

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet

Minutes

Meeting date: 24 September 2024

Meeting time: 6.00 pm - 7.10 pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

Victoria Atherstone, Flo Clucas, Iain Dobie, Rowena Hay, Martin Horwood, Peter Jeffries, Alisha Lewis and Izaak Tailford

Also in attendance:

Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive) and Paul Jones (Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer))

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Collins.

2 Declarations of interest

With reference the Agenda item 7, Councillor Horwood said his membership of Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Cleeve Common is a matter of public record, but he did not consider this to be a prejudicial interest. He would therefore remain in the Chamber and take part in consideration of that item.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

The draft public minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2024 were approved unanimously and signed as a true record.

4 Public and Member Questions and Petitions

Two public questions had been received:

1. Question from Mr David Redgewell to Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Public Realm

Cheltenham Spa is a town with many disabled residents and visitors, with the National Star College and two University of Gloucester campuses also based in the town.

Under the 2010 Equalities Act the council has a public sector equality duty to protect people with protected characteristics (including race, religion, age, pregnancy and maternity leave, sexual orientation, gender reassignment and disability) using public services, as consumers or when buying or renting property.

Many council services and contracts are failing to look at or understand the public sector equality duty of Cheltenham Borough Council. Ranging from council bins being placed on kerbs or blocking the bus stop in Arle Road by the Territorial Army Centre, to emergency signage being out of date on the disabled toilets opposite Royal Well Bus and Coach Station, and to former Cheltenham Borough Homes staff having little training on protected characteristics in social and affordable housing.

The council needs to work more closely with Gloucestershire County Council on the quality of the public realm in Cheltenham Spa. Other councils in southwest England have directors or officers who provide equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training within the council and oversee services to residents, and visitors to the borough, district or county.

When will Cheltenham Borough Council look at employing or appointing a Council Director with responsibility for EDI and consider employment of an EDI officer within the authority or through a shared post with Gloucester City Council or Tewkesbury Borough Council (North Gloucestershire Borough Council)?

Cabinet Member Response

Thank you for your question Mr Redgewell.

The council is passionate about ED&I and this is evidenced in the work we do. All policies and service changes require completion of an Equality Impact Assessment which provides relevant ED&I information to ensure that decisions take EDI factors into account. You will see examples of these appended to the reports we are considering today.

Our employee group, led by the Director of Governance and Customer Services, meets regularly and is currently reviewing the council's ED&I policy and action plan. These documents were considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on 26 February 2024 and are now out for public consultation. You can view the draft policy and action plan on our [website](#) and submit your comments by emailing equalities@cheltenham.gov.uk

Whilst we do not have an officer with equalities in their job title we believe that ED&I is the responsibility of all officers and elected members and should be considered as part of everything we do. I recently spent the morning with a ward resident to understand their accessibility issues in part of the town, so I can better support their request for change from Gloucestershire County Council – and this is something we should always strive to do so we can ensure our town keeps moving forward.

Supplementary question from Mr Redgewell

I am surprised that there is no senior officer making sure that ED&I training is carried out within the authority. I spend a lot of time talking to various officers to try and get them to understand the issues for disabled residents, and feel that CBH officers need more understanding of who is responsible for what, for example regarding accessibility issues. Other authorities have ED&I officers, but at CBC there is no single, identifiable person who disabled people can feel is championing their cause and making sure all staff are trained. Can the council look again at the structure, and identify an officer or member who people in the borough can turn to for support and advice?

Leader's response

I confirm that ED&I runs through the core of the council, is considered by everyone, and the Disability Forum is regularly consulted, but unfortunately finances do not allow for a dedicated officer. However, there is always rooms for improvement – I will ask officers to provide you with more detail of what we do currently and how we can offer further support.

2. Question from Mr David Redgewell to Cabinet Member for Planning and Building Control

Within Cheltenham Borough Council's joint local plan with Gloucestershire County Council, Tewkesbury Borough Council (North Gloucestershire Borough Council), and Gloucester City Council, there appears to be a shortage of accessible housing, especially within Cheltenham Spa.

With disabled young people leaving college and universities in the borough and more older people in the community, how will Cheltenham Borough Council and its new housing department deal with and provide more accessible homes with wheelchair access in areas with good drop kerbs and walking and wheeling routes to services and public transport to meet this urgent housing need.

Cabinet Member Response

Thank you Mr Redgewell for your question which is very timely as we work to prepare the Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury Strategic and Local Plan (SLP).

Looking at ways we can raise accessibility standards for new homes is an important consideration. For many people the important features in a home are around things like location, size and affordability, but for older people and those

with disabilities the accessibility of their home is paramount and contributes to both general wellbeing and being able to live an active and independent life.

As noted in a 2023 [government research briefing](#) on UK disability statistics “The prevalence of disability rises with age: around 11% of children were disabled, compared with 23% of working age adults and 45% of adults over State Pension age”. In preparing the SLP, we are assessing all housing needs and how we plan for these but recognising the importance of suitable homes for older people and those with disabilities, particularly in light of our demographics which clearly demonstrates an ageing population means that any benefits built into new homes around accessibility will support not just today’s population, but also generations to come.

As we review the policies for the SLP, the team is, within the context of housing needs overall, exploring the most effective policy mechanisms for securing more accessible homes through the planning system, for both market and affordable tenures. I have alerted the SLP team and Housing Enabling Officer to the very important points you have raised through this question and to consider ways we can more explicitly build accessibility outcomes into our emerging policies. I would encourage you to take part in future engagements and consultations on the SLP and encourage you to review the [SLP website](#) and sign up to the consultation portal to be alerted of future activities for consultation.

From a housing perspective, the council's negotiations via our Housing Enabling Officer always seek to provide appropriate, accessible, affordable housing as set out within the local evidence base.

[Part M of Building Regulations](#) sets specific requirements which cover the majority of new dwelling houses built within the Cheltenham area and include guidance on:

- Approach to the dwelling/development
- External ramp and ambulant stepped approach
- Communal entrances, lifts and stairs
- Principal entrance doors and level thresholds
- Circulation areas – door and hall widths
- Sanitary facilities – WC facilities at ground floor level
- Services and controls – switch, socket and control height requirements.

The Council's Building Control team work closely with architects and developers, at both design and construction stages, to ensure all new dwelling applications submitted to the Local Authority, reasonably satisfy these access requirements.

The Building Control team also work closely with homeowners and housing associations when dwellings are being adapted for disabled access requirements and provide a fee exempt application and inspection service for this work.

Supplementary question from Mr Redgewell

I understand that CBC is working with Gloucester and Tewkesbury on the Strategic and Local Plan to ensure that facilities are built to M standards, but in view of the ageing population and future needs, but what as housing authority is the council doing outside the usual planning process to provide more disabled and lifetime housing beyond the M standards – such as liaising with the county council to ensure that pavements and footways around new-build houses are fully accessible. I realise that this is not easy for a non-unitary council, but can it be looked at and improved? Also, can more houses be built in the borough for people with reduced mobility?

Leader's response

In the absence of officers and the appropriate Cabinet Member, this is another question to take away. A written response will be provided.

5 Housing Assistance Policy

The Cabinet Member for Safety and Communities introduced her report, saying that the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance)(England and Wales) Order 2002 provides general powers for local authorities to renew and adapt houses, but which can only be used in accordance with a published Housing Assistance Policy. The report sets out how the council will provide financial support to improve and adapt homes in Cheltenham for eligible disabled people. She listed the discretionary policies and funding available in association with adaptations to a disabled person's home included in the Housing Assistance Policy.

The Cabinet Member for Major Developments and Housing Regeneration regretted that the government had not raised the discretionary grant funding limit, but was pleased that CBC has a discretionary policy and will continue to do all it can to help residents who need extra support. He said it raises the much bigger question of house-building in the future, and ensuring houses are suitable for future residents, but in the meantime, was happy to support the recommendations.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. in accordance with the powers contained in the RRO, the discretionary funding contained within the Housing Assistance Policy, forming Appendix 4, and its publication is approved;**
- 2. the regular review of funding, to ensure that the council's statutory duties are met and that available resources for discretionary expenditure are not exceeded, are approved;**
- 3. the annual review of the Housing Assistance Policy is approved and minor amendments will be made at the discretion of the Head of Public Protection in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member. Any decision to withdraw the availability of discretionary grants will be the subject of a Cabinet decision and all amendments published;**

4. **the contents of Appendix 5 are noted, to be debated and agreed at the DFG Forum, representing the district councils within Gloucestershire, Gloucestershire County Council, Gloucestershire Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust.**

6 Budget Monitoring report 2024/25 - position at 31 July 2024

In introducing her report, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets said that the council is in a difficult place, needing to protect the range of services provided while attempting to close the big financial gap. She said decades of good decisions have put CBC in a better position than many other councils, and we are still able to deliver an impressive range of discretionary services which residents need and deserve, but her job over the next few months will be to work out how to continue to deliver and balance the budget, particularly on housing and climate change, in the current unstable financial climate. Tough choices will be needed but the alternative is unthinkable. She looks forward to opening the consultation process soon.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Wellbeing and Culture commended the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets on her realistic but optimistic approach, and endorsed the report.

The Cabinet Member for Major Developments and Housing Delivery said this is a key document in the budgetary cycle, and was confident that despite the many challenges, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets will bring forward a balanced budget and Cheltenham will weather the storm.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services thanked the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets for confirming CBC's commitment to help vulnerable residents, and echoed earlier comments that, unlike many councils around the country, CBC continues to manage its finances well to support the people we serve. She thanked officers and Members for their years of good management.

The Leader reiterated that councils face a huge challenge in having to consult on their budgets before they know what has been allocated to them by the government. She said it is remarkable that CBC continues to be able to afford so many discretionary services, through innovation and hard work from committed officers and Members.

RESOLVED THAT:

- **the contents of the report are noted, including the key projected variances to the general fund and Housing Revenue Account ("HRA") 2024/25 revenue and capital budgets approved**

by council on 23 February 2024 and the actions to ensure overspends are reduced as far as possible by the end of the financial year.

7 Declaration of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common as a National Nature Reserve

The Cabinet Member for Waste Services, Recycling and Public Realm introduced his report, which requests approval to work towards declaring Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common as a National Nature Reserve (NNR), in recognition of its national importance for geology, wildlife and learning. He said Cheltenham is lucky to have such a fabulous public asset and thanked everyone who works and volunteers to maintain and preserve it. Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common is already a Site of Special Scientific Interest, in view of its important Jurassic limestone grassland and diverse flora and fauna, and he welcomed the invitation to join the England-wide network of 221 NNRs, in recognition of its national importance. He confirmed that this would not bring any additional burdens, but would result in more signage at no extra cost, which was very welcome.

He asked Members to authorise the designation and approve the necessary actions.

The Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency agreed that Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common are inspirational, saying that his time spent there as a child has inspired a lifetime appreciation of nature and beauty. He wholeheartedly supports the recommendation, and welcomes national recognition of a place which is very special to the people of Cheltenham.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Wellbeing and Culture said he also endorses and warmly supports the recommendation to protect this amazingly special place, not only for its wide range of flora and fauna and its geology, but also for its political importance as the site of spectacular non-violent action in the early twentieth century which culminated in 1927 in public ownership of Leckhampton Hill, making it open for everyone and a safe space for nature. He thanked the Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common and CBC's ranger team.

He also suggested that the climate change could well be revisited, as there is much about the proposal to contribute to the green agenda.

The Cabinet Member for Waste Services, Recycling and Public Realm thanked fellow Members for their thoughts, saying this demonstrated why the area is such an important public asset to the town and why it should be protected for ever.

The Leader suggested that it would be worth taking a retrospective look at the climate change assessment and the proposal will clearly tick many of the boxes.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. the council's application to Natural England to become an Approved Body pursuant to section 35 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 is authorised;**

- 2. consent is given to the designation of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common as a National Nature Reserve;**
- 3. all necessary actions to facilitate the designation process in collaboration with Natural England for Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common as a National Nature Reserve are approved.**

8 Briefings from Cabinet Members

The Leader invited Members to share briefings.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets said that the budget consultation would be starting very soon, and she would welcome suggestions from colleagues.

The Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Public Realm confirmed that staff are working hard to clear the weeds which have become problematic in some areas, following the wet and mild weather. This is being done area by area, using weed spray and manual clearance, and also the clearance of debris which will help protect against future flooding. He said the recent heavy rain had also necessitated additional street cleaning and tidying.

The Cabinet Member for Safety and Communities shared three items:

- she was happy to report on the new approach to graffiti in the town centre, with a grant for £15k from the Police and Crime Commissioner to work with BID and local businesses. The 3-month pilot will involve mapping incidents, removing graffiti, and patrol sites including G1 and G2 listed buildings and public open space. She confirmed that there was more to come, targeting other areas outside the town centre;
- the Healthy Start Scheme has recently launched at the Springbank Community Food Pantry, providing a Healthy Start card for expectant mothers and those with children under four, to help them to buy healthy food, including fruit and vegetables, milk and baby formula. People can find more information and if they are eligible via the NHS Healthy Start website;
- she wished a happy retirement to Mark Nelson in Private Sector Housing, and thanked him for his support over the years in her various Cabinet roles.

The Cabinet Member for Climate Change reported that the Net Zero team is continuing to explore heat networks, which provide a central source of heat from a variety of sources to customers in an urban area through a network of underground pipes. They have responded to an invitation from the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) for funding to develop a business case for a town centre heating network. This will examine the benefits, including financial returns and savings, and he is reasonably confident that a positive business case can be made.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Well-being and Culture shared two items:

- was happy to reflect on a spectacular summer of sport and culture in Cheltenham, from the success of Flora Peel and particularly Laura Collett in the Olympics, to the Music Festival, Paint

Festival, and the recently ended Radev exhibition at the Wilson. He also welcomed Cheltenham Town's successful start to the season at Whaddon Road;

- following the recent very heavy rain, he thanked staff teams for their quick action in response to leaks in various council buildings, including the Town Hall and Leisure@, which are both fully functional again;
- unfortunately, the Holst celebration, scheduled for Saturday 21 September, had to be postponed at short notice; thanks to the team who managed that situation.

The Cabinet Member for Major Developments and Housing Delivery said the soft launch for the marketing of the Municipal Offices would commence soon, and there has already been significant interest. He welcomed this exciting milestone in the building's history, after a 100-year association with the council, and thanked the team project board for their work to date, promising progress updates as they occur.

The Leader shared three items:

- congratulations to Max Wilkinson, MP, on being appointed Liberal Democrat spokesperson for Culture, Media and Sport. She wished him luck and enjoyment in the role;
- congratulations and thanks to Annette Wight on her retirement, for many years of service to the town as twinning officer;
- following the recent rain, massive thanks to all officers across the organisation in the emergency planning team who, within an hour or two, had everything in place and had communicated with residents, to ensure everyone was safe or had some somewhere safe to go.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services had no briefings on this occasion.

9 Local Government Act 1972 - Exempt Business

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 paragraph ?, Part (1) Schedule (12A) Local Government Act 1972, namely:

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

Paragraph 5: Information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings

10 Exempt Minutes

The exempt minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2024 were approved as a true record and signed accordingly.