

Public questions to Council – 6 February 2015

Question from Mrs V Wegg-Prosser, Breinton

Question 1

Medium term financial strategy and South Wye transport package

Regarding the approved capital investment programme within the MTFs, please advise why the South Wye transport package is so called when its costings are only related to the building of the Southern Link Road.

Answer from Councillor PD Price, cabinet member infrastructure

Answer to question 1

The budget allocation within the medium term financial strategy is correctly identified as being for the South Wye transport package. It will be used, alongside other transport funding, to fund a package of transport measures in the South Wye area. The largest element of this package is of course the southern link road. However, the package also includes complementary sustainable transport measures which will be delivered in conjunction with the southern link road.

Question from Dr N Geeson, Hereford

Question 2

Medium term financial strategy and biological records

Regarding Appendix 1 of the MTFs papers for Council, please provide information as to where the hosting costs of the Herefordshire Biological Records Centre are listed in the Savings Proposal. This was allocated for the period 2015/16 to 2016/17 against some anticipated self-sustaining new funding streams, with the provision for reduced service provision, if necessary, as per Cl. 11.12 of Herefordshire Council's Annual Monitoring Report (2013-14):

P56 "11.12 The council's Planning Service is reliant on biodiversity and geodiversity data collected, managed and supplied by the Herefordshire Biological Records Centre (HBRC). The council has withdrawn direct funding for the HBRC but is continuing to cover the hosting costs. The aspiration is for the HBRC to become financially self-sustaining; it is in a process of expanding existing and developing new funding streams to this end. Should full cost recovery not be achievable, the outcome would be reduced service provision which would impact significantly on the supply and updating of environmental data to the Planning Service and to strategic biodiversity work by other organisations."

Surely the Council needs to pin-point finance for ongoing biological record-keeping for the County? Otherwise it will not have up-to-date information to assess planning applications, it will not be able to make accurate Strategic Environmental Assessments and Habitat Regulations Assessments, and it will not conform with the NPPF.

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More specifically, there are other actions referred to in the Annual Monitoring Report (2013-14) that will depend on ongoing provision of up-to-date biological information, e.g. for the Green Infrastructure Strategy (CI 11.16), for funding management plans for local wildlife sites, (CL 11.17) and for monitoring Priority Species. (CI 11.13). How will these actions be continued and funded?

Answer from Councillor PD Price, cabinet member infrastructure

Answer to question 1

The savings made in respect of the Herefordshire Biological Records Centre (HBRC) were secured in 2013 as part of the re-design of the planning, regulatory, conservation and archaeological services. These savings were accounted for in the financial year 2013/2014 which is why they are not shown in the directorate savings plans for 2015/16 and beyond.

The saving delivered as part of that review related to the council ceasing to pay an annual contribution of £20K to the running costs; it was projected that income from funding streams would replace this funding. Income generation is on track with projections in the HBRC's business plan. The council is continuing to pay for the hosting costs of the HBRC. This includes office accommodation, IT support, personnel, accountancy and corporate services. The council has also invested in building the Herefordshire Archive and Records Centre, which provides bespoke facilities for the HBRC officers and volunteers. These enhanced facilities will enable the HBRC to grow and develop. The HBRC moved into HARC this January.

The HBRC will continue to provide data to support strategy, project and policy development, making use of relevant funding streams wherever possible.

Supplementary Question

With reference again to the annual monitoring report, if full cost recovery is not achievable and service provision is reduced, how can the Council ensure that there will be accurate, complete and up to date data sets that are needed to support the Council's environmental policies and Neighbourhood Plans and to properly assess planning applications?

Answer by Councillor Price

Reductions in costs had to be made. Efficiencies had been achieved. The service would meet its commitments and if it appeared that it was not doing so a review would take place to ensure that a satisfactory level of service was provided, recognising the importance of a reliable Planning Service.