

COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 5 October

Question 1

Councillor Hitchiner, Stoney Street

To: Cabinet Member, Transport and Infrastructure

Am I to take it that Cllr Price is asking the Cabinet to start a journey to gain approval to spend up to £12.3m on a project before it is known whether or not that project has a business case in support, and whether, even with a good business case, finance may not be available to complete it?

There is no obvious rush which requires a decision to be made in this extremely risky.

Can he please follow the example of the previous administration and make decisions based on a current business plan and up to date evidence rather than take the huge risks which this proposal represents?

Response

Subject to the decision of Cabinet, and the support of Full Council to approve the proposed changes to the Capital Programme, we will of course ensure the necessary business cases are presented as part of the decision making process. The proposal to allocate £12.3m is part of that process to ensure we are able to deliver on those commitments.

Supplementary question

The Cabinet report states the £12.3m budget is to enable land negotiations to comment and initial works to start all before a business case is developed. In his reply Councillor Price does not categorically say that initial work's will not start until a business case has been approved. I will be disappointed if Cabinet members accept the report which allowed such work to start. Several Cabinet members were portfolio holders during the last administration when Blueschool street fiasco occurred. Secondly there was the inner Link Road which not only built a costly road, it also failed to deliver the transport hub. Thirdly, the failed procurement process for the SRR in 2018/19 which Councillor Price should accept some responsibility. Fourthly, the poor value for money for the BBLP contract. Lessons are contained in the internal audit reports copies of which I suggest Cabinet members read so they can learn from their previous mistakes. The administration I headed spent a lot of effort on putting in place procedures so there would not be a repeat. The last conservative administration do not have a good record, and the ability to spend £12.3m before a full business case is developed does not fill me with confidence. Would Cabinet amend the proposal today so that it clearly states that no money will be spent on works on the ground until a full business case is accepted by Council and the money to complete the project is available and guaranteed? That would surely be a better practice. We do not want another HS2 type disaster in Herefordshire.

Supplementary Response

Thank you for your question. I will dispute the facts that some of the contents you say, and I am absolutely categorical about the inner relief road, that was not overspent, it was within budget. With the change to the current funding in the capital budget, that money is put into the capital budget so that we can do the necessary work to get the business case brought forward for the delivery of what is a priority for the Council and that is to build the South Wye relief road and we do it with the process. Your administration will be involved in the process just the same as we have been, ever since this Council has been formed. My answer at this moment in time, is that

money is there to ensure the processes go forward and are suitably funded. We will not be building that road until we have secured the funding for it.

Question 2

Councillor Toni Fagan, Birch Ward

To: Cabinet member, Adults, Health and Wellbeing

The removal of Talk Community hub funding from the Capital Programme is a blow to many community groups. Volunteers are on their knees trying to support their communities whilst the state of our community infrastructure crumbles. Since the pandemic most grants have been revenue based to enable the roll-out of additional support and services – meanwhile roofs leak and buildings fall into disrepair – diverting precious voluntary time and energy into trying to keep structures functional for the communities they serve.

Could you please tell me:

1. How many expressions of interest there were for the Hubs Capital Grant Scheme ?
2. The percentage of those expressions of interest which related to the key aims of the Herefordshire Wellbeing Strategy: a) The best start in life for children and b) Good mental wellbeing?

Response

Talk Community remains a key strand of the council's work to support individuals and communities to help themselves and help each other. There are 75 hubs across the county of various sizes based within communities. When this capital money was allocated by the previous administration to create Super Hubs, expressions of interest (EOIs) were invited from all local organisations, not just Talk Community Hubs, to deliver a broader range of integrated and co-located services close to local communities, such as health, counselling, midwifery, health visiting, mental health services and physiotherapy and possibly confidential meetings/clinics.

43 EOIs were submitted in total, far more than would be capable of being funded from the capital allocation. In all cases, I recognise the significant amount of work that people have put into developing their EOIs and I understand the disappointment.

Whilst a few organisations submitted an EOI focusing mainly on repair to their buildings with no added value, it is important to be clear that the money was never intended to be used to cover the costs of existing activities at Talk Community Hubs or to pay for the maintenance or repair of the premises in which they operated. It was, as the title states, to potentially create Super Hubs across the county.

We want to be absolutely sure that any funding will bring a real benefit to communities and that is why we are undertaking a wider, strategic review of the Talk Community approach. The recommendation to take the funding out of the coming year's Capital Programme does not mean that we are dismissing the idea of Super Hubs and I can assure members and those organisations who made their submissions that once we have a better understanding of what is being delivered, how many people it is reaching, where the gaps are etc. we will look again at the Super Hub proposal.

In response to the final part of the question, I can confirm that the EOI did not specifically ask applicants to address the key aims of the Herefordshire Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy. However, 20% of applicants stated they would provide services for 0-5 year olds with 51% of applications stating they would provide mental health support services.

Supplementary question

The expressions of interest show that, despite not even being asked to meet the key aims of the Wellbeing Strategy – the best start in life and mental wellbeing (themes emerging out of our crisis with children and the impact of covid on our communities) – Community groups are well primed and willing to deliver these aims – with some capital investment.

The Community Paradigm intends to empower our community sector to strengthen the fabric of our society, providing Universal Care and making it resilient to future shocks. I would suggest you are literally throwing the baby out with the bathwater because the papers say that Super Hub funding is not in line with current priorities.

Can you confirm that strengthening our beleaguered but vital Third Sector, during a crisis in children and families and mental health following the pandemic, is no longer a priority? If it is- what alternative action will we see to support this sector?

Supplementary Response

Thankyou Councillor Fagan. My original response confirms that we are committed in supporting residents and communities, and the community and voluntary sector is integral to that work. The recently approved health and wellbeing strategy identifies a best start in life and good mental health as key priorities to the county. As chair of the health and wellbeing board, I'll be ensuring that those priorities are actively address for the benefit of individuals and communities. The super hubs proposal has not been dismissed but the wider strategic review of talk community that I referred to in my original response is key to us developing a better understanding of what is being delivered and where there may be gaps in order to ensure that any future funding will bring real benefits to the county and the residents of the county.