

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 26 October 2023

Question 1

Dr Nichola Geeson – Hereford

To: Councillor Bramer, Community Services and Assets

The Maylords is an ideal location for a new Library, being central, close to frequently-used shops, and beside the Job Centre, so ideal for people researching employment opportunities. A new Library could open there in April 2024. We read: “The cost of moving the library service from Broad Street to either Maylord Orchards or Shirehall will require an increase in budget as the footprint for the library in both locations will be greater. For Maylord Orchards, the increase was estimated at £515,973 and for the Shirehall £390,077”. If this is the basis for preferring the Shire Hall, it is very misleading. Why is it not made clearer that £4.2million needs to be spent on renovating the fabric of Shire Hall before it can even open its doors again, and that the earliest a new Library could open is June 2026?

Response

Thank you for the question.

You are correct that the Shirehall does require investment to enable the library and learning centre to be located there and bring the building back into use. This is noted in the report.

The additional revenue running costs for the library service are set out in the report for completeness. However, there are many other reasons why the Shirehall is recommended as the preferred location as it would:

- bring a valuable heritage asset back into community use
- make more visible the civic, communal and built heritage of Shirehall, connecting to the wider cultural and visitor attraction aspirations of the city
- deliver 895m² total floor space, which includes a 435m² Library footprint, 174m² Learning Centre footprint and 286m² back of house, circulation and other space.
- maximise the potential to integrate the library, adult learning, health and wellbeing and other community services under one roof
- provide residents with new access to sensory learning, digital skills lounge, makerspace and business development advice in a series of dedicated spaces (these resources would not be achievable at Maylord Orchards due to space limitation)
- provide a dedicated events space on the Assembly Hall stage to enable the delivery of a broad-ranging and quality cultural programme to widen participation
- generate income through hire of spaces and events and programmes in the Assembly Hall (income to library service plus income provided to Property Services from hire of training rooms)
- retain the earmarked space in Maylord Orchards for commercial purposes

It does mean that the library would reopen in June 2026 but temporary arrangements will continue to be put in place to enable residents to access the services.

Supplementary question:

Thank you for your reply to my Question, but I do not find your reasons for preferring the Shire Hall over The Maylords compelling. In a City with so many empty retail properties I believe

putting the Library in The Maylords would actually be a magnet to increase interest in retail and commercial opportunities nearby. My Supplementary Question is to ask whether you have now calculated the extra space available at The Maylords as a result of Wilco leaving, which would surely invalidate your argument that there is slightly greater space at Shire Hall?

Supplementary response:

Thank you for the question. I am delighted to be able confirm we currently have commercial interest in the Wilco unit and are seeking to bring those interests into a formal letting.

Question 2

John Harrington – Hereford

To: Councillor Price, Transport and Infrastructure

Can I ask Cllr. Price where is the Strategic Outline Business Case for ERIC, the Eastern Crossing at Rotherwas, that was supposed to land in Spring - by anyone's calculations, 5 months ago?

And can I ask if Cllr. Price has any objections to the Eastern Crossing which will deliver a bridge more quickly, more efficiently and for less environmental and financial cost and which was agreed as policy by Full Council and has been championed by opposition members such as Cllr. Bob Matthews, the business community and our MP.

Response

Whilst I have no doubt that the Eastern River Crossing, in providing a second bridge over the River Wye, would add some resilience to the highway network I continue to believe that the city's economy and need for housing would be better served by a western bypass. This would provide a complete alternative alignment for the A49 trunk road, thereby removing traffic from the city and handing responsibility for local accessibility and traffic improvements back to the council for the current route.

The Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) includes an updated cost estimate for the scheme. Far from the original £56m cost estimate from last year, anticipated project costs would be in the region of circa £150m. The SOBC does not include a benefit cost ratio calculation – this is normally carried out at a later stage - so the scheme's value for money is uncertain but it clearly no longer looks such an attractive proposition as is suggested.

When the final report has been received, it will be presented to Cabinet for consideration, but I do not see any value in publishing it out of context until we fully understand all the options open to us.

Supplementary question

My follow up question for Cllr Price.

Thank you very much for your response Philip and your clear statement around housing which leads me again to believe that a Western bypass is not a bypass but meant primarily to be an access road to accommodate an enormous amount of housing on Grade 1 farm land around the Huntingdon and Bobblestock areas. You will note Worcester's failed policy of more and more roads paid for by huge housing estate infill which has caused them to have significantly worse congestion than Hereford - according to the company that supplies traffic data to Google, INRIX - I think resilience, not housebuilding, is the best case for a new bridge and all signs point East.

Can you tell me precisely what we are waiting for in the Aecom Eastern Crossing "final report" nearly half a year after it landed on your desk? Does its release need to be achieved via a Freedom of Information request?

Can I also check you and your Cabinet colleagues think it is a good idea to take over the maintenance of a national trunk road bridge that had a provisional lifespan of 60 years at a point that is likely to be a few years past that 60 year lifespan projection? National Highways will think all their Xmases have come at once if they can dump that liability on the County.

Finally can I finally ask you to check with the CX and the MO the rules around due process. You appear to have not only neglected to allocate any funding in the forward capital programme for agreed Council policy, like the Eastern Crossing, but are pressing for funding for items that are not agreed policy. I am extremely concerned that you are putting the Council at reputational and financial and risk of judicial review by appearing to be proceeding against policy.

Supplementary response:

Thank you for the question. As there is so much in it we will require 10 days to come up with a full answer. With regards to everything asked, there are two points I would absolutely refute. I don't know why you think I have had this report, because I have not and this is the first place I've heard anything about the A49 trunk road being handed to the Council.

Full supplementary response:

I note your comments regarding the Western Bypass and, as I am sure you will appreciate, it is the Local Plan, and our need to provide housing land, that drives the requirement to provide transport links and not vice versa.

With regards to the Eastern Crossing, I refer you to my original answer. The AECOM report puts forward a shortlist of route options that, at this early stage, appear to be technically feasible but at a significantly higher cost than that previously estimated. Given this, the scheme no longer offers the value for money that was originally envisaged.

In the interests of understanding the best way to provide greater highway resilience and to support the economy and future growth of Hereford, the administration is rightly considering all the options available to it. There is nothing to hide in the AECOM report, but publishing it ahead of any decision on the way forward could therefore be considered premature.

The construction of a second river crossing to the west of the city does not suggest the de-trunking of the current A49. Any decision to take on responsibility for Greyfriars Bridge would come only after a full assessment of its condition and agreement with National Highways of a commuted sum needed for its future maintenance. National Highways has confirmed that the bridge is in good condition and that its current maintenance regime will ensure it remains so for decades to come.

A report will be presented to Cabinet on 21st December that will set out how we are to move the Southern Link Road, Western Bypass and Eastern River Crossing forward during the course of this administration.

I will, of course, ensure that whatever we do is in line with the council's governance processes.