

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

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
MQ 1	Cllr Dan Hurcomb, Bircher	<p>A number of areas in my Ward are prone to flooding. One, Orleton, has through the hard work of volunteers, undertaken proactive clearance work on the local brook to keep the water flowing and reduce potential for flooding. They have also developed a solution for flooding from the highway which I am pleased to say the Council's Highways Team have helpfully assisted. The work of these volunteers shows that there is no substitute for good proactive maintenance work and collaboration. Whilst the £445k the Council has allocated to local drainage work this year is welcomed, can the Leader confirm that under his leadership this Council will, where budgets allow:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to invest additional money in drainage works; • Prioritise works in areas prone to flooding; and • Switch the emphasis from reactive clearing of assets to a schedule of proactive maintenance? 	Leader
<p>Response:</p> <p>Thank you for your question Cllr Hurcomb.</p> <p>In response to your first point, the Council recognises the importance of highway drainage and for 2024/25 a further £1 million has been allocated to this area as part of the Highway Infrastructure Investment programme, alongside the £445k Drainage Grant that you reference and that the Council has recently invited Parish and Town Councils to apply for so as to undertake small improvement schemes. I understand that the Highway Infrastructure Investment programme continues for a further two years and I will be supportive of the use of this money to continue improving drainage assets around the county.</p> <p>In response to your second point, whilst it is obviously important to maintain and improve existing assets where possible to ensure that they perform as well as they can, there is recognition that there will be rainfall events that lead to the capacity of drainage systems simply being exceeded, leading to flooding. In response to this, there is a role that the Council plays in helping to better protect properties that are at risk from flooding across Herefordshire, working with partners such as the Environment Agency to bid for funding from DEFRA to help introduce new flood defences or natural flood management techniques, or to install property flood resilience measures. The Council is committed to working with such partners to secure any available funding for schemes that will benefit residents and businesses in Herefordshire.</p> <p>As to your third point around gully cleansing, the Council already operates a cyclical inspection and cleansing programme of its highway drainage assets on the county's A and B road network and on a reactive basis on other roads. It is likely that the UK will see more frequent, intense weather</p>			

events in future years, which is something that the Council recognises and that forms part of its recently published Climate Change Adaptation Plan. As part of the preparation for the new Public Realm Contract, Officers are reviewing the arrangements that are required in the future, including gully emptying and drainage to ensure the service is fit for the future. As part of this work, I will ask Officers to explore the practical and financial implications of your suggestion.

Finally, I understand that details of known highway drainage assets are routinely captured and mapped on the Council's highway asset management system. Such assets include highway gullies (the pots on the side of the road), including the pipework associated with them that then leads to water company owned and maintained sewers. Examples of other assets that are captured and mapped include headwalls, trash screens and culverts.

As you have stated, the Council has recently invited Parish and Town Councils to apply for funding through a £445k Drainage Grant to review the existing drainage map of their area and use their local knowledge to log any assets which need adding to our system. Officers have been making arrangements for how this will happen and Parish and Town Councils who have applied for funding will be provided with this information when they are contacted with the outcome of their application.

MQ 2	Cllr Oliver, Saxon Gate	In respect of a planning permission granted to Herefordshire Council in 2010/11. The Council included a provision to carry out road improvements to Holme Lacy Road. Despite Amey drawing up outline proposals this provision has not been carried out. Will the Leader of the Council state that the current administration will bring forward proposals to rectify this omission.	Leader/Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
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Response:
I can confirm that the Council has completed detailed design and intends to seek construction tenders for the improvement measures on the Holme Lacy Road. It has taken some time to do this given the need to tie these improvements into the wider local transport plan for the area but construction of the further active travel improvements funded from the Levelling Up Fund is planned to start in 2025/26 with an approximate 12 months construction period. We will communicate with residents as we get closer to the start of construction around the details of how the works will be delivered.

Supplementary question:
Can assurance be provided that the Holme Lacy traffic calming scheme will commence by 2026?

Response from the Leader:
The Cabinet Member transport and infrastructure will meet with Cllr Oliver to discuss.

MQ3	Cllr Engel, Golden Valley South	I can find no reference in the Leaders' Report to a discussion that has been taking place in private. This is the notion to merge Herefordshire with a larger county in order to be granted more money – with the accompanying threat that otherwise Herefordshire might “be left behind”. This would not necessarily mean a reunion with our old masters in Worcestershire, but one that would be likely to become known – officially or not – as Shropfordshire or maybe Slopfordshire. I	Leader
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		<p>realise this is in the very early stages. But bad ideas thrive in secret and we have seen this bad idea before.</p> <p>Before a county with a history that predates the Domesday Book disappears again can we have a written assurance that any such decision would be taken by the full unwhipped council after meaningful consultation with the population of Herefordshire.</p>	
<p>Response: Thank you for your question, Cllr Engel.</p> <p>Firstly, I want to address the suggestion that conversations are taking place privately. Categorically and for the public record this is not the case. There are clearly conversations happening across the upper tier of local authorities across England in response to the Government's new devolution policy initiative, which as Leader of this Council you would rightly expect me to be listening to. Every local authority, without a deal in place, is in the same position as Herefordshire Council; awaiting further details from Government before we proceed any further.</p> <p>Crucially, we await further details of the devolution framework but what we do know about devolution is that it is not about the merging of local authorities as you describe in your question.</p> <p>The Council will be tracking developments of the Devolution Bill as it passes through parliament and considering what opportunities devolution could mean for Herefordshire. As soon as further details are received, we will arrange for further all-member briefings to consider the options open to the Council.</p> <p>The chief executive's response, to the deputy prime minister, also confirmed that progress to further stages of Devolution will be subject to Full Council or Cabinet approval as appropriate.</p>			
<p>Supplementary question:</p> <p>There was concern that the devolution process posed a risk that Herefordshire would become part of a larger regional organisation. It was asked whether Council would be given a free vote on the final proposal.</p>			
<p>Response from Leader of the Council:</p> <p>The full details of the devolution were not yet known. An expression of interest had been sent to central government which had been informed by discussions between the Group Leaders. The application to central government would focus on the Herefordshire area and negotiations with central government would be undertaken. The final proposal would be debated by full Council.</p>			
MQ 4	Cllr Harvey, Ledbury North	<p>Please would the Cabinet Member confirm:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether or not he has now received a reply from Government confirming that government funding will be provided to undertake all the works necessary to complete the Southern Link Road (SLR) 	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether or not government and both MPs have confirmed their support for the works he has in train to progress the SLR and the Western Relief Road; • What his latest spend figures are for the money taken from council reserves that he is using to progress his plans, and their date; and • To what extent has he personally been, and continues to be, involved in the purchase of land blocks on and adjacent to his proposed route for the roads? 	
<p>Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The council has received a response from DfT however, at this stage, they are unable to provide further clarification on the mechanism for drawing down upon the Local Transport Fund that was awarded to Herefordshire Council by the previous government. It is hoped that further information will be received before the end of the financial year. • Government have previously confirmed that it would be for local politicians to determine how to spend the money allocated within the Local Transport Fund and therefore have not indicated support one way or the other for the Southern Link Road. The Council has not yet sought explicit approval from the MPs for the scheme but will be doing so upon completion of a revised business case for a western by-pass. The MP for North Herefordshire has previously stated that they are not supportive of the scheme. • The council has currently spent £88,000 to progress the scheme since it was restarted. • I have had informal conversations with property owners. However and for the public record negotiations are quite properly only taking place between officers of the council or their land agent and property owners along the route of the Southern Link Road. 			
<p>Supplementary question: Will the cabinet confirm that the Department for Transport require that the business case for the Southern Link Road demonstrates value for money as a standalone project?</p>			
<p>Response from cabinet member transport and infrastructure: The cabinet member would meet with Cllr Harvey to discuss.</p>			
MQ 5	Cllr Hitchiner, Stoney Street	<p>The greedy and desperate tactics of previous Conservative administrations to housing growth have seen areas of the county hammered by predatory and unplanned development, while the county was unable to deliver on its unnecessarily high growth promises.</p> <p>Now the new Labour Government's clumsy one-size-fits-all approach to calculating housing targets has Herefordshire facing the grim prospect of an utterly undeliverable increase of more than 10,000 in the houses it is expected to magic up by 2041 to over 26,000.</p> <p>Is the Cabinet Member responding 'How high?' to this instruction to 'Jump', or is she squaring up to defend our communities?</p>	Cabinet member environment

		Please would the Cabinet Member inform this council and the public of her intentions as regards these damaging proposals?"	
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Response:
Thank you for your question. The 'predatory and unplanned development' to which you refer is most likely in reference to developments that have come forward as result of a planning appeals and sites that have come forward due to the Council being unable to demonstrate a 5-year housing land supply. The Council has demonstrated a 5-year housing land supply for the last 3-years. This council remains in favour of plan led development as non-plan led development inevitably jeopardises the delivery of infrastructure and completely undermines the plan led system. As a result, in response to the NPPF consultation, the Council has made clear that where mandatory 'aspirational' targets are enforced, the 5-year housing land supply requirement should no longer apply.

The mandatory housing targets as set on in the government's NPPF Consultation takes a new approach to setting housing targets based on a revised formula and data. This means the housing target set for Herefordshire has increased from 773 dwellings per annum to 1,375 dwellings per annum. This would mean 27,500 dwellings over a 20-year plan period. The recent Draft Local Plan (March 2024) consultation set out a target for 16,100 homes over the plan period, so this is a significant proposed increase.

The Council's NPPF consultation response makes clear that this mandatory housing target is set too high for Herefordshire and does not reflect past build rates nor market demand. The response makes clear that the target set is 'highly aspirational' on the part of the government and raises concerns around the delivery of infrastructure to support such levels of growth, in addition to concerns in relation to environmental capacity and the ability to allocate further land for future growth.

Furthermore, the response makes clear that should high mandatory targets be imposed, then the 5-year housing land supply requirement should be abolished as this should not be used against Council's for non-delivery when the targets have been set far in excess of anything that has been achieved previously. This is important and enforces the Council's view that we should not support changes to national planning guidance that would ultimately undermine plan-led decision making.

Supplementary question:
The proposed housing targets were unattainable, there was a lack of capacity in the building trade, inadequate local services and insufficient land supply. Can the cabinet member provide assurance.

Response from Cabinet Member Environment:
The targets under the new methodology were not credible and were opposed. A response from Government to the council's consultation response was awaited. Without investment in infrastructure the targets were not achievable.