PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 6 FEBRUARY 2009

1 Question from Mr Peter McKay, Leominster, Hereford.

1 Council motto is to Preserve our Heritage, and Full Council initial reply to my guestion put before that meeting is that Council is keen to ensure information it holds is readily accessible, and will look at how it can improve availability. Back in 1983, on 27 January, Hereford and Worcester Council held a Public Rights of Way County Conference, with the conference learning, question 24, that the Council would look into difficulties concerning paths not shown on the definitive map. This came about due to a large number of parishes at the conference asking why paths were not recorded, a question raised by them at that time due to it only becoming apparent in the 1980/90s when paths were cleared of obstructions and signed that this was not being undertaken on all parish paths, ie they had not all been recorded, and parishes had not been informed that their information had been rejected and the reasons why. Having inspected some of your modern records I find they reveal that many paths submitted for recording by parishes and rural district councils were not recorded, for reasons which Government Inspector has declared to have nothing to do with whether or not they were public rights of way, reference FPS/W1850/7/7 a copy of which is held by your Rights of Way Department regarding paths Wellington 14 and 26, and can be provided. Council action per conference has yet to take place, and these paths are slowly being lost to development. But Council has now completed its computerisation of the definitive map and could raise a layer showing these unrecorded paths, along with the reasons not shown, enabling your planners to take their existence into account, and assume that they exist unless and until proved otherwise, and parishes to likewise have access to this information so that they may consider whether or not the reason for rejection was valid and to bring those paths back into use. This would comply both with your motto to preserve our heritage, and with your stated intention to be keen to make information you hold readily available, along with the conference consideration of this issue. So would Council undertake to do this, or if not, change its motto?

Answer from Councillor DB Wilcox Cabinet Member Highways and Transportation

1 A digital mapping layer of unrecorded routes would only be of any value if it could be reliably established that the routes recorded on it were indeed public rights of way.

The Council in its roles of highway authority and surveying authority cannot just *assume* that public rights exist over a way: it must act reasonably and on the basis of evidence. Similarly, compiling and using such a mapping layer to influence planning decisions raises significant questions over blighting land for future development, and also legitimate interest of the current landowners/occupiers. This could rightly be challenged on the basis of being arbitrary and not based on sound evidence.

There is considerable range of reasons why routes did not get recorded on the original definitive map. Determining which routes should be included on such a digital mapping layer could only be achieved through considerable research and

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assessment of the evidence against established criteria. Such a process already exists – it is the definitive map modification order procedure set out in section 53 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Although time consuming, this process does provide legal certainty over the status of rights of way which are so recorded. Producing an additional map layer of suspected unrecorded rights of way would, in the Councils view, only give rise to greater uncertainty and confusion whilst diverting valuable resources away from the Council's statutory duties under that Act.

Supplementary Question from Mr McKay

Council stated that the procedures is set out in section 53 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 – this being the case, could the matter be referred to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee so that they can determine whether it is functioning correctly.

Answer provided by Councillor DB Wilcox Cabinet Member Highways and Transportation

It is for the Scrutiny Committee to consider appropriate issues for deliberation, however the Cabinet Member will take up the matter with the Interim Head of Culture and Leisure to ensure that the issues are addressed.

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2 Question from Ms Nicola Goodwin, Hereford

Since the closure of the pool teachers and coaches have found it impossible to give children the standard of swimming coaching that they deserve, the number of badges completed by children has almost halved since the pool was closed (from 212 to 108) and the health and the safety of children using the St Martin's pool has been compromised on numerous occasions. The amount of time available for the Hereford public to swim has been dramatically cut and both Hereford Triathlon Club and Hereford Swimming Club have seen members leave the county due to the lack of pool time available. I would like cabinet to ask to view CCTV of the St Martin's pool between 0930 and 1000 on Friday January 23 when you will see almost 60 pupils from the Kielder Unit forced into half the main pool with no space to improve their swimming, up to 5 fast swimmers unable to swim at their regular speed as the lane they were pushed into had no space for overtaking and the remaining 16 plus recreational swimmers packed into the remaining lane like sardines. The safety of all of those swimmers was at risk and this is at a time advertised on Halo's website and in their promotional material as 'public swimming.

2 Will the council please consider reopening the LEA pool in Hinton with immediate effect to ensure the safety of Herefordshire's schoolchildren and the general public?

Answer from Councillor PD Price Cabinet Member ICT, Education and Achievement

Composite Answer:

2 Cabinet recognises the strength of feeling that continues to be expressed in support of ensuring appropriate swimming provision within the county. As a reflection of the priority Cabinet places on maintaining and developing the four public swimming facilities within the county (in the City itself and the market towns of Ledbury, Leominster and Ross on Wye), the capital programme proposals to be put before Council at its meeting in March will include investment over the next two years to ensure these public facilities are fit for purpose. It is also a Cabinet priority to deliver free swimming provision for those county residents under the age of 16 and as well as those over the age of 60.

To enable the local community to have sufficient time to assess the viability of taking on the operation of the closed LEA pool as a community asset, Cabinet has ensured that alternative arrangements are in place for school users and that these arrangements are operating in compliance with all relevant health and safety and best practice guidelines. Cabinet will consider any business case put forward by the community at its meeting on 2 April.

The council continues to work closely with its partner HALO to meet the needs of the different user groups within the county.

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3 Questions from Mr Iain Nunn, Belmont, Hereford

- 3 Please would the Council please consider re-opening the LEA Pool in Hinton because:
 - *a:* the structure of the Leisure Pool has proven to be completely unsuitable for teaching young children to swim;
 - b: the amount of time available on the current timetable for Public Swimming is just not acceptable. The sessions that are available are too restrictive, and at times dangerous due to the large number of swimmers (of all abilities) being restricted to lane swimming;
 - c: more people should be encouraged to swim and take exercise to combat obesity, heart problems etc. etc., all of which puts a severe strain on our Health System;
 - d: the population of Hereford/Herefordshire is continuing to grow; and
 - e: athletes from Hereford are now looking elsewhere to train, possibly even moving away or just giving up due to this closure.

I hope you will vote favourably on this very important issue.

Answer from Councillor PD Price Cabinet Member ICT, Education and Achievement

Composite Answer:

3 Cabinet recognises the strength of feeling that continues to be expressed in support of ensuring appropriate swimming provision within the county. As a reflection of the priority Cabinet places on maintaining and developing the four public swimming facilities within the county (in the City itself and the market towns of Ledbury, Leominster and Ross on Wye), the capital programme proposals to be put before Council at its meeting in March will include investment over the next two years to ensure these public facilities are fit for purpose. It is also a Cabinet priority to deliver free swimming provision for those county residents under the age of 16 and as well as those over the age of 60.

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4 Question from Mr Steve Grist, Chairman, Herefordshire Association of School Governors

I can still remember the feeling, at age five years, of slipping under the surface of the River Roding. I can still see my father diving into the river, fully clothed, dragging me to the surface and emptying my lungs of water. A year later I nearly drowned in the sea and again my father pulled me out of the waves. By the age of six years I was terrified of rivers, the sea and any expanse of open water. My father was, understandably totally fed up with pulling me out of those expanses of water, half drowned. The remedy was quite clear, that being that I should attend the LEA swimming pool to learn to swim.

It was a very cold summer and the LEA pool was an open pool. I shivered for six weeks gradually developing the confidence to move away from the side of the pool. Then I took a few strokes, then I swam.... and at the end of the summer holiday I was able to swim three hundred yards. Not only was I now able to swim and be safe around water but I developed a sense of confidence and self esteem that carried on into other areas of sport and learning.

It is essential that the children of Herefordshire have the same access to a swimming pool that I had. The Hereford Leisure Pool does not meet the requirements for teaching a child to swim, and I am aware that it is incumbent upon schools to teach each child to swim a minimum of twenty five metres. The majority of school governors are parents and they are adamant that their children are taught to swim from an early age. Herefordshire, after all is a County with a large river flowing through it and a number of very swift flowing tributaries. The Hereford Local Authority Pool must be re-opened, and rapidly. It provides both a life saving and educational service to our children.

4 A recent questionnaire to school governors poses the question, how will they as governors fulfil their obligations ensuring that children are taught to swim the requisite twenty five metres. I believe that question should now be posed to Herefordshire Council, that being how do they mean to provide the facilities, the LEA pool, whereby children may be taught to swim?

Answer from Councillor PD Price Cabinet Member ICT, Education and Achievement

Composite Answer:

4 Cabinet recognises the strength of feeling that continues to be expressed in support of ensuring appropriate swimming provision within the county. As a reflection of the priority Cabinet places on maintaining and developing the four public swimming facilities within the county (in the City itself and the market towns of Ledbury, Leominster and Ross on Wye), the capital programme proposals to be put before Council at its meeting in March will include investment over the next two years to ensure these public facilities are fit for purpose. It is also a Cabinet priority to deliver free swimming provision for those county residents under the age of 16 and as well as those over the age of 60.

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To enable the local community to have sufficient time to assess the viability of taking on the operation of the closed LEA pool as a community asset, Cabinet has ensured that alternative arrangements are in place for school users and that these arrangements are operating in compliance with all relevant health and safety and best practice guidelines. Cabinet will consider any business case put forward by the community at its meeting on 2 April.

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5 Questions from Mr Mike Wilson, Lugwardine, Hereford

On matters of procedure:

- 5.1 In a recent request to the Standards Committee, for review of an Assessment subcommittee decision, the Review sub-committee failed to comply with the timescale laid down in the Act of Parliament, namely 3 months. What action has been taken for this breach of the Law and what actions have been taken to ensure it does not happen in the future?
- 5.2 The Standards Board for England (SBE) in its document on Local Assessment of Complaints states that Standards Committees are to develop Assessment Criteria, which are to be available to the public. Are these in existence and where may they be found? A search-engine search of the website failed to produce them.
- 5.3 In the complaint at question 5.1, the Standards Committee's decision notices contained errors of fact (again) and also stated that evidence was not submitted. The document at question 2 clearly shows the task of the sub-committees to be to consider if there was a POTENTIAL breach of the Code of Conduct. To be requiring evidence at this stage is premature and implies the committees are making findings without the full evidence. To quote the document "The assessment and review sub-committees make no findings of fact". If this is the case were the decisions valid and are the sub-committees carrying out the task for which they were set up or are they exceeding their remit?
- 5.4 Why is the Standards Committee exempt from any form of scrutiny and apparently answerable to no one?

Answer from Chairman, Standards Committee

- 5.1 This question refers to eight complaints brought by the questioner. The Standards Committee's Assessment Sub-Committee considered that there was no *prima facie* evidence of a breach of the Code of Conduct in any of them. The questioner then asked for a review of that decision. The Review Sub-Committee, consisting of different members, endorsed the decision of the Assessment Sub-Committee in every one of the eight cases. The Review Sub-Committee was called for 25 October. One member declared a prejudicial interest and the meeting had to be postponed. 25 November was the earliest date on which it could be rescheduled. The questioner was told of the delay. The meeting took place eleven days outside the required time. We informed the Standards Board for England of the delay and the reasons for it.
- 5.2 The Assessment Criteria have been available to the public since they were agreed by the Committee on the 4 July 2008. An amendment on the handling of anonymous complaints was made on 17 October 2008. They are now on the Council's website.

The new procedures were advertised in the Hereford Times on 7 August 2008.

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The Assessment Sub-Committee's Terms of Reference were also set out in the Decision Notice, a copy of which was given to the questioner.

- 5.3 This question is baseless. Obviously the Assessment Sub-Committee has to consider whether *prima facie* there may have been a breach of the Code of Conduct. Similarly, the Review Sub-Committee has to consider whether there are any grounds, including any further information that may be to hand, for reversing the decision of the Assessment Sub-Committee. Neither makes findings of fact, and neither did in this case.
- 5.4 The questioner has had this question answered before, but for the sake of the record, I will say that the Standards Board for England has regulatory powers in respect of Standards Committees; that:

Committees' determinations may be appealed to the Adjudication Panel for England, and on a point of law to the High Court: and that:

The Herefordshire Standards Committee reports fully on its work both to the Council and to the public.

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6 Questions from Mr Bob Clay, Hereford

- 6.1 Will the Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources now publish the legal advice that the Cabinet rely on when refuting the opinion of the House of Commons library and Paul Keetch MP, the parliamentary sponsor of the Hereford Markets Act 2003, that "the Act does not require the council to build a new market"?
- 6.2 Does the Council have the legal power to purchase houses within its area that have been re-possessed by financial institutions?
- 6.3 How much has been spent so far on Aylestone Park and what has been achieved so far? What is the current estimate of the time and funding required to complete the project as currently envisaged?
- 6.4 What plans does the Council have for the future use of Churchill House?
- 6.5 What representations has the Council received concerning the lack of a Community centre or any similar facility in Aylestone Ward?

Answer from Councillor JP French Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources and Acting Cabinet Member for Resources

6.1 No. The legal advice the Council has received is clear in stating that the Council has a continuing obligation to provide a cattle market. It is also important to emphasise that, in any event, the Council would want to support the local economy through the provision of a market to meet the current and future needs of the agricultural industry. It is the long standing policy of the authority not to disclose confidential legal papers.

Answer from Councillor JG Jarvis, Cabinet Member Environment and Strategic Housing.

6.2 The Council has the general ability to use wide ranging powers conferred by the Local Government Act 2000 for the social, economic or environmental well being of the county. Such powers could be exercised, in appropriate circumstances, for the acquisition of property. Herefordshire Council has, on a number of occasions, provided grant support and worked in partnership with Registered Social Landlords (RSL), to purchase homes off the open market where appropriate opportunities have arisen. Such properties are then owned and managed by the partner RSL who will let the property at affordable rents to households from the Housing Register. The purchase of properties off the open market is expensive by comparison to new build provision and higher levels of grant input may therefore be required. Furthermore, such properties are unlikely to meet the housing standards expected by the Homes and Communities Agency when it provides grant support.

Answer from Councillor AJM Blackshaw Cabinet Member Economic Development and Community Services

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6.3 The spend to date on Aylestone Park has been approximately £1.03 million, this has been spent on the purchase of the land, the laying the cables underground, the construction of the main road junction, the construction of the gate pillars and underlying groundworks, the refurbishment of the RAF Gates and their erection, a grant to Aylestone Park Association (spent on materials, plant hire etc for footpaths and fencing), the desilting the canal, treating the silt and building the roadway and carparking spaces. This figure also includes fees

The funding required to complete the project is estimated to be £550,000 for Football Pitches, a Bowling Green and a Building. Whilst there are some modest funds available from within the project it is not enough to complete the project. The future completion is dependent on further funding being secured.

- 6.4 The Council currently leases Churchill House to Hereford College of Arts. Discussions are ongoing with the current tenant regarding a possible extension or new lease.
 - 6.5 Various discussions have been held over recent years addressing the lack of community facilities in the Aylestone/Tupsley Wards. Representations have been received from the former College Estate Residents Association and its successor body. Following a study undertaken through Hereford Voluntary Action in 2007, a needs analysis for the area confirmed that community facilities were needed. Representations have also been made by one of the local Aylestone Ward members resulting in £180,000 received for the loss of the Youth Centre on College Road to be placed into a reserve fund for future use to provide a community facility in the area.

Supplementary question from Mr Clay

Has the Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources and Acting Cabinet Member for Resources seen the letter referred to in the question from the House of Commons Library to Paul Keetch MP and will the Council disclosure its legal advice to enable full consideration of the facts when reaching decisions in this matter?.

Answer from Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources and Acting Cabinet Member for Resources.

Trusted officers have given clear advice to members on this matter, any challenge of this matter should be carried out in court.

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7 Question from Mr Luke Moseley, Hereford

7 As a PE teacher in Herefordshire I am only too aware of the importance of promoting healthy lifestyles for our young people. Can the committee explain how they will ensure that the loss of pool time for young people/schools will **not** have an adverse effect on the number of young people learning to swim (as evidenced by the greater than 50% reduction in the number of swimming badges gained by the young people of Herefordshire since the closure of the LEA pool)?

Answer from Councillor PD Price Cabinet Member ICT, Education and Achievement

Composite Answer:

7 Cabinet recognises the strength of feeling that continues to be expressed in support of ensuring appropriate swimming provision within the county. As a reflection of the priority Cabinet places on maintaining and developing the four public swimming facilities within the county (in the City itself and the market towns of Ledbury, Leominster and Ross on Wye), the capital programme proposals to be put before Council at its meeting in March will include investment over the next two years to ensure these public facilities are fit for purpose. It is also a Cabinet priority to deliver free swimming provision for those county residents under the age of 16 and as well as those over the age of 60.

To enable the local community to have sufficient time to assess the viability of taking on the operation of the closed LEA pool as a community asset, Cabinet has ensured that alternative arrangements are in place for school users and that these arrangements are operating in compliance with all relevant health and safety and best practice guidelines. Cabinet will consider any business case put forward by the community at its meeting on 2 April.

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8 Question from Mr Peter Crowther, Hereford

8 How can the council not consider reopening the Local Education Authority pool after the quality of children's teaching has substantially decreased since its closure." This is clearly evident from the fact that the amount of swimming badges completed by schoolchildren in Herefordshire has dropped from 212 badges per year to 108 per year since the pool was closed.

Answer from Councillor PD Price Cabinet Member ICT, Education and Achievement

Composite Answer:

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9 Question from Mrs Uta Clay, Hereford

9 What consultation took place with service users and carers in relation to the proposed amalgamation of the two respite units for Learning Disabled adults? Will the effect of this amalgamation be that the availability of respite will be reduced?

Answer from Councillor LO Barnett Cabinet Member Social Care Adults

9 Extensive consultation took place in 2007/08 to agree the strategic direction for service modernisation, which led to the Cabinet decision of May 2008 approving the strategic partnership with 'Midland Heart' as part of the Transformation Plan.

As a follow up to this consultation and the Cabinet decision, it was agreed that individuals would have their needs reviewed to ensure that their services were commissioned to meet those assessed needs. This process will be completed by 31 March 2009.

The Council can reassure Mrs Clay that those service users and their carers who need respite care will receive services in the new arrangements, and that specific, sensitive and careful preparation will be undertaken with families to make sure any potential disruption is kept to a minimum.

In terms of the volume of available service in the future arrangements, the Council is facing a difficult challenge to balance the increasing demand for this service from service users with increasing levels of dependency. The individual reassessments (currently underway) will clarify service users' level of need as measured by 'Fair Access to Care', and ensure that those whose needs are critical or substantial are offered an appropriate volume of service. Inevitably, there could be some service users who no longer meet the eligibility criteria, and there are certainly new service users reaching adulthood who will have critical or substantial needs.

A range of other services have also been developed to support family carers and offer alternatives to residential respite care. These include personal budgets, weekend breaks, adult placements and individual support to access local leisure and social activities.

The Council continues to look for ways in which consultation and engagement can be improved, and will undertake further discussions with the families affected over the next month.

Supplementary Question from Mrs U Clay

If the proposed amalgamation of two respite units for Learning Disabled adults goes through, how many respite beds will be lost?

Answer from Cabinet Member Social Care Adults

The exact number was not to hand, however the answer will be forwarded to Mrs Clay.

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10 Question from Ms Barbara Evans, Kings Thorn, Hereford.

10 Does responsibility for planning all bus services that will access the Edgar Street Grid transport hub rest with the County Council or the ESG company?

Answer from Councillor DB Wilcox Cabinet Member Highways and Transportation

10 The ESG Company has no responsibility for planning bus services. The services that are likely to access the proposed Transport Hub will comprise services subsidised by the Council as well as commercial services operated by bus operators. The responsibility for planning bus services will lie with the Council in respect of the services it subsidises and with bus operators in respect of commercial services.

Supplementary question from Ms Barbara Evans

When will the detailed plans for transport hub be available and how can the transport hub go ahead without these plans?

Answer from Councillor DB Wilcox Cabinet Member Highways and Transportation

Two recent displays have been put on for interested groups and put forward to the bus operators so that they are aware of the outline proposals and are able to provide comments. We will be synchronised and joined up about how public transport will operate.

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11 Questions from Ms Rebecca Gill, Hereford

I was very disappointed to learn that the LEA pool has not re-opened. I have always taken my 4 year old twins swimming and we are now feeling the impact of the closure of the LEA pool as I am finding the public baths often inaccessible because they are closed due to swimming lessons or galas. I try to take them swimming in the week as at weekends it is usually full of young people who are often boisterous and their behaviour and bad language is upsetting to my twins.

- 11.1 Why can't the LEA pool reopen for school use which would then free up the public baths for the general public?
- 11.2 People are having to take their families to Leominster, do you not agree then that Hereford is not providing enough public swimming time for them and do you not agree that Hereford is losing valuable income?
- 11.3 The Council is failing in its duty to provide adequate swimming for my children along with other members of the public, do you not agree that because of the increased school use and decreased public use, we are now being denied the right as citizens and taxpayers of Hereford to accessible public swimming sessions?

Answer from Councillor PD Price Cabinet Member ICT, Education and Achievement

Composite Answer:

11.1 – 3

Cabinet recognises the strength of feeling that continues to be expressed in support of ensuring appropriate swimming provision within the county. As a reflection of the priority Cabinet places on maintaining and developing the four public swimming facilities within the county (in the City itself and the market towns of Ledbury, Leominster and Ross on Wye), the capital programme proposals to be put before Council at its meeting in March will include investment over the next two years to ensure these public facilities are fit for purpose. It is also a Cabinet priority to deliver free swimming provision for those county residents under the age of 16 and as well as those over the age of 60.

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