

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 16 SEPTEMBER 2021

Question 1

From: Mr M Willmont, Hereford

To: Cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

The Council's LTP is fairly ambivalent with regard to the potential for rail freight. Notwithstanding this has the Council entered into any discussions with Network Rail, any of the freight operating companies and any local businesses, for example Heineken or Avara Foods, with respect to the use of the rail network for the transport of their goods so as to reduce HGV traffic in Hereford? If not is there any intention to do so?

Response

Thank you for this question, Mr Willmont. As a new administration we sought the views of the business community and other key stakeholders about transport priorities as part of the review of the Hereford Transport Strategy which we undertook during 2020 but rail freight was not identified as a priority focus during that consultation.

Prior to the Hereford Transport Strategy Review the council, jointly with the Marches LEP, Growing Mid Wales Partnership, Welsh Government and neighbouring local authorities, commissioned the Marches and Mid Wales Freight Strategy which was published in 2018. The strategy was developed by MDS Transmodal and included consultation with parish councils, businesses and other key stakeholders during the development of the strategy. It recognised that main existing rail freight flows to and from the Marches area are mostly construction materials, locally via Moreton-on-Lugg in Herefordshire to various locations around the country. The strategy did not see significant potential to expand rail freight locally concluding:

- "...road freight would remain the dominate mode for freight transport in the Marches and Mid Wales because of the dispersed pattern of settlement and economic activity...and issues related to the infrastructure which reduces the capacity and capability of the network to accommodation rail freight services."

Additionally the strategy also reviewed the potential for new rail freight facilities reflecting on the relative performance of the bespoke Telford International Railfreight Park:

- "...While the rail terminal at Donnington near Telford could have an enhanced role in the future, the Marches and Mid-Wales area is likely to lack the critical mass of traffic to justify the development of further rail-connected distribution parks, and the area is likely to remain reliant to a great extent on long distance road-based distribution to and from the Midlands, including to and from existing potential future rail-connected distribution parks.."

Whilst it is unclear that there is a demand for further rail freight provision amongst the business community we need as a Council to be leading on any opportunity to decarbonise transport and will be raising this issue further through our ongoing discussions with local businesses and in support of the development of the 2050 Big Plan and Hereford City Masterplan.

In addition, we have, as a new administration, been financially supporting the business case put forward by local scheme promoters for a new parkway model station at Pontrilas (provisionally suggested as a site adjacent to Pontrilas Timber Mill on the A49). The scheme promoters have had discussions with two local businesses, Pontrilas Timber and Black Mountain Quarries, both of whom have indicated an interest in transporting some materials by rail.

Question 2

From: Ms M Albright, for Herefordshire Construction Industry Lobby Group

To: Cabinet member, housing, regulatory services, and community safety and cabinet member, environment and economy

The Herefordshire Construction Industry Lobby Group (HCILG) are committed to and support the wider objective of Carbon Zero development across all sectors within Herefordshire. However, having only just seen the Net Zero Carbon Affordable Housing Standard Draft, we were hoping that councillors would be able to offer more clarity on the purpose and intended use of this document?

Response

Dear Mrs Albright, these are the standards we intend to adopt for all housing that we will build as a council ourselves. The purpose of the document is to ensure that all Herefordshire Council built housing from hereafter will now be net zero carbon. The intended use of the document is therefore to guide all stakeholders involved in our council's housing programme as to the required standards.

Recognising the urgent need to respond to the climate and ecological emergency and our council's commitment to net zero by 2030, we aim to lead by example in driving up new building standards. These standards will therefore apply to all housing built by Herefordshire Council, but we are also keen to encourage all housing developers to adopt net zero standards themselves and hope the Herefordshire Future Homes Standard will inspire private developers to improve building standards too. We will also shortly be consulting on an Environmental Building Standards SPD that will provide guidance and encouragement to improve the standards of all new buildings in Herefordshire. We are keen to work with all industry stakeholders to address the challenge of the climate crisis and the opportunity of the transition to net zero.

Question 3

From: Mr B Albright, Herefordshire

To: Cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

Natural England have recently confirmed:

It is our view that it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to meet water quality targets on the river without some action on agriculture. Furthermore, it would not be in accordance with the concept of Fair Share, that sets out parameters for the contribution that each sector might reasonably be expected to make towards resolving the nutrient problem. An action plan for housing alone would not help in allowing development to go

ahead, as it could not demonstrate with certainty that water quality targets will be achieved on the river.

Which clearly shows that housing actions (ie wetlands and criteria) are not sufficient to restore the river as housing phosphate pollution is too small to be meaningfully reduced. NE are clearly expecting certain and effective phosphate reduction contributions from agriculture in order to release housing, tourism and commercial development projects. The moratorium has strangled our business for more than 2 years- what plans does the council have to bring forward phosphate pollution reduction from the agricultural sector and is this a priority?

Response

Thank you for your question. I am aware of some of the correspondence between the officers and the Herefordshire Construction Lobby Group and am also aware that the officers have been liaising with Natural England on this very same matter. Additionally, we have sought further legal advice to clarify our position on this.

It is our view that the greatest impacts upon the Wye catchment which will enable the River Lugg to attain 'favourable condition status' by 2027 will be through tackling agriculture. This is why Herefordshire Council continues to lobby central government and will continue to seek funding assistance for the Environment Agency. Unfortunately the council does not regulate the agricultural sector and your questioning would best be redirected to either the Environment Agency of Defra itself. That said, we have and will do all we can to lobby government for change. We have also instigated cross border discussions with our colleagues at Powys Council, have worked very hard to get our MPs involved in understanding and focussing on the pertinent issues of reduced resources for the regulatory and statutory bodies and we have led engagement with the NFU to encourage all sectors to understand the scale of the problem and identify a pathway to betterment.

The current redrawing of the Council's local plan, the Core Strategy, allows us a further opportunity to consider what we can do to make changes to the way the County is built on and farmed.

Supplementary question

It is encouraging to hear that the Council agrees with Natural England in that the greatest positive impact upon river ecology restoration in the Wye will come from changing agricultural practice. However, as we enter the third year of a crippling housing moratorium we remain deeply concerned that the punishment for the cumulative issues within the agricultural sector are being borne by local construction companies and rural communities.

Can the council explain why their planning moratorium is only applied to housing and commercial development in the Lugg catchment and clarify if there are any plans for the moratorium to be extended to the wider catchment and to agricultural developments?

Response

The cabinet member explained that there were no plans to extend the moratorium and that the requirements in terms of neutrality or investment in terms of phosphate load were put in place by Natural England. He also highlighted that the first wetland should shortly be online as part of the council's efforts on mitigation. The council had had discussions with Natural England, the Environment Agency and local MPs in relation to source apportionment between agriculture and housing and the council continued to press national agencies on this issue.