

Councillors' questions at Cabinet – 26 September 2019

Question 1

Councillor Diana Toynbee, Greyfriars Ward

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

In January 2019 I received a written answer from the previous Cabinet member for Infrastructure that the forecast spend of £2,508K for 2018/19 would, amongst other things, deliver

- Procurement of a contractor for the Southern Link Road construction and mobilisation
- Completion of the full business case for the South Wye Transport Package for submission and sign off to Department for Transport
- Development of a programme for delivery of the active travel measures.

As work has continued into this financial year, please tell me where I can find the signed and submitted full business case, the programme for the Active Travel measures and the name of the contractor for the construction of the Southern Link Road?

Response

Whilst the development of the full business case for the south wye transport package and the contractor procurement process for the southern link road progressed in 2018/2019 these were not completed as originally programmed and work extended into 2019/2020. There is therefore not yet a final business case, and approved programme of active travel measures or an appointed contractor to publish. As a result actual spend in 2018/2019 was £2.006m which was less than that forecast in January 2019 as elements of this work was reprogrammed into 2019/2020.

Work in 2019/2020 was further impacted by the purdah period and the elections in Spring 2019 and following the formation of a new administration we took some time to consider both the South Wye and Hereford transport packages to ensure they remained the best option to meet the desired outcomes and any new or emerging priorities, such as those associated with the climate emergency.

I therefore took the decision in August to pause and review this scheme and the Hereford Transport Package. My decision was called in and reviewed by the General Scrutiny Committee and I am considering their recommendations before taking my final decision.

Question 2

Councillor Roger Phillips, Arrow Ward

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

During the pause if the Cabinet member seriously considers building an eastern bridge crossing without a link between the A438 and A4103 (the Worcester and Ledbury main roads); will he establish the impact the crossing would make on the level of traffic through Lugwardine and Bartestree villages, on Cotts Lane and Lumber lane, and also in Tupsley on the Ledbury road and Hampton Dean highway?

Response

No decision has yet been taken to progress the eastern bridge scheme. If a decision were taken scheme development would include the appropriate assessment of impacts of the scheme. This would include traffic modelling and forecasting the impact of the scheme on the highway network. It is likely this would include the areas referred to in your question. Any decision regarding this scheme would be the subject of a further decision report.

Question 3

Councillor Bob Matthews, Credenhill Ward

To: cabinet member, environment, economy and skills

Owing to the fact that the county is desperately in need of a considerable number of secure and well paid jobs, can the Cabinet Member inform us of what her plans are to deal with this extremely serious situation. There are thousands of houses under construction within the county, so I am sure that she will agree that it is of paramount importance that these jobs and adequate support services are delivered without delay.

Response

Growing the economy, developing higher value sustainable employment opportunities for current and future residents is a key priority for the council. The county faces a number of significant economic challenges such as having a very low wage economy (19% below the national average weekly wage), low productivity (27% below national average Gross Value Added per head of population), and an aging population/ workforce with 24% of people 65 or over, compared to a national average of 18%.

As we set out at the Parish Summit on the 20th September, within the Corporate Plan consultation document a priority is to '*Support an economy which builds on the county's strengths and resources*'. The council continues to deliver the Invest Herefordshire economic vision, and is proactively working with the Local Enterprise Partnership and businesses to deliver the Marches Strategic Economic Plan.

In the first few weeks of the new administration we have enabled the £19 million development of the first purpose built student accommodation in Hereford and underwritten part of NMiTE's Growth Deal grant to establish teaching space on Blackfriars St. This will support the critical development of Higher Education provision in the county, developing higher level skills, retaining/ attracting younger people, creating the workforce to attract business investment. We have also approved £5m to support the continued successful development of the Hereford Enterprise Zone, establishing high quality business space to enable growth. The £9 million development of the Midlands Centre for Cyber Security and the £7 million development of business incubation space at the Shell Store remain on track to open in the summer 2020.

As per recent government announcements, the council have also secured £2m of Heritage Action Zone funding to support the development of Leominster, and up to £25m of stronger towns funding to support the development of Hereford.

We are reviewing employment land and business space needs across the wider county.

Supplementary Question

I thank the cabinet member for her report but I must point out that most of what she has mentioned was well in place with the previous administration so there is still a lot of work to do. A prosperous and sound local infrastructure is vital to deliver all the climate change and other services that this county needs so we should all be working strongly in support of that view. Could I ask how often does she meet the local business people at Rotherwas and elsewhere in the county? Also there is no mention at all of the tourist trade which I think is an extremely undervalued trade within the county that is one of our strengths. Could she take this up and try and take that forward.

Response

I have been out to the LEZ two times, I haven't yet managed to circle the actual businesses but I have had a lot of discussions with Mark Pearce and his team. Tourism now explicitly appears in one of the cabinet portfolios. Only yesterday, I was at a meeting of the Herefordshire Sustainable Tourism and Food Partnership which is drawing up a proposal to have a Herefordshire Business Improvement District (BID), which would focus on tourism businesses across the county. Despite the relatively small number of people in economic development, they do an excellent job in keeping, as much as they can, tourism on the board and they were instrumental in securing a number of capital bids recently which should help among other things with tourism.

The cabinet member undertook to look at regular reporting on job creation following clarification of the measurements Councillor Matthews was seeking.

Question 4

Councillor Nigel Shaw, Bromyard Bringsty Ward

To: cabinet member, corporate strategy and budget

The Marches LEP agenda includes an update growth deal projects. Table 3 (p24) notes that the NMiTE phase 2 (£5,660,000.00) and South Wye Transport Package (£27,000,000.00) are now high risk in relation to generating full spend by 31 March 2021.

The report notes, "The decision to undertake 'pause and review' work on the Southern link road presents the LEP with a significant risk due to the timescales involved in ensuring that £27m of Growth Deal Funding is spent by 21 March 2021."

In the LEP board meeting on the 24th September how is the Leader proposing to explain to our LEP partners how the Authority will mitigate the risk for the LEP on each project and what kind of impact does he think this situation will have on any future application for government funding by the Authority, through any source?

Response

The meeting to which Councillor Shaw refers has taken place.

South Wye Transport Package: A robust discussion took place over this issue with the case being put forward for the funding to remain in Herefordshire, and being available should a decision be made which would enable work on the Southern Link Road to start before the end of March 2021. The council, Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Department for Transport (DfT) are due to meet in October to discuss the pause and review and explore funding options,

and an additional meeting of the LEP Board is due to take place following that meeting. The South Wye Transport Package includes a wide range of active travel measures in addition to the proposed road. To date LEP partners, DfT and Midlands Connect have all been understanding of the need for a pause and review to ensure all options are considered to deliver the best outcome for the county.

NMiTE: Representatives from NMiTE attended the same meeting and will attend the same additional LEP Board meeting to present more refined plans for the next phase of their Growth Deal allocation. They have developed their plans in consultation with the council, LEP executive team and a wide range of local partners.

So far as future applications are concerned, we have been encouraged by some of the responses we have received. I think that if we continue to present strong cases, there is every reason to believe that if our proposals address the climate emergency as well as economic development, employment and housing needs, we will receive a good reception from government.

Supplementary question

I thank Councillor Hitchiner for his reply and appreciate that he remains in such good humour in respect of our relationship with the LEP. I hear that the LEP was also put in good humour by his request to change the purpose of the SWTP package into funding for electric buses, however a further result of this pleading at Tuesday's Board meeting was a resolution for LEP members to propose new projects to spend the funding currently secured by Herefordshire, quite possibly elsewhere in Shropshire or Telford and Wrekin to be submitted by end of October, after which this funding will presumably be forfeit by the Council.

I do sympathise with Councillor Hitchiner as he and his Independent group are being pulled into ever more extreme position by his Green and IOC supporters that now appear to be dictating the administration's policies. Can Councillor Hitchiner confirm that he is getting tired of leading this county towards economic stagnation and his arm is being twisted to step down as Leader in favour of a representative from one of these other groups in the coming year?

Response

A written response will be provided.

The following written response was provided.

I am sorry I wasn't present to answer in person, but thank Councillor Shaw for his concern for my welfare. I would wish to reassure him that I am delighted to have the opportunity to lead this Council in the development of its new corporate plan to address the current and future needs of Herefordshire; I do not tire easily, and certainly not when pursuing the best interests of this county. I would also like to assure him that both my arms are in their usual position.