

COUNCIL

10th February 2006

Present: The Mayor (Councillor Chaplin), the Deputy Mayor (Councillor Mrs. Fletcher), Councillors Allen, Barnes, Bishop, Britter, Buckland, Coleman, Mrs. Driver, Flynn, Forbes, Mrs. Franklin, Freeman, Garnham, Gearing, Mrs. Hale, M. Hale, Hay, Mrs. Hibbert, Mrs. Holliday, Jordan, Mrs. Ledoux, MacDonald, McKinlay, McLain, Morris, Nicholson, Prince, Rawson, Mrs. Regan, Mrs. Ryder, Seacome, Smith, Stennett, Surgenor, Mrs. Thornton, Wall, Webster and Wheeler.

Apologies: Councillor Godwin.
(2.30 p.m. – 7.00 p.m)

99. Prayers

The Mayor's Chaplain, Honorary Alderman the Reverend Jeremy Whales, opened the meeting with Prayer.

100. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

101. Minutes

Resolved, that the minutes of the meeting held on 5th December 2005, be approved and signed as a correct record.

102. Public Questions

No public questions had been received.

103. Appointment of Mayor-Elect 2006-2007 and Deputy Mayor 2006-2007.

The Acting Managing Director recommended to Council that in accordance with the order of precedence provisions within the Council's constitution, Councillor Mrs. Jacky Fletcher be confirmed as Mayor-Elect and Councillor John Rawson be confirmed as Deputy Mayor-Elect.

The formal appointments would be confirmed at the Annual Council Meeting in May.

- Resolved,**
- (1) that Councillor Mrs. Jacky Fletcher be confirmed as Mayor-Elect for the Municipal Year 2006-2007;
 - (2) that Councillor John Rawson be confirmed as Deputy Mayor-Elect for the Municipal Year 2006-2007.

104. New Year's Honours List 2006

The Mayor informed Council that the following had received honours in the New Years Honours List 2006:-

- Mr. Iain Lobban, Director of Operations, GCHQ was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath
- Mary Ayre, an MBE for services to sport

- Chief Superintendent Kevin Lambert, an MBE, for services to Gloucestershire Police
- John Millington, an MBE, for services to Cotswold Voluntary Warden Service and the Sue Ryder Care Hospice.

105. Cheltenham Tsunami Villages Appeal

The Mayor, aware that a considerable sum had been raised through the Mayor's Tsunami Villages Appeal, placed on record this Council's appreciation of the role played by Councillor Garnham in his leadership of the appeal.

Councillor Garnham updated Council on the appeal and stated that within eighteen months of starting the appeal, housing was beginning to be provided to relieve some of the victims of the Tsunami disaster.

106. Mayor's Charity Gala Performance

The Mayor placed on record his thanks to all those who had supported the Charity Gala held at the Everyman Theatre on 7th February, 2006. A sum in excess of £16,000 had been raised. He particularly thanked the Chelsea Building Society for its continuing support to the Mayor's Charities.

107. Mayor's Charity Ball

The Mayor informed Council that his Charity Ball was to be held on 24th March, 2006 at the Town Hall. Tickets were priced at £35 each for a three course meal with dancing to two jazz bands and a performance by the dance group – The Coady Crew. He encouraged members of the Council to support this event.

108. Cheltenham Town Football Club

The Mayor wished to extend congratulations to "The Robins" on their commendable performance against Newcastle in the FA Cup. The whole day had reflected Cheltenham in a positive way and was a highlight in the history of the club and town.

109. Gloucestershire Constabulary

The Mayor informed Council that he had written to the Chief Constable to support his submission to the Home Office that Gloucestershire Constabulary should not be merged into a sub-regional force. A copy of the letter had been sent to the Home Office, a final decision on this issue was awaited.

110. Communications by the Leader of the Council

- (a) The Leader of the Council indicated that, with the Acting Managing Director, he had been invited to participate in a summit meeting to discuss central government relationships with local government and devolution of powers. He had also, with the Managing Director, been invited to a ministerial dialogue on 20th February about the future role, functions and forms of local authorities in England. He referred to the speculation in the press with regard to local government reorganisation. He was now however informed that 2007 elections would proceed as planned and that a white paper on local government would be published in the Summer 2006.
- (b) The Leader of the Council informed Council that, at the Council Tax meeting on 24th February there would also be a major report on a local plan issue.

111. Members Questions

The questions and replies to the member questions are set out in Appendix A

112. Section 25 Report

The Acting Section 151 Officer, in accordance with Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 reported to Council on the robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of setting the budget and the adequacy of the proposed financial reserves.

Council was reminded that it had a statutory obligation to have regard to this report when making its decisions on the proposed budget. In presenting the report which had been circulated to all members of the Council, the Acting Section 151 Officer referred to the following key issues:

- A need to redress the annual funding gap of £0.5m each year
- “Gershon” efficiency savings
- Procurement savings
- Medium-term financial strategy
- Planned maintenance programme and capital programme
- Assessment of reserves

The Section 151 Officer indicated that he was satisfied that the current level of earmarked reserves were sound for the forthcoming year.

In response to a question, the Acting Section 151 Officer referred Council to revised Appendix H tabled at the meeting. This showed that, projecting Gershon efficiency savings through to 2007/08, the Council would achieve its overall savings target.

Resolved, that the contents of the Section 25 report be noted and that Council have regard to it when setting the Budget, Council Tax and rents.

**113. Revised General Fund Budget 2005-2006
Budget Proposals 2006-2007**

The Deputy (Exchequer) on behalf of the Cabinet presented his report setting out the background to the budget proposals for 2006-2007. The text to the Budget Statement is set out in appendix 2. In determining the final revenue and capital budget proposals for 2006/07 the Cabinet had endeavoured to undertake the following:-

- To set a budget which requires a modest increase in Council Tax
- To consider feedback from the budget consultation
- To accommodate additional service requirements, for example increased responsibilities in respect of concessionary fares and electoral administration
- To support the majority of growth bids and identify areas of savings to address the priorities identified in the Council’s Corporate Business Plan
- To set a budget which continued to tackle identified risks in service areas and the corporate risk register
- To produce a balanced budget which was sustainable and continued to address issues likely to face the Council in the future

- To address CPA Inspection concerns regarding the linking of the Council's business planning process with the financial planning process
- To continue to address the issue of maintaining the Council's assets and infrastructure over the next twenty years
- To work towards addressing the funding gap identified in the medium-term financial strategy projection.

The Mayor, to facilitate the presentation of the budget, proposed the suspension of certain rules of debate namely:

- To allow the Deputy (Exchequer) to speak for more than ten minutes when moving the adoption of the budget being proposed by the Cabinet (The Cabinet's budget)
- To allow the Group Leaders to speak for more than ten minutes
- To allow the Deputy (Exchequer) and Group Leaders to speak more than once in debate in addition to any right of reply etc. (with the consent of the Mayor).

This was agreed by Council.

The Deputy Exchequer responded to questions on his budget statement and the proposed revenue and capital budget as follows.

On behalf of the Deputy (Exchequer) the Deputy (Built Environment and Democracy) indicated that it had been determined to rationalise car parking concessions that existed throughout Cheltenham and these had been removed. The removal of the concessions had affected other communities as well as the Bangladeshi community.

- It was confirmed that the reference to the existing small car park with charging at a maximum of two hours was not the new brewery development car park but the small car park in Baynham Way.
- The budget did not propose any cuts to the Cheltenham Young Arts Centre
- It was acknowledged that car parking enforcement was an issue, but until such time as decriminalisation of car parking was introduced, there was no remedy available to the Council
- It was acknowledged that the freeze on car parking charges could be considered to be non-compliant with priority four of the Council's business plan. The purpose was however to ensure Cheltenham remained competitive after a period of high increases in car parking charges by different administrations.
- In rolling out the waste recycling scheme, a general rule had been that the first residents to receive the scheme were those living furthest away from the depot.
- In response to a direct question, the Deputy indicated that the additional budget to support community grants was shown on page one, Appendix B4 (D30100).

Councillor Mrs. Driver specifically requested the Deputy (Exchequer) to clarify his definition of disabled with regard to users of the Leisure@ facilities. The Deputy indicated that he would respond to that question in writing.

The Deputy (Exchequer) responded to the following questions that were raised on the capital programme.

- The reported information regarding the County Council's apparent advice on interest rates and capital projects was noted; however he was not aware of any change in rates that would impact on the Council borrowing.
- The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) on behalf of the Deputy (Exchequer) informed Council that choice-based lettings was a government initiative to be implemented by 2010. A County-wide website would be created to notify availability of social housing and hopefully eventually, private properties to let.
- It was indicated that the budget sum for St. Paul's was to prepare development plans and ensure full consultation took place in the area.
- It was acknowledged that the agreed scheme at Sixways, Charlton Kings, should be reassessed and to possibly explore whether the funding available to the County Council to improve the A40 could be utilised.

Councillor Smith, on behalf of the Conservative Group, welcomed certain elements of the budget, particularly the joint working which he hoped would continue into the future. The budget as presented however was a "flat do nothing" standstill budget. It was unfortunate that items of growth within the budget related to legal services and property services which did not add deliverable value from the budget.

The budget did not propose any solutions to problems highlighted by the Section 151 Officer with regard to property maintenance issues; did not make adequate provision for single status and although the view was held that single status should be cost-neutral there would be significant costs in the short-medium term which would be unfair if they were to fall on the taxpayer.

The budget proposal did not support the disabled and disadvantaged particularly at Leisure@ and neither did it support community organisations, in particular the voluntary sector.

In concluding his statement, Councillor Smith congratulated the Deputy (Exchequer) on becoming Deputy Mayor and also thanked him for the courteous way in which he had carried out his role as Deputy (Exchequer). However, Councillor Smith put Council on notice that should his group become the majority in May, a budget Council would be called in July to re-prioritise the 2006/07 budget.

The Conservative Group proposed no amendments to the budget.

Councillor Prince, on behalf of the People Against Bureaucracy Group, thanked the Deputy (Exchequer) for his presentation and acknowledged the level of cross party working that had an input into the budget presented. Although it was noted there were no increases in parking charges this year, the extended hours of charging introduced last year had caused serious disruption to residents adjoining town centre car parks, for example Portland Street. He also was of the view that the budget contradicted itself in so far as whilst not discouraging motorists, the fee for residents' parking had been increased even though the level of enforcement was almost non-existent.

Reference was made to Dowdeswell Country Park and although there was no reference within the budget he was given to understand that an outstanding sum of £47,000 was set aside towards the construction of a bridge at the Country Park. In his view this funding should have been made available to the open space budget to fund additional Park Wardens and to ensure that parks were being kept up to standard.

It was noted that the Deputy (Exchequer) had acknowledged that savings from senior management restructure were not as high as he thought. However, the decision taken at the last Council to have an additional Group Director was welcomed.

In concluding, Councillor Prince specifically welcomed the funding for the Prince of Wales Stadium. He also hoped that the extended parking charging hours would be reviewed in due course. The PAB Group did not propose any amendments to the budget.

Councillor M. Hale on behalf of the Labour Group, added his congratulations on the presentation of the budget which in the main, he could support. However he had concerns with regard to the impact on the festivals which whilst he accepted a need to encourage them to become self sufficient, could suffer in particular areas, for example, the educational programme. Also the increased funding on keeping gateways to the town tidy would be appreciated but there was a perception of a lack of attention in general which impacted on the view of the town. Where there were savings in budget, these were recognised as not a bad thing, however it should be possible to recognise what had been achieved with the money saved. The regeneration schemes were welcomed but these should include long-term vision planning for the future and to ensure funding provision.

In conclusion Councillor M. Hale recognised the dilemma facing politicians regarding parking provision/charges and public transport. This was an issue that needed to be grasped and resolved with a long-term aim of discouraging motorists. The Labour Group did not present any alternative budget.

The Council then debated the budget in further detail.

Councillor Jordan, responding to the statement from the Conservative Group Leader, noted the stated aim of re-prioritising the budget following the May Council elections. He opposed the view that the budget proposals did not match the wishes of Cheltenham as the consultation undertaken had flagged-up recycling, crime and transport as key aspirations. The budget proposals linked business and financial planning and he could not agree that additional legal and property staff would not be of benefit. He had sympathy with the issue of parking and the possible impact in residential areas, but the County Council's delay in implementing de-criminalisation until 2008 did not help.

In supporting the budget Councillor Jordan placed on record his thanks to the Deputy (Exchequer) and the officers who had supported him to bring forward the 2006/07 budget proposals.

Councillor Webster indicated that some of the issues raised by the Conservative Group Leader were either not affected by the budget proposals or were in service areas for which Cheltenham Borough Council had no responsibilities.

Councillor Morris expressed his support for the budget proposals, suggesting that good budget management equalled savings. He too had sympathy with the view expressed by Councillor Prince regarding residential parking, the issue of parking enforcement, either by de-criminalisation policy or the Police was an issue to be addressed in future. He was pleased to support a budget that increased Council Tax by only 3% and further extended the green waste collection scheme and made provision for the Clyde Crescent resource centre.

Councillor McKinlay, in seconding the budget, indicated that contrary to the view of the Conservative Group Leader, the budget was in line with the responses to the public consultation as set out in Appendix Q of the budget proposals report. The budget did not make any large cuts nor reduce any service provision. It was a moderate budget, in tune with the wishes of the people of Cheltenham that took forward financial planning linked to the business plan.

Councillor Prince indicated that the introduction of de-criminalisation had been suggested by the PAB Groups, supported by others four years ago. It was not however until the current Conservative County administration took office in May that any progress had been made. He suggested that if the Lib Dem Group wished to continue as ruling group, it should learn from past experience and listen to the public and particularly consultation exercises, which in his view was not happening in St. Pauls, nor at Dowdeswell site.

Councillor Wall suggested the proposals put forward were a mixed budget and the move towards closing the funding gap was to be welcomed. He was however of the view there were missed opportunities to have done more as there was no evidence of considering out-sourcing or whether staffing levels were appropriate. He also thought more could be done to support community groups throughout the town.

Councillor Surgenor, responding to a comment with regard to additional funding for crime and disorder, indicated that the Crime and Disorder Partnership comprised of six authorities but that to-date no additional funding had been made available by either the County Council or the Police Authority.

Councillor Mrs. Regan expressed her concern that there was no provision for local youth services and also at the level of rents payable to enable provision for youth facilities from Council properties.

Councillor McLain was of the view that in reality the gains in the budget reflected the pilot green waste and recycling schemes introduced by the Conservative Group. The free concessionary fare was also a government scheme. In real time the budget made cuts to homelessness; sport and play and also to the provision of CCTV.

Councillor Mrs. Hay, responding to Councillor Smith, indicated that difficult choices had to be made to ensure an appropriate level of income at Leisure@ was achieved. Community use at reduced rates was available at the Town Hall on week nights except Friday and Saturday. The income from these nights subsidised that community use. It was also restated that Cheltenham Borough Council did not manage the youth service.

Councillor Seacome however asked that reduced hire rates for Friday/Saturday should also be made to community groups because these were the evenings when such groups were able to make best use of them. He reminded Council that the original concept of the Town Hall was as a community building.

Councillor Rawson in summing up the debate, restated that an important plank of the budget was to put in place a level of investment for planned maintenance, he also suggested that issues raised by other groups were not even part of the budget proposals, for example CAB; evening parking charges; and small grants budget. He referred to the take-up of overnight parking permits that could support the residential parking schemes. The improved cleaning to the gateway approaches should not be taken in isolation but as part of a cleansing issue for the town as a whole. It was however, a sensible first step.

Previous criticism with regard to under spends was unjustified but had arisen due to pessimism regarding income. He confirmed that there were no changes in policy throughout the budget although some individual budgets had been re-allocated.

He commended the budget proposals to Council as they provided for solid investment, sustainable growth and addressed long-term aspirations for property maintenance.

- Resolved,**
- (1) that the revised budget for 2005/06 be noted;
 - (2) that the budget proposals for 2006/07 including a net budget requirement for 2006/07 of £15,255,127, and a proposed Council Tax for the services provided by Cheltenham Borough Council of £167.07p per year (3% increase based on a Band D) or 9 pence per week;
 - (3) that the detailed revenue budgets for 2006/07 based on a standstill level of service be approved;
 - (4) that the revenue growth items in the proposed budget for 2006/07 be approved;
 - (5) that the policy revision savings and additional income identified and included in the proposed budget for 2006/07 be approved;
 - (6) that the Asset Management Revenue Account budgets for 2006/07 be approved;
 - (7) that the budgeted movements to and from reserves for 2006/07 be approved and the projected revenue reserve moves to 1st April 2005 be noted;
 - (8) that the level of supplementary estimate of £100,000 for 2006/07 be approved;

- (9) that the initial assessment of the additional tasks be added to the business plan for 2006/07 and future years
- (10) that the medium-term financial strategy be noted;
- (11) that the capital bids supported for 2006/07 be approved;
- (12) that the revisions for the 2005/06 general fund capital programme be noted and the additional schemes proposed for 2006/07 and schemes earmarked for funding in period 2007/08 – 2010/2011 be approved;
- (13) that the planned maintenance programme for 2006/07 be approved and the programme for future years be noted;
- (14) that the revisions for the 2005/06 general fund housing capital programme and additional schemes proposed for 2006/07 be noted;
- (15) that the Section 151 Officer be delegated authority to draw down from the Civic Pride reserve to meet match funding costs; project officer costs and other related project development costs.

Voting

For	21
Against	12
Abstained	5

At this point the Council voted to carry on its business as it had been in session for four hours.

114. Revised Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2005/06 And Final Budget Proposals 2006/07.

The Deputy (Exchequer) presented the revised Housing Revenue Account budget 2005/06 and final budget proposals 2006/07.

- Resolved,**
- (1) that the Housing Revenue Account revised budget for 2005/06 be noted;
 - (2) that the Housing Revenue account 2006/07 budget including an average rent increase of 2.45% together with other increases in HRA charges be approved;
 - (3) that the Housing Revenue Account capital programme for 2005/06 (revised) and 2006/07 be approved.

Voting

For	22
Against	13

115. Prudential indicators 2006/07.

The Deputy (Exchequer) presented a report setting out the prudential indicators for 2006/2007 as required by the Local Government Act 2003. Prudential indicators fell into three categories

- Capital expenditure
- External debt
- Treasury management

It was stressed that these prudential indicators were not performance indicators and that their use was for internal purposes of prudential control and not for external comparisons with other authorities.

- Resolved,**
- (1) that the prudential indicators for 2006/07 as submitted to Council, including the authorised limit as the statutory affordable borrowing limit determined under Section 3(1) Local Government Act 2003 be approved;
 - (2) that the delegations, as set out throughout be reaffirmed or approved;
 - (3) that the prudential indicators are monitored by the Assistant Director Finance and Asset Management throughout the year and the factual indicators for the year are reported to Cabinet and Council as part of the out-turn report following the year end;
 - (4) that any material, actual or forecast departures from the indicators arising during the year be reported to Cabinet via the quarterly budget monitoring reports.

Voting

For	34
Against	3

116. Annual Investment Strategy 2006/07.

The Deputy (Exchequer) presented a report which was circulated to all members of Council.

Section 15(1)(a) Local Government Act 2003 required Councils to adopt an annual investment strategy setting out policies for managing its investments. The guidance indicated that the annual investment strategy should be approved by Council for the start of the financial year. The investment panel had been consulted on the strategy and its comments had been included within the report now submitted.

- Resolved,** that the annual investment strategy for 2006-2007 and the delegations contained within it be adopted.

Voting

For	36
Against	0
Abstentions	1

117. Notice of Motion

Councillor Wall informed Council that he intended to make a minor amendment to the motion. The Notice of Motion now put was as follows:

“This Council recognises that planning gain contributions obtained from developers add a significant contribution to the economic and social development of the town. It also recognises that its relevant officers have done much over the years to enhance these objectives.

In order to ensure that the use of these contributions continues to support local need, as well as being appropriately assessed to reflect compliance with both local and national policy guidelines, this Council asks that local Ward Councillors (for the Ward where a development is being proposed) are always consulted as part of the allocation process”.

Upon a vote being taken the Notice of Motion was CARRIED.

Voting UNANIMOUS

118. Memorials (Petitions)

No petitions had been received.

119. Any Other business the Mayor determines to be urgent and which requires a decision.

There was no such business.

120. Local Government Act 1972 – Exempt Information.

Resolved, that in accordance with Section 100A(2) and (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining items of business as it was likely that, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, if members of the public were present there would be disclosed to them exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1, Part 2, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, namely:

Paragraph 1: Information relating to a particular employee, former employee, or applicant to become an employee of, or a particular office-holder, former office-holder or applicant to become an office-holder under, the authority.

121. Exempt Minutes

Resolved, that the exempt minutes of the meeting held on 5th December 2005 be approved and signed as a correct record.

The Mayor declared the meeting closed at 7.00 p.m.

**COUNCILLOR BRIAN CHAPLIN
MAYOR**

Council 10 February 2006

Members Questions

1. **Question from Councillor Smith to Deputy Exchequer/ Deputy Performance and Support Services**

(i) How many complaints have there been in the last 4 years to the local Government Ombudsman about Cheltenham Borough Council? (ii) What was the general nature of the complaints, (iii) how many complaints have been successful and (iv) how much has the council had to pay out in compensation to members of the public?

Reply

The figures given are of complaints decided by the ombudsman in the relevant year. These are figures which are published and exclude premature complaints which are referred back to the council. They include complaints received in one year but decided in the next.

The ombudsman analyses his decisions into several categories: maladministration and injustice, with and without public report; local settlement; no maladministration, with and without public report; ombudsman's discretion (not to pursue the complaint); outside the ombudsman's jurisdiction. Except for the 'local settlement' category, these are self explanatory. 'Local settlement' is defined by the ombudsman as being "decisions...discontinuing our investigation because action has been agreed by the authority and accepted by the Ombudsman as a satisfactory outcome for the complainant."

The number of complaints decided and the service complained about are as follows:

COMPLAINTS	01 – 02	02 – 03	03 – 04	04 - 05
Development Control	7	10	5	8
Housing	2	2	6	2
Housing Benefit	1			
NNDR		1		
Transport	1	2	3	2
Green Environment	1			
Council Tax		1	1	
Environmental Protection			2	2
Legal Services				1
Festivals and Entertainments				1
Neighbourhood Regeneration				1
Cleansing	1			
Total	13	16	17	17
OUTCOME				
Maladministration			1	
No maladministration/ no case to answer	13	11	16	17
Local settlement		5		
Total	13	16	17	17

The ombudsman counts complaints against Cheltenham Borough Homes as being against the council since it has retained ownership of the housing stock.

In the period, two of the local settlement decisions in 2002-03 involved a payment of a remedy; £750 for a Housing complaint about a failure to apply the neighbour nuisance policy and £150 for a Planning complaint about a failure to notify a neighbour of a planning application. In 2003-04 the finding of maladministration and injustice resulted in a public report and payment of a remedy of £10,250 resulting from a complaint originating in a mistake in drafting a map in the local plan. No other payments have been made in the period.

In the current year, there have been 8 complaints. The one local settlement decision resulted in payment of a remedy of £1,000. The complaint was about delays in Legal Services in agreeing a section 106 agreement.

There was no supplementary question.

2. Question from Councillor Smith to Deputy Neighbourhood and Community

- A. How many council owned properties are there within the Charlton Kings Parish? Of those can the deputy confirm how many
- a) are currently vacant
 - b) are available as family accommodation
 - c) still have outside toilets
 - d) still have kitchens and bathrooms to be replaced?
- B. What customer satisfaction rates are required from contractors like Bullocks who are undertaking the refurbishment of council owned properties? What satisfaction rates are the contractors achieving?

Reply Question A

There are 186 council owned properties in Charlton Kings/Ewens Farm of which 101 properties are family accommodation and there are 5 properties currently vacant.

Within the Ward there are a small number of properties (around 10) where the toilets are within the main structure of the property but are accessed by going through the back door of the kitchen into an internal lobby. Five of these properties have two toilets with the main toilet located in an upstairs bathroom.

The internal improvements (kitchen & bathroom refurbishments, central heating and rewiring) were carried out to the properties in the Ward by Bullock Construction during August – December 2005.

There are a number of properties (99 in total) where the internal improvements have not been carried out to date as follows:-

Works refused	37 properties
Works suspended (major structural problems)	1 property
Works held pending sheltered accommodation review	58 properties
Works delayed due to bathroom design problems [scheduled for March]	3 properties

Where works are refused then a record is kept of the reason for refusal (e.g. the tenant is elderly and they don't want the disruption) and when the property next becomes void the improvements are carried out.

The work to the two sheltered accommodation schemes (Coopers Court & Gilbert Ward Court) are held pending the sheltered accommodation review which is due to be completed later this year and works are programmed for 2007/08.

Reply Question B

The level of customer satisfaction received during the Creating Better Homes internal improvement works is measured from tenant satisfaction forms received by CBH. The results form part of a suite of key performance indicators agreed at the commencement of the Strategic Partnering Agreement in January 2005. A target of 85% satisfaction was agreed with the Strategic Partners (Lovell & Bullock), CBH Officers and Savills (CBH's Strategic Partnering Advisor).

The partner's performance is monitored on a weekly basis and reported to the strategic partnering meeting every 4 weeks. Areas of performance which don't meet the target are reviewed to identify trends relating to individual or groups of operatives or where additional works have resulted in longer time periods to complete.

A workshop will be held during March with tenants, tenant liaison staff & operatives from the strategic partners and CBH Officers (including response repair operatives) to evaluate progress to date identify service improvements and review the performance targets.

The current levels of satisfaction are as follows:-

KPI 1 - Tenant satisfaction with the level of consultation.

Bullock = 100% Lovell = 84%

KPI 2 - Tenant satisfaction with the level of service received from Bullock /

Lovell Bullock = 83% Lovell = 79%

KPI 3 - Tenant satisfaction with the finished product

Bullock = 83% Lovell = 87%

In a supplementary question, Councillor Smith asked what the Deputy was doing to ensure that tenants were not let down by Cheltenham Borough homes or contractors.

The Deputy Neighbourhood and Community advised that the council was having regular meetings with the two main contractors in order to maintain performance. He was satisfied that the performance of Bullock Construction had improved dramatically and they were now achieving quality standards. He was not aware of the complaints that Councillor Smith had referred to and encouraged tenants to make use of the established procedures which had been set up to deal with such complaints.

3. Councillor Smith to Deputy Exchequer.

Can the deputy identify what additional funding has been made available to support the Queen's 80th birthday celebrations in Cheltenham in 2006?

Reply

In the interests of prudent financial management, I have generally followed a policy of funding one-off items of expenditure from one-off revenue such as budget savings or unplanned income.

If the Mayor-elect and the Council wish to hold an event to mark the happy occasion of The Queen's 80th birthday later this year, I feel sure that appropriate funding can be found from within existing budgets, and I will do what I can to facilitate this.

In a supplementary question, Councillor Smith was concerned that in view of the generosity being demonstrated by Cheltenham in Bloom and other members of the public, the Council should be doing more to celebrate this event.

The Deputy agreed he would give his full support to the Council in celebrating this event however he reiterated that financial support would come from existing budgets.

4. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Performance and Support Services.

How many complaints have been received by CBC from members of the public claiming accident or injury relating to pavements/roads over the past three years? What were the CBC public liability insurance costs for each of the last three years? What are the costs of administering this process?

Reply

The number of complaints made to the Council in respect of pavements and roads that resulted in claims is 173 since April 2003. 73 of these were in 2003/4, 56 in 2004/5 and 44 so far in the current year 2005/06.

Premiums paid to Insurers amounted to £156,826 for 2003/4 and £161,731 for 2004/5. From April 2005 the council adopted a different process for dealing with insurance claims whereby the Council elected to pay the first £50,000 of each and every highway claim which has resulted in a reduction in the highways insurance premium for 2005/6 to £22,575, on top of which there is a claims handling fee of £18,095.

The total premiums paid to Zurich Municipal for the three years amounts to £359,227.

The annual cost of administering this process, i.e. claims handling, investigating claims, dealing with correspondence with Insurers, solicitors etc involving Cheltenham Borough council staff totals £10,700. This does not include the claims handling costs incurred by the Insurer.

In a supplementary question, Councillor McLain asked how many complaints had been received which had not resulted in claims.

The Deputy Performance and Support Services did not have this information to hand but agreed to liaise with Councillor McLain outside the meeting.

5. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Built Environment and Democracy

What is the average weekend income from staff car parks utilised by the public at weekends?

Reply

The only staff car park used by the public at weekends is Chapel Walk. In 2004/05, the last complete financial year, income at weekends was £19,784.80. This equates to £380/weekend.

There was no supplementary question.

6. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Built Environment and Democracy

(i)How many members of staff receive free parking permits? (ii)How many staff receive free parking permits and allowances as essential car users? (iii)How many car parking spaces are allocated for exclusive staff use during the working week?

Reply

(i)As of August 2005:

Individual Staff Permits (Mon-Fri) = 407

Shared permits (Mon-Fri) = 24 for CBC staff, 10 for CBH

Individual Staff Permits (7-Day) = 81

(ii) To the best of our knowledge there are approximately 94 essential car users with their own permit.

(iii) The only car parks with spaces allocated exclusively for staff are at Chapel Walk and Synagogue Lane. Synagogue Lane is not open to the public. Chapel Walk, a public car park at weekends, has 44 staff spaces. Synagogue Lane (not open to the public) has 38 spaces. This makes a total of 82 allocated spaces. Staff without allocated spaces park in public car parks on a first come first served basis.

The whole issue of staff parking is being considered by the Board for inclusion in negotiations with Unions on Single Status and a review of staff terms and conditions.

There was no supplementary question.

7. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Built Environment and Democracy

What is the current number of traffic calming schemes in operation across the borough?

Reply

23 schemes

There was no supplementary question.

8. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Built Environment and Democracy

How many requests for road and/or pavement improvements are currently waiting on the relevant traffic management programme?

Reply

There is a difference between structural maintenance of roads and footways and traffic management. On the presumption that the request is for information on all highway improvements in the current County approved programme I can confirm the following:

- There are 50 schemes on the Integrated Transport capital programme. 17 are complete and 33 are underway.
- There are 37 schemes on the Structural Maintenance programme. 33 will be completed this financial year.

There was no supplementary question.

9. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Public and Environmental Protection

How regularly are street cleaning checks carried out in residential areas?

Reply

An average of 2 hours per day is spent monitoring cleanliness standards and the performance of cleansing teams in residential areas. This allows for between 15 - 20 residential street inspections each weekday. In addition to this, the council are required to make 360 random cleanliness inspections in residential streets each year to comply with Best Value Performance Indicator 199 (Local Street and Environmental Cleanliness - Litter and Detritus).

In response to a supplementary question, the Deputy Public and Environmental Protection agreed to provide all members with a list of streets inspected on a quarterly basis.

10. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Performance and Support Services.

What were the CBC workforce numbers, including full/time equivalents, by department, for the past 3 years?

Reply

Due to the restructuring, accurate figures for 2003/04 are not available in the same format as for later years. As a result only Group totals are shown here.

The increase in staff numbers between 2003/04 and 2004/05 was largely due to taking the leisure centre back under council control and in particular the reopening of the wet side.

STAFFING NUMBERS

03/04

04/05

05/06

Based on permanent FTE's

CORPORATE SERVICES

MD Management and Admin	5.0	4.0
Human Resources	13.5	12.5
AD for Legal & Democratic Services	1.0	1.0
Legal Practice	10.5	10.5
Civic & Member Services	2.5	2.5
DSU	3.0	3.0
District Elections/ Registration	3.0	3.0
P & PR Management	8.0	7.0
Communication Services	3.0	1.0
Nexus	0.0	0.0
Sub total	48.5	49.5

ECONOMY & BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT

Audit & Assurance Services	4.5	4.5
Customer Relations	1.0	1.0
Best Value	2.0	2.0
Business & Economic Development	2.0	2.0
EB & I Management & Admin	3.0	2.0
Tourist Information Centre	6.0	6.5
Tourism - Promotions & Marketing	3.0	3.0
Town Hall	3.0	3.0
Pump Room	5.0	5.5
Festivals & Ent. Division	8.5	8.5
Sales/Marketing	12.0	12.5
Financial Services	14.0	15.0
Property Services	6.5	7.0
Exchequer Management	2.0	2.0
Exchequer IT Projects	3.0	3.0
Housing Benefits	23.0	21.5
Council Tax	14.0	15.0
Cashiering and Banking	4.0	4.0
Car Park Income Collectors	3.5	3.5
Outside Inspectors	6.0	6.0
Housing Benefit Fraud	2.5	2.5
Business Revenues	4.5	4.5
Customer Services	12.0	12.5
Custodians	2.0	2.0
E Government	2.0	2.0
ICT Services	23.5	23.0
Sub total	173.5	174.0

ENVIRONMENT

Built Environment Division	45.0	44.0
Environmental Maintenance Division	98.0	112.0
Transport - Fleet Management	8.0	8.0

STAFFING NUMBERS	03/04	04/05	05/06
Environment Management & Admin		6.0	6.0
Green Environment Division		71.0	69.0
Nursery		0.0	0.0
Stratford DC contract		0.0	0.0
GCC Schools contract		0.0	0.0
Shopmobility		2.0	2.0
Cemetery & Crematorium		11.0	11.0
Integrated Transportation Division		20.0	20.0
Private Sector Housing Division		13.0	10.0
Sub total		263.5	274.0

SOCIAL & COMMUNITY

Licensing		3.0	0.0
Youth Affairs		2.0	1.0
Recreation Centre		60.0	65.0
Holiday Recreation		1.5	1.0
Sports and Play Division		5.0	4.0
AG & M Division		21.5	21.0
Massive		1.0	0.0
Crime & Disorder		2.0	2.0
Public Protection Division		24.0	25.0
S & C Management & Admin		3.0	3.0
Community Services Division		21.0	21.0
Sub total		113.5	144.0

Total		599.0	640.0	643.5
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There was no supplementary question.

11. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Performance and Support Services.

Which Windows systems (by %) are currently being used on the CBC desktop systems including PCs, laptops and tablets,

Reply

The council has a programme of standardising and upgrading its software platform. The standard is Windows XP with Office XP applications. This is running on 60% of the 770 desktop devices (PC's, laptops and tablets). 39% have Windows 2000 as they run the financial management system, APTOS which is incompatible with XP in the current version. An upgrade of APTOS is underway and will be implemented in Spring 2006 following testing. Four PC's run Windows '95 because of application conflicts with XP.

There was no supplementary question.

12. Question from Councillor McLain to Deputy Health Wellbeing and Economy

What European funding has been accessed by CBC and provided for local projects over the past three years?

Reply

It needs to be emphasised that Cheltenham Borough is **not eligible** for EU Structural Funds such as Objective 1, Objective 2 or the Leader Programme which were the largest pots of EU funding to tackle urban and rural economic deprivation in the UK. Post EU enlargement, there has been a review of EU Structural Funding and only Cornwall in the UK will retain its EU Objective 1 status over the next 5 years.

Looking back over the last three years, there have been limited opportunities for CBC to apply directly for funding as a sole applicant, to support CBC priorities and service delivery. Only two examples have been identified, where Cheltenham businesses or CBC staff have directly benefited from EU funding support.

Firstly, in 2005 the Economic Development team working in partnership with Skillsmart (the sector skills council for retail), Destination Bristol, LSC, Cheltenham Business Partnership, Gloucester City Council, Gloucester Town Centre Initiative, Business Link secured **£247,000** towards retail skills training in Gloucestershire over a two year period (ends June 07). Project title *Retail Skills Network*. To date this funding has helped to fund 37 Mystery Shop exercises and 8 NVQ qualifications in Cheltenham. This project will also be funding the Cheltenham Business Excellence Medal in 2007 which will be spotlighting the retail sector.

Secondly, both members of the CBC Sustainability Team participated in 2 days of EMAS training in November 2005 organised by Stroud DC's Compass Project. The estimated value to CBC of this EU funded training was some £1,500 -2,000.

The clear message for future EU funded projects is one of working in partnership with other public, private or community/voluntary sector partners to maximise sub-regional economic, social and environmental benefit.

I am happy that this question has been asked as it gives me the opportunity to draw members' attention to the latest funding opportunities on offer from the EU which CBC and its partners may want to bid for

For example, funding is available from the European Commission for projects which promote innovation in cooperation, training and information in non-formal education. The following type of project would be eligible to apply for funds:

- promoting cultural diversity and tolerance;
- promoting the inclusion of young people in less favoured regions, both geographically and socio-economically;
- strengthening the Youth Programme in eastern Europe, the Caucasus and south east Europe;
- bringing Europe closer to young people and promoting the idea of European citizenship; and
- enabling cooperation between local or regional authorities and youth organisations.

Projects should have a clear trans-national dimension and involve young people. They should create or build on partnerships between non profit-making organisations and local and regional authorities.

Projects should involve at least four countries, which may include countries from outside the EU as long as at least one is a Member State. Only organisations based in the EU may apply for the funding.

The total amount available is €2 million. Applicants may be awarded up to €100,000 per year and not more than €300,000 in total. Projects should last between 18 and 36 months, and should begin between 1 January and 28 February 2007. The deadline for applications is *1 July 2006*.

In a supplementary question, Councillor McLain noted the Deputy's enthusiasm for the types of projects suggested and asked which ones the Deputy was planning to support and which other countries was she proposing the Council should link up with.

In response, the Deputy stressed that details of the funding available had only just been released. As a small borough council it was essential that Cheltenham worked in partnership on such projects and she would be asking officers to follow this up in more detail.

13 Question from Councillor Wall to Deputy Neighbourhood and Community:

The Council's business plan for 2005-06 rightly contains plans for building strong healthy communities that are empowered to improve the lives of residents. What is the Cabinet's current policy on developing sustainable communities? Does this policy ensure that all communities within Cheltenham have equal opportunity to develop?

Reply

Whilst Cheltenham has a thriving commercial centre, and is a popular place to live, it has to the north and west of the immediate town centre an arc of relative deprivation, perpetuating social exclusion and highlighting a priority need for investment in local communities to avoid a spiral of decline.

A quick review of a number of leading indices of deprivation consistently highlights hotspots within our wards – see appendix A. Many other indices, down to neighbourhood level, can be gleaned from the Maiden project website that reinforces the same story.

Many of the problems faced within these communities militate against safe and sustainable environments. It is hoped that by prioritising preventative work in these areas it may be possible to slow down, or even prevent, communities entering the spiral of decline.

In order to attempt to 'level the playing field' CBC has, since the mid 90's, adopted a regeneration strategy based on worst first in an attempt to better balance the borough – with all party support. A position now adopted by the Cheltenham Strategic Partnership. The Cabinet currently endorses this approach.

Regeneration requires many millions of matched and additional funding to be levered in to be successful and sustainable. Most major funders – government, lottery, trusts, future builders et al – require bids to be backed up by evidenced deprivation indicators to be successful. This further restricts area of spend to hotspot areas.

In terms of development opportunities, both residential and commercial, many schemes have been delivered outside of immediate regeneration areas, through the Cheltenham Housing Investment Partnership and Safer Communities, bringing with them contributions to highways, health, green space and educational enhancements. Many more are planned – contained within the Cheltenham & Tewkesbury Housing Partnership (copy from Neighbourhood Regeneration Div.) and the Local Plan.

The current Neighbourhood Regeneration team deals with the supply and improvement of housing. Community development is dealt with by Community Services.

Operationally, Community Development initiatives take place throughout the town. Following restructuring by the previous (Conservative) administration the resources for community development were significantly reduced to one officer and one administrator. Regeneration activity focuses primarily on the areas in town that suffer the highest levels of deprivation and is supported by local regeneration partnerships.

There was no supplementary question.

14. Question from Councillor Wall to Deputy Policy and Performance

A key priority of this Council is the improved capacity to deliver excellent services. In light of the recent and ongoing problems with the procurement and installation of a new telephony system, can the Deputy explain how substantial investments in ICT projects that are intended to deliver ongoing savings and cost benefits to the Council suffer huge time and cost overruns to the detriment of council tax payers?

Reply

The council has introduced rigorous project management techniques (Prince2) which have been used as part of the ICT/E-government programme and the new Business Change programme. These have delivered some excellent improvements to services which are being welcomed by customers.

The unified reception, implemented around 18mths ago has been welcomed by virtually all users and has been visited and positively remarked on by many other councils who wish to copy our approach. The new CRM system, introduced in the autumn this year has provided some important new customer facilities such as enabling those who book bulky waste collections to fix a convenient time and pay for collection in one transaction. The Report It! Internet customer service tool has been well used over the past 2 years and the service has gone on to include many council services. Customers welcome the opportunity to contact the council and easily report issues or request services at any time 24/7.

All of these projects were delivered on budget and within the expected timescales.

Whilst not all projects run smoothly it should be recognised that there have been great strides forward in efficiency and customer service. Far from being to the detriment of the taxpayer the telephony project will deliver better service and realise cost savings over its lifetime. In the meantime no taxpayers' money has yet been paid to the prime contractor, Affiniti, and nothing will be paid until it is complete and working.

In a supplementary question Councillor Wall asked the deputy to confirm the current projected savings on the Telephony system and were these the same as originally projected at the start of the project.

The Deputy Performance and Support Services that the annual savings were still estimated to be in the order of £55,000 but the pay back period had now been extended to 6 years to take account of the increased project costs.

15. Question from Councillor Wall to Deputy Policy and Performance

What planning and scoping was undertaken at the start of the telephony system project to ensure that all likely installation sites were covered, and why did this subsequently change? What was the extra cost caused by the addition of new installation sites?

Reply

The scoping work at the start of the project documented the required business needs but it focussed primarily on the new required functionality in areas such as the Town Hall box office. Following the procurement process an opportunity was identified to have some sites serviced by independent business lines from BT or their existing independent solutions, these were; Cemetery and Crematorium, Tourist Information Office and Prince of Wales Stadium. However during later discussions with business areas and further analysis of the level of usage the decision was taken to re-include these sites in the main corporate system. For the TIC this results in substantial overall revenue cost saving during the 10 year life of the new system.

The current costs are:

Cemetery - £11,900

Prince of Wales Stadium - £6,600

Tourist Information Centre - £1,500 (covered in year one by a comparable revenue cost saving)

There was no supplementary question.

16. Question from Councillor Wall to Deputy Policy and Performance

Is the substantial investment in a telephony system at serious risk of failure to deliver the predicted cost savings during its lifetime particularly when the agreed scope of the system is changed during the project, implementation dates are delayed, and the system is suspended pending discussion of 'issues' with the supplier?"

Reply

No the investment is not at risk and it should provide substantial benefits. Firstly the main contract amount (£210,768) has not been paid to the contractor Affiniti, and will not be paid until they have completed the work to a satisfactory standard. The contract is 'payment on completion' deliberately so, to minimise risk.

Secondly, it is sensible to re-consider the scope during implementation. Opportunities arise and needs change. Inevitably this may cause some delay to implementation but it is better to have a project that delivers to the needs at the point of implementation rather than those which may now be out of date.

Thirdly, the project is currently suspended. We have taken a firm line when we presented with increased costs by the supplier which we saw as unreasonable. It is appropriate that we moved to protect the public money and suspend the work (on legal advice). During the period of suspension we have worked positively with the supplier to clarify the issues of cost and we have progressed with other areas of work which did not directly concern the main supplier. Timescales have been little affected by the suspension as it covered a period (Council Tax billing peak) when we would not have chosen to implement in any event due to the call volumes and risk to service.

There was no supplementary question.

17. Question from Councillor Smith to Deputy Health Wellbeing and Economy

Can the Deputy explain to council the reasons why Leisure@ did not host the recent Gloucestershire table tennis championships?

Reply

The event was not hosted by Leisure@ because the event organisers chose not to book the facilities. Leisure@ has recently appointed an Events Manager whose responsibilities include making contact with event organisers, who have booked the facilities in the past, in order to maximise "repeat" business opportunities.

For Councillor Smith's information the weekend that the GTTA event would have been staged at the Centre, a number of other special events were hosted within the sports hall at the Centre, all of which were charged the correct hire charges for the use of the facilities based on this Council's decision of the 25 February 2005 budget meeting. In revenue terms this represented increased revenue (£1200) than in previous years, when the Centre has hosted the GTTA event, due to the subsidy given. At a meeting of the Social & Community Scrutiny Committee I was told that Leisure @ must be run more on business & commercial lines and keep within budget.

In a supplementary question, Councillor Smith asked whether the Deputy would review the hire rates at leisure @ as clearly the centre could only achieve increased revenue if organisations continued to use the centre. This was borne out by the fact that the GTTA had held their championships at Cheltenham College, reportedly for half the price that the leisure centre would have charged.

In response the Deputy reiterated that the centre had been filled to capacity on that particular weekend and had maximized its potential revenue. She advised that GTTA already used Cheltenham College for its weekly training sessions so already had a connection there.

18. Question from Councillor Smith to Deputy Health Wellbeing and Economy

Can the deputy explain to council the rationale for closing the catering facilities at Leisure@ and the cost/savings of that decision in the current year?

Reply

There are catering facilities at Leisure @, however if Councillor Smith is referring to the closure of the cafeteria service, this decision was based on the annual £33,000 losses incurred by this area of the business. This decision has been influential in Leisure @ Cheltenham's improved financial position this year by approximately 75%. To clarify leisure@ has continued to offer a comprehensive range of catering provision to all special events it has hosted since the cafeteria's closure, without incurring major losses.

19. Question from Councillors Mrs Regan to Deputy Built Environment and Democracy

Subject; Free Bus Pass Scheme

- i. Will the deputy acknowledge that the cost of passport photographs for the new bus passes is to cost up to £5.00, half the cost of the present ticket scheme?
- ii. Why is a photograph necessary when proof of age and residence is also required?
- iii. Why in rural areas are over 60's able to have free transport throughout Gloucestershire and not Cheltenham citizens?
- iv. Will the Deputy agree NOT to move the "9am start of use time" to 9.30am because of affordability, when they review this scheme.

Reply

(i) The cost of photographs from a photo booth is typically £3.50 to £4.00. Anyone holding a half fare permit is currently required to supply a photograph with their application. By making the new bus permits valid for a period of three years the annual cost is reduced.

(ii) Evidence of age and of residence is required to ensure that the pass is appropriately issued. The photograph on the pass enables the bus driver to confirm that the person using the pass is the person to whom it has been issued and helps to minimise fraudulent use. Both of the above measures help to ensure that the Concessionary travel budget is directed to those that it is intended to help.

The current bus tickets have a limited one year lifespan and also offer a limited number of journeys. This means that if they are misused the financial impact to the Council is limited. It was therefore considered not necessary for bus ticket customers to have some form of photographic evidence when boarding the bus.

The free travel pass is a valuable item particularly as it offers an unlimited number of journeys in the borough and will have a three year lifespan.

(iii) The new free off-peak travel scheme was introduced by the Government, but each district council is being left to set up its own scheme with its own rules. That means there are differences from one district to another. For example, in Cheltenham the scheme will start at 9. a.m. because that is when our current concessionary scheme starts. Most other districts will not start the scheme until 9.30 a.m.

Residents in Stroud, Cotswolds, Tewkesbury and the Forest will be able to travel outside their own district boundaries within certain limits. But it is untrue to say that they will have free transport throughout Gloucestershire. None of the districts have reached an agreement on implementation of the new travel scheme with bus operators. What we are led to understand from the County is that the following example would apply. A Forest of Dean resident wants to travel from Newent to Cirencester changing buses at Gloucester, he/she will be able to travel the first leg of the journey free. But when getting the bus from Gloucester to Cirencester, will have to pay the normal fare, as he/she will be travelling outside the district boundary.

A mix of different regulations and restrictions is clearly not satisfactory and we need to move towards a single set of county-wide rules as soon as we can.

One of the problems with the new scheme is that it is extremely difficult to predict the cost, because demand is likely to be much higher than under the old schemes. That is why councils have tended to adopt schemes which are as close as possible to their existing schemes. For example if Cheltenham and Gloucester were to allow free county-wide travel immediately, it would expose them to huge financial risk. This is not a political issue, as Conservative run Gloucester City Council has taken the same view as we do.

Having said that, once the new system settles down and we have a better idea of costs, it will hopefully be possible to review the different schemes and move towards putting them on a county-wide basis.

In the meantime, let's not forget the huge benefit that the Cheltenham scheme will offer. The greater availability of bus services in urban areas and the better access to local amenities certainly means Cheltenham residents will be getting at least as much value out of their scheme as rural residents will get out of theirs.

(iv) We have set up the scheme on the basis that it will start at 9.00 a.m. and have no intention of changing this.

In a supplementary question, Councillor Regan asked the Deputy whether he was aware of the dismay amongst potential users of the scheme that they would not be able to travel county wide for free like their neighbours in Tewkesbury borough. She also stated that she had written evidence where assurances had been given that the scheme would not be subject to review. Finally she asked whether the Council would be providing a free passport photo service at the municipal offices.

The Deputy Built Environment and Democracy advised that the information regarding Tewkesbury was inaccurate and although there might be future support for a county wide scheme for any borough it was not currently county wide. It was essential to review the scheme after the first year as costs could only be estimated at this stage.

20. Question from Councillor Forbes to Deputy Built Environment and Democracy.

Would the Deputy Built Environment and Democracy give a short briefing and update on the highway agency agreement.

Reply

Members will be aware of that for the last two years this Council with Gloucester City Council has been in negotiations with the County to review the existing Highways Agency agreement.

In May 2005 a change of administration took place at Shire Hall. In the following months, the new administration made significant changes to the terms and conditions within the draft of the Highway agency Agreement. When we received the final legally ratified draft on December 12th, two days before the County Council cabinet was due to discuss it, the key changes were as follows:

- A demand that we move from a partnership agreement to a contractual agreement, with less scope for integrated highway services higher percentage of financial risk transferred to the agents (Cheltenham).
- A reduction in the notice period from 12 months to 6 (negotiated to 9 months).
- Final agreement to be signed by the 31st of December or the County would serve notice.

There was a letter received by this administration, which accused us of stalling the negotiations. I would like to stress to members that the new agreement we were asked to sign up to was received by officers of this authority at 1pm on 12th December 2005. This was just 2 hours before a pre-arranged meeting at which those same officers were expected to sign a document that they had only just had access to.

It is my understanding that senior Conservative councillors had a meeting with Cllr Charles Gilliams and Cllr Stan Waddington on the 13th January in which they were given to believe that the outstanding issues were minor. This was not the view taken by our officers, who considered these issues were of major importance and rightly queried the financial implications.

It is well documented that the County Cabinet met on the 14th December at which they served notice to terminate the Highway agency agreement on the 31st December 2005 if agreement was not reached to the satisfaction of the County Council.

The officers of this authority and the City tried five times to arrange meetings with officers of the County between 14th and 31st of December but were refused on each occasion.

Following pressure from Conservative members of this authority on their Conservative colleagues on the County, officers of the County met with officers from the City and the Borough on the 17th January 2006. The County's position was that there would be no change to the agreement issued on the 12th December 2005.

Liberal Democrat members on the County Council requested a "call in" to Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel, to express concerns about the process around the decisions taken by the Cabinet on 14th December 2005. It

was noted with some concern that the County Solicitor had stated "his objective was to minimise the employment risk to the county by transferring it to the agents (City and Borough)".

The City and Borough requested that the County extend the signing deadline, due to the financial, employment and service implications in the final document. This was refused, except for the employment liabilities, which they agreed need not be completed until 18th January.

Our last offer, a reduction in the notice period for the existing Agency from 14 to twelve months allowing another eight weeks to negotiate, was refused by Cllr Gilliams at the full County Council meeting of the 25th January 2006. At the same meeting the following motion was put and supported by the both Liberal Democrat and Conservative councillors

"This council notes the cabinet decision on 14th December regarding the Highways Agency Agreement.

This council urges all parties to take into account the following issues and not to close down negotiations unreasonably:

1. The potential loss of over 60 jobs in Cheltenham and Gloucester who are now working predominantly on the Highways Agency
2. The added value of these agency arrangements to services provided by the county in Gloucester city and Cheltenham borough.

This council recognises the value of continued agency agreements and urges the cabinet to conclude a new agency agreement, if possible, to the satisfaction of all parties.

An email was received by the City and Borough on the evening of the 26th giving us until the 2nd February to iron out most of the issues that were of concern to all. The proviso was that both City and Borough had to agree to the same format. This would be viewed by the Cabinet and if they felt that there was a good chance to come to an amicable agreement they would allow those discussions to go on until the 17th February.

Cheltenham and the City's legal officers have, with support from the County's legal officer, arrived at an agreed way forward in relation to the agency draft document and presented it to the County by the deadline of the 2nd February.

The County Cabinet met on the afternoon of the 3rd February and the position we are now at is that the negotiations are on going until the 17th February.

I would like to place on record my thanks to officers of this Authority for their hard work in doing all they can to resolve this matter.

In a supplementary question, Councillor Forbes asked whether the issue had not been resolved or was it likely to be resolved by 17 February.

The Deputy responded that the matter had not yet been resolved but with the help of officers he hoped that it soon would be.

Councillor Garnham asked for clarification on how he could object to any apparent inaccuracies in the deputy's reply.

The Monitoring Officer advised that if any member had a misunderstanding of what the Deputy had said in his reply they could ask for clarification from the Deputy but this did not open the matter up for general debate. On this basis the Mayor allowed two further points to be raised.

In a point of clarification, Councillor Garnham asked whether in requesting a call in of this matter, the Liberal Democrat members on the County Council had acted on their own initiative or whether their action had been prompted by the Deputy's email.

The Deputy replied that he could not give a view on this.

In a point of clarification, Councillor Prince wished it to be recorded that the PAB members of the County had also supported the resolution to the full County Council meeting referred to in the Deputy's response.

21. Question from Councillor Mrs Ryder to Deputy Green Environment and Licensing

The Borough Council in conjunction with Cheltenham and District Allotment Holders Association, were successful in obtaining funding from the Esmee Fairburn Foundation back in 2003 - 04 (as part of an initial application to the Allotment Regeneration Initiative) in a project to improve the Hayden 2 Allotment site, to provide educational opportunities for the promotion of allotments and community gardening, also to people with disabilities, to build or regain their confidence and self esteem and restore strength and mobility after accident or illness. £14,500 was the figure which was awarded to the project. I believe that £4,500 was received in 03 - 04 or 04 - 05. Please could the Deputy enlighten me as to what this was spent on, and how is the project proceeding.

Reply

The Esmee Fairburn Foundation awarded the sum of £14,550 to Cheltenham Borough Council as part of its wider grants programme in recognition of the development work the council has been undertaking for its allotments service. The sum was awarded over a five year period and an initial draw down of £4,544 was received in 03/04. Preparatory work was undertaken in respect of master planning and design detail for the project. Unfortunately the council's Allotments officer became seriously ill and was away from work for a long period and has only recently returned to work. This has hampered the implementation of the project. The council is still committed to carrying out the work which is referred to specifically in the Allotments strategy recently adopted by the council. The council has kept the Esmee Fairburn Foundation apprised of the situation and, now that the staffing situation has improved, it is anticipated that the project will commence in spring of this year."

In a supplementary question, Councillor Ryder asked whether there were any conditions that the council had to comply with in order to take up the £10,000 that was outstanding with this grant award? Was there any time limit on the take up of funding that might mean the Council could lose out on this very

worthwhile scheme and had the Council agreed to matchfund this project.

The Deputy confirmed that the funding was still being held for the Council for a period of 5 years.

22. Question from Councillor Mrs Ryder to Deputy Green Environment and Licensing

Please could the Deputy inform me if she is still allowing plots to be taken up at the Midwinter Allotments.

Reply

Plots are still being let amongst the tenanted areas on Midwinter as they become vacant. The council worked with Cheltenham and District Allotment Holders Association last summer to establish where plots could be let, particularly in view of the future potential development of the Midwinter site. It was agreed with the Allotment Holders Association that this would be done on an incremental basis within the core area of cultivated plots, to ensure that the letting of plots is managed and that plots are not let in areas of the site which may impact upon the development brief and any future proposals for Midwinter.

In a supplementary question, Councillor Ryder asked how long it took for someone applying for an allotment plot to receive an acknowledgment and was the Council meeting its obligations under the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908, section 23. She had concerns about the length of time it was currently taking to receive an acknowledgement, it at all.

The Deputy said she did not have that information with her but would supply this outside the meeting. She was aware that had been some problems but she expected these to be resolved once the allotment officer returned to full time work in the near future.

**Budget Statement by Councillor John Rawson, Exchequer Deputy, to
Cheltenham Borough Council on Friday 10th February 2006**

Mr Mayor

It gives me great pleasure to present the revised budget for 2005/6 and the budget proposals for 2006/7.

A budget is more than just a set of figures. It is a statement of what the Council thinks it is about. In the statement that accompanied the draft budget in December, I identified two words – VALUE and VISION – to describe what this budget means to the Council and the town.

Value

VALUE is about giving people the best services for the money they pay. People often don't realise that all the services they get from the Borough Council come from quite a small share of the council tax they pay. In 2005/6, the Borough Council's share of council tax is just £162.20 per year, or £3.12 a week.

Even so, our costs and statutory duties increase faster than our government funding, and the peculiarities of the council tax system mean that any increase in our costs has a disproportionate impact on council tax bills. Therefore we are engaged in a constant fight to keep costs down in order to deliver good services at an acceptable price.

It is a fight we have waged with some vigour in my time as Exchequer Deputy. As I have said in the report and on numerous other occasions, I have sought to encourage a culture in which managers manage budgets actively right through the financial year in order to achieve additional income and save on costs, as any business would.

This approach has been misrepresented as under spending, but I endure that injustice cheerfully, because it has made it possible for us to put aside £480,000 for the short and medium term costs of Single Status, and £59,000 for managing the implementation of Single Status, both of which would have fallen directly on the council tax but for our prudent approach. We have also been able to meet a large part of the costs of management restructuring from budget savings rather than imposing them on the revenue budget.

In addition, we have closely examined the outturn at the end of each financial year to see where savings and additional income can be sustained into following years. This process has helped the budget situation for 2006/7 by identifying £147,500 of savings and £303,000 of additional income which can be and have been built into the base budget.

Much of this happy situation is due to additional income generated by additional activity or wise management. Planning fees are up. Recycling income is up. Sports and open spaces income is up. Fraud incentive scheme income is well up. Investment income is up. These are not underspends. They are not failures. They are roaring successes, often delivered though the hard work and diligence of officers, and I think it only right at this point to pay tribute to our hard-working senior management and staff.

However, these successes alone will not give us the budget savings I was aiming at in this budget, and I would like to turn to some other important areas where savings can be achieved.

One of these is the restructuring of management in the Business Support and Policy and PR divisions, the Festivals and Entertainments division and the Art Galley and Museum. Together they will deliver an annual saving of £118,000. The savings from management restructuring aren't as high as I had hoped they would be, but they are substantial. And of course I recognise that this has been achieved by cross-party working, particularly by the members of the Staff and Support Services Committee.

Another important opportunity to make savings is through more efficient procurement. Members will know that now have a procurement team in place, which we are employing jointly with Gloucester City Council, to get the best 'bangs for bucks' from our procurement budget.

Because of the substantial investment we are making in this area, it is only right that we should expect a realistic return, and that is why I have targeted £100,000 in savings from procurement as part of this budget. This is not just wishful thinking, still less is it a figure plucked out of the air. It is based on the work that our officers have been doing at my request over the past few months to draw up a realistic, achievable and measurable programme of work.

As you will see at appendix I, the procurement team will be targeting savings in areas such as printers and print consumables, computer equipment, IT maintenance, printing, furniture and fittings, agency staff, fuel and banking. But this work programme is very much a living document, and the team will be taking other opportunities as they arise to save the council money.

To assist our ability to improve the efficiency of procurement, the Council is linking up with Gloucester City and Gloucestershire County in an electronic marketplace. The plan is to buy goods and services through a web-based service called @UK. Buying, receipting and payment of invoices will all be made easier. Paper systems will be phased out making processes faster and cheaper. Management information on purchasing will become easier to obtain and procurement easier to coordinate. The project is being funded by the Gloucestershire Electronic Partnership but it will require a certain level of capital funding, as you will see at appendix L.

Gershon savings

Mr Mayor, may I now turn to the subject of Gershon savings. As members will know, the Government's Gershon targets require us to achieve a 2.5% efficiency savings in our budgets each year between 2005/6 and 2007/8. It is a challenge I have relished, because it enables us to show in a clear and measurable way that we are delivering value for money for our residents.

The Gershon target embraces a range of efficiency gains. Not all budget savings count towards Gershon, and not all the efficiency gains that contribute to Gershon are cashable budget savings.

Nonetheless, the budget savings we have made over the past two years have helped to put us well ahead of the game in terms of achieving our Gershon targets. As members will see at appendix H, we expect to achieve £863,000 of Gershon savings in 2005/6, against an annual target of £578,000. That represents savings not of 2.5% but 3.6%.

In the coming year we face an even stiffer challenge as we have to push the efficiency savings up to 5%. But the savings proposed in this budget, together with a generally prudent approach to financial management, will again help us to get there. The package of measures on page 2 of appendix H will deliver a projected efficiency saving in 2006/7 of £634,000. That compares with a target of £578,000 and represents a cumulative efficiency saving over two years, not of 5%, but of 7.4%.

Benefits of prudent management

Mr Mayor, let me turn now to the benefits that will come from our prudent management.

The effect of this budget and the financial savings we have made is that we can manage with a very modest level of council tax increase – 3%, an extra £4.87 a year, or 9p a week, for a Band D council tax payer. What's more this can be achieved without cutting front-line services, and without putting up taxes by the back door by increasing charges over and above the rate of inflation.

At the same time, we can strengthen the Council's finances for the longer term. In framing this year's budget, we are thinking not just of 2006/7 but of the years beyond, as members will see in the Medium Term Financial Strategy at appendix K. The MTFs always projects funding gaps for future years because our costs tend to rise faster than our government funding. But since I presented last year's budget, those gaps have reduced in size, and in some cases very significantly. The projected funding gap for 2007/8 has reduced from £600,000 to £553,000, for 2008/9 from £506,000 to £402,000, for 2009/10 from £458,000 to £203,000 and for 2010/11 from £440,000 to £109,000.

Cheltenham Festivals

Mr Mayor, one saving we are proposing this year that has been attracted some comment is a modest reduction of £24,000 in the Council's funding for Cheltenham Festivals, and perhaps you will allow me to say a little about this. Cheltenham Borough Council spends considerably more than typical district councils on culture and the arts, and that's right. Cheltenham's cultural life is part of what makes it a terrific place to live, and no one is a bigger enthusiast for the Literature Festival than I am. But I am concerned about whether, in an era of shrinking budgets in the future, the Council will be able to sustain the level of financial support that it is putting in now.

What I have sought to do is encourage Cheltenham Festivals to become gradually more financial independent of the Council over a period of years. The proposed £24,000 saving this year is therefore one step in what we see as a four-year plan to gradually make the Cheltenham Festivals board more self-supporting. Can I stress that it is not an attempt to cut the Festivals themselves, and it has to be seen in the context of a year in which the Literature Festival's income was £96,000 over budget.

May I also add that I am impressed with the way the Festivals board is facing the challenging of becoming more self-funding. It is making great efforts to develop its own fundraising programme, including big gift campaigns and legacy marketing. This is the right way to go, and I believe Cheltenham Festivals will come out of this process stronger. In addition, a four year funding plan will give the board some certainty and a basis on which to plan.

Fees and charges

Mr Mayor, can I turn now to the subject of fees and charges. Generally I propose an increase in charges at the level of inflation, but there are two significant exceptions.

First, parking charges.

When I joined this Council in 2004 and was unceremoniously propelled into the Cabinet, I was left in no doubt that parking charges were a major bone of contention among people and especially business people in the town. We had seen a number of increases well above inflation over a number of years, and under successive administrations, in 2002, 2003 and 2004. I was in no doubt that I would not be able to continue this trend, even if I had wanted to do so.

Accordingly, I proposed last year that off-street parking charges would increase by 2.5% overall, but with most individual charges remaining unchanged. This approach seems to have paid off, in that we have achieved our car parking income targets for the first time for several years.

This year, I am proposing that we should have a freeze on car park charges, except at Grosvenor Terrace which has recently been improved and where the charges are at present considerably lower than in other town centre car parks.

What this means is that most car park charges will remain unchanged for three years running. It will mean, for example, that if you park for two hours in Portland Street in March 2007, you will be paying the same as you would have paid in April 2004. I believe this will be helpful to residents and visitors and so benefit the local economy.

Towards the end of last year, the Cabinet adopted the recommendation of the all-party Parking Solutions Working Party that certain parking concessions should be phased out. This is incorporated into the parking charges schedule at appendix D, although it is not strictly part of the budget process. All I would say is that, because of the freeze in car parking charges, every pound we raise from phasing out parking concessions is in effect being ploughed back into keeping charges down for the whole community.

May I also say a word about charges at leisure@Cheltenham.

Last year, there was a major restructuring of charges at leisure@Cheltenham, following an exercise in which management looked at the real costs of providing individual services and the comparable costs in neighbouring authorities and in the private sector. In many areas but not all, there were above-inflation increases, and this was painful, especially as the proposals came forward relatively late in the budget process. This year I am proposing no increases at all in the leisure@Cheltenham fees. The rationale for this is perfectly simple, and eminently sensible in terms of the centre's business plans. The management wants to have a period of stability in which to increase usage of its facilities.

In addition to this, leisure@Cheltenham has recently introduced a range of new membership packages that are extremely good value. For example, the new Swim and Spa membership gives access to swimming and spa facilities and concessionary rates to use the gyms and exercise classes for just £20 monthly or £200 annually for a single person.

Passport To Leisure, which is particularly targeted at the over 60s, teens and students, disabled people and those on low incomes, gives unlimited access to gyms, classes, pools and spa for £25 monthly or £250 annually for a single person. That's roughly a fiver a week for unlimited access. By any standards these packages are excellent value for money and exactly what we ought to be doing to promote our health and fitness agenda.

Vision

Mr Mayor, having dealt with the theme of value, let me now turn to the other v-word I mentioned earlier – VISION.

I believe people in Cheltenham have a shared vision of the kind of town they want to live in.

We want it to be attractive, clean and green. We want it to be safe. We want it to have decent housing and a strong community life. And we want it to give a good quality of life to its more vulnerable members. These objectives are set out clearly in the Corporate Business Plan.

But there is no point in having a Business Plan if the budget process – the most powerful engine for delivering the plan's objectives – goes its own sweet way. In the past, the budget process has not been sufficiently integrated with the Business Plan. This year we have put that right. As you can see, Business Plan objectives were turned into tasks which were then assessed in terms of their financial implication. If a cost was involved, over and above what can be done within existing budgets, they then triggered a growth bid which was considered as part of the budget process. This exercise has been a huge task for officers, and I would like to thank them for the work they have done.

The result of all this work is that our budget and our Medium Term Financial Strategy are more closely aligned than ever before with our Business Plan priorities. In making the final budget, the Cabinet have considered what is necessary to deliver the big projects we all want to see in the years ahead and built in realistic budgets and staffing levels to achieve them. We have also sought through the budget to address the Council's identified risk areas. And as the Corporate Risk Assessment says at appendix R, "The only revenue growth item which does not appear to address an identified risk area relates to the funding of disabled taxi vouchers".

Another big step forward in our budget planning is to have developed a 20 Year Maintenance Programme, which you will see at appendix N. Clearly all council budgets now and in the future have to take into account the need to maintain our property portfolio. If they don't, we are building up problems for future councils and future generations of Cheltenham residents. The 20 Year Maintenance Programme provides us for the first time ever with a comprehensive plan covering all our maintenance responsibilities over the next two decades. Meeting those responsibilities will be a tough financial challenge, and I have set out in section 24 of the main report some ways in which that might be done. In the meantime, in 2006/7 we are making a start by budgeting over a million pounds from the revenue budget for maintenance work.

Service growth

I spoke earlier about our prudent financial management and how it has helped us avoid cuts in front-line services. Now I should add that it has done more than this. It has also allowed us to provide a modest level of service growth.

The biggest single growth item is the one that gives me the greatest pleasure, but it is also the one that I have least responsibility for. That is the introduction of free off-peak bus travel for people over 60 and disabled people. This is a requirement of central Government, though one the Cabinet and I hope the Council are eager to embrace. The additional responsibility it gives us is largely though not entirely funded by central Government, with the Chancellor contributing £539,000 out of a total estimated cost for Cheltenham of £653,000.

I believe the new scheme is going to make a huge contribution to the quality of life of older people in the town. I look forward to qualifying in three years time. When combined with the extension of the taxi voucher scheme for disabled people and the expansion of the Lifeline which I am also proposing today, it adds up to a very good budget for older and disabled people.

Moving on, Mr Mayor, I don't want to go into each of our growth proposals in detail, but there are a number that I want to refer to.

Last July as part of the outturn report I proposed that a third round of green waste collection should be introduced from September, bringing the number of participating households to around 33,000.

This budget picks up the full year cost of this service and also proposes to extend it to something like 5,000 more households.

The cabinet is committed to improving the standard of street cleaning incrementally, year by year, and this year I have adopted the proposal from the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee for more frequent cleaning of gateway routes into the town. I am grateful to them for their initiative and the work they put into it. I am also proposing to fund the purchase and installation of more litter bins at locations that tend to attract litter like neighbourhood shopping centres.

I would also like to say a word about our proposals to strengthen our response to crime and disorder. In this budget I propose to fund a new community safety officer, and also additional legal resources to enforce the growing body of legislation on anti-social and unneighbourly behaviour.

The days are long gone when law and order could be maintained by the police alone. Reducing crime now requires the whole community to identify the biggest problems and respond to them in an intelligent, targeted way. And it requires the whole community to work together, including local authorities, housing, social services, education, health services, community groups as well as the police. Indeed the Council has a clear statutory responsibility to play its part in this joint working.

We have a strong Crime and Disorder Partnership here in the town, and this new post will be part of our contribution to that Partnership. The new post will also be part of a strong, unified enforcement team which is being developed within the Council, providing a more effective response to licensing violations, environmental offences, crime and anti-social behaviour.

Before I move on from service growth to other matters, I would also like to refer to the biggest new capital project to be coming forward in this budget. This is the proposed new Community Resource Centre for the Oakley area at Clyde Crescent. The need for this centre has long been recognised. It will act as a focus for a wide range of activity that will strengthen the community, provide better access to services, and offer wider opportunities to people in that part of town.

On our side of the chamber, we have an unambiguous, unequivocal, unreserved commitment to this project.

Civic Pride

Mr Mayor, the Book of Proverbs tells us that “Where there is no vision, the people perish”. That may be a slight exaggeration when applied to the people of Cheltenham, but it is no exaggeration when applied to the town itself. Cheltenham and particularly the town centre needs a vision.

We have several large, empty sites around St Margaret’s Road that are much too important to be left undeveloped. We have a traffic system that creaks at the seams. We see other towns going ahead with imaginative new schemes. We need to get moving, and that is why I am delighted that this budget makes that possible by starting to release the money we have earmarked for the Civic Pride initiative to create a blueprint for comprehensive redevelopment. This follows Cheltenham’s success in gaining £250,000 of Regional Development Agency money to press ahead with the initiative.

Like you, Mr Mayor, I have a dream. My dream is that instead of acres of surface car parks on prime town centre sites, we see high quality development combining housing, employment, leisure and car parking, all within the context of a coherent plan. My dream is that we see Royal Crescent and Royal Well achieve their potential. This is what Civic Pride can achieve for us, and much more besides. It can mean a more prosperous and attractive community for all of us, and that’s the opportunity this budget helps us to grasp.

Public consultation

Finally, I would like to say a word about public consultation. This year we have been more proactive than ever before in seeking people’s views about the budget. In particular, we sent out questionnaires to members of the Viewpoint panel. The result is that we received something like 323 questionnaires as well as dozens of letters and emails. This gives us a strong basis on which to gauge public reaction to the budget.

I am pleased to report that the response was strongly positive. 68% of respondents felt our tax increase was about right. There was also majority support – and in many cases overwhelming support – for our priorities and growth and savings proposals.

This is a good budget. In fact it is a terrific budget. A modest tax increase. No cuts in frontline services. Modest increases, and in some cases no increase at all, in charges. Modest but targeted growth aimed at improving the environment, reducing crime, and helping our older and disabled citizens. My Mayor, in the real world it doesn’t come much better than this.