

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 18 November 2011**Question from Mr P Mitchell, Herefordshire**

Question 1

It was recently reported in the Hereford Times that the Council will press ahead with their commitment to a new bypass for Hereford without further public consultation on the assumption that the wider council taxpaying public would support this – and by implication this priority over other capital spend options such as schools, care homes, other essential civic infrastructure maintenance or new build.

Given the adverse Council funding conditions which have been prevailing in recent years and which are likely to continue for some time (inflationary costs have risen significantly ahead of Council's funding receipts):

Can the Council justify and demonstrate the wisdom, feasibility and financial affordability of committing to its decision (and explain its assumption of public support).

This against a backdrop of confirming its first priority must always be to meet rising financial costs of maintaining essential public services and support to the vulnerable whilst at the same time also ensuring council tax payments will not be allowed to rise. Even if justifiable in this context, in the absence of suitable asset disposals this will inevitably result in reducing its available funding to meet any of its capital spend aspirations.

There has previously also been implied dependency that developer/s will be sufficiently commercially incentivized to meet a substantial proportion of the 9 figure cost of this bypass. The extent is also a highly questionable contention and equally difficult to justify and demonstrate given that unless the developer can commit to on balance sheet funding they will otherwise (in an unfavorable climate) need to seek very difficult to obtain project finance. In either event to be justifiable any such development will have to generate sufficiently attractive and financially sustainable rates of returns to cover their financing costs, overall development costs (including contribution to the bypass) against realistic and achievable asset valuations and any associated supporting income streams going forward in today's less than rosy economic climate. Always of course assuming mutual desirability of associated proposed developments – with Council meeting their civic duty to ensure they socially and responsibly achieve, not at the expense of, the wishes, aspirations, interests and needs of the people of Hereford.

The wisdom and validity of such assumptions and commitments by the Council and the dependency on the developer to deliver low risk (to the Council / Taxpayer) and suitable support in meeting what the City wants and needs must be very questionable at least for some considerable time to come. Particularly given that council taxpayers themselves are under enormous similar financial pressures and are therefore likely to find **any** increased risk of council tax rises unwelcome if not intolerable.

Answer from Councillor DB Wilcox, Cabinet Member Environment, Housing & Planning

Answer to question 1

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Whilst it is true that this administration remains committed to the delivery of a Hereford relief road, we are currently carrying out further consultation as part of the development of the Local Development Framework (LDF) for the county. This consultation includes a proposal for a preferred western route for a relief road, on which we are seeking comments. The inclusion of a route in the adopted LDF does not constitute a financial commitment by the Council; it is however an essential first step to securing funding for any such scheme and its deliverability and sources of funding will have been fully tested before the submission of the LDF to the Inspector.

Supplementary Question

Mr Mitchell reiterated his concern about the feasibility and financial affordability of the proposals for a bypass for Hereford given their dependence on housing development. Mr Mitchell sought clarification on detailed proposals for funding the road scheme and the effect on services including Council tax.

Answer from Councillor DB Wilcox, Cabinet Member Environment, Housing and Planning

The Cabinet Member stated that there were a variety of potential funding sources available and referred the questioner to his written answer. The detail of any scheme had yet to be finalised so any costing was an estimate and depending on the specification the scheme could cost from £80m-£130m. The Cabinet Member repeated his answer that sources of funding would have been fully tested before the submission of the LDF to the Inspector.

Question from Mr P McKay, Hereford

Question 2

With a year having passed since I last enquired and it still not being known which of our unsurfaced roads suffer from long term obstructions to equestrians, even though they are inspected annually on foot if need be, and our meeting subject of reply to question at May Full Council meeting being unrecorded, may I enquire if you could confirm that Council is considering modification to the roles of Highways and Rights of Way to make them more efficient and effective, so that highways undertake all surface maintenance functions, that being what they are best at, and more importantly that Rights of Way undertake all access inspections with any follow up actions, that being what they are best at, so that it will be known within 12 months which of our unsurfaced maintained and non-maintained roads are obstructed, ploughed, have broken gates, where signs would be beneficial, etc., they comprising about 30% of available equestrian routes, with appropriate action being taken in similar manner as is done for our ramblers with footpaths?

Answer from Councillor AJM Blackshaw Cabinet Member Highways, Transportation and Sustainability

Answer to question 2

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These services are provided for the Council by Amey Herefordshire. Amey are responsible for structuring their service to maximise efficiency and effectiveness; we continue to monitor outcomes achieved within the budgetary constraints existing.

Supplementary Question

Why should footpaths be maintained to a lower standard than roads?

Answer from Councillor AJM Blackshaw, Cabinet Member Highways, Transportation and Sustainability

The Cabinet Member responded that the efficiency of Amey Wye Valley's work would be monitored.

Question from Mr T Packham, Grafton, Hereford

Question 3

I refer to routes A301 SC1 and A302 SC2 in the October 2010 Amey Plan. Link SC2 runs to the south of Hayleasow Wood to avoid what is an area of Ancient Woodland and a SWS, and was the route favoured by the Study of Options Environmental Assessment Report Hereford Relief Road August 2010 (see page 51).

I am therefore very concerned about the 3rd route, shown red, that has now been hastily proposed, without any consultation with the Parish Council or local residents and which has not been assessed for its environmental impacts on the surrounding area, in particular the Ancient Woodland site.

Why has the Council re-routed the road in response to just three objections from the Haywood Lodge area, without wider consultation, and with no environmental assessment of this new proposed route?

Answer from Councillor AJM Blackshaw Cabinet Member Highways, Transportation and Sustainability

Answer to question 3

The route referred to is based on the previously safeguarded route for the former Hereford bypass scheme between the A49(S) and the A465. Consultation is underway, as part of the Local Development Framework process, on the inclusion of this route within the overall southern route corridor, and the results of that consultation will be taken into account in determining the route corridor to be included within the submission Core Strategy. The eventual route of the relief road within that corridor will only be able to be determined following further scheme engineering design and assessment.

No supplementary question

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO COUNCIL – 18 November 2011**Question from P Churchward, Breinton, Hereford**

Question 4

Can the Council confirm the value of its assets, loans and liabilities and the ratio of this figure against assets held on the balance sheet?

Answer from Councillor PD Price, Cabinet Member Corporate Services & Education

Answer to question 4

This information can be found in the Council's balance sheet at 31st March 2011, forming part of the statement of accounts presented to Audit & Governance Committee in September 2011 the papers for which are available on the council website. The Council's audited accounts have received an unqualified opinion.

Included in the liabilities figures are £145.6m loans outstanding, which is 29.7% of long-term assets.

It should be noted however, that only a relatively small proportion of borrowing is 'prudential' borrowing (the costs of which are met by the local taxpayer); the majority is 'supported' borrowing funded by other government sources. A number of factors, including movement in working capital and investment balances, influence when and how much is borrowed so it is not possible to provide a static figure for the split between the types of borrowing, or indeed the allocation of that borrowing to individual schemes; however on an assumption of average prudential borrow levels for the current capital programme, this percentage reduces to 7.5%.

Without such borrowing it would not be possible to deliver projects which are essential to the local community including: Riverside School, Leominster swimming pool, Hereford crematorium, Rotherwas relief road, enhancements to Hereford city centre, Kington library, the mortgage rescue scheme, the museum resource & learning centre at Friars Street, improvements to public toilets and improvements to disability access.

Supplementary Question

Assurance was sought that the Council would not be borrowing a further £130 m to fund the proposed Hereford relief road.

Answer from Councillor PD Price, Cabinet Member Corporate Services & Education

The Cabinet Member confirmed that £130 m would not be borrowed to build the relief road.

Question from AT Oliver, Hereford

Question 5

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In the light of the fact that violence towards women is said to be increasing; that on average one woman per week in the UK is killed by their partner; that apparently a significant number of young people believe it is alright to slap, punch, abuse a female partner for any misdemeanour and that teenage pregnancies are still increasing.

Would the Cabinet Member for Children's Services give a categorical assurance that this Council will insist on Herefordshire's secondary schools providing comprehensive sex education?

(Sex education which includes not only the biology of sex but also the issue of relationships between the sexes, which makes clear that it is not acceptable behaviour to abuse, or use violence towards your partner, and also informs young women that it is not normal to be in a relationship which involves physical violence and controlling behaviour and that society will provide help and support if they are trapped in such a relationship.)

Answer from Councillor P Price, Cabinet Member Corporate Services & Education

Answer to question 5

The Council cannot require action as requested, as the responsibility for the school curriculum, including sex and relationship education, lies with the governing bodies and head teachers of maintained schools.

Secondary schools must provide sex education (including education about HIV and AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases), and all maintained schools should teach human growth and reproduction as set out in the statutory national curriculum for science. All governing bodies must have a written statement of whatever policy they adopt on sex and relationship education and make it available to parents. The governing body and head teacher should also make sure that Personal, Social, Health and Economic education encourages pupils to consider the moral aspects of sex education and to develop loving and caring relationships.

Parents have the right to withdraw their children from all or part of any sex and relationship education provided (but not from the biological aspects of human growth and reproduction necessary under the national curriculum for science).

It should be said that whilst Herefordshire schools do adopt a strong approach the approaches taken by them are only part of the learning which children have; families and local communities also play a strong part.

Supplementary Question

Concern was expressed that unless action was taken the Council would be failing in its duty and leaving people vulnerable.

Answer from Councillor P Price, Cabinet Member Corporate Services & Education

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The Cabinet Member reiterated that this was an issue that needed to be addressed by society as a whole. The Director for People's Services encouraged appropriate behaviour both through schools and the wider society.