

Cheltenham Borough Council

Council

Minutes

Meeting date: 23 February 2024

Meeting time: 2.30 pm – 5.10 pm

In attendance:

Councillors (29):

Matt Babbage (Chair), Paul Baker (Vice-Chair), Glenn Andrews, Victoria Atherstone, Angie Boyes, Nigel Britter, Jackie Chelin, Ed Chidley, Flo Clucas, Mike Collins, Iain Dobie, Bernard Fisher, Tim Harman, Steve Harvey, Rowena Hay, Martin Horwood, Peter Jeffries, Alisha Lewis, Paul McCloskey, Emma Nelson, Richard Pineger, Diggory Seacome, Smith, Izaak Tailford, Julian Tooke, Simon Wheeler, Max Wilkinson, Suzanne Williams and David Willingham

Also in attendance:

Paul Jones (Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer)), Claire Hughes (Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer), Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive), Gemma Bell (Director of Finance and Assets and Deputy S151 Officer) and Jayne Gilpin (Head of Revenues and Benefits)

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Bamford, Barnes, Bassett-Smith, Beale, Clarke, Fifield, Flynn, Holliday, Joy, Oliver and Sankey.

2 Declarations of interest

Councillor Horwood declared an interest in Agenda item 13, and said he would withdraw from the Chamber during the debate for that item.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2023 were unanimously approved and signed as a true record.

4 Communications by the Mayor

The Mayor said that although he doesn't normally talk about mayoral engagements as he attends so many and cannot mention them all, but on this occasion, he wanted to highlight the following events:

- the recent No Child Left Behind awards were a credit to all involved – all the groups and young people who were nominated or won awards, and to everyone who gives their time;
- a play at the Everyman Theatre, performed by young Ukrainian people, exploring their experiences of leaving their homes and families. This was particularly poignant as it coincided with the second anniversary of the Russian invasion.

He said that HQ Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) have been put forward to be admitted Honorary Freedom of the Borough in recognition and appreciation of the eminent services rendered by them, and Les Bonney, Chun Kong and Michael Ratcliffe MBE have been put forward to be admitted as Honorary Freeman. Members voted unanimously to approve these names being put forward for official nomination at Extraordinary Council in May.

5 Communications by the Leader of the Council

The Leader updated Members on the following:

- the Housing Services Tenant and Leaseholder Consultation finished on 11 February, with an excellent response of over 10%. Thanks to all who responded;
- planning permission for North Place has been submitted and is awaiting validation. Thanks to BBS and Wavensmere Homes for working collaboratively with the council to bring the site forward with much-needed housing;
- congratulations to everyone involved with the first phase of the community orchard project at Weavers Field in Warden Hill, with 20 fruit trees planted, and 40 members of the community involved, including local councillors, Bournside, Leckhampton High School and Warden Hill Primary School pupils, and local residents. A further ten trees are due to be planted in next month;
- the assessment process for the Cheltenham Zero Small Business grant award scheme is well underway – it has proved extremely popular with a wide range of businesses applying, and will deliver innovative climate adaptation projects to help drive towards the 2030 vision set out in the Corporate Plan;
- a recent tour of the MX showed that it is near completion, with furnishings, carpets and desks in place. It is good to note that the provision of toilets includes changing places facilities. Now some dry weather is needed to complete the outside of the building and landscaping.

Finally, she spoke about local government funding, and began by saying that although the additional £600m released recently released by the government to the local government sector was welcome, not a huge amount was left to distribute across the sector after £500m was top-sliced for top tier councils. With councils around the country going bust, she viewed it as a sticking plaster after 10 years of underfunding and neglect.

She went on to say that what was more concerning was the condition that to receive any additional funding, every council must produce a productivity plan to demonstrate efficiency and how it is eliminating 'wasteful spending', including programmes such as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). She said she would have welcomed an opportunity to demonstrate how hard CBC works to protect services and squeeze every efficiency it can from tax payers' money – as evidenced by the recent decision on Cheltenham Borough Homes. She believed that the statement about wasteful spending and comments about EDI were an example of the government's divisive populism and policy by press release as its only strategy.

She said our productivity plan will be brought to Council in July, but thought that the government should also be required to produce one, in view of countless reports from the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee highlighting many examples of government waste – funding which could be released to public services if the government got its own act together.

6 To receive petitions

Councillor Harman presented a petition on behalf of Councillor Fifield, concerning the sale of Idsall Drive Car Park in Prestbury. As more than 750 verified signatures were included, he understood that a debate on the matter would be scheduled for a future meeting.

7 Public Questions

Thirteen public questions had been received, with the responses published and taken as read. There were four supplementary questions:

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 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. 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/ielssueDetails.aspx?IId=24877&PlanId=0&Opt=3#AI21584>

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.

Supplementary Question

Cheltenham residents are very concerned and unhappy about the globalist agenda CBC is implementing, financed by them but without their consent, including the super-city of Cheltenham Gloucester and Tewkesbury, the Net Zero agenda, and the building out of 5G. When can a town hall forum be introduced, to discuss and debate these issues like adults?

Cabinet Member response

Please send your question to Democratic Services; I will respond in writing.

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.

Supplementary question

The Companies Act states that directors must act to promote the success of the company for the benefit of its members, so the idea that the non-exec director representing the council at the airport does not have a responsibility to its shareholders would be a new one for the business world. What meetings have you had or initiated in the last six years of the airport's continuing operational losses to address the issues on behalf of residents who ultimately own the asset?

Cabinet Member response

I can provide information on actions and interventions since I became shareholder three years ago, but will have to look back at records and come back with a written response.

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

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

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.

Supplementary question

What discussions are taking place with the county council and the bus service improvement plan to upgrade the facilities at Royal Well, which still a major National Express hub? Running the site may cost £21k in council tax, but it brings a lot of money in economic development to Cheltenham, and a lot of buses services pass the site but don't stop, using less accessible town centre bus stops instead.

Cabinet Member response

I agree; buses and the public transport system are very important, particularly as we want a more joined-up way of travelling across the town and to other areas. I haven't had any precise, detailed conversations with the county council on this - it is a tricky subject, as their priorities are different from ours, and ideally, there should be a review of the whole transport system across the county. I will speak with officers and double check if there is any information regarding this to be shared.

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.

Supplementary question

I'm concerned that allocation of finance for a passenger bus station isn't ring-fenced, and that the budget goes into some public realm, where the Department of Transport would expect it ring-fenced for the site. It is complicated by the fact that CBC owns the site, but the county is responsible for the infrastructure, but a ring-fenced budget would make it clear to the public and the Department of Transport what they money is being spent on at Royal Well and the town, especially as this will be included in the Bus Service Improvement Plan which the county is due to submit to the government on 12 June.

Cabinet Member response

This is more of a county conversation, although the council engages where it can and considers any financial risk. I am not altogether comfortable with the two-tier system, but it would not be right to ring-fence money when we don't know what the county has in mind. We would respond positively to any conversation around necessary investment, though I cannot say what the result would be.

The Mayor thanked the questioners, those in attendance, and Cabinet Members for their responses.

8 Member Questions

Eleven Member questions had been received. The responses were taken as read.

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.

Supplementary question

It is reassuring to hear that we are on top of the business rates situation with regard to long-term empty commercial properties in the town, and a shame that we don't have the power we have with residential properties whereby we can charge a higher rate on long-term empty commercial properties. Would the Cabinet Member consider taking this up with our MP, to see if the government would review how

business rates are calculated on long-term empty properties. It is a scandal, with some properties empty for 20 years.

Cabinet Member response

I agree that this is a problem, and more reform of the business rates system is needed – long-term empty properties are a blight. I will take this up with our MP.

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.

Supplementary question

The response slightly misses the point of the question. Understanding the position and the dynamics of the high street, there could be a lengthy interregnum when the building stands empty, which will be an eyesore as well as a big loss of space right in the middle of the town. Would the council envisage working with the local business community to use it for other things that might bring people to Cheltenham, such as markets or activities?

Cabinet Member response

There have been conversations and some press coverage of this, and there is very much an ongoing conversation between the owners, Canada Life, and the Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing, about the 'meanwhile use' of the building, and to avoid being faced with blank windows for a long time. It is a complicated site on many different levels, but conversations are taking place.

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.

Supplementary question

There is a precedent for this council as a whole to have a vote, and given the relevance and concern expressed by many members of the public, I hope Cabinet might consider giving all Members a vote when the policy is next reviewed.

Cabinet Member response

The questioner will be aware that the banning of SEVs in limited periods such as race week is impossible under current law; we can only decide whether to regulate or not, but not prevent SEVs from popping up at different addresses during race week. The general consensus is that it is better to have regulated rather than unregulated SEVs, as these are safer for all concerned, especially the performers.

On the point about the decision level, this is set by the Constitution as a Cabinet vote, which was reviewed last June, and received unanimous support. It is, however, open to review in the future.

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.

Supplementary question

Thanks for the response, and it is great to hear that over 70 fines have been imposed, although litter continues to be a blight, despite the hard work of volunteer

groups as well as officers. It is great to see a plan in place and that a PR campaign is making people aware that the fines have gone up. Signage is good, but naming and shaming would also make people realise that there is a consequence for their litter-dropping actions.

Cabinet Member response

These are all good points, and we can and do use the maximum fine levels available from government, deploy mobile CCTV to identify hotspots and offenders, and are looking at the priorities of the neighbourhood team as part of overall council restructuring. It is very clear that litter and fly-tipping will continue to be a priority going forward, and the council has demonstrated that it can and does issue fixed penalty notices, with 30 for littering and 40 for fly-tipping, resulting in £10k in fines and four prosecutions since 2021. It's fair to say that awareness may not be as high as should or could be, and a lot of people may not be aware of the maximum fines being imposed; the Cabinet can discuss the possibility of a high-profile campaign later this year. Litter and fly-tipping is a menace throughout the town; local volunteer litter pickers do excellent work, including Kit Braunholz in Leckhampton, and the council can help further by raising the profile of the issue.

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

Weed Ripping and Street Clearance

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.

The Mayor thanked Members for their questions and responses.

9 Final General Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals 2024-25 and Quarterly Budget Monitoring Report, October-December 2023

The Mayor explained the process, then invited that Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets to introduce the budget. He began by highlighting the following points:

- despite another 12 months of economic uncertainty and instability and the cost of living crisis, the budget is driven by support residents and investing in the town;
- we are faced with severe national and local challenges – a housing crisis, climate crisis, broken NHS and social care systems, mental health crisis, ecological crisis, poverty crisis, and struggling education and police services;
- the national debt is hovering around almost 100% of GDP; in 2022-23, the current government spent around £108bn servicing the debt, more than it spent on education, and over £100bn-worth of waste and fraud has been identified by the parliamentary accounts committee;
- moving on to the challenges of the local authority funding crisis, for over a decade local authorities have been under unprecedented, sustained pressure with government funding reduced by around 50%, below-inflation council tax rises, and commercial-driven revenue savagely affected by the government's mini-budget and economics which, with cost and demand pressures rising faster than funding, will, by 2024-25, have added £15bn (28.6%) to the cost of delivering council services;
- eight authorities have issued 114 notices, unable to balance their budgets and facing bankruptcy, and a recent LGA survey shows that one in five authorities are likely to issue a 114 notice this year or next. Financial resilience in the sector is at an all-time low as a result of the current government's political choices;
- it isn't true to say that Cheltenham gets a good deal – it is the 19th worst-funded council in the country, despite delivering vital services and support to vulnerable residents. The council's financial resilience has been tested – we have innovated, changed the shape and structure of the council and how services are delivered, and continue to find efficiencies, savings and additional income to bridge the funding gap, which takes time, resources and no small effort from Cabinet colleagues and officers across the council.

He then moved on to the ways in which our strategy enables the council to continue to deliver services, support residents, invest in the town and put Cheltenham first:

- keeping all our services running efficiently and effectively to support businesses, the daytime and night-time economy and our residents;
- directing grant funding to support our leisure and cultural sector, also working collaboratively and in partnership, underpinning the town's economic activity and preserving its uniqueness, loved by residents and visitors;
- supporting vulnerable residents with our council tax discount scheme, benefit and money advice measures, working with Cheltenham's food network, and

supporting voluntary and community organisations through the third sector rent support policy;

- working to reduce CO2 emissions whilst promoting biodiversity in Cheltenham's parks and gardens;
- leading the way with kerbside recycling and being the only district council in the country to offer its residents a town household recycling centre.

He said the budget underpins our statutory services, but there are also many examples of discretionary spending. The strategy aims to balance financial sustainability with investment for the future, putting Cheltenham first. This includes:

- our continuing housing investment programme, to provide safe, secure and good quality housing, and recognising the need more affordable homes across the town;
- investing in our communities to combat the climate crisis, including the successful launch of the Green Deal scheme, which has led to the installation of Cheltenham's largest solar array; community organisations and small businesses benefiting from retrofit grants; the retrofit of the leisure centre; and the launch of a new cycle hub for the town centre;
- key investment by the council in the Golden Valley development not only plays a role in our financial sustainability, but also enables economic growth and much more - new homes, businesses, jobs, unique opportunities . The planning application has now been submitted for the innovation centre, mobility hub and housing.

He went on to say that growing inequality in our society is reflected in the nearly 4500 children and young people in our town living in poverty and whilst we cannot solve this crisis, the No Child Left Behind initiative is vital, already having touched the lives of over 7000 children across the town in recent times, by connecting people, businesses and organisations that care to give opportunity and hope to those children.

He ended by saying that the 2024-25 budget continues to navigate through the national economic turmoil and financial uncertainty, and reiterated that our priorities are supporting our residents, investing in our town, and putting Cheltenham first.

The budget was seconded by Councillor Hay, who reserved the right to speak.

Member Questions

Members thanked the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, and officers Paul Jones, Gemma Bell, Jon Whitlock and all the finance team for their tireless work on the budget.

In response to Members' questions, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets confirmed that:

- he hoped to give reassurance that the general fund balance could be maintained at a healthy level, in view of the predicted overspend of £70k sending it below £1m - last year's budget report advised that it would be maintained at £1.5m and the revenue budget for 2023-24 was set accordingly.

Where budgets are stretched, overspend comes into play, and Appendix 7 shows that £629k is planned to go back into the general balance. We need to take a prudent approach, however – there are plans to replenish the balance, but no knowing what the next 12 months may hold;

- in preparing the budget, the finance team gets the necessary data on the economy from the Department of Levelling up, Housing and Communities, the Office of National Statistics, the Bank of England, and a range of outside organisations including financial advisers ArlingClose and PSTAX consultancy. It also relies on the experience and knowledge of officers;
- he is as confident as he can be about delivering revenue and additional income savings, based on data analysis and assessments – but anything can change;
- he is aware of the county council's drive to install EV charging points, with all six districts jointly bidding to get a cheaper deal, but this doesn't necessarily work for CBC which is taking a different model in how it approaches the EV end supplier;
- regarding the government's £600m boost to local councils (£500m of which has been directed to social care), the council plans to spend £1395 per household per year; the usual government funding makes up £104 of this, of 7%. The additional funding adds around £3.50 per household.

Statements from Group Leaders

The Leader of the Conservative Group said he understand the intense pressures on local government, made worse by international situations which have sent shockwaves through all economies, but added that in 37 years as an officer and councillor, he had never known a time when councillors didn't criticise the government of the day for lack of funding.

He said his group understood the need to recognise the real work situation and the challenges of this, and thanked Gemma Bell, Jon Whitlock and Paul Jones for preparing the budgets – his group proposed only modest amendments.

He went on to make the following observations:

- separate to the budget, he couldn't ignore the government's £20m investment in the cyber park, saying it was unrealistic to say the town was being starved of funds, and as a county councillor he particularly welcomed the £600m additional funding, £500m of which would be spent on social care;
- all councils would like more money but the greater emphasis was to use money safely; blind criticism of the Secretary of State was unfair as there are many councils which do not spend their money well. He added that CBC has a better team-working ethic than many other councils;
- his party's proposed amendments were modest, and familiar, but proposed because they think it is the right thing to do. As the Leader said earlier, it is important to look after every penny, and the amendments help use money more sensibly on things that people really want – cleaner streets and more opportunities for recycling.

There were no other group leader statements.

Proposed amendment from Conservative group

The Leader of the Conservative Group explained his group's proposed amendments as follows:

- the county council works with a Cabinet of nine, with a £616m budget;
- the all-Member elections in May, due to the boundary change, could be continued going forward. This would save money, avoid confusing residents, and reduce the workload for election staff, with a general and county council elections due in the next two years. Cheltenham is the only council in Gloucestershire to hold two-yearly elections, and it is to be noted that the other two districts which hold whole council elections are both LibDem-led;
- the savings would be modest, and many things in the budget are excellent, but his group feel it is their duty and responsibility to propose these amendments;
- as ward members, they hear many complaints about the filthy streets, and more sweeping could be done. The savings on elections will finance 0.8% of an operative, or four days a week;
- regarding the recycling centre, residents are frustrated and opposed to it being closed on Wednesdays, and we need to send a clear signal that we are serious about recycling.

He hoped that these amendments would be considered sensibly and not simply dismissed.

The amendments were seconded by Councillor Nelson, who reserved the right to speak.

Cabinet Member response

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets thanked Councillor Harman for the Conservative group's amendments, and for providing them in advance to allow his group the opportunity to consider and discuss them. He said that the Conservatives have been proposing the same amendments since 2018, and made the following comments:

- he welcomed the £20m from the government, but this was capital spend towards the national infrastructure for which the town is paying, and not part of the revenue budget;
- the council has changed in shape and size in the last few years, and does a lot more work than it used to and does it effectively – which is why the two additional Cabinet posts are needed;
- two-yearly elections work for Cheltenham and give our residents a voice between general elections;
- regarding the spending proposals, CBC is the only district council in the country running a town centre recycling centre, and is not going to sacrifice two Cabinet Members for it to be open for a few more hours a week;
- we also have record recycling numbers, with the type of recyclates being collected from the doorstep growing;

- although it could be said that street cleaning isn't as good as it could be, an additional £22,700 in a £1.4m budget is negligible. He will feed the facts into the review of the Ubico contract.

He concluded by saying that the LibDem group rejected the amendments.

Debate on amendments

Members had nothing further to add.

Secunder for amendments

Seconding the amendments, Councillor Nelson felt that four-yearly elections would be more efficient, as well as saving money, and said that the roads are a disgrace and additional street-cleaning is desperately needed.

Councillor Harman thanked Councillor Nelson for her support and said that the reason his group returns to these proposals each year is because they are sticking to their principles and think it is the right thing to do – more efficient and less confusing for the electorate who don't altogether understand what the county and the borough councils do, and reducing the risk of depressing the turn-out at elections. His group is here to improve the lot of people in Cheltenham, and must do what they can in the limited envelope of opportunity to make Cheltenham more efficient and cleaner.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets said his group would not support the amendments.

Vote on the Conservative Group's amendments

Savings:

Reduce the cabinet size by two, saving £37k per annum

Adopt whole council elections, saving £25k per annum

Alternative spending made possible by the above:

Return the Swindon Road Recycling Centre to its previous hours - £35k

Top up street cleaning in targeted areas - £22.7k

Against: Andrews, Atherstone, Baker, Boyes, Britter, Chelin, Chidley, Clucas, Collins, Dobie, fisher, Harman, Harvey, Hay, Horwood, Jeffries, Lewis, McCloskey, Pineger, Tailford, Tooke, Wheeler, Wilkinson, Williams, Willingham

For: Councillors Babbage, Harman, Nelson, Seacome.

Abstention: Councillor Smith

NOT CARRIED

Debate on substantive motion

Members made the following comments:

- the budget is welcome, and it is particularly pleasing to note that when many councils are in crisis and cutting back on planning services, CBC is currently

recruiting two new conservation officers, a senior enforcement officer to deal with the backlog of enforcement cases, and a borough ecologist to help deliver more than the government's 10% target of biodiversity net gain and provide a valuable resource for the whole council in tackling nature recovery and nature emergency in the country. It is good financial management from the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets and the Executive Director of Finance, Assets and Regeneration and their predecessors that make this possible, and puts the council in this strong position;

- it is great that we are able to continue investment in the private rented sector, providing homes for those in need of affordable housing and a great landlord;
- the recent No Child Left Behind awards ceremony celebrated the great work done by that organisation in creating community, making children feel valued and part of something unique. Seven thousand children and families have been helped, and this is due to the stable budget, and a finance team that doesn't look for short term quick fixes but for ways to make things better for all our residents, children, businesses, and organisations. No Child Left Behind is a small part of this, but thanks are due to officers, leadership, the town, businesses, and organisations such as Punchline for their support and commitment. Looking to the future, it is clear that the Golden Valley development will change the future of the town, providing apprenticeships, job opportunities and new homes;
- all councillors want the best for the town, irrespective of their political parties, and it is frustrating that year after year, we cannot do more for the town due to various constraints and having our hands tied by council tax, and lack of government funding. It would be impossible to run a business like this, often acting blind while waiting for late government announcements. Huge thanks to all local authority staff across the borough and county who do a remarkable job in challenging circumstances, often having to have difficult conversations and deal with complaints about decisions, year after year;
- Cabinet Members are also to be thanked for the great job they do, and for their energy, knowledge and passion for their subjects; to suggest reducing their number is nonsense;
- There is good news in the budget - £4.5m in the private rented sector providing desperately-needed social housing, £80k for parks, more CCTV in the town, making it safer and increasing prosecutions for anti-social behaviour and littering;
- The £20m from government for the Golden Valley development is not a blank cheque for CBC to spend as it wants, and was awarded in the second round of levelling-up funding – Cheltenham got nothing from the first round;
- In the current economic climate, the budget proposed is brilliant, with the Golden Valley Development set to deliver 3000 new, low carbon homes, included 35% affordable, and 11 thousand brand new jobs, borne out of collaboration with partnerships, an internationally renowned development partner, government agencies, big industry, and academia, to name but a few;
- the planning department does a wonderful job, but the conservation and enforcement posts referred to earlier are not new posts – officers have left and are being replaced;
- it is good that the North Place planning application has been received, but should be noted that a few years ago, CBC was given the chance to bid for £3m government grant towards that application – if that had been pursued,

the protected green fields in Leckhampton might have been saved from development;

- it is not fair to say Cheltenham's MP has not helped the town with funding its projects - £187m has come to Cheltenham through him. It may be capital funding, but doesn't include the costs of A417 or Junction 9;
- there is some fantastic climate change work in the budget, and it is important to note that the finance team has found a way to keep us on same budget as last year, with no cuts to climate investment and still spending money, prioritising investment in town and its future;
- with an incredible degree of flexibility and creativity, the finance team has been able not only to balance the books but also to enable the unique green deal investment scheme which allows businesses to borrow money at a reduced rate to invest in climate adaptation in Cheltenham, delivering incredible investment at very low cost to the tax payer;
- it is very concerning that our budget is predicated on potentially compromising our duty to the Equality Act, which seems to be where the government is going with its requirements to reduce spending on EDI. Strong local government has always delivered good services for its people, and the government should be looking at how local government be strengthened to deliver what local people want in their areas. Hopefully a new government will take a different approach.

Secunder for budget

As secunder, the Leader made the following points:

- of course government funding is acknowledged and welcome, but of the £95m spend on the Golden Valley, the government has contributed £20m, and of the £10m for the MX, government has contributed just over £3m. The council also funds its own development team for £700k per annum. These stark figures show the council's huge commitment, but we cannot achieve all our goals such as climate change and house-building in isolation, and strive to form and work with partnerships to bring forward economy, development and community. The budget shows how we are growing the economy with more jobs, not just at Golden Valley, but also in other areas;
- she is proud of what small our small authority does in EDI, and vehemently disagrees with any suggestion from government that this is a waste of money;
- the budget is all about securing our future and young people's and children's future;
- thanks to Cabinet colleagues and officers who all work extremely hard, often unseen and unrecognised, and special thanks to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets for all the work and commitment he puts into his role.

Cabinet Member summing-up

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets thanked Members for their questions and debate, and also thanked the public for their response to the budget consultation – their contributions are always welcome.

He went on to make the following points:

- with so much negativity in national politics, the country feels let down by the government. Our budget focusses on our town, and its whole purpose is to

help people - all that makes the town unique stems from its residents. The budget secures our future and aims to overcome any challenges, investing in the people and the town;

- the finance team has to review and monitor the national economic situation constantly and works non-stop to do this. Thanks to all officers, and the finance team especially. Personal thanks the Executive Director for Finance and Assets, to Gemma Bell and Jon Whitlock for all their work and the depth of their knowledge, and exceptional professional advice and guidance;
- thanks to all Members across the Chamber, the Leader, Cabinet colleagues and the LibDem group for their support. As stated in the opening statement, the political choices and priorities of the LibDem administration are clear - supporting residents, investing in the town, and putting Cheltenham first.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. the revised budget for 2023/24 which is reported as part of the budget monitoring process for 31 December 2023 in Section 6 is approved;**
- 2. the budget assessment by the Section 151 Officer at Appendix 2 is considered in agreeing the following recommendations:**
- 3. the final budget proposals including a proposed council tax for the services provided by Cheltenham Borough Council of £237.68 for the year 2024/25 based on a Band D property (an increase of 2.99%), as detailed in paragraphs 9.1 to 9.6 is approved;**
- 4. the savings / additional income totalling £2,741,000 and the budget strategy at Appendix 4 is approved;**
- 5. the revenue growth items totalling £158,000 at Appendix 5 is approved;**
- 6. the capital programme at Appendix 6 is approved;**
- 7. the use of reserves and general balances and note the projected level of reserves, as detailed at Appendix 7 is approved;**
- 8. the programmed maintenance programme at Appendix 8 is approved;**
- 9. the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) detailed in Appendix 9 is approved;**
- 10. the flexible use of capital receipts strategy as detailed in Appendix 10 is approved;**
- 11. that the Council will remain in the Gloucestershire business rates pool for 2024/25 is noted;**
- 12. the Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25, including the continued payment of a living wage supplement at Appendix 11 is approved;**
- 13. the responses to the questions raised during the budget consultation in Appendix 12 are noted;**
- 14. the proposed fees and charges schedule for 2024/25 at Appendix 13, subject to appropriate consultation where required are approved;**
- 15. a level of supplementary estimate of £100,000 for 2024/25 as outlined in Section 18 is approved.**

For: Andrews, Atherstone, Baker, Boyes, Britter, Chelin, Chidley, Clucas, Collins, Dobie, Fisher, Harvey, Hay, Horwood, Jeffries, Lewis, McCloskey, Pineger, Smith, Tailford, Tooke, Wheeler, Wilkinson, Williams, Willingham.

Abstentions: Councillors Babbage, Harman, Nelson and Seacome.

10 Housing Revenue Account Revised Forecast 2023-24 and Budget 2024-25

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets introduced the report, highlighting that the same economic challenges faced by the General Fund continued to put financial pressure on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). That said, he was pleased to report that with the confirmation of national rent policy for 2024/25, along with the small reduction in interest rates from the peak in 2022, the long-term position of the HRA has started to show signs of improvement.

He made the following comments:

- he regretted what he felt was the continued short-term policy approach from government towards local authority housing, emphasising the need for longer term funding plans and rent policy in order to address the growing homelessness crisis and the lack of affordable and social housing, which need long-term commitments, policy certainty and sensible funding solutions;
- the Cabinet set a clear direction of travel in October 2023 to bring housing services back in house which was in the best interest of communities. This bold vision had been set to deliver savings to retain the council's financial resilience, but also presented an opportunity to deliver services better, and to be better placed to respond to further government regulations or compliance requirements;
- a commitment was made in last year's budget to continue to grow the HRA in order to support tenants by investing in new and existing homes, despite the financial challenges faced. He believed this has proved to be the right approach.

He said the HRA interim budget proposals for 2024/25 before Members would deliver on the ambition set by the council to provide a housing service that:

- places residents at the centre of decision making;
- delivers high quality new homes;
- reinvests in existing homes and neighbourhoods;
- delivers value for money;
- continues to support the most vulnerable and those in financial hardship in our communities.

He ended by putting on record his thanks to all the staff at Cheltenham Borough Homes and officers within the council, whose hard work on behalf of the town's communities was valued and recognised. The HRA budget for 2024-25 enables us to continue supporting our tenants, invest in their homes, deliver new homes, and continue to put Cheltenham first.

Member Questions

In response to a question, the Cabinet Member confirmed that the cost of bringing CBH back in house would be met from CBH reserves.

Member Debate

The Cabinet Member for Housing began by thanking all officers from CBC and CBH for their outstanding work in the last 12 months, especially in view of the increase in demand for housing services. She made the following points:

- it was upsetting to see people being forced out of their homes with limited opportunity to find alternative accommodation, but was pleased that building and investment in new homes would continue, highlighting 390 affordable new homes in the pipeline over the next four years –high quality, sustainable, energy efficient homes. It is exciting that nine such homes have already been built in Leckhampton through an S106 agreement
- land-led projects at 320 Swindon Road (24 homes) and the former Monkscroft school site (70 homes) are moving forward;

- the number of valuable housing services provided to residents and communities are welcomed, with investment into the existing housing stock informed by the asset management strategy, a data driven document - good data would continue to be collected in order to inform investments going forward
- over the next five years, a replacement kitchen programme will be rolled out, with 500 planned for this financial year, and a further 1000 each year over the next four years. In addition, vast investment in fire and electrical safety measures and work on addressing mould and damp condensation conditions is underway, representing key investments and working towards the new standards required by the social housing regulator and the housing ombudsman;
- overall, housing is in a stronger position than last year, albeit the recovery has been modest, but we still need to be careful. Services will be streamlined by bringing CBH back in house, reducing duplicate systems and adding value to a broader range of residents, tenants, leaseholders, shared ownership, and private rented sector.

She ended by putting on record her thanks to the finance team and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets for their hard work.

In debate, the following comments were made :

- there are huge disparities of wealth in communities across the town, and it is great therefore to hear about investment in existing council housing stock. It is also exciting that this authority is one of the first to resume building council housing and it will continue to do so in challenging circumstances..
- tribute was paid to CBH for all they have delivered, but it is exciting to note that, by bringing CBH back in house under Paul Minnis (job title), we will see significant delivery of more council homes in the years ahead. It is important that the council is demanding of developers in the 40% share of affordable housing requirement – a serious way to deliver much-needed homes;
- with mental health issues increasing across the country and especially in children who will become adults with ongoing mental health issues, it was hoped that special provision for housing for those with mental disabilities where support is needed would be taken forward.

Summing up

In summing up, the Cabinet Member thanked Members, highlighted the importance of the HRA for improving people's lives, particularly keen on the investment.

RESOLVED THAT :

- 1. the final HRA budget proposals (shown at Appendix 2) is approved;**
- 2. a rent increase of 7.7% for social rent homes, affordable rent homes and shared ownership homes and changes to other rents and charges as detailed within the report is approved;**
- 3. the HRA capital programme as shown at Appendix 3 and the detailed capital programme at Appendix 4 are approved;**
- 4. the HRA's Asset Management Plan is approved.**

For (unanimous): Andrews, Atherstone, Babbage, Baker, Boyes, Britter, Chelin, Chidley, Clucas, Collins, Dobie, Fisher, Haman, Harvey, Hay, Horwood, Jeffries, Lewis, McCloskey, Nelson, Pineger, Seacome, Smith, Tailford, Tooke, Wheeler Wilkinson, Williams, Willingham.

11 Council Tax Resolution 2024-25

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets said that now that the budget had been agreed, Members were required to formally approve the total council tax for the residents of Cheltenham for the coming year. This includes the council tax requirements of the county council, Police and where relevant, parishes.

There were no questions or debate on this item.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. the formal Council Tax resolution at Appendix 2 is approved and the commentary in respect of the increase in Council Tax at Paragraph 6 of Appendix 2 is noted.**

For (unanimous): Andrews, Atherstone, Babbage, Baker, Boyes, Britter, Chelin, Chidley, Clucas, Collins, Dobie, Fisher, Harman, Harvey, Hay, Horwood, Jeffries, Lewis, McCloskey Pineger, Seacome Smith, Tailford, Tooke, Wheeler, Wilkinson Williams, Willingham

12 Council Tax Discount Scheme for Care Leavers

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets introduced the report, which recommends some changes to CBC's existing care leavers' council tax discount scheme, recommended after last year's review of Gloucestershire's offer, by the Department of Education's national advisor for care leavers. There is currently a

common policy across the districts, so the recommendations put forward will form an extension of this policy. The proposed change is that from April 2024, care leavers are eligible up until their 25th birthday (previously 22nd) and will include care leavers previously in the care of other local authorities as well as Gloucestershire County Council.

He said that all six districts are recommending that the care leaver discount scheme is amended from April 2024 to include these changes, and knowing how vulnerable care leavers are, he was happy to be bringing the report and recommendations, which he hoped Members would support.

There were no Member questions.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing commented on another example of the council's big-hearted approach, looking after its most vulnerable residents. A Member said that his group fully supported the recommendations, and having met a number of care leavers and being aware of the big challenges they can face, felt that the council should do all it could to support them.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets noted that this is not a political issue, but has cross-party support across the county.

RESOLVED THAT

- 1. the Council Tax Discount for Care Leavers scheme in Appendix 2 is approved.**

26 in support

1 abstain

13 Council Tax Premium on Empty Properties and Second Homes

Councillor Horwood left the Chamber for this item.

In introducing his report, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets said that, with the continued housing crisis, the council uses all the tools at its disposal to bring empty homes back into use, including our discretionary powers to levy council tax on long-term empty properties. The level of premium and current number of properties is shown at 2.3 in the report, but changes in the relevant acts of parliament mean that, if Members are supportive, we can now charge the premium on properties that have been empty for one year instead of two.

In addition, a new power means that we can now charge a premium for second homes. Until now a loophole in the legislation means that if a long-term empty home

is furnished, it can be classed as a second home, thus circumnavigating the empty homes premium.

He said there are currently 963 properties classed as second homes, and although most of these are not long-term empty, they do not positively contribute to community cohesion, and the changes should encourage their owners to consider freeing them up. Taking the decision now means that we will be prepared and proactive as soon as the changes come into force in April 2025.

A Member asked how the council recognises that a property has been empty for more than a year. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets confirmed that the council is notified when a property is vacated, and if no council tax payments are subsequently received, officers will assume the property has remained empty and undertake investigations to check.

A Member said it is an eye-opener to see how many empty properties there are across the town, and hard to think that many of them could not be put back into good use. With the new policy coming into effect next year, this will help encourage people to bring those homes back into use for other Cheltenham residents;

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets summed up by saying that although this is not a huge problem, it is a problem none the less, and he thanked Jayne Gilpin and the council tax team for the fantastic work they do on behalf of Cheltenham residents.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. the change to the Empty Homes Premium is approved, so that properties which have been unoccupied and unfurnished for one year, instead of two, will become subject to the 100% premium from April 2025;**
- 2. the implementation of the 100% Second Homes Premium from April 2025 is approved;**
- 3. authority is delegated to the Executive Director for Finance Assets and Regeneration in consultation with the Cabinet Member Finance and Assets to amend the policy so that it meets the requirements of any guidance/ regulations due to be issued by Government and to ensure the premiums are administered efficiently.**

14 Council Order of Precedence - Nominations for Mayor Elect

The Chief Executive said this is the regular report to Members, as required by the Constitution, which looks to confirm the order of precedence for the nomination and election of the next Mayor. Councillor Baker is put forward, subject to the outcomes of the May election, and the official appointment of the Mayor and Deputy Mayor will take place after the election.

There were no Member questions or debate on this item.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. the Order of Precedence in Appendix 2 is noted;**
- 2. pending the outcome of the borough elections, Councillor Paul Baker will be put to the Annual and Selection Council Meeting for election as Mayor for the Municipal year 2024–2025;**
- 3. the Councillor nomination for Deputy Mayor for the Municipal year 2024-2025 will be put to the Annual and Selection Council Meeting for election.**

15 Council Diary

Introducing the item, the Leader said everyone had been consulted and given the opportunity to comment on the proposed corporate diary for 2024-25. She said it is always a challenge to accommodate all the committees and working groups at times which work for everyone, and officers work hard to avoid high days and holidays and group meetings, although there is inevitably some conflict. She thanked the Democratic Services team for pulling it together.

In response to a Member's question, she confirmed that party conferences were taken into consideration when assembling the diary.

RESOLVED THAT:

- the draft Council Diary of meetings for September 2024 – August 2025 is approved.**

16 Notices of Motion

There were no motions on this occasion.

17 Any other item the Mayor determines as urgent and which requires a decision

There was none.

18 Local Government Act 1972 - Exempt Information

RESOLVED THAT:

In accordance with Section 100A(4) Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining agenda items as it is likely that, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, if members of the public are present there will be disclosed to them exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1, 2 and 3, Part (1) Schedule (12A) Local Government Act 1972, namely:

Paragraph 1: Information relating to any individual

Paragraph 2: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual

Paragraph 3: Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

19 Organisational Review

The Chief Executive introduced his report, and following a debate, Members voted in support of the recommendations.