

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 5 October 2023

Question 1

Mrs E Morawiecka – Breinton, Hereford

To: Cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

Regarding reopening of Pontrilas station Councillor Price said "I would be unwilling to saddle the council with the additional financial risk that building a new station would present at this time," despite the support of Transport for Wales, and the local MP. Worcester Parkway station opened February 2020 and is already performing way ahead of schedule with 544,270 journeys made from the station between April 2022 and March 2023 – the kind of volume not expected to be achieved for at least another eleven years. The last transport project Councillor Price oversaw cost taxpayers 25% more than budget and failed to deliver the Hereford Transport Hub.

Where is the evidence to justify allocating £12.3million on a new road scheme will offer better value for money, have lower financial risk, and comply with Council Policy on Climate, than opening the Pontrilas station?

Response

The reopening of Pontrilas station is a priority for this Council, and my role as Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Transport, working with my colleagues, is to facilitate discussions with all local, regional and national stakeholders, including Midlands Connect, the Department for Transport and Network Rail, to make the case for this station, benefitting not only the rural areas of the Golden Valley but to the wider county and the region, by improving connectivity within the County and beyond.

I have already met with representatives from Midlands Connect, and set out our ambitions for improving infrastructure across the County, and beyond. With the formation of the new Marches Forward Partnership, which brings together the Leaders of Herefordshire, Monmouthshire, Powys and Shropshire, we will take every step to explore and promote the project as a priority for future cross-border working

A proposal was submitted to Government to reopen Pontrilas station, as part of the Restoring Your Railway programme, and the response received has provided a number of issues that need further consideration, and I will continue to work with partners to strengthen that case. The original outline business case was very clear on the benefits the reopening of the station would bring, including better access to jobs and health care provision, as documented in the outline business case, including -

- enhance the catchment of Herefordshire Colleges
- 'level up' the local economy
- reduce road traffic in the city of Hereford
- reduce car-parking pressure at Hereford and Abergavenny stations;
- address the decarbonisation agenda by reducing the car mileage associated with accessing long-distance rail services, or driving all the way to one's destination

During a review of the Capital Programme, we have identified an opportunity to invest in essential infrastructure in the County, and the allocation of £12.3m will enable us to develop the necessary business cases, and review this in line with the 2021 South Wye Transport Package report

The council will consider every opportunity to promote a choice of travel for the residents in Herefordshire. Pontrilas offers the potential to improve our transport infrastructure, now and in the longer term.

Supplementary question

“Thank you, it is excellent to hear that Pontrilas Railway station is a priority for the Council, especially as the new station is likely to cost much less than the £12.3 million that Cabinet today is recommending be allocated for developing a business case for a new road.

Worcester Parkway Station had an outline Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of 3.54. With 3 times the number of passengers using Worcester Parkway than forecast, the actual BCR achieved is even higher. Opening Pontrilas station is likely to have a BCR of 3 or higher, whilst meeting so many other Council policy objectives, including tackling climate change and transferring heavy freight from road to rail.

In comparison, the Southern Link Road was estimated to have a BCR of 2.0, based on 2014 cost estimates. The Treasury Green Book recommends that when comparing alternative capital projects those with the highest BCR should be progressed ahead of those with lower BCRs.

With Pontrilas Station a priority of this Council, would the Cabinet member please explain the evidence which justifies the recommendation for £12.3 million to be allocated not to the Pontrilas station project, but to developing a new road project, which offers a lower return, poorer value for money to the taxpayer and none of the benefits you have mentioned?”

Supplementary Response

Thank you for your supplementary question. The BCRs are of different projects and further work is required to confirm the BCR for the Pontrilas site and our role as a Council is to support the partners that will ultimately deliver that scheme. We will work with Network Rail and transport for Wales to help form and develop a business case.

Question 2

Victoria Wegg-Prosser, Breinton, Hereford

To: Cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

Councillor Price assured Cabinet (28.9.23) that ‘due process’ will be followed as regards the SLR and the Western bypass which he proposes to revive. ‘Due process’ in 2020 revealed these projects to be inadequately costed, in conflict with climate emergency targets, and likely to achieve minimum traffic reduction in the City of Hereford. Cabinet is now being asked to endorse the transfer of £12.3MN Current Capital funds away from critical programmes such as Partnership Activities, Fastershire and Super Hubs to the SLR proposals, all three weeks in advance of the ‘due process’ of deliberating a Key Decision for the SLR. Is this an example of Councillor Price following ‘due process’?

Response

I can confirm that due process will of course be followed, and the allocation of £12.3m budget for the Southern Link Road will ensure the Council has allocated funds to commence the Strategic Outline Business Case.

The report on the Cabinet agenda – Capital Programme Review and Update sets out the rationale for changes to specific projects and programmes, and how these funds would be reallocated. Subject to the decision of Cabinet, and approval by full Council, governance and decision making requirements will be followed before any spend commences against these budgets.

No supplementary question