

# Council

27 February 2025

## Public Questions (3 total)

### 1. Question from Trevor Witton-Bourke to Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, Councillor Flo Clucas

Cheltenham Borough Council has confirmed that it has expressed an interest in participating in the Home Office Asylum Dispersal Pilots scheme. Under what governance route was this expression of interest authorised (for example Cabinet decision, individual Cabinet Member decision, or delegated officer authority), and were elected members formally informed prior to submission?

#### Member response

Thank you for your question.

The expression of interest in the Home Office pilot scheme was submitted by officers in line with the council's scheme of delegation. As Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, I am proud that Cheltenham is a Town of Sanctuary and that we continue to welcome refugees and migrants. I therefore fully support the decision taken by officers.

It is important to emphasise that submitting an expression of interest does not commit the council to participating in the scheme, even if Cheltenham were to be selected. Any decision to proceed would be subject to further consideration.

### 2. Question from Trevor Witton-Bourke to Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, Councillor Flo Clucas

If Cheltenham is accepted into the pilot, will participation be brought to Cabinet or Full Council for formal consideration before implementation, and what arrangements will be put in place to ensure transparency and public reporting as further information becomes available?

#### Member response

Thank you for your question.

If Cheltenham is invited to take part in the Home Office pilot, any decision to participate would be brought through the appropriate democratic route in line with

the council's constitution. At this stage, we do not have any detail of the pilot and therefore it is not possible to confirm what that route will be.

We are committed to ensuring openness and transparency throughout this process. Should the pilot progress, we will establish clear arrangements for sharing information with elected members and the public.

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

The recent Audit report from Bishop Fleming raises many concerns including, but not limited to:

- Reference to disclaimed audit opinion by previous auditors over the 2022/23 statement of accounts
- Unable to complete work due to delay in finalising financial statements and quality of said statements
- Anticipate issuing disclaimed audit opinion due to lack of assurances over opening balances
- Unable to complete work on valuation of land and buildings (and Council dwellings), investment properties, and heritage assets

Given these concerns, particularly with regards to valuations of assets and of both opening and current balances, how confident is the council of the asset values in the 2026/2027 budget, and how much has been allowed within the budget should any re-statement of asset values or opening balances be required once the audit is completed? This is considered particularly key given the importance of secure financial status as we head into any unitary arrangements.

#### **Member response**

Thank you for your question.

It is widely recognised that the local government audit process has been under considerable pressure over the last few years which has resulted in a backlog of audits and seen the introduction of the statutory audit backstop date of the end of February. The position we find ourselves in is not ideal. Bishop Fleming have stated that they plan to build back assurance in 2025/26 by testing the 31 March 2026 year-end balance on all of the assets. We have now carried out the full revaluation of our assets and are expecting a markedly improved position for 2025/26 external audit.

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## Member Question

**1. Question from Councillor Suzanne Williams to the Cabinet Member Major Developments and Housing Delivery, Councillor Alisha Lewis**

A recent Green party leaflet delivered in my area referred to the Cyber Park as a vanity project.

Given that the Golden Valley project will build on our town's strength as a centre for cyber and technology, bring thousands of new jobs to the town, and include over a thousand new homes, including affordable homes, does the cabinet member agree with me that the description of this as a vanity project is a long way off the mark and that it will bring a much-needed economic boost to the west of the town and to Cheltenham as a whole?

## Member response

I'd like to thank Councillor Williams for the question.

GCHQ's association with Cheltenham dates back to the 1950s. Today thousands of people in our town work for GCHQ or in the defence and security supply chain, helping to deliver GCHQ's central mission of keeping the UK safe. Because of this, technology, security and cyber industries represent a significant, vital and growing part of our local economy. Delivering the Golden Valley Development and the National Cyber Innovation Centre – named IDEA, was included as a commitment within the National Cyber Strategy and it also forms part of the delivery plan for the National Industrial Strategy making it recognised by government as a key to both our security and our economy.

But more than that, the seven decades relationship between Cheltenham, GCHQ and our national security sector has fundamentally shaped and influenced our town. Employees working to keep us safe are our residents, our community our constituents. In many cases they are even family members. Almost everyone in Cheltenham will be related to, work with or know someone who works in a role that helps to keep us safe. So instead of the Green Party choosing words like 'vanity project', which only serve to insult to all those who work so hard to protect us, what all councillors should be doing is recording our thanks to all those people who live and work in Cheltenham who are committed to combatting the very real threats that this country faces, just as we did when awarded GCHQ the freedom of the borough in 2019.

In terms of the opportunity the Golden Valley Development presents, when completed this new district in Cheltenham will have created thousands of high-quality jobs and hundreds of more social and affordable homes which local people will be able to take advantage. As a councillor, I am still struck by how challenging circumstances are for many families and communities, particularly in the west of Cheltenham. This highlights just how important it is to make sure that Golden Valley can provide more opportunities for local people to secure good jobs, get on the housing ladder and feel the benefit of the prosperity and success that Golden Valley can provide.

Because of its importance to the national security of our country, the delivery of Golden Valley should be a non-political issue where there is cross party consensus. That's why it's disappointing that with its recent leaflets and slogans, the Green Party is only demonstrating that they don't understand or don't care about our town and the fundamental role it plays in our national security. But more than that, it shows everyone that the Green Party is anti those who work to keep us safe, anti-jobs and anti-aspiration.