

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

| Question Number | Questioner | Question | Question to |
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| MQ 1 | Cllr Liz Harvey, Ledbury North | <p>In February 2024, in order to achieve a balanced budget and to mitigate the worst effects of applying the maximum increase allowed in Council Tax, your minority administration gave assurances to this Council that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £2.3m of reserves would be repaid by savings delivered by the Children’s Directorate; and • All income received above that budgeted from council investments would be used to provide additional targeted support to hard hit families. <p>Please would the Leader confirm that you going to honour these firm undertakings?</p> | Leader |
| <p>Response:</p> <p>We recognise the challenging financial climate and its impact on individuals and we continue to provide support to households in hardship. The Council Tax Reduction Scheme, approved by full Council in February 2024, continues to provide support at the maximum level 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. In addition, the Council continues to offer support to residents through award of Discretionary Housing Payments, administration and allocation of the Household Support Fund, support services provided by Talk Community and by providing temporary housing solutions for individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It is expected that this support will continue in 2025/26.</p> <p>As at Period 6 of 2024/25 (September 2024), the Children & Young People Directorate is forecasting a balanced position against the approved revenue budget. This forecast assumes delivery of Savings Targets S2 and S3 in full and that activity in progress over the remainder of the year will achieve Savings Target S3 by 31 March 2025; Savings Target S4 is currently assessed as ‘at risk’. This means that the Directorate will have achieved £2.3m of savings in 2024/25 without using the additional budget allocated from reserves by the Budget Amendment approved by Full Council in February 2024.</p> <p>As at P6, the revised forecast, including management recovery actions, highlights that the additional budget allocation of £2.3m is not forecast to be used in 2024/25. This is currently presented as an underspend and included in the overall forecast position for the year to report performance against the approved Revenue Budget of £212.8m. Due to the volatility of the Directorate’s demand-led activity and risk of impact on the outturn position, until the full year results and achievement of savings are known, the final requirement from the additional budget cannot be confirmed. We are continuing to monitor financial performance and identify recovery action in 2024/25, however, any overspend on the council’s Revenue Budget in 2024/25 must be funded from the council’s available reserves.</p> | | | |
| <p>Supplementary Question:</p> | | | |

In quarter 2 of current FY £1.2 million additional interest has been received; the likely outturn will be over £2million of extra income from interest received. Will this additional income be used to increase support to hard up households, consistent with the commitment at the budget meeting, or should the credibility of such pronouncements be considered unreliable.

Response to the supplementary question from the Leader:

There was doubt regarding that the commitment mentioned had been made and officers had been asked to investigate but were also unsure where it had come from. It is important to highlight the positive news that the council is gaining interest and income. The Council Tax Reduction Scheme had been maintained to help over 11,000 households and the Household Support Fund continued to be provided.

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| MQ 2 | Cllr Dave Boulter, Whitecross | The Leader's Report states that "1,100 high value jobs have been created" on the Enterprise Zone. What is the evidence businesses on the site are required to provide to evidence the achievement of these jobs, and what is the definition of 'high value' that you are using to test and to agree their figures? | Cabinet member economy and growth |
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Response:

The Hereford Enterprise Zone Ltd Board has a Placement Strategy setting out a range of criteria that a business must meet to qualify to locate on Skylon Park. The Placement Strategy ensures only businesses that in key target sectors that will create higher value employment (more better paid jobs) located on the Enterprise Zone. The business commits at the point of contractual sale of the land as to how many jobs they will create as a result of their business growth on the Enterprise Zone.

Following a review of the Hereford Enterprise Zone at the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee in November, we are also committed to commissioning an external economic impact assessment to gather and review the evidence required to further quantify the significant impact it has and continues to make to the Herefordshire economy.

Supplementary Question:

It was not felt that the question had been adequately answered and additional detail around the claims in the response of 1,100 high value jobs was requested including: how many companies are involved; how many employees they have; and what the average salary is across those companies.

Response to the supplementary question from the Cabinet Member Economy and Growth and the Leader:

It was felt that the answer had been provided and the detail would be contained in the economic impact report which had been commissioned.

A recent business consultation event had taken place recently with employers of 3,800 employees which was positive engagement. There was a commitment that the detail would be shared with Cllr Boulter when available.

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| MQ3 | Cllr Pauline Crockett, | Many of us have witnessed and experienced the devastation caused by recent and repeated flooding in our County. Every time this happens homes are ruined and lives are thrown into turmoil! | Cabinet support member |
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| | <p>Our County's drainage system is unable to cope with the scale and frequency of these severe weather events. Residents need action now.</p> <p>This Council must robustly enforce landowner riparian responsibilities, and take action to better manage water on and off the public highway.</p> <p>The Council must also maintain the operational effectiveness of existing flood defence schemes and ensure that the Environment Agency does likewise.</p> <p>In my Ward all of my Parishes have had to report serious flooding events, I am sure I am not alone!</p> <p>What are this administration's immediate plans to improve the protection of our residents and where will you be investing early?</p> | |
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Response:

This administration is utterly committed to addressing the serious flooding risks that have caused such hardship to residents, and disruption to our schools and economy. It is clear to everyone that the events are becoming more frequent and more intense. In response to the October and November floods, and building on the motion passed by this council at our last meeting, we have set in progress a county wide project to understand each and every flood or near-flood event, and then, where possible, take remedial action – whether that be addressing failures or capacity issues in our drainage system, resolving problems with how quickly the rivers can get water away, looking at – as I mentioned in the previous meeting of Council – our plans for new homes in light of their contribution to flood risks, and yes, as you suggest, working with landowners and where necessary taking enforcement action where riparian responsibilities have been neglected. We will also be looking at improving our flood mitigation and emergency response services.

Solving a problem in one area carries the risk of moving it elsewhere. This work will require coordination of all of those risk areas, and as the Lead Local Flood Authority we will be taking leadership of all the various bodies involved in this – the Environment Agency, Welsh Water, Severn Trent Water, The Lugg and Lower Wye Internal Drainage Boards, and so on, as well as the parish councils who we have already partnered with to map any missing assets and develop a deeper understanding of the local drainage network.

To this end we have already seconded staff into a growing flood team so that we have the ability to move forward on this across the county, and they are already hard at work. We are drawing funds from our [emergency response budget] and will be asking this council to support investment in flood response in our capital budget next month. There is much in climate change that is beyond our control. But rest assured we will leave no stone unturned in facing this.

Supplementary question:

It was not felt that the response had answered the question. If we are borrowing to fix the roads surely we should be fixing the drainage issues first. Can assurance be provided that the developments at Three Elms and Lower Bullingham will not proceed as we are aware of the flooding issues on those sites. As per my original question, what are the immediate plans?

Response to the supplementary question from the Cabinet Support Member:

A full flooding assessment would be undertaken as necessary as part of any planning process. In terms of response, a team has been developed, access to emergency funding had been arranged and proposals for capital funding toward long term structural changes to ensure the phasing of response is correct. The requirement for match funding to support works had also been lifted which had been seen as a hindrance to improvements previously.