

Council

Meeting date: 11 December 2023

Member Questions (10 total)

1. Question from Councillor Tim Harman to Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Street Services, Councillor Iain Dobie

Will the Cabinet Member explain what steps are being taken to sweep/remove the leaf fall which can make pavements slippery at this time of year?

Cabinet Member response:

Members will be aware that every year during the Autumn the leaves fall off the trees onto the pavements and as such there is a regular programme of leaf clearance that takes place and details can be found on our website.

As we plant more trees to support climate change, the amount of leaves that fall in our green spaces and built up areas such as the High Street, is increasing and not only in the Autumn. As we have seen over the last few years, periods of hot and dry weather during the summer also cause the trees to drop their leaves. In other words, the trees that we value so much in our efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change are generating more work when the leaves do fall.

As I have already mentioned, every year, Ubico deliver a regular programme of leaf clearance and move around the town centre and the rest of the borough as quickly as they can. Residents are asked to report any specific areas where there is a build up of leaf fall as this does vary from year to year and is also very dependent on weather conditions. I can confirm that during November this year we received 62 requests for leaf clearance of which 44 have been completed already. Over the last few weeks leaf clearance has taken place across the borough including in Queens Road, Christchurch Road, Malvern Road, Lansdown Crescent, Douro Road, Bayshill Road, Lansdown Road, Parabola Road, Hatherley Road, College Road, Sandford Mill Road, Keynsham Road, Pittville Circus and All Saints Road.

I would urge residents to support our street cleansing efforts by moving parked cars when asked to enable cleansing of leaves and detritus from pavements and the highway.

Not only will you see crews manually clearing leaves on pavements and the highway but the road sweepers are also deployed to clear leaves and as such if parked cars block areas of the road these efforts are thwarted. During periods of cold weather, as instructed by Gloucestershire County Council, the road sweepers are stood down on main roads and gateway routes to ensure any gritting that takes place over night is not swept away early in the morning by the road sweepers. As you can imagine

this does sometimes slow down the leaf clearing process but I can assure you leaves are cleared as quickly as possible within the available resources.

2. Question from Councillor Tim Harman to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

From confidential briefings at this Council I understand that the potential sale of Gloucestershire Airport needed to remain under wraps at this stage . The premature disclosure of the potential sale, prompted by a question at Gloucester City Council by a senior liberal democrat councillor, seems to have prompted a formal statement by the two shareholding councils .

Will the Leader like to comment and can she state what the proceeds of CBCs share will be earmarked for ?

Cabinet Member response:

Thank you for your question Councillor Harman. The decision to approve the exit strategy for the Council's shareholding in Gloucestershire Airport was made by Full Council in December 2020 and is a matter of public record.

Whilst the formal statement was published a week earlier than planned, it does not change the fact that this Council had approved its exit strategy 3 years ago and all Members within this Chamber had been fully briefed via their Group Leaders.

It would be negligent for me to put on record what the proceeds will be earmarked for in advance of any sale being completed, but I can confirm that any proceeds, should they be realised, will be put towards meeting our corporate priorities as defined in our Corporate Plan.

3. Question from Councillor Stephan Fifield to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets Councillor Peter Jeffries

It's been 6 months since I last raised the issue of the unavailability of Spa Water at the Pittville Pump Room. The Cabinet Member said he would update us on the ongoing works within 3 months. We haven't received an update. Could you give us an update on all the works that have been done, clarify what the current situation of the water is, and whether the water will be returning in the next 6 months?

Cabinet Member response:

I would like to thank Cllr Fifield for his question and I am pleased to provide an update on the activity which has been undertaken over the last three months in particular. In September the property team replaced the spa water pump in the well which meant the spa tap was operational.

Following the repair, the cold water storage tank was cleaned and disinfected following external advice in advance of water samples being taken.

At the start of October the spa water was tested and the results show the quality of the water was unsatisfactory and not suitable for consumption. This means at present the spa water can run but is not drinkable.

Working in partnership with the Cheltenham trust this situation is being monitored.

4. Question from Councillor Stephan Fifield to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

It was recently reported that the Pump Room was closed for emergency works. This sounds very worrying. Could you please give an update on the works that have been made, why they needed to be done so suddenly, the cost of these works so far, and if these works have completed?

Cabinet Member response:

I would like to thank Cllr Fifield for his question and his interest in the Pittville Pump Rooms.

The Pump Rooms are currently closed in order to undertake some repairs on the plasterwork in the main ballroom. The decision to undertake these works so urgently was made following a close quarters inspection of the ceilings and the iconic dome which was completed in October 2023.

The Pump Rooms are an important destination for visitors in our town and also available for private hire as well as being an office space for staff at the Cheltenham Trust. It is with great regret that the building has been closed but the Council takes its responsibility to make sure the building continues to be safe for users extremely seriously. We are also committed to ensuring the building can be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations.

In order to move forward as quickly as possible with the remedial works, a specialist contract was appointed by the Council through a waiver within five calendar days of the inspection. We have an initial quote for these works but the full cost may change, depending on whether additional consequential repairs are identified during remediation.

5. Question from Councillor Stephan Fifield to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

Could you please tell me what works have been made to the Municipal building to modernise it since the beginning of the 2020 financial year. Do you have costings for these works and what are they?

Cabinet Member response:

I would like to thank Cllr Fifield for his question. Other than reactive repairs and other health and safety related work at the Municipal Offices, the only modernisation work undertaken has been the redecoration of the first and second floor of the building and the refurbishment of the reception area. This work started in 2020 and completed in 2021. The total revenue cost of the redecoration was £205k and the reception capital works cost £125k.

I'm sure you will remember prior to 2020, the office space throughout the building had not been decorated or refurbished for over a decade, in some areas even longer. Modernising the décor allowed the full roll out of agile working as staff returned to the office after the pandemic, it meant the Council could reduce its footprint in the building at a time of rising energy costs in 2022 and provided more modern space to lease and generate commercial income to support the delivery of core services.

The refurbishment of the reception area meant we were able to re-open to the public after the pandemic with a much more professional and fit for purpose customer service front of house. This investment considered the potential future re-location of the Council and all equipment, including the desk itself, can be re-located to a new space.

6. Question from Councillor Stephan Fifield to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

Could you please tell me if there have been any negotiations with any potential buyers for Idsall Drive Car Park in the last 6 months, and if so how many separate negotiations have there been, and how many are ongoing?

Cabinet Member response:

I would like to thank Cllr Fifield for his question. As you are aware, the Cabinet took a decision on the 19 September to declare the land at Idsall Drive surplus to requirements and dispose of the holding for best consideration. At the request of the Leader, conversations were re-opened with Prestbury Parish Council to purchase the land. These have now concluded and the land will shortly be advertised for sale on the open market.

No other negotiations have been undertaken with potential buyers in the last six months.

7. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

In previous years, CBC have allowed free parking after 5.00 pm in selected town centre car parks to boost the town's Christmas economy. What plans, if any, are there to do something similar this year? Which car parks will be free and when will this initiative be announced?

Cabinet Member response:

I would like to thank Cllr Nelson for her question. You may have seen the media release on 4 December that free parking is being offered in the Town Centre East car park on Thursday 7, 14 and 21 from 12noon to 8pm.

This demonstrates the commitment our Council has for residents to be able to shop locally and support our fantastic retail and hospitality sector in the run up to

Christmas. This has proved a successful initiative in previous years and has been endorsed by the Cheltenham BID.

I would also like to take the opportunity to draw attention to a number of events running in the town over the festive period – our very own ice rink in Imperial Gardens, the pantomimes at the Everyman and Playhouse Theatres and the Christmas Arts and Crafts Market which will be running from 14 to 23 December on the Promenade.

And finally, to wish all our residents, visitors, staff and Members a very Merry Christmas!

8. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

The Council has 11 car parks around the town centre offering a total of 1,803 spaces, including 71 (4%) disabled bays. In all parks but the Regent Arcade, disabled drivers are allowed to park for the first 3 hours for free yet the Regent Arcade Car park requires them to pay normal charges. Why is this and can this be classified as inclusive or fair?

Cabinet Member response:

I would like to thank Cllr Nelson for her question. In our pay and display car parks, free parking for up to 3 hours for disabled users is available without the customer purchasing a ticket. As long as a blue badge is displayed in the vehicle, our enforcement officers will not issue a penalty charge notice.

Regent Arcade is a pay on foot barrier system. The customer takes a ticket on entry, pays at one of the machines before leaving. In order to exit the car park a validated ticket should be inserted into the barrier. All vehicles must insert a paid ticket for the exit barrier to open. At present it is not possible for individuals or groups of individuals to by-pass this process.

This information is published by the Council on our website and as part of the consultation on the Car Parking Order when this change was introduced, in direct response to legal advice sought at the time.

https://www.cheltenham.gov.uk/info/58/disabilities/399/disabled_parking

The Council's car parking strategy is currently under review and key themes such as accessibility, pricing and capacity to meet future needs are being considered as part of this.

9. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

What are the plans for installing EVs in all the CBC-owned car parks? What is the time frame and how many will be installed in each?

Cabinet Member response:

I would like to thank Cllr Nelson for her question. The property team have been working hard over the last year to develop a proposal for installing EV charging points in our car parks across the town. Working with EV Network, heads of terms are currently being agreed for the provision of 44 rapid charging points in five locations spread evenly across the town: St James Street, Bath Terrace, West End, Six ways and Church Piece.

Before any of the leases can be completed and work begins on the installation of the infrastructure, we will be going out to consultation on the relevant changes that are needed to the Car Parking Order. We look forward to hearing the views of key stakeholders through this consultation period and, subject to the outcome, construction should be able to begin before the end of this financial year.

10. Question from Councillor Tony Oliver to Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Victoria Atherstone

Some of my recent casework has been with helping leaseholders of CBH properties with financial difficulties arising from the costs of updating these properties.

CBH has been following a long running programme of works to maintain and improve the properties they own for the benefit of all their tenants.

Problems have arisen with the costs of improvement works to maisonettes and the shared responsibility for works that are a feature of such properties. As I understand it, CBH maisonette tenants wishing to exercise the 'right to buy' their maisonette could only do so on a leasehold basis, in order to ensure that the costs of any improvements could be equally recovered.

This has caused financial problems to some leaseholders I am working with who have been asked to cover their share of replacing items such as doors and windows and in some instances up to circa £9k towards roof replacements. Whilst payment plans are being offered, I am aware that even for lower costs work these are amounting to around £250 per month over an extended period, which in the current cost of living crisis means that some are finding it increasingly difficult to afford essentials such as food.

Can the Cabinet Member for Housing tell me how many maisonettes in Cheltenham are occupied by CBH leaseholders and what plans there are to help ease the financial concerns of leaseholders who are afraid of running into debts they cannot afford and ultimately losing their homes?

Cabinet Member response:

Thank you Councillor Oliver for your important question.

It is correct that some leaseholders can face substantial invoices for their share of costs to the blocks in which they hold their lease. This can apply to leaseholders living in flats as well as to leaseholders living in maisonettes.

There are currently 435 leaseholders within our housing stock (both flats and maisonettes), and of these 161 (37%) are sublet. Being a leaseholder can come with

financial challenges, given both the annual service charges and expected contributions towards “major works” such as roof replacements. CBC therefore has a range of options available to help leaseholders, depending on their circumstances. It is important to note that when approached by a leaseholder for help, we will always handle each situation with compassion, sensitivity and agility, especially given the current financial climate.

The options that we would fully explore with a leaseholder are as follows:

1) Payment arrangements

This option is the most common. We will investigate a leaseholder’s circumstances, considering any other outstanding invoices, and conduct an overview of their finances to see what help is needed and what repayment arrangements can be made. In some cases we may make a referral to our in-house Benefit and Money Advice Service to see if any additional income can be obtained and other sources and for any guidance on budgeting and bills.

Quite often problems can arise from a change in personal circumstances, so if this happens, we will seek to make a temporary affordable repayment arrangement, which is then reviewed after an agreed period (eg 6 -12 months). If their circumstances have improved, the repayment contributions can then be revisited. The key is flexibility. We will only make arrangements that are affordable to individuals and not based on fixed time periods and amounts. At this stage of the process these arrangements are interest free.

2) Private Finance (borrowing)

We will advise those leaseholders without savings to obtain independent financial advice on taking out a private loan. Leaseholders may find adding the amount to their mortgage or seeking a private loan to be the cheapest method of borrowing.

3) Buy backs

In some cases, we have worked with individuals who don’t want to be a leaseholder due to financial pressures. In such instances we have successfully worked with leaseholders to purchase their property, clear any associated debts owed to the council, and then allowed them to remain in the property on a tenancy.

4) Service Charge Loan

A leaseholder also has the right to request a loan from the council to cover the costs for major works done to the property demanded as part of the annual service charges, provided certain eligibility criteria is met.

5) Discretionary deferred payment

We realise that it is not always possible for a leaseholder to pay for a major works bill in one go or be able to borrow money from banks and building societies.

A leaseholder may not be eligible for a Service Charge Loan or in the case of being eligible, may not be able to take up the option on the grounds of affordability.

Therefore we can, at our discretion, offer various methods of payments to help leaseholders, based on individual circumstances.

The council would offer discretionary loans to leaseholders, deferring payments, once they have demonstrated that they have not been able to obtain a loan from elsewhere. We would consider each individual leaseholder's circumstances, taking account of their ability to repay the loan and the amount of equity that they have in their property, before arriving at a decision. This discretionary loan option will only be given to a leaseholder in extreme hardship and is subject to interest.

6) Voluntary Charge on the property

If none of the above payment options assist a leaseholder facing extreme hardship, a legal charge (known as a Voluntary Charge) can be secured on the property with the Land Registry.

Interest will be charged and once the property is sold, assigned, or passed on through inheritance, the charge would be immediately repayable to the council. The leaseholder will be required to pay the monthly interest to the council but if this was not possible then the council could accrue the interest to be paid from the proceeds of the sold property.

In summary, at present none of our 435 leaseholders have needed to rely on the Council's Major Works Policy for Leaseholders in terms of Service Charge Loans, Discretionary Deferred Payments, or Voluntary Charges. There have been more suitable options for leaseholders in terms of payment arrangements (based on affordability), private finance (borrowing) or through buy backs.

In addition, no leaseholder debts have ever needed to be written off. Ultimately when a leasehold property is sold any outstanding services charges are cleared through the proceeds of sale. Non-payment of Service Charges and Major Works would leave a leaseholder at risk of forfeiture of their lease. This is the means for a landlord to terminate the lease. This has never occurred and should give some further comfort that existing options are working, and that leaseholders are being dealt with sensitively and with compassion.