
services**Response:**

Herefordshire's highway network is over 2,100 miles in length, which is long enough to stretch from Land's End to John O'Groats some two and a half times. We also have over 410 miles of footways, mainly centred in the city and market towns but also providing essential links in our villages. Our Officers and contractors work proactively to maintain and improve our highway network. Our Cabinet recognises that more is required for the council to match the aspirations of its residents and so to help address this we are committing £10 million pounds of additional investment into highway resurfacing between 2024-2026; thus investing for the future. In addition, Government has also recently announced that this council will receive an additional £106,918,000 for investment in the network, over the next 10 years as a part of its Network North initiative. This funding will help to address the maintenance and also improve Herefordshire's roads and pavement network to a good and safe condition.

PQ 7	Mr Evered	To reduce the CO2 level of Herefordshire's atmosphere by 0.16 PPM (parts per million) or 0.000016%, how much is the council tax payer contributing to the council in order to achieve its Net Zero goal? If not known, what is the council's projected figures for this?	Cabinet member environment
<p>Response: In the financial year 2022/23 the Council invested £4,773,000 in capital projects to support our net zero carbon and nature rich goals. Of this amount £4,431,000 was external grant funding secured by the Council, the remaining £342,000 capital coming from the Council's own budgets. Much of Council's spend is in 'invest to save' projects such as installing solar photovoltaic panels on schools.</p>			

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

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
MQ1	Cllr Toni Fagan, Birch	<p>https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/directory/23/changes-to-public-rights-of-way/category/44</p> <p>There are 50 footpaths under temporary closure orders, including 28 bridges needing repairing, some dating back to 2018.</p> <p>OC10 in Orcop, closed since Feb 2020, is a vital link through the parish.</p> <p>According to the Destination Management Plan for Rural Herefordshire tourism is worth half £billion to our economy (9% of county employment). Walking rural Herefordshire contributes substantially to this economy, is important to the leisure and wellbeing of our residents, and provides important routes connecting rural communities.</p> <p>The administration has acknowledged that urgent investment is needed in our footpath assets. When is that investment likely to impact the 50 closed footpaths and bridges?</p> <p>Does the PROW team have sufficient capacity and resources to deliver this work?</p> <p>If not, how will this be addressed ensuring repairs can be undertaken at pace to get footpaths reopened and bridges repaired?</p>	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
<p>Response:</p> <p>Public Rights of Way is an area that the Council needs to invest in given the challenges that we face in dealing with such a large network.</p> <p>There is a proposal in the budget to invest further in the Public Rights of Way network from this April and that investment will be used to address the challenges and issues we face and our ambitions to develop the network.</p> <p>In terms of capacity and resource, the Council is currently out to tender for local contractors to assist with the delivery of works and the team is intending to use them from April.</p> <p>Separately, I am pleased that a Public Rights of Way Volunteer Development Officer started with us last month. This Officer will play an important role in enabling our volunteer cohort to undertake works, to an agreed standard.</p>			
MQ 2	Cllr Matthew Engel, Golden Valley South	<p>I am pleased that the Lengthsman Grant Scheme is being continued by the present administration. Could the Cabinet Member explain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the qualifying criteria are for parishes to participate in the scheme? 	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how do you calculate each parish's grant allocation – clarifying in particular whether there a difference for urban and rural parishes? And • what changes in allocation are being made for 24-25 – clarifying whether there is an adequate increase for inflation or a real terms cut? 	
<p>Response:</p> <p>For the 24-25 Lengthsman Scheme, a sum of £60 per KM of C and U road network will be awarded to Parish Councils. Parish Councils can also submit a request for match funding as follows:</p> <p>Urban Parishes: Any Parish Council could choose to allocate funding from its precept and then Herefordshire Council will match this on a £2 parish, £1 HC basis. There is a cap set at £100 per km for the HC match. For example, a parish that has 10km of eligible network and chooses to allocate £2000 parish precept will receive an additional £1000 of HC match. Utilising match funding means that an urban parish could allocate up to £400 per km to carry out Lengthsman type work</p> <p>Rural Parishes: Where the Parish chooses to allocate funding from its precept then Herefordshire Council will match this on a £1 parish, £1 HC basis. There is a cap set at £60 per km for the HC match. For example, a parish that has 10km of eligible network and chooses to allocate £600 parish precept will receive an additional £600 of HC match. Utilising match funding means that a rural parish could allocate up to £180 per km to carry out Lengthsman type work</p> <p>In terms of the allocation for 2024/25, I am pleased to say that there is a proposal within the budget to increase the funding by £250k. It should be noted that the amount of Parish Councils taking part in the scheme ultimately determines whether the £60 per km base sum can be increased.</p>			
MQ 3	Cllr David Hitchiner, Stoney Street	<p>The Children's Directorate has not only overspent significantly in the last two financial years by nearly £20m, but in 2023-24 is so far forecasting to deliver NONE of its £4.5m savings. These were due to come from reducing the number of agency staff employed and the number and cost of Looked After Children.</p> <p>Both the Scrutiny Management Board and Children's Scrutiny Committee have made it clear that, without there being any evidence of such in-year savings being declared, it is unsafe to balance this council's budget by presuming that Children's Directorate will deliver £2.5m savings – particularly with the delivery profile suggested – in 2024-25.</p> <p>Before this council considers your 2024-25 budget, will the Cabinet Member for Children's and the Cabinet Member for Finance each confirm that the Q3 Performance Report (completed in Dec 23) will include LAC and Agency Staff savings.</p>	Cabinet member children and young people

Response:

The Children & Young People Directorate Delivery Plan 2024/25 was presented to the Scrutiny Management Board at its meeting held 10 January 2024. The Plan detailed the proposed savings and profile of delivery in 2024/25 and provided further information to confirm that sufficient funding has been allocated in the revenue budget to support increased demand and cost pressures in 2024/25. Additional supporting information and evidence has been provided through the Children & Young People Directorate Budget Task & Finish Group at the two meetings held in December 2023, including relevant assumptions, risks and dependencies. The delivery of proposed savings will be monitored as part of routine financial monitoring arrangements in 2024/25 and reported quarterly by Cabinet.

At Quarter 3 (Period 9) of 2023/24, £0.3m of the Directorate savings are forecast as on target for delivery in respect of approved saving S18: Placement Management. In addition, the forecast outturn at P9 notes a reduction of £0.2m in agency staffing costs.

MQ 4	Cllr Aubrey Oliver, Saxon Gate	<p>Herefordshire Council was awarded a grant of £952,037 by the Government for the year 2023/24 to improve the frequency of bus services across the county.</p> <p>It is a major concern that no funding has yet been allocated for improvements in the 2023/24 financial year. If this funding is not used by 31 March 2024 does it have to be returned to the Government?</p> <p>Has the council made any attempt to put forward a bus service improvement plan? If so, when will it be published?</p>	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
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Response:

The original Bus Service Improvement Plan was introduced by the Department for Transport (DfT) following COVID, to deliver “more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, cheaper, or greener bus services”. All authorities were encouraged to submit ambitious bids, Herefordshire’s was for £18million. Unfortunately the Council was not successful. However, despite being unfunded, I am pleased Herefordshire’s BSIP is in place, and is published on the Council website, [here](#).

DfT then released a new funding pot, BSIP+, which was for all authorities that did not receive anything in the first round to support those services at risk. We were awarded and have received £952,037, and we have been awarded the same amount the following year. Under BSIP regulations, the delivery of a BSIP plan is through either a franchising model or an Enhanced Partnership board; hence we have convened an Enhanced Partnership board. This consists of the council and all the bus operators who operate a service in the county (even if that service also runs into neighbouring areas). It is the board who agree and make decisions on where the BSIP+ money should be spent, (not the council).

Regarding our actions against the plan, we have received the money from DfT, and so we have given a deadline to operators to come back to us with their proposals for those services in the plan, where they would want to see extra support. From this we will create the tenders to deliver these services and present them to the Enhanced Partnership.

We will not lose the funding, nor need to return it to the DfT. The tenders will be seen, assessed and administered by the Enhanced Partnership Board well within the DfT's time frames for spending. I would be happy to discuss the Bus Service Improvement Plan and how the Enhanced Partnership board works further if that would be helpful.

MQ 5	Cllr Liz Harvey, Ledbury North	<p>Scrutiny Management Board has recommended that the present administration provide this Council with additional information in the form of an indicative forecast of which earmarked reserves it proposes to raid to cover the £13.8m overspend being forecast by Children's Directorate at Q2, and to provide impact statements as regards the proposed reductions made in each earmarked reserve utilised.</p> <p>It is clear from the information contained in the agenda pack for this meeting that this minority administration has chosen to ignore SMB's request.</p> <p>I request again the Cabinet Member provide this information to Council, so in advance of voting on this budget all councillors can see where this money may be taken from and can understand the possible impact that doing so will have upon funds previously earmarked for investments and for risk mitigation .across all areas of this Council's operation.</p>	Cabinet member finance and corporate services
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Response:
In the meeting held 25 January 2024, Cabinet noted the recommendations from Scrutiny Management Board and agreed they would be given due consideration. A forecast of earmarked reserve balances to 31 March 2024 is included per Appendix E to the Budget Setting Report. This confirms a forecast of £57.2m in earmarked reserves at 31 March 2024 after adjusting for the forecast overspend for 2023/24 of £13.8m as at Quarter 2; Cabinet intend to use these Earmarked Reserve balances to fund the 2023/24 overspend. Reserve balances will remain under review over the remainder of the 2023/24 financial year and the proposed reserve transfers to fund the 2023/24 overspend will be confirmed in the Quarter 4 outturn report as part of routine year-end closedown procedures.