

Agenda item no. 6 - Questions from members of the Council

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
MQ1	Cllr Toni Fagan, Birch	<p>https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/directory/23/changes-to-public-rights-of-way/category/44</p> <p>There are 50 footpaths under temporary closure orders, including 28 bridges needing repairing, some dating back to 2018.</p> <p>OC10 in Orcop, closed since Feb 2020, is a vital link through the parish.</p> <p>According to the Destination Management Plan for Rural Herefordshire tourism is worth half £billion to our economy (9% of county employment). Walking rural Herefordshire contributes substantially to this economy, is important to the leisure and wellbeing of our residents, and provides important routes connecting rural communities.</p> <p>The administration has acknowledged that urgent investment is needed in our footpath assets. When is that investment likely to impact the 50 closed footpaths and bridges?</p> <p>Does the PROW team have sufficient capacity and resources to deliver this work?</p> <p>If not, how will this be addressed ensuring repairs can be undertaken at pace to get footpaths reopened and bridges repaired?</p>	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
<p>Response:</p> <p>Public Rights of Way is an area that the Council needs to invest in given the challenges that we face in dealing with such a large network.</p> <p>There is a proposal in the budget to invest further in the Public Rights of Way network from this April and that investment will be used to address the challenges and issues we face and our ambitions to develop the network.</p> <p>In terms of capacity and resource, the Council is currently out to tender for local contractors to assist with the delivery of works and the team is intending to use them from April.</p> <p>Separately, I am pleased that a Public Rights of Way Volunteer Development Officer started with us last month. This Officer will play an important role in enabling our volunteer cohort to undertake works, to an agreed standard.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question:</p> <p>I'm pleased that local contractors will be involved in the repairs to bridges and footpaths. Can you confirm please that Balfour Beatty will not be relied upon to deliver these works? Also, at the Local Access Forum meeting recently it was reported that there was 72 outstanding council projects. In this</p>			

current financial year £200k was allocated by the previous administration towards footpaths. Please can I have a project specific breakdown in writing of how this funding was spent and what the barriers were to the funding having an impact on the PRoW network in this instance?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member transport and infrastructure:

A written response would be provided.

Written response provided on 23 February 2024:

The framework that is currently out to tender will allow Officers to compare against Balfour Beatty and identify the delivery approach that offers the best value for money to the Council for works on the Public Rights of Way network.

Opportunities to allocate the £200k are being worked up by Officers and if necessary any underspend will be carried over to the next financial year.

MQ 2	Cllr Matthew Engel, Golden Valley South	<p>I am pleased that the Lengthsman Grant Scheme is being continued by the present administration. Could the Cabinet Member explain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the qualifying criteria are for parishes to participate in the scheme? • how do you calculate each parish's grant allocation – clarifying in particular whether there a difference for urban and rural parishes? And • what changes in allocation are being made for 24-25 – clarifying whether there is an adequate increase for inflation or a real terms cut? 	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
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Response:

For the 24-25 Lengthsman Scheme, a sum of £60 per KM of C and U road network will be awarded to Parish Councils. Parish Councils can also submit a request for match funding as follows:

Urban Parishes: Any Parish Council could choose to allocate funding from its precept and then Herefordshire Council will match this on a £2 parish, £1 HC basis. There is a cap set at £100 per km for the HC match. For example, a parish that has 10km of eligible network and chooses to allocate £2000 parish precept will receive an additional £1000 of HC match.

Utilising match funding means that an urban parish could allocate up to £400 per km to carry out Lengthsman type work

Rural Parishes: Where the Parish chooses to allocate funding from its precept then Herefordshire Council will match this on a £1 parish, £1 HC basis. There is a cap set at £60 per km for the HC match. For example, a parish that has 10km of eligible network and chooses to allocate £600 parish precept will receive an additional £600 of HC match.

Utilising match funding means that a rural parish could allocate up to £180 per km to carry out Lengthsman type work

In terms of the allocation for 2024/25, I am pleased to say that there is a proposal within the budget to increase the funding by £250k. It should be noted that the amount of Parish Councils taking part in the scheme ultimately determines whether the £60 per km base sum can be increased.

MQ 3	Cllr David Hitchiner, Stoney Street	<p>The Children’s Directorate has not only overspent significantly in the last two financial years by nearly £20m, but in 2023-24 is so far forecasting to deliver NONE of its £4.5m savings. These were due to come from reducing the number of agency staff employed and the number and cost of Looked After Children.</p> <p>Both the Scrutiny Management Board and Children’s Scrutiny Committee have made it clear that, without there being any evidence of such in-year savings being declared, it is unsafe to balance this council’s budget by presuming that Children’s Directorate will deliver £2.5m savings – particularly with the delivery profile suggested – in 2024-25.</p> <p>Before this council considers your 2024-25 budget, will the Cabinet Member for Children’s and the Cabinet Member for Finance each confirm that the Q3 Performance Report (completed in Dec 23) will include LAC and Agency Staff savings.</p>	Cabinet member children and young people
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Response:

The Children & Young People Directorate Delivery Plan 2024/25 was presented to the Scrutiny Management Board at its meeting held 10 January 2024. The Plan detailed the proposed savings and profile of delivery in 2024/25 and provided further information to confirm that sufficient funding has been allocated in the revenue budget to support increased demand and cost pressures in 2024/25. Additional supporting information and evidence has been provided through the Children & Young People Directorate Budget Task & Finish Group at the two meetings held in December 2023, including relevant assumptions, risks and dependencies. The delivery of proposed savings will be monitored as part of routine financial monitoring arrangements in 2024/25 and reported quarterly by Cabinet.

At Quarter 3 (Period 9) of 2023/24, £0.3m of the Directorate savings are forecast as on target for delivery in respect of approved saving S18: Placement Management. In addition, the forecast outturn at P9 notes a reduction of £0.2m in agency staffing costs.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for providing with a preview of the 23/24 savings of £300k for residential placement costs which are likely to be forecast in this administration’s Q3 performance report. These savings represent a disappointingly small amount, £300k out of around £4.5m and an amount that could so easily be reversed by changes in demand. Can the cabinet member clarify if the £200k of savings he refers to in staff costs are being used elsewhere to offset in year pressures in the directorate?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member children and young people:

A written response would be provided.

Written response provided on 26 February 2024:

The Q3 report notes a reduction in the forecast for agency staffing costs. This is a reduction in a forecast overspend and not a saving or underspend in 2023/24 and therefore cannot be used to offset other expenditure. This reduction in forecast expenditure for 2023/24 has a positive impact on the overall Directorate forecast outturn position.

MQ 4	Cllr Aubrey Oliver, Saxon Gate	Herefordshire Council was awarded a grant of £952,037 by the Government for the year 2023/24 to improve the frequency of bus services across the county. It is a major concern that no funding has yet been allocated for improvements in the 2023/24 financial year. If this funding is not used by 31 March 2024 does it have to be returned to the Government? Has the council made any attempt to put forward a bus service improvement plan? If so, when will it be published?	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
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Response:

The original Bus Service Improvement Plan was introduced by the Department for Transport (DfT) following COVID, to deliver “more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, cheaper, or greener bus services”. All authorities were encouraged to submit ambitious bids, Herefordshire’s was for £18million. Unfortunately the Council was not successful. However, despite being unfunded, I am pleased Herefordshire’s BSIP is in place, and is published on the Council website, [here](#).

DfT then released a new funding pot, BSIP+, which was for all authorities that did not receive anything in the first round to support those services at risk. We were awarded and have received £952,037, and we have been awarded the same amount the following year. Under BSIP regulations, the delivery of a BSIP plan is through either a franchising model or an Enhanced Partnership board; hence we have convened an Enhanced Partnership board. This consists of the council and all the bus operators who operate a service in the county (even if that service also runs into neighbouring areas). It is the board who agree and make decisions on where the BSIP+ money should be spent, (not the council).

Regarding our actions against the plan, we have received the money from DfT, and so we have given a deadline to operators to come back to us with their proposals for those services in the plan, where they would want to see extra support. From this we will create the tenders to deliver these services and present them to the Enhanced Partnership.

We will not lose the funding, nor need to return it to the DfT. The tenders will be seen, assessed and administered by the Enhanced Partnership Board well within the DfT’s time frames for spending. I would be happy to discuss the Bus Service Improvement Plan and how the Enhanced Partnership board works further if that would be helpful.

MQ 5	Cllr Liz Harvey, Ledbury North	<p>Scrutiny Management Board has recommended that the present administration provide this Council with additional information in the form of an indicative forecast of which earmarked reserves it proposes to raid to cover the £13.8m overspend being forecast by Children's Directorate at Q2, and to provide impact statements as regards the proposed reductions made in each earmarked reserve utilised.</p> <p>It is clear from the information contained in the agenda pack for this meeting that this minority administration has chosen to ignore SMB's request.</p> <p>I request again the Cabinet Member provide this information to Council, so in advance of voting on this budget all councillors can see where this money may be taken from and can understand the possible impact that doing so will have upon funds previously earmarked for investments and for risk mitigation .across all areas of this Council's operation.</p>	Cabinet member finance and corporate services
<p>Response: In the meeting held 25 January 2024, Cabinet noted the recommendations from Scrutiny Management Board and agreed they would be given due consideration. A forecast of earmarked reserve balances to 31 March 2024 is included per Appendix E to the Budget Setting Report. This confirms a forecast of £57.2m in earmarked reserves at 31 March 2024 after adjusting for the forecast overspend for 2023/24 of £13.8m as at Quarter 2; Cabinet intend to use these Earmarked Reserve balances to fund the 2023/24 overspend. Reserve balances will remain under review over the remainder of the 2023/24 financial year and the proposed reserve transfers to fund the 2023/24 overspend will be confirmed in the Quarter 4 outturn report as part of routine year-end closedown procedures.</p>			