

Council

Meeting date: 23 February 2024

Public Questions (11 total)

1. Question from Mr Steven Thomas to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

As a Cheltenham resident who was born here, I am very concerned about the Cheltenham / Gloucester / Tewkesbury “Super City” which will become one of the largest cities in the UK: <https://www.glos2050.com/>

The public consultation that was carried out in 2018 showed that the public are not in support of this, and despite the council saying that that there are no plans for this to happen, the development taking place in West Cheltenham contradicts this. First, we have the Cyber Park which will give rise to approximately 3,000 – 4,000 new homes: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-gloucestershire-67474592>

Secondly, plans were announced a few weeks ago for an additional 4,000 homes in Elm Park: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-gloucestershire-67522618>

Both of these developments would fuel an exponential rise in the population of Cheltenham, taking it from the “Centre Of The Cotswolds” to a larger urban development much akin to what is being proposed in the “2050 Super City”.

I listened to the entirety of the council meeting on the 11th December 2023, and heard many concerning quotes being thrown around by members of the council:

“We mustn’t lose the ambition to spread the load”, and “Tewkesbury has far more ability to build”. (in reference to housing).

“We ***have made the commitment***, *but have to test*” (in respect to developing on the Green Belt), which implies the decision to develop has already been made.

Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury each have their own unique heritage, so why is there such a push to rapidly redevelop them into something that the public do not want? This is not just my opinion, but one that is shared by many others who have lived here all our lives and are proud of our cultural history. It seems to all of us that Cheltenham Borough Council are going full steam ahead with the Super City but are trying not to overtly call it that in any of the meetings or refer to it as such through the Joint Core Strategy between the three councils.

Cabinet Member response:

I would like to thank Mr Thomas for his question which I will answer in two parts.

The first part of the question relates to the adopted Gloucester, Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Joint Core Strategy (JCS), approved in 2017. The sites referenced, Elms Park and West Cheltenham, are both strategic allocations which were allocated for development through the preparation of the JCS. This plan forms part of the statutory development Plan for Cheltenham and was the subject of statutory public consultation together with an independent examination in public. The evidence base which informed the preparation of this plan can be viewed via the following link <https://www.jointcorestrategy.org>.

To respond to the second part of the question. In line with the council's statutory duty to keep its development plan up to date we have refreshed our approach to plan making and this was the report debated at council on 11th December. At that meeting the council confirmed the preparation of Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury Strategic and Local Plan (SLP) and our ongoing commitment to work with our partners Gloucester and Tewkesbury. I will not set out the detail of that report again here as the background is available via the council report which can be viewed via the following link

[https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/documents/s46064/Cheltenham Gloucester Tewkesbury Strategic Local Plan Consultation.pdf](https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/documents/s46064/Cheltenham_Gloucester_Tewkesbury_Strategic_Local_Plan_Consultation.pdf). I will however highlight the importance all three councils place on recognising the unique character each district has and the importance of recognising and ensuring appropriate local policies are in place as we prepare the SLP. For Cheltenham, heritage, as you have pointed out is a good example of this, as are other local issues such as local green space.

As a point of reference, the 2050 vision was essentially a conversation across a range of partners which originated in 2017 around a commitment to look at the longer-term challenges facing the county, and to consider what changes might be needed to address those challenges to deliver improved outcomes for future generations. The University of Gloucestershire facilitated the 2050 vision study, and it was subject to wider public consultation focussed around what was considered large scale transformational projects. Whilst this is relevant as part of the wider evidence base in preparing development plans, it is only one element. In addition, it represents a point in time. Since that time the councils of Gloucestershire have prepared and agreed a Gloucestershire Statement of Common Ground, this includes a series of 37 very broad and high level agreements dealing with a range of environmental issues and land use matters including addressing the climate and ecological emergencies, housing and economic needs, the Green Belt, transport provision, the natural environment and green infrastructure, health and social infrastructure, infrastructure delivery and minerals and waste. This was approved by Cheltenham Borough Council on 18 July 2022 and can be viewed via the following link

<https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/ielIssueDetails.aspx?IId=24877&PlanId=0&Opt=3#A121584>

The SLP is currently subject to public consultation, and I would very much encourage you to get involved in that process. All details can be found via the following link <https://strategiclocalplan.org/>. The consultation includes a variety of in-person and online events and full details can be found under the events page of the strategic local plan website.

2. Question from Mr Peter Frings to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

Cheltenham Borough Council has a non-exec director on the Board of Gloucestershire Airport to represent and safeguard the interests of local residents and the council. From July 2018 to March 2023, this was Roger Whyborn. From 31 March 2023, it has been Adrian Bamford.

The accounts for the airport over the last 6 financial years (2018 to 2023) show consistently declining operational profitability. Over this period, if property revaluations and the notional loss on the disposal of the third runway are excluded, the airport has made a loss of £4.8m over this period.

If instead you include all the property valuation adjustments including the third runway, the loss over the 6 year period is £4.1m. These figures would be even higher if it were not for a one-off boost to turnover in 2023, which I presume is from the sale of the long leasehold on CGX Connect business park.

Aircraft movements were 80k in 2018 declining to 61k in 2023.

What interventions or actions have the non-exec directors representing CBC on the Gloucestershire Airport's board taken over the last 6 years to address the long-term decline in the financial health of the airport; if any were taken, were these reported back to council officers and the Cabinet? Please provide dates and summary of each intervention.

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question.

Whilst the Council nominates one of its members to be a non-executive director on the Board of Gloucestershire Airport, once appointed, that director is required by law to hold office according to the constitution of the company.

This means that once the appointment has been confirmed, the member takes on all the responsibilities of that position, and their duty when acting as a director is to the company, and not to their appointing council. They must therefore act in accordance with what they consider necessary to promote the success of the company.

In light of this the Council is unable to provide information in relation to any actions that the non-executive director may have taken in relation to their role on the Board of Gloucestershire Airport.

3. Question from Mr Peter Frings to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

On 23 December 2021, in answer to an enquiry, the CBC Customer Relations and Information Officer gave me the following information in writing about the airport:

“Further to your question we can confirm that Gloucestershire Airport’s proposal at the December 2020 meeting contained no suggestion that any increase in aviation flights was envisaged or proposed, whether that was for private flights or the introduction of any public passenger flights.

The number of flights permitted are covered by the ‘Green Policy’ which stipulates both the number of flights permitted and hours of operation. The number of flights and out of hours flights is governed by the original planning permission for the runway safety project as set out below:

16: The Airport shall be limited to Code 2 Runway operations as defined by the Civil Aviation Authority.

17: the number of air movements at the airport shall not exceed 95,000 a year (excluding police, emergency and military-related flights)

18: the airport’s main hours of operation shall be restricted to between the hours of 0830 – 1930 with no more than 1.5% of movements per annum outside of these hours (excluding police, emergency and military flights, and those arriving late for operational reasons).

19: The number of movements between the hours of 23.00 and 6.00 shall be limited to 100 per calendar year (excluding police, emergency and military-related flight).”

Can the council confirm that all these conditions on the operation of the airport will be maintained in the event of the airport being sold?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question.

These are operational matters for Tewkesbury Borough Council, as planning authority, and the Civil Aviation Authority to decide and enforce in their statutory capacities.

However, the councils are taking legal advice on the nature and structure of legal covenants that can be imposed on a sale to safeguard the future operation of the airport.

4. Question from Phillip Angell to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

Councillor Rowena Hay was quoted on the Gloucestershire Airport in December 2023 saying “...the timing is now right for both councils to bring in a new owner to

take it (the airport) forward”. However, when the Council’s most recent draft statement of accounts was published in June 2023, it stated on page 62 that the 50% of shares in Gloucestershire Airport held by the council “are not held for trading and there are no plans to dispose of them”. When was the decision to sell the airport taken, which councillors were involved in this decision, and what prompted the sudden change of strategy?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question Mr. Angell.

The decision to approve the exit strategy for the Council’s shareholding in Gloucestershire Airport was made by Full Council on 7th December 2020 and is a matter of public record.

<https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=19148>

Full delegation was approved whereby the Executive Director Finance and Assets (in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member for Gloucestershire Airport Limited and the Borough Solicitor) be authorised to take such actions and make such arrangements as are necessary for the implementation of the recommendations within that report including such legal processes and agreements as are necessary.

In September 2023, alongside the Leader at Gloucester City Council, we formally exercised that delegation and informed the Board of Gloucestershire Airport Limited that it was both Council’s intention to dispose of our interests at Gloucestershire Airport and that our intention was to formally bring the sale to the market.

5. Question from Phillip Angell to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

Gloucester City Council Leader Richard Cook said in a written response (as reported by the BBC) that the full Gloucester City Council had already approved an exit strategy (i.e. sale) for the airport at its meeting on 15 December 2020. Cheltenham Borough Council, in closed session at its December 2020 meeting, approved a multi-million pound loan to refurbish the airport runways. Was Cheltenham Borough Council also aware of an intention to sell the airport at the time at which they agreed in December 2020 to invest in the runway refurbishment? Specifically, was an intention to sell the airport as part of a future exit strategy explicitly mentioned in the proposal documents that Cheltenham Borough councillors saw at that December 2020 meeting?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question Mr. Angell.

As stated in my answer to your previous question, I can confirm that the decision to approve the exit strategy for the Council’s shareholding in Gloucestershire Airport was made by Full Council on 7th December 2020 and is a matter of public record.

<https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=19148>

6. Question from Miriam Frings to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

It appears that a decision to seek a buyer for the airport has been taken very suddenly, possibly triggered by a belated awareness of the steady losses at the airport; or because of a perceived risk to the council's own finances; or as means to get a one-off cash injection to shore up the council's finances. But the airport is a 300 acre prime site, very close to Cheltenham and Gloucester, and could be a huge potential public asset. Will the council engage with all residents over other possible uses for the site, rather than just maintaining an airport for a small number of hobbyists and private jets, or handing the asset over at a fire-sale price to a private developer?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question.

Whilst I accept not all residents may support Gloucestershire Airport, previous studies have found that there is an economic value from having an operational airport, contributing around 475 FTE jobs and £52m of (Gross Valued added) GVA (economic productivity metric that measures the contribution to an economy) to the local area. Closure of the Airport would see these benefits lost from the local area as there would be no alternative for relocation of operators. If the Airport were to cease operations, this could have detrimental consequences for the ability to attract high value companies to the area, including as part of the 'Golden Valley Development'.

The significant investment in the main runway allowed the strategic decision to be taken to close the rarely used north-south runway (thus saving maintenance costs) and release previously sterilised land for development, now known as the CGX Business Park. This will enable significant job creation as part of the economic recovery and be realised through private investment.

A further study concluded that closure of the whole site for housing could deliver net returns of £97 million over a 30 year period but this would require release from Green Belt and could take some time to be realised. Alternative commercial uses would also give rise to the same planning issues and would be likely to realise lower land values.

I can assure the questioner that the Council's finances are robust and sustainable as can be demonstrated from the budget related reports that are on the agenda for today's meeting. If this Council was in need of a one-off cash injection to shore up the council's finances, as the questioner suggests, then I feel it right to point out that we would probably not be selling this prized County asset as an on-going airport.

7. Question from Miriam Frings to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

If offers to buy the airport are received, will the decision as to whether to accept an offer come to full Council or only to the Cabinet?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question.

The decision to approve the exit strategy for the Council's shareholding in Gloucestershire Airport was made by Full Council on 7th December 2020 and is a matter of public record.

<https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=19148>

Full delegation was approved whereby the Executive Director Finance and Assets (in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member for Gloucestershire Airport Limited and the Borough Solicitor) be authorised to take such actions and make such arrangements as are necessary for the implementation of the recommendations within that report including such legal processes and agreements as are necessary.

Therefore, in line with the delegation above, the decision as to whether to accept an offer will be made by myself and the Leader of Gloucester City Council with support from relevant senior officers at both Councils.

8. Question from Dr Diane Cook to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

80% of aircraft movements at Gloucestershire Airport are from Aero Club flights and private flying (Civil Aviation Authority statistics). The financial accounts of the airport make it clear that the airport is unprofitable in operational terms, and only survives on property and rental income. It is likely that any potential buyer will be much more interested in the development potential of the site, rather than trying to make the airport profitable from aviation activities. Given that the airport falls under Tewkesbury Council in planning terms, neither Cheltenham or Gloucester councils will have any planning control over what happens to the site once it is sold. In these circumstances, does the council intend to impose any covenants on the sale in order to control future development, or to ensure the airport continues to operate its two runways, for example?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question.

At this stage the intention is to impose restrictive covenants in respect of the protected zones and the key operational areas that are essential to the day-to-day operation of the airport, in which no development will be permitted (bar operational and infrastructure).

Beyond these areas but within the boundary of the wider site, it is intended that there will be restrictive covenants preventing any development that would be detrimental to the operation of the airport and in any event, no housing development with Use Class C3: Dwelling-houses.

The councils are taking legal and professional advice on this matter and will be exploring further measures to protect the operation of the airport, whilst providing any investor with the maximum flexibility to undertake appropriate commercial development which will support and enhance its ongoing viability.

9. Question from Dr Diane Cook to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

The council voted in July 2019 to declare a climate emergency. Almost five years later, there has been negligible concrete action or progress towards achieving 'net zero' in Cheltenham. The Government Climate Change Committee makes it clear that we must rapidly increase renewable electricity generation, and at the same time dramatically reduce those activities such as aviation which are most harmful in generating CO2 emissions. Aviation, particularly private aviation, has to be curtailed due to the climate emergency. The airport is a failing business, making substantial losses over recent years. The airport runways are a flat site, very close to large numbers of houses in Cheltenham and Gloucester. It is therefore a prime site for a solar farm which could provide clean, renewable electricity for a very substantial number of local homes. If the council is serious about wanting to take climate action, why doesn't it commission a feasibility study on closing down the airport runways, compensating affected businesses on the airport site, and establishing a major solar farm?

Cabinet Member response

I would like to thank Dr Cook for her question to which I would respond as follows:

Climate Emergency Action Plan

When the Council declared a climate emergency in 2019, it drew up an action plan to address emissions and has made good progress in terms of implementation against this. <https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/documents/b12519/Climate%20Emergency%20Review%20-%20updated%20report%2004th-Sep-2023%2018.00%20Overview%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=9> Progress is also evident from the Council's own internal carbon footprint calculations (scope 1,2 and 3 emissions) which have continued to fall by 15% per annum from the agreed baseline, in line with the requisite 14% straight line trajectory required to meet the net zero goal.

Airport Closure & Aviation Emission Reduction

The Climate Change Committee estimate the emissions from aviation nationally to be around 7%^[1]. Unfortunately, shutting the airport would likely relocate rather than reduce demand and address associated emissions. In 2022, the government has put in place a Jet Zero Strategy to address emissions associated with air transport. This plan will necessitate a significant increase in the production and use of

^[1] <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/2023-progress-report-to-parliament/>

Sustainable Aviation Fuel, alongside new aircraft design (such as the hydrogen planes under development by Zero Avia elsewhere in Gloucestershire).

Locations Suitable for Renewable Energy Generation

The Council are considering suitable locations for renewable energy development within the development of the Strategic and Local Plan (SLP). To support development of the SLP, the Centre for Sustainable Energy were commissioned to deliver a two-part study. Project • Renewable Energy Study (citizenlab.co). This report explores renewable energy potential at a strategic level. Part two of the study, to be conducted following the first stage of public engagement on the new plan (the first Regulation 18 Consultation), will explore area-specific opportunities, and provide recommendations for renewable energy policies.

However, the potential for renewable generation must be balanced against other options for land use. In this case, given the existing businesses located at the airport, rather than being utilised as an energy asset, it is felt that the land is best sold as a going concern, maintaining jobs and growth potential.

10. Question from Gary Clarke to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

In the Council's Draft Statement of Accounts, page 43 states that the Managing Director for Place and Growth left on 31 August 2022, and on page 24 it totals his termination benefits as £264,662. What percentage of this payment was discretionary (i.e. over and above the minimum required by employment law), and how does the council justify a payment of this size, particularly at a time of intense pressure on the council's finances?

Cabinet Member response

I would like to thank Mr Clarke for his question and for considering our draft Statement of Accounts which our finance team work so hard each year to publish by the statutory deadline.

In relation to the exit payment for the Managing Director for Place and Growth, all elements of the payment were calculated in line with statute and no discretionary payments were made.

The payment was approved in line with the Council's constitution as part of the business case for the structure proposed as part of phase one of the Council's organisational review to re-align our resources, this one off payment helped to deliver efficiencies to reinvest and continue delivering the Council's Corporate Priorities.

11. Question from Gary Clarke to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

The Draft Statement of Accounts reports that the council's usable reserves at 31 March 2021 were £19m. At 31 March 2022 they were £10m. At 31 March 2023 they

were down to £4m. Commentators are predicting that in the next two years, more and more local councils will be at risk of predicted expenditure exceeding available funds. It appears that CBC has been forced to make substantial inroads into its reserves over the last two years, at a rate which will exhaust the usable reserves during this current financial year. What is the Chief Financial Officer's estimate of the likelihood that CBC will have to issue a section 114 notice within the financial years ending March 2025 and March 2026, and what, if any, asset sales are built into the Chief Financial Officer's planning and predictions over this time period?

Cabinet Member response

I would like to thank Mr Clarke for his question as it raises the profile and specifically, the sustainability of local government finance.

Since 2009/10 this Council has had its core funding from the Government cut by more than 50%. In addition to this, the last multi-year financial settlement from central government was in 2016/17 which gives little opportunity for budget planning afforded to many other areas within the public sector.

The principles of that settlement in 2016/17 saw a shift away from freezing council tax to using council tax to generate additional funding. Reserves were also noted as being one element of an efficiency plan through a voluntary drawdown of reserves as the price for greater certainty for future settlements.

Whilst your analysis on our total reserves, taken from the draft statement of accounts, is correct, I do need to qualify the rationale for these movements. During the pandemic, central government provided significant grants through the business rates system to compensate business for lost income during the various lockdowns. Due to the timing differences between receiving the money from central government and passing these funds to local businesses, these funds were earmarked within our reserves.

As at 31st March 2021, £14.771m was held in the business rates retention equalisation reserve. As at 31st March 2022, this had fallen to £5.985m and at 31st March 2023 it had fallen back to just £23,820. Taking this into account, you will note that our remaining reserves in general have remained constant over the last 3 years, albeit personally I would like our reserves to be higher to ensure we are resilient to shocks such as a pandemic and the recent cost of living crisis.

Having said the above, the Council needs to ensure the right balance when determining the level of its reserves. There appears to be an assumption that having high levels of reserves is a good measure which doesn't necessarily fit well with the equity perspective that councils should not be sitting on high levels of reserves as this is being funded by local taxpayers that are not getting any benefit.

The latter part of your question refers to our Chief Financial Officer's assessment as to whether he believes we are likely to issue a section 114 notice and what assumptions he has made on asset sales and what planning and predictions have been made for the next two financial years.

The Local Government Act 2003 Section 25 includes a specific duty on the Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) to make a report to the authority when it is considering its annual budget and council tax levels. The report must deal with the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the reserves included within the budget. (For the purpose of the Act 'reserves' includes 'general fund balances'.) The Act requires the Council to have due regard to the report in making its decisions at the Council's budget and council tax setting meeting. This report can be found at Appendix 2 to the General Fund budget report which forms part of today's agenda.

I trust you will find comfort from his report which is a comprehensive independent assessment on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the reserves.

12. Question from David Redgewell to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Peter Jeffries

What is the budget for maintenance and improvements to Royal Well bus and coach station, and does this include maintenance of bus stops and shelters in the bus and coach station, CCTV and lighting? Are the charges from bus and coach services departing the bus and coach station - National Express Coaches Limited, Go Ahead Oxford bus company[formally Pulham Coaches], Stagecoach West and tourist coaches, and money from the private car park on site, reinvested in the up-keep of the bus and coach station?

Cabinet Member response

I thank Mr Redgewell for his question. The budget for maintenance and management of the Royal Well bus node for 2024/25 is £9,000, including the utility costs associated with the site. In addition to this there are costs incurred through the Ubico contract for the landscaping, planting and grass cutting of the area.

These costs are covered by the income generated from the service operators who use the site.

However, due to the business rates payable on the site the net cost to the Council of running the site is £21k.

13. Question from David Redgewell to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

In this year's budget, has any money been allocated to improve customer experience and facilities at Cheltenham Spa Royal Well bus and coach station, or into the public realm in Cheltenham Town centre for bus and coach passengers including bus shelters?

Cabinet Member response

I thank Mr Redgewell for his question. The details of the budget for the Royal Well bus node is included in the response to question 12. With regards to wider public realm in

Cheltenham for bus and coach passengers, all other bus shelters including those on the Royal Well Road are owned and managed by the County Council. Whilst we work closely with the County Council on improving the accessible and green transport offer for the town, it is not within our authority to directly invest or improve the existing infrastructure that sits outside our ownership.

Council

Meeting date: 23 February 2024

Member Questions (11 total)

1. Question from Councillor Paul Baker to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

It is right that the Council is looking to increase Council tax on empty residential properties unless there are extenuating circumstances. I am equally concerned that the Council should be charging business rates on empty commercial property, be that retail or industrial. Empty properties represent a wasted opportunity and owners must be encouraged and cajoled to let them, even if it means reducing rents.

I understand no business rates are payable for the first three months that a property is empty but after that the full charge will be levied whether the property is empty or not. Members will all be aware of empty properties in their area, in the High Street; I know of one in Swindon Road which has been empty for as long as I can remember, and there will be others.

I understand that there are exemptions such as listed buildings, properties owned by charities, and buildings with a rateable value under £2,900, but can the Cabinet Member assure me that, where we can, full business rates are being levied on qualifying empty commercial properties?

Cabinet Member response:

I thank Councillor Baker for his question. It is correct that the Council is looking to charge a higher level of council tax on residential properties treated as second homes. We already charge higher council tax on long term empty properties and I welcome the change in legislation allowing us to do the same on second homes. Charging the higher level of council tax will encourage all owners to consider bringing their properties in to use as much needed homes and generate additional council tax income. There will be some exemptions for extenuating circumstances. We don't have the details yet but these will be applied before the increased charges start in April 2025.

With regards to business premises, regrettably the council doesn't have any power to increase the level of business rates on empty properties so can't use this as a tool to incentivise owners to bring their business properties in to use.

Legislation dictates that an exemption must be given when properties first become empty. Industrial premises are exempt for 6 months and all other types of premises, such as retail or offices get 3 months. The business rates team monitor all business properties. They collect lots of information and make checks including inspecting

properties before deciding, in line with what the rules say, whether occupied or empty rates should be charged. Where properties are classed as empty and not exempt, such as listed properties then yes empty business rates are being charged.

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

The closure of Cavendish House and the uncertainty over its future poses a challenge for the Promenade and the Town Centre . The Leader has stated that this is an opportunity and I hope she is right. The decision by this Council to possibly sell the Municipal offices is another factor increasing uncertainty.

Does the Council have any plan to respond to these challenges, working with the business community to promote the Town centre in the short and medium term while the uncertainty remains?

Cabinet Member response:

I thank Councillor Harman for his question, and he will be familiar with the loss of high-profile names from the High Street, with the latest being Bodyshop entering administration. However, it is not a doom and gloom picture as referenced in the recent article in the The Guardian which describes Cheltenham as “the handsome town centre streets are bustling, business seems to be, if not booming, then not exactly in existential crisis”, this alongside the recent announcement that M&S are investing in their high performing high street premises just goes to show that there is more positives than negatives.

High Streets are evolving and as a Council, we are best placed to help facilitate the changes needed to ensure Cheltenham continues to maintain its place as a destination, supporting our businesses, communities and expanding our visitor base. Whilst change brings uncertainty it also brings opportunity, as reflected in our Corporate Plan which identifies supporting the high street and increasing town centre living as key drivers.

Cheltenham attracted almost 2 million visitors in 2022 (latest data set) and the town is a popular destination for local, regional and national visitors’ thanks, in part, to extensive promotional activity carried out by the council and other stakeholders. Landlords and agents cite a high demand from incoming businesses for shop units in the town, particularly in key streets where the footfall is high, and while there have been a small number of longer-term vacancies, empty units in Cheltenham in the main experience active churn when users vacate.

In 2023 we agreed the Cheltenham Vacant Units Action Plan, with its key objectives being to:

- Understand the current and ongoing position of empty shops in the town centre.
- Encourage the conversion of empty and underused space to maximise brownfield residential development.

- Take enforcement against unsightly empty premises to clear up our town centre.
- Work with landlords, agents, and town centre businesses to ensure that stakeholders understand key issues facing town centre development.
- Encourage flexibility of the planning system and future strategic planning to bring more residential accommodation to the town centre.
- Identify opportunities for meanwhile use where appropriate.
- Highlight opportunities for regeneration and recognise the value of key development sites within the town acting as a catalyst for lasting change.

In many ways, Cheltenham bucks trends seen nationally, with increasing visitor numbers and a lower than average vacancy rate for town centre units. Nonetheless, the action plan seeks to address vacancies and improve the town centre by focussing on identifying vacancies, improving the look and feel of vacant units, and promoting opportunities to potential occupiers.

Engagement with the business community is key and active and ongoing engagement takes place with key stakeholders, for example Cheltenham BID, Cheltenham Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Business alongside our ongoing interactions with agents, landlords and developers. Our strong relationships are demonstrated in the recent vacant units piece which was co-commissioned with the Cheltenham BID.

Turning specifically to Cavendish House, Canada Life is the landowner and I am sure you will have seen their press release following the announcement of the closure of the store that makes their commitment to bringing forward a solution that supports the vitality and viability of the High Street.

The council is proactively engaging with Canada Life to support them in this transition phase. While any decisions about short, medium or longer-term occupation of the building sit with Canada Life, the council has offered to support where possible. Discussions are ongoing and more information will be shared about next steps in due course.

The planning team is currently in pre application engagement with the agent representing Canada Life with the expectation that an application will be presented shortly. This application has the opportunity to bring forward a development that will include much needed town centre homes alongside retail and leisure, reflecting the priorities of our corporate plan in respect of regeneration and investment in the town centre.

In the medium term we are developing the Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury Strategic and Local Plan (SLP) and I encourage you to engage in that process. The SLP brings a fresh opportunity to ensure we build flexibility into our longer-term planning policies and ensure they are fit for the future.

Turning to the Municipal Office, Councillor Harman will be aware that the Council only utilise a small percentage of the space. Its use and occupancy numbers have been in continual decline for a number of years which has been rapidly accelerated by the COVID pandemic. New opportunity and activity relating to the Municipal Offices has the ability to enhance the vibrancy of the town and contribute to securing the towns economic future, the opposite of the effects of our diminished occupation.

The town is in a period of rapid transition and the Municipal Offices is part of the new chapter. Our Council will remain in the town, continuing to provide its services, so the outcomes of disposal allow for rebirth, growth, economic stability and vitality.

3. Question from Councillor Tim Harman to the Cabinet Member for Customer and Regulatory Services, Councillor Martin Horwood

When will the Council's policy on sexual entertainment venues next be considered and when it is, can I be assured that the whole Council vote on it?

Cabinet Member response:

I thank Councillor Harman for his question. The sexual entertainment venue policy is scheduled for a review this year. The work on the policy review is likely to commence summer 2024.

Under Cheltenham's constitution, the adoption of the sexual entertainment venue policy is an executive function that is the responsibility of Cabinet. Cabinet can decide to provide Council with an opportunity to debate the revised policy.

A change to the constitution to amend the decision level can, of course, be proposed although the current constitution was reviewed and agreed only last year.

The Cabinet decision will in any case be subject to the normal call-in process that may also provide Council with an opportunity to consider the policy adoption decision.

It is important to point out that licensing decisions and policy operate under a framework of law set by Parliament and also that licensing decisions on individual applications remain the responsibility of the Licensing Committee.

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

Could the Cabinet member please clarify whether, considering a petition has been submitted and will be debated at the March Council Meeting, that Idsall Drive Car Park will be taken off the market while its future is decided?

Cabinet Member response:

Thank you for the question Cllr Fifield.

Interactions with our communities are always welcomed, even in the form of a petition. At the time of writing this response to your question I have not seen the petition or read the petition statement. Also, I have not had any correspondence from the petition organiser, or relevant ward councillors in relation to the petition.

For clarity the car park has been advertised for sale on the open market and the deadline for the submission of bids for the land was 9 February 2024. The submissions have already been reviewed and the sales process has begun with the preferred bidder.

In direct response to your question, the site is no longer on the market as the bidding process has closed.

As you rightly point out, this petition will be discussed at the March council meeting, where all the relevant information will be available for Members.

5. Question from Councillor Paul Baker to Cabinet Member for Customer and Regulatory Services, Councillor Martin Horwood

Firstly let me congratulate UBICO for doing their very best to keep our town centre litter free, sadly it is an impossible task as it appears to me that litter is being dropped with impunity every minute of every day. No sooner is a street picked than it needs picking again, it is a similar story in many of parks where we are indebted to local groups like the Friends of Sandford Park or Pittville Park for carrying out regular litter clearance.

As an authority we rightly take great pride in our town but litter is damaging our reputation, enough is enough. We have CCTV cameras all over the place, occasionally we see a police officer or PCSO and we have our own officers too I understand. Dropping litter is unacceptable, it is lazy and disrespectful of our town and fines can be handed out. Can I ask the Cabinet Member to initiate a crackdown on this behaviour with publicity and fines or consider employing a company to patrol the street and issues fines on our behalf?

Cabinet Member response:

I thank Councillor Baker for his question. Everybody agrees that littering is a nuisance to society and a blight on our streets when it happens.

As Councillor Baker notes, Ubico is doing a good job at street clearing and cleaning and I would also like to congratulate the many councillors who lead community litter picks in every part of Cheltenham, including 94 year old parish councillor Kit Braunholtz of Leckhampton .

In addition to the work of Ubico, Cheltenham Borough Council has a team of neighbourhood officers who, amongst other things, enforce anti-littering policy

including public engagement but also fines and, if necessary, prosecutions. In addition to their normal foot patrols, the authority also relies on mobile CCTV cameras that are moved around town to target littering and fly tipping hotspots. These deployments have proven effective with public engagement and persuasion first but also over 70 fines issued and 4 successful prosecutions for littering and fly tipping offences. The team already carry out joint operations with the police and other partners, and this will continue.

Last year we dramatically increased the maximum fine for littering in Cheltenham to £500 (up from £150), as soon as government allowed us to do this.

This is our preferred approach rather than employing a third party company who would inevitably charge for their service, would be less flexible than our in-house neighbourhood team and might risk public confidence by an approach which prioritised fine numbers or income over successful outcomes.

As part of the council's organisational restructure, a review of the neighbourhood team is currently being undertaken to re-prioritise the team's work. Littering, along with graffiti and fly posting offences have already been agreed as areas of priority for the team moving forward and the completion of the review, together with the increased fines already in place, would seem to be an opportune time to do as Cllr Baker suggests and launch a publicity campaign to discourage littering and draw attention to the increased risk of very high fines for this anti-social behaviour.

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

Given my recent question to Council about parking, I noted with interest the report in *Glos Live* on Feb 1st stating that Cheltenham Borough Council earned income of £2.5 million from parking fines and pay-and-display charges, net of expenses. The County Council earned £2.8 million, including fines just under £1.8 million. Given the relative sizes of the two organisations how come CBC income was almost equal to GCC and how much of the CBC £2.5 million relates to fines? Where is the £2.5 million shown in the budget figures?

What is the average occupancy of the 11 CBC Town Centre Car Parks (total spaces 1,803)?

Cabinet Member response:

I thank Councillor Nelson for her question. £2.5million is the council's income in 2022/23 from parking fees and fines, after deducting operational costs. £91,000 of this was received from fines. This figure is the operational surplus and is taken from the published Revenue Outturn return submitted to Government.

The income from parking is shown in appendix 3 to the 2022/23 Financial Outturn Report which was considered by this council on 24 July 2023. The figure differs from the £2.5million because it takes account of asset depreciation which is not included in the Government's Revenue Outturn Return.

Parking income will depend on factors such as the number and type of parking spaces, the value of fees charges and the number of fines issued but being a much larger organisation doesn't in itself guarantee more parking income. The county council provides on-street parking and although they cover a large geographical area only Cheltenham and Gloucester will generate significant sums, not the rural areas. In fact around two-thirds of the county's on-street parking bays are located in Cheltenham so the majority of the income will come from Cheltenham alone. This Council provides off street parking suitable for long and short stay across 14 car parks. A parking strategy should encourage off-street parking and discourage commuters and shoppers from parking on-street, especially in residential areas, leaving residents generally able to park.

I note with interest that the county makes over 60% (£1.8million) of its income from issuing parking fines whereas this council's approach is to encourage users of our car parks to pay the correct fees, avoiding the need to issue so many fines. In fact, the payment system in Regent Arcade, our largest car park, prevents vehicles from leaving the car park without paying so no enforcement is necessary.

With regards to average occupancy, taking into account that some car parks are busier than others and that usage does change at different times of the year the average occupancy rate across all town centre car parks during daytime hours is about 85%.

7. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Street Services, Councillor Iain Dobie

I see from the CBC website that (as of 13th February) the street clearance schedule ends on February 7th. How often is this schedule updated and how is priority decided of which roads need doing? Leckhampton Road could do with attention please!

Also, I believe the Council has two weed ripping machines. How successful are they, and where have they been deployed recently?

Cabinet Member response:

Thank you for your question which is very timely given the number of councils, like Brighton and Hove, that have recently decided to revert back to, or increase, the use of herbicides to control weeds due to budget pressures.

Following our one weed spray in the spring, weed removal has been taking place across the borough during the year, including in St Marks, Noverton Estate and Prestbury High Street and is also part of the street clearance schedule. Manual weed removal absorbs significant resource and crews are doing their best to maximise the amount of weed removal taking place. Weed rippers are very effective but the manual clearance of weeds is a slower, more expensive and resource intensive way of dealing with weeds currently.

The street clearance schedule is updated on the website as often as possible and was last updated on 16 February 2024. The list of street clearances is set out on the website but the additions since 7 February are:

February 21 2024	Selkirk Street
February 22 2024	Portland Square
February 28 2024	Hewlett Road
February 29 2024	St Stephen's Road

Street clearance work takes place every year from November/December until the end of February and priority is decided following inspections of the roads to determine which roads need clearances along with requests from the public. Roads with greater numbers of trees are usually a higher priority due to leaf fall and flooding risk.

I can assure you that Leckhampton Road has had leaf fall cleared from pavements and road gullies where there are no parked cars. We are however waiting for Gloucestershire County Council to arrange the annual street clearance works for this area to ensure all parked cars are moved and the works normally take 2 or 3 days to complete. Gloucestershire County Council would need to comment on this however there have been various road works in the area which may have delayed the usual street clearance.

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

Update on status of old taxi rank site in Royal Well

A while ago, a question was tabled regarding the future of the Royal Well old taxi rank space. Until recently it was used as temporary parking for construction workmen developing a nearby site. I see that it is now a barrier controlled car park for Crescent Place guests. It still seems in need of attention and looks in a sorry state. Who is responsible for maintenance of the site? How much rental is CBC receiving from Crescent Place and what is the duration of the agreement please?

Cabinet Member response:

I thank Councillor Nelson for her question. In relation to the Royal Well taxi rank, you are correct that this had recently been used as temporary site to support a local business that was undergoing construction. A registered lease is in place with this business for the ongoing use of the site as parking for Crescent Place customers.

Maintenance of the site is the responsibility of the tenant under the lease and recently work has been undertaken to bring the infrastructure in keeping with the Royal Well surroundings.

The Council receive £25,000 per annum for the site and the lease is for a period of 10 years.

9. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing, Max Wilkinson

It is most unfortunate that the recent discovery of RAAC in the ceiling panels at Leisure @ resulted in the temporary closure of the Teaching Pool and Splash Pool, particularly over half-term week; and this coming so soon after the sudden closure of the Pump Room at the end of October due to the need for urgent repairs to plasterwork on the ceiling.

Will the Teaching Pool and Splash Pool at Leisure @ be able to re-open as planned w/c 4th March?

Cabinet Member response:

Thank you to Cllr Nelson for the three questions. RAAC has been found across the country in schools, hospitals and other public buildings like courts, police stations, libraries and public housing. This is not an issue that should be viewed in isolation as something only being experienced in Cheltenham at our leisure centre. I'm sure she would consider asking the government, perhaps via our MP, to setup a national risk register of all public buildings alongside funding from the treasury to help hard-pressed local authorities deal with the issue. As Cllr Nelson will be aware, urgent maintenance costs must come from somewhere and sacrifices will inevitably be made either now, or in the future, as a result of the discovery of RAAC. A national fund is required to mitigate this, as well as the disruption caused to pupils, patients and other users of public buildings across the country. A national ministerial taskforce is undoubtedly required.

In response to Government guidance released in 2023 a full assessment and inspection by specialist contractors confirmed there are ceiling panels containing RAAC in the Teaching Pool and Splashpad which led to the decision to close the Teaching Pool and Splashpad on 24 January. The measures taken to strengthen the panels and ensure the area is made safe for the public has involved aligning multiple different contractors to overcome the additional complexities on operating in a wet side environment. We have experienced some delays with the supply of materials and labour, particularly given that many other public bodies are also requiring these resources to strengthen areas of RAAC in their buildings. The handover of the site back to the Cheltenham Trust is now expected on Friday 15 March. Following that handover, the areas will need to be cleaned and pool water sampling will be undertaken before re-opening. The Trust will be updating their communication to customers this week but is expecting to be re-open for the busy Easter holidays.

10. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing, Max Wilkinson

When will the works at the Pump Room be completed?

How much revenue has Cheltenham Trust lost as a result of the closure of the Pump Room?

Cabinet Member response:

I was pleased to visit the Pump Room in person with Cllr Julian Tooke, who has been monitoring this issue closely. We saw the complexity of the specialist work being undertaken to look after such an important heritage asset. The works are due to be completed and the building made fully available to the Cheltenham Trust on Friday 8 March in advance of their busy Cheltenham Festival events. The Council understands the importance of Festival week for the town's economy. Officers have worked hard with staff at the Trust to ensure that they can benefit from what is arguably the most important week of the year for any business. Questions about the finances of The Cheltenham Trust's revenues should be directed to the Trust.

11. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing, Max Wilkinson

The recent maintenance issues at two of the Council's and Cheltenham Trust key facilities (Leisure @ and Pittville Pump Room) leads me to ask - what lessons has the council learnt to ensure their other facilities, and indeed these two, are fit for purpose going forward?

Cabinet Member response:

While Cllr Nelson has mixed the two cases, it is important that this authority considers these two closures separately as the decision to close each was due to very different issues. One relates to a building that is almost 200 years old, while the other relates to concrete used in a much more modern structure. In both cases, the Council and The Cheltenham Trust prioritised the safety of staff and customers. The two organisations have worked together to ensure the venues are closed for the shortest time possible. The teams are focused on making sure the work is completed in line with the timescales set out above. When the venues are re-opened, this authority will work with the Trust to consider any learnings from the work undertaken, to help inform future maintenance plans.

On a more general level, this authority continues to take a great deal of pride in local facilities such as Leisure@ and the Pittville Pump Room. Indeed, many other authorities would not have retained these buildings in public ownership, given the ongoing squeeze on local council finances. As a member of two principal local authorities, Cllr Nelson is aware of the financial challenges faced by local government and I'm sure she shares our frustration. Cllr Nelson is presumably also aware that a past administration run by a different political party toyed with various ideas for privatising the Pittville Pump Room. However, sound financial management of this Council over many years, alongside a commitment to heritage and partnership working, has enabled the retention of the Pump Room in public ownership and the ongoing function of Leisure@ as a municipal leisure centre.

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