

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 25 January 2024

Question 1

Herefordshire Construction Industry Group, Hereford

To: Councillor Swinglehurst, cabinet member for environment

Herefordshire Council recently stated that new homes are responsible for around 0.023% of the phosphorous load in the Wye.

It is estimated (by HC) that local housing providers will need access to around 800kg of phosphorus mitigation, in order to meet the councils next decade of housing obligations.

Welsh Water will have removed more than 14,000 kg of phosphorus per annum by 2025, part of the 23,000kg they will have removed across the wider Wye Catchment.

Does the cabinet think that it is sensible or fair to maintain a housing moratorium in the Lugg - or to expect expensive and elusive mitigation - from a sector whose nutrient contribution is negligible, and more than covered by the water company?

Response

The Council acknowledges that point source pollution from development is only a small percentage of the overall source of pollution. However the **Habitats Regulations** require the Council, by law, to undertake an assessment to demonstrate with scientific certainty that no plan or project will add further nutrient pollution to the river.

The Council has both sought legal advice on this requirement and lobbied in central government. As this legislative requirement still stands we have developed strategic mitigation in the form of the wetlands, Luston is already operating, in order to be able to trade Phosphate credits to mitigate the nutrient load of development. Our intention is to continue with developing further sites and to introduce Package Treatment Plants at a number of locations that will further help to mitigate phosphate pollution.

Supplementary question

Thank you. Unfortunately this doesn't answer the question.

Credits remain elusive and glacial.

We worry that Herefordshire Council controls all aspects of mitigation – what is done, who gets credits, when and how much they cost.

Powys and Monmouthshire CC plan to use Welsh Water's upgrades as mitigation. Following amendment NC77 to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 all other English counties will do the same.

As an English county with a Welsh operator Herefordshire is excluded – so is significantly disadvantaged, despite new housing needing so little mitigation.

Could HC seek legal and Govt. advice regarding Welsh Water mitigation capacity?

Would HC meet with HCILG to discuss the situation in more detail so we can better understand and help one another?

We desperately need urgent support and presumably the council needs the money, homes and jobs HCILG generate?

Supplementary response

Thank you for the question. I am really sorry that they feel the credit allocation process is glacial. The planning team are working hard to deliver mitigation for schemes that have been on hold for the longest on a first in first out basis. Close to 600 houses have been released so far. As soon as we're able to commence the project planning for the additional mitigation measures outlined in our original response then I'm assured we will have sufficient mitigation in place for development beyond 2030. With respect to the approach adopted by our neighbours in Wales. Our understanding is that funding has been secured by Monmouthshire Council in addition to the requirements of AMP 8 to upgrade wastewater treatment works at two sites in Monmouth and Llanfoist and this enabled further development linked to these works to be permitted. In Herefordshire we've launched the environment advice service which allows developers to propose their own private mitigation scheme and this would then be included as part of the development agreements which means that council is not going to be the sole provider of credit allocations going forward. Herefordshire Council recognises that the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act (2023) seeks to address the issue of growth through applying further funding to upgrade wastewater treatment works across the country but Herefordshire is at a particular disadvantage in this respect. We drew this to the attention of Therese Coffey the former Environment Minister during her visit to the county and an action plan specific to the River Wye was proposed. In light of the change of Minister the Council will be making further representations to government to once again highlight this issue. I am of course more than happy to meet with Ms Albright and the Construction Industry Lobby Group to further discuss this issue.

Question 2

Mr David Stephenson, Ledbury

To: Councillor Stoddart, cabinet member for finance and corporate services

How can Herefordshire Council justify the proposition of yet another 4.99% Council Tax increase, at a time when many hard working families are already struggling. While at the same time approving large pay rises and bonuses for it's top bosses?

At what point will Herefordshire Council realise and understand that continuously passing it's shortfalls in funding, via maximum Council tax increases to it's residents, is callous, unfair, and most importantly unsustainable to the residents of Herefordshire?

While I appreciate that Councils have encountered wide spread cuts from central Government. The answer simply cannot be year upon year, to effectively pass these cuts onto the residents of Herefordshire, that you are supposedly elected to represent. This knee jerk reaction is quite frankly laziness or down right incompetence by those managing finance within the Council.

Response

Despite significant financial challenges, linked to rising inflation and unprecedented increases in demand for adult and children's social care, the Council has achieved a balanced budget position for 2024/25.

The £207.7 million budget for 2024/25 includes demand and cost pressures of £43.3 million. The proposed increase in council tax is one of the measures, along with delivery of £19.5 million in savings and efficiencies across council services, to balance the budget and secure the delivery of key services in the future.

The Council relies on income from Council Tax, alongside other funding sources from Government, to deliver services across the county. The Council recognises the challenging financial climate and its impact on individuals and we continue to provide support to households

in hardship. In addition, the Council Tax Reduction Scheme continues to provide support to those most in need with more than 11,000 households expected to receive 100% discount on their council tax through this scheme – paying no council tax at all. The scheme provides support to eligible households regardless of their council tax banding. The 2024/25 budget includes additional sources of income generation and transformation activity to further limit the pressure on local tax raising and to manage our financial challenges internally as much as possible

Question 3

Hannah Currie, Hereford

To: Councillor Powell, cabinet member for children and young people

The 2024/25 Budget, Medium Term Financial and Treasury Management Strategy – Revenue report (Agenda No. 7) mentions the Herefordshire Children's Services Improvement Plan.

It is concerning that the Improvement Plan on the council's website is dated 19th December 2022 when a newer version (dated 7th June 2023) was presented six months ago to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee meeting on 18th July 2023.

Given two Nolan Principles are Openness and Accountability. Can the cabinet please confirm what is the date of the most recent version of the Herefordshire Children's Services Improvement Plan and will it be linked to the webpage:

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/social-care-support/childrens-services-improvements>

by 31st January 2024?

Response

Thank you for your question. You quite rightly point out that the improvement plan was signed off and published in December 2022 which was the date that it was submitted to Ofsted, following the inspection in July 2022.

The Improvement Board receives regular updates, rather than substantive changes to the Improvement Plan (which has not changed significantly in the past 12 months).

In response to your question though we will publish the most recent version of the document that was presented to the Improvement Board (November 2023), incorporating the progress update on our website before 31st January.

You might also like to know that we plan to refresh the Improvement Plan in the Spring this year.

Question 4

Christina Price, Hereford

To: Councillor Durkin, cabinet member for roads and regulatory services

In view of the obvious dangers of potholes with poor road stability for road users why does the Council continue to throw multiples of money at LED and 5G installations which the people of Herefordshire have neither requested nor been made aware of unresearched dangers ?

Why are our roads disregarded when it applies to our safety?

Response

In answer to the question, we would advise Ms Price that the Council completed a county wide scheme to introduce LED street lighting across the county prior to 2020, so has not been investing in this area recently, other than where maintenance is required. With regard to 5G installations, this is not something that the Council has delivered nor does it form a part of our investment strategy at this time.

In terms of Ms Price's comments about road defects, we would always encourage her to report any issues online via our My Herefordshire portal so that we can arrange for them to be looked at. Our network is managed in line with the Council's Highways Maintenance Plan, this provides the Council with clear guidance as to how defects on the network are categorised and repairs instructed. The Plan also sets out the minimum standards for our highways safety inspections, these are used to satisfy our statutory obligations contained with the Highways Act 1980.

On an annual basis, we would note that considerable investment is made into Herefordshire's highway network. By the end of the 2023/24 financial year, £25.7 million will have been invested across the county's public realm in terms of maintenance and improvement work, from filling potholes and resurfacing roads, to sweeping our streets and cutting grass, through to keeping our network moving in extreme weather conditions by sending out our fleet of gritters. Supplementing additional central government funding, more local investment is being made by the Council in 2024/25 and which will see total additional spend of £16.8 million on our highway network should the budget be approved in February. It is anticipated that at least £11m of investment will be made in carriageway works, ranging from surface dressing to full resurfacing.