

Council

14 October 2024

Public Questions

1. Question from Mr David Redgewell to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

The government is looking for regional government authorities and councils to work together on planning, homes, economic development and transport, and in terms of sub-regional authorities, the close working relationship between Tewkesbury, Gloucester and Cheltenham shows that there is a need for more joint working or a unitary authority.

What discussions are taking place between Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, Tewkesbury, Gloucester City, Cotswolds, Stroud, Forest of Dean and South Gloucestershire councils on setting up unitary authorities within Gloucestershire and becoming part of a regional devolution deal with Western Gateway partnership and Western Gateway Transport Board?

What submission has Cheltenham Borough Council made to the Secretary of State for Transport or the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing and Local Government as part of the Western Gateway deal on a regional devolution?

Leader's response:

I'd like to thank Mr Redgewell for his question.

There are no current conversations between Gloucestershire councils that Cheltenham Borough Council is involved in that are discussing local government reorganisation to become a unitary. Cheltenham Borough Council has always worked in partnership with local authorities. We are a joint owner of Ubico, who provide waste and recycling services, we are part of a shared legal service, and we take our full part in a range of cross Gloucestershire committees and forums such as the City Region Board and Climate Leadership Gloucestershire. Due to partnership working, Cheltenham Borough Council's view is that local government reorganisation is not necessary. This has been a view shared by other Gloucestershire authorities.

With regard to devolution, previously Cheltenham Borough Council supported a level 2 devolution deal being proposed to government but, as of yet, government have chosen not to progress it at this time. However, the government is expected to publish a new devolution framework in the coming months and we wait to see the content of that framework before having further discussions. We remain interested in exploring a further devolution deal and alongside all Gloucestershire councils we have submitted an expression of interest to simply register our interest in exploring a future deal.

2. Question from Mr Tim Harman to Cabinet Member for Major Developments and Housing Delivery, Councillor Peter Jeffries

It is good that the MX project has finally been completed. Can I ask the relevant Cabinet Member for the final cost of the project and how much this varies from the original budget for the project?

Cabinet Member's response:

The budget for the original scope of the MX project was £4,259,809 when it was first submitted for planning permission in 2019. This was part funded by a £3.5m Government grant and the design at this stage was based on the hub being built from 31 shipping containers.

However, since this date the design of the building has changed substantially, and the completed building is a permanent structure on a much bigger footprint and much better able to fuel business growth in Cheltenham than the original proposal.

The final approved cost of the delivery of the MX hub is £9.267m however given the changes in design over the past five years, this is not a like for like comparison with the original budget. Full Council were presented with annual updates on the project and any budget uplift was approved as part of the key decisions in the relevant reports.

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Member Questions (3 total)

1. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy to Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Planning and Building Control, Councillor Mike Collins

Does CBC have a policy on Rural Exception Sites? If so, how can it be found, and are we acting on GRCC's recommendations?

[Potential Rural Exception Sites wanted for small affordable housing developments in rural areas. - News & Events - GRCC](#)

Cabinet Member's response:

I thank Councillor Joy for her question.

Rural exception sites are located on the edge of rural settlements, and are usually small in size, as is recognised within the provided note from Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC). Rural exception sites are not allocated within the Development Plan and would not normally be used for housing. The [National Planning Policy Framework](#) sets out that the purpose of such sites is to enable the building of affordable homes in rural areas with the aim of addressing local housing need.

The Joint Core Strategy (2017), which covers Cheltenham Borough, Gloucester City and Tewkesbury Borough has a number of policies that refer to rural exception sites. These are policies SD10: Residential Development and SD12: Affordable Housing. Point 7 of Policy SD12 states *"In certain circumstances, where there is clear evidence of a local housing need that cannot be met elsewhere, affordable housing will be permitted on rural exception sites. A rural exception site must be within, or on the edge of, a rural settlement. It should be of a scale well related to the settlement both functionally and in terms of design"*.

The Cheltenham Plan (2020) refers to the Principal Urban Area which *"marks the limits of Cheltenham town, being the dividing line between built-up/urban areas (the settlement) and non-urban or rural areas (the countryside)"*. There are no policies or references to rural settlements within the Cheltenham Plan, presumably because there are no rural settlements within Cheltenham Borough. Therefore, it is very difficult to envisage any circumstances in which a rural exception site would come forward within Cheltenham Borough.

GRCC's call for potential rural exception sites is more likely to be relevant to some of the other authorities within Gloucestershire. For example, it is noted that within the

Tewkesbury Borough Plan (2022) there are references to rural settlements and they also have a specific Policy RES6 Rural Exception Sites.

2. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy to Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, Councillor Flo Clucas

In light of the recent first reading of the Renters Rights Bill, is CBC beginning to take action to identify private landlords for a prospective registry, and formulate information-sharing platforms to ensure adequate protections for renters?

Cabinet Member's response:

I thank Councillor Joy for her question.

Important to say, in the first instance, that the Bill has a long passage ahead of it before receiving Royal Assent next summer. There will be changes to the Bill that will become clear overtime.

Having said that, officers have begun work to plan for the Bill's implementation and the impact the Bill will have on the day-to-day working of the council's work. In relation to the specific question by Councillor Joy, in the Renters Rights Bill, s74 the 'Database operator' is specified currently as either the Secretary of State or person who Secretary of State 'has arranged to be database service operator'. Therefore, the creating and keeping up of a landlord registry is not specified as Local Authority's duty yet.

The Bill also states that the Secretary of State may make regulations as to what information it holds and what functionality it has. At this stage, officers are unable to make any preparations until further information is known or Regulations are put forward by the Secretary of State.

Notwithstanding this, officers working in the Private Sector Housing Team do maintain a list of landlords and agents. Officers will use this list to share information and requirements from the Renters Rights Bill. In addition, the Private Sector Housing Team will update our website with the requirements and links as necessary to advise tenants / landlords of changes and obligations.

Finally, the Private Sector Housing Team officers have identified a provider to assist the team with training and information on the Bill in the lead up to the predicted summer 2025 Royal Assent date to ensure the team is able to respond to the new powers and duties under the act to protect renters in that sector.

3. Question from Councillor Ashleigh Davies to Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, Councillor Flo Clucas

Do we have any statistics and figures on vacant housing in Cheltenham? We appreciate recent efforts to open up vacant business addresses, but we were wondering if there were similar plans for housing too.

Cabinet Member's response:

I thank Councillor Davies for her question.

The council does hold data on vacant properties. The most comprehensive data sits with the Council Tax team who will maintain information on empty properties. The council's private sector housing team also maintains such a list – when vacant properties are reported to the council – but this list is not as comprehensive as the council tax information.

It is also appropriate to report on the outcome of the recent house conditions survey. This report concluded that:

At the time of survey, 49,577 dwellings (95.1%) were occupied^[1], the remaining 2,527 dwellings (4.9%) were vacant. Within the vacant housing stock, 2,388 dwellings (94.5%) have been vacant for under six months and are expected to return to occupancy in the short-term. These include dwellings for sale or rent (1,820 dwellings) and those undergoing repair or modernisation (568 dwellings). 139 vacant dwellings (5.5%) were assessed as vacant for over six months and are generally regarded as problematic in future occupancy terms.

Tackling empty homes is a strategic priority for the council, as recognised in our Housing, Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-28. Also, an important aim of the house conditions survey is to track progress on work being done to bring properties up to the Decent Homes Standard. These properties include those vacant due to hazards that cannot be re-occupied as a consequence.

In 2011:

- 3,352 dwellings (7.5%) exhibit Category 1 hazards within the HHSRS.
- 8,757 dwellings (19.7%) exhibit high level Category 2 hazards within the HHSRS.

In 2024:

- 526 dwellings (1.1%) exhibit Category 1 hazards within the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS); and
- 1,091 dwellings (2.2%) fail to provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort.

This authority's work, plans and strategies has had a significant impact on improving housing standards including vacant dwellings assessed as vacant and therefore problematic in future occupancy.

However, as this is a discretionary area and as there have been increased pressures on our Private Sector Housing team to tackle poor housing conditions in the private

sector, it has been necessary to divert our limited resources to improving the quality of homes in this sector. We will continue to keep under review opportunities to reduce the number of empty homes within the resources currently available.

^[1] Housing stock (all tenures) was indicated at 52,104 dwellings. A small number of occupied dwellings were either Airbnb or other Holiday Company lets.