

MEMBERS' QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 16 JULY 2010**Question from Councillor PJ Watts to Councillor JA Hyde Cabinet Member Children's Services***Question 1*

- 1 *With regard to Phase One of the Playbuilder Scheme which was recently completed within the recreation ground - Ledbury. However when finished in Ledbury it contained a number of defects which showed up in a Rospa report as risks of a low or medium status. As this was totally new build theoretically and practically there should have been no defects. This project was under the control of HC officers.*
- A *Does HC have a policy where responsible officer check projects like this for defects and get them corrected before signing them off?*
- B *How much was spent on this particular project in Ledbury. (The money came from a central government grant)?*
- C *Can HC confirm that when the Playbuilder project was rolled out across Herefordshire at other locations, there were problems with other finished developments – eg Bromyard?*
- D *Can HC confirm that when Playbuilder Phase 2 comes forward (with regard to budget constraints) that the same contractor Park Leisure is to be used again?*

Question from Councillor PJ Watts to Councillor AJM Blackshaw Cabinet Member Economic Development and Community Services*Question 2*

The Ledbury library project has been in place for some 3 years with £2.9 million earmarked for its future development

- A *Is Ledbury going to get a new building to primarily house the library?*
- B *If the above project is cancelled what plans are in place to re-house the library, where and when?*

Answer from the Cabinet Member Children's Services

Answer to question 1

Playbuilder funding was allocated to Ledbury Town Council as a grant towards providing play space for 8 – 13 year olds. Playbuilder has been closely monitored by Central Government, requiring Councils to take the same stance when providing grants either to Town and Parish Councils or to Community

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Groups. For this reason, whilst every project has been closely monitored, the grant recipient is ultimately responsible for liaison with their supplier.

- A Every Playbuilder project, has been inspected by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents to ensure the finished play space is complete and to provide a risk rating. (Several of the problems noted at Ledbury Recreation Ground were faults with existing parts of the space, eg damaged fencing and low tree branches) It should also be noted that Central Government is requesting a higher degree of risk and challenge in play than has been available to children in recent years, this is being achieved through design of play spaces.
- B The grant to Ledbury Town Council was £48,000.
- C As part of the final inspections a number of defects were recorded at six sites, and the installers have now corrected most or all of these. In addition there were two known acts of vandalism, one at Bromyard and the other at King George V playing fields, Hereford that occurred soon after installation.
- D If the Playbuilder budgets remain available this year it will fund grants to up to nine other organisations and five council schemes. The suppliers for these schemes have not yet been confirmed; selection would be in compliance with the appropriate procurement processes.

Answer from the Cabinet Member Economic Development and Community Services

Answer to question 2

Work is continuing on library provision for Ledbury. The work is focussing on the Masters House and the adjoining land. Given the historic and listed nature of the Masters House with its various constraints this is a complex project. Any library provision on this site will be part of a more comprehensive group of public services where residents of Ledbury can access a range of activities. Work is currently underway to assess all of the different premises and service requirements in Ledbury across all of the Public and Voluntary Sector. This work should inform the exact mix of services which can be co-located with a Library on the Masters House site.

Supplementary to Question 1

Would the Cabinet Member visit the Playbuilder scheme in Ledbury to consider whether the project has been value for money?

Answer from the Cabinet Member Children's Services

The Cabinet Member confirmed that she would be happy to meet with Councillor Watts at their earliest convenience to talk about the perceived problems relation to the Playbuilder in order that any defects are remedied if substandard.

No supplementary to question 2.

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Question from Councillor AT Oliver to Councillor JP French Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources

Question 3

What is the total cost in legal fees to the Council since 1 May 2007 of defending legal cases brought against the Council, together with the cost of defending planning appeals, and how many cases does this cover? What are the total costs awarded against the Council in these cases?

Question from Councillor AT Oliver to Councillor JG Jarvis Cabinet Member Environment and Strategic Housing

Question 4

We are advised that the target figure for 2010/11 for social and affordable housing in Hereford City is 2%. Given the scale of the housing need in Hereford City, and bearing in mind the deterioration in people's wellbeing and health when left to fester in poor housing and over-crowded conditions, has the Council considered any emergency schemes to increase the numbers of social housing completed within the next 24 months?

Question from Councillor AT Oliver to Councillor DB Wilcox Cabinet Member Highways and Transportation

Question 5

Whilst welcoming the refurbishment of Widemarsh Street, given that the total cost of this scheme is £1.4 million, for an area of 220 yards in length, which at the equivalent cost would mean a price of some £8 - £10 million to build a single track road, does the Cabinet Member believe that this scheme represents good value to Council Tax payers, at a time when the Council is contemplating cutting back on its services and staff?

Answer from the Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources

Answer to question 3

All defence costs have been recovered through awards of costs on successful cases.

The only cost incurred since 1 May 2007 is £250,129.96 on one very complex and historical property related case which remains ongoing. This case is due to come to trial in January 2011. The question of award of costs between the parties will be settled as part of the case.

The costs incurred in Planning Appeals, including judicial review, s.287 and s.288 of the Town and County Planning Act cases, are £96,300.35. There are cases still to be resolved and on which the costs may yet be recovered.

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Since May 2007 Legal Services have defended with 29 cases brought against the Council including planning appeals. These do not include defending insured claims which are dealt with by insurers. Many cases are dealt with solely by in-house lawyers and no legal costs external expenditure is incurred.

Answer from the Cabinet Member Environment and Strategic Housing

Answer to question 4

There is no 2% target. The target we are operating to in 2010/11 is 170 affordable homes across Herefordshire which is nearer 19% of the annual housing targets proposal over the 20 year plan period of the LDF as set out in the Shaping our Place consultation.

Over the 20 year plan period the average number of homes delivered is expected to be 900 new homes per annum of which a third are planned to be affordable. Approximately half of these homes are to be delivered in Hereford City.

There are no 'emergency' schemes to increase the number of social homes completed within the next 24 months and no national funding programme exists to support such a proposal. Instead we are focussing our efforts on supporting the delivery of new and innovative housing schemes, continuing to target empty properties and developing a range of pro-active planning policies through the LDF to support our ambitious plans for affordable housing growth.

Answer from the Cabinet Member Highways and Transportation

Answer to question 5

Widemarsh Street is a key retail street within Hereford city centre. The refurbishment of the street is part of the Council's capital programme and is key to supporting the growth of local business and jobs within the retail sector. The use of high quality materials will provide a much improved shopping environment and help attract more people to come to shop and do business in the city. Therefore, this scheme represents good value for Council Tax payers and looks to ensure the good connectivity between different parts of the city centre.

Supplementary to Question 3

Is the Cabinet Member able to identify the complex case which has cost the Council over £250,000 to date?

Answer from the Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources

The identity of the case would not be revealed in a public forum.

Supplementary to Question 4

On a point of clarification, the figure quoted in the question had been mistranslated and should have read 21%.

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Is it proposed to develop a scheme of 30 houses on the site of the former Hunderton School, and if so, could the site not be used for affordable social housing?

Answer from the Cabinet Member Environment and Strategic Housing

Whilst not aware of any social considerations for the site, the Cabinet Member would make enquiries and provide a full response by means of a written answer.

Supplementary to Question 5

As the cost of refurbishing Widemarsh Street has increased from £1.3m (Services Update February 2010) to £1.4m (July 2010) can assurance be provided that the project would be completed to the new budget?

Answer from the Cabinet Member Highways and Transportation

Yes, it is hoped that the project would be completed within the £1.4million budget.

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Question from Councillor RI Matthews to Councillor RJ Phillips Leader of the Council

Question 6

The Government have stated that in the near future GP practices will be given sole responsibility for overseeing £80B of front line medical care with PCTs to be scrapped. Can we be told how it is envisaged that these changes will affect the present partnership between the Council and the local PCT?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

Answer to question 6

The Government White Paper, published this week, aims to achieve improved health services and outcomes, as well as better value for money for taxpayers, and contains much that is familiar to Herefordshire. The shared vision for NHS Herefordshire and Herefordshire Council is totally consistent with the aims of the White Paper, and our values, to put people at the heart of everything we do, are also reflected in the Government's proposals.

Our ambitious direction of travel for reforming health and social care in Herefordshire is consistent with, and complements, the proposals in the White Paper which underlines the need for health and social care services to be joined up to deliver the right care at the right time in the right place, through stronger relationships between local authorities and the NHS, who will work closely together in promoting the integration of services. With our partners NHS Herefordshire, and thanks to the hard work and dedication of our staff, this is something we have been doing successfully in Herefordshire for over two and a half years, and which we will continue.

Although the White Paper envisages that PCT's will cease to exist in 2013 and indicates the transfer of a number of functions to local authorities, many of these functions will continue to be carried out in partnership with other public bodies including the GP consortia outlined by the Secretary of State.

Supplementary question

Whilst all Members have welcomed the development of the partnership arrangements in Herefordshire, it is disappointing to note that, as the benefits (both financial and otherwise) are coming to fruition, legislative changes may impact on the partnership's future. Could the Leader inform the Council of any financial implications to the Council which would arise should there be a need for the partnership to be dissolved?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

Having met with Government Ministers, they have welcomed and acknowledged the partnership arrangements which had been developed within Herefordshire. Whilst the PCT would be disbanded from 2013 and a GP consortium established, the principles which underpinned the current partnership would remain valid. There was to be a clear duty of co-operation between local authorities and such

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consortia, especially in relation to social care. More active funding of both preventative and social care would be envisaged which would, for instance, reduce problems such as bedblocking. As Herefordshire Council had worked proactively with health for several years, it was considered to be at the forefront of such developments, although it was appreciated that more work would need to be done. Ministers were seeking to meet with the Chief Executive at the earliest opportunity. Engagement with GPs was already in place within the existing partnership arrangements. Whilst it was envisaged that there would not be any financial implications as such to dissolution of the partnership, the challenge to provide service provision would remain.

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Question from Councillor TM James to Councillor JP French Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources

Question 7

Can the Cabinet Member inform Members as to the contractual position of joint management staff of the Council/PCT in the event of the PCT being abolished or its functions dramatically reduced?

Question 8

Can the Cabinet Member inform Members as to the number of agency/consultancy/acting staff paid at a rate of £500 and above per day and £700 and above per day in the last twelve months.

Answer from the Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources

Answer to question 7

Jointly managed staff have only one legal employer. Staff employed by the PCT, which will continue to exist until 2013, have employment contractual rights with the PCT and will be covered by the PCT Organisational Change policy. The same applies for staff employed by the Council in respect of the Council's change policy. Any changes required to the role and functions of employees will be dealt with under these policies as for any other organisational change. It is also worth reflecting that joint appointments are nothing new, and are commonplace across the public sector; indeed the White Paper itself presages an increase in the number of joint appointments.

Answer to question 8

The number of Interim staff paid at a rate of £500 and above per day, and £700 and above per day during the period July 2009 and July 2010 are as follows:

10	-	Over £500
5	-	Over £700

It is important to note that in paying a daily rate, the council does not carry the financial liabilities arising from employment overheads such as national insurance, pensions, tax and paid leave; interims not uncommonly work less than 5 days a week, and for short periods of time. This is a cost effective way of ensuring the capacity is in place to deliver services during periods of change whilst minimising longer term liabilities in relation to employment costs and redundancy liabilities.

Supplementary to Question 7

What are the contract arrangements in the event of the demise of the PCT and is there a guarantee that the level of remuneration would be appropriately adjusted

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accordingly? Is the Council safeguarded in respect of joint contracts or will it be liable to cover the whole salary costs?

Answer from the Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources

Joint staff have either a contract with the PCT or Council with a Service Level Agreement to provide duties to the other organisation as appropriate. Consideration would need to be given to the impact to contracts as changes took place within the partnership. It was anticipated that work would be undertaken to appropriately consider the management structure of the Council in the lead up to the demise of the PCT. The Government would also be lobbied appropriately.

In considering the changes, Members were requested to consider such impacts of the staff across the public services as many may feel vulnerable given the current circumstances.

Supplementary to Question 8

As a substantial number of people were employed by the Council for short periods in posts were currently supported by consultants the figures quoted in the response were queried.

Answer from the Cabinet Member Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources

The original response would be referred back to officers for confirmation.

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Question from Councillor SJ Robertson to Councillor JA Hyde Cabinet Member Children's Services

Question 9

- A *Following the announcement on the 10 June 2010 outlining local government savings, could the cabinet member give reassurance that the phase 2 schemes identified under the Playbuilder programme will still go ahead?*
- B *Does the cabinet member not agree that considerable time and effort has been spent by communities on these projects, including engaging with young people, and it would be unfair to withdraw the Playbuilder funding at this late stage?*
- C *It states in the Cabinet Report on the 17 June 2010 "Herefordshire is scoping the extent of contracts which will not be funded", which Playbuilder schemes does this statement relate to?*

Answer from the Cabinet Member Children's Services

Answer to question 9

Cllr Robertson will of course be aware that the government has implemented a number of in-year budget and grant reductions, accompanied by the removal of a number of grant ring-fences. Local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that the available resources are directed to meet local priorities. We are, with our partners, working to review funding allocations and until that process is complete I cannot make any commitment to funding as yet uncommitted schemes.

Supplementary Question

Given that the Playbuilder projects had been the first time for many young people to be engaged with local government, does not the possibility that this scheme won't be funded provide a negative view to young people of local democracy? The Playbuilder team were commended for their good work.

Answer from the Cabinet Member Children's Services

The huge impact of cutting £934,000 from the Department of Education section of the area based grant has required the Council to concentrate on priorities and vulnerable areas. Whilst the authority will do its best not to cut the budget altogether, the scheme is not considered a priority.

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Question from Councillor PL Bettington to Cllr AJM Blackshaw, Cabinet Member Economic Development and Community Services

Question 10

Prince William's report in the press that more than 2000 playing fields are to be created as a permanent memorial to the Queen in her Diamond Jubilee Year 2012. The Charity Fields in Trust have identified 550 sites across the UK, as they require local authorities to nominate further plots for consideration. My question to the Council is to nominate Ledbury's Football and Cricket Fields as part of the said scheme, if they are selected this will protect them for perpetuity.

Answer from the Cabinet Member Economic Development and Community Services

Answer to question 10

The Queen Elizabeth II Fields Challenge is a new program championed by Prince William to mark the Queens Diamond Jubilee. It is a landmark project designed to create a permanent and tangible legacy from the two major events in 2012, the Olympics and the Queens Diamond Jubilee. The aim of the project is to bring focus on the benefits of having accessible public open space for health and well being, community cohesion and reducing anti social behaviour by protecting and improving outdoor recreational space.

Herefordshire Council's parks service are looking at ways to take the challenge forward which will engage with local communities and provide local people with an opportunity to nominate a suitable area or areas.

No supplementary question asked.

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Question from Councillor DW Greenow to Councillor RJ Phillips, Leader of the Council

Question 11

Following the new management of Hereford United, has Herefordshire Council been in formal contact with them regarding the future?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

Answer to question 11

Yes I can confirm that I have met with the new Management of Hereford United and that the Council is working closely with them in supporting them with their future vision for the club.

No supplementary question asked.