

Cheltenham Borough Council Overview & Scrutiny Committee Minutes

Meeting date: 29 September 2025

Meeting time: 6.00 pm - 7.10 pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

Jackie Chelin (Vice-Chair), Graham Beale, Chris Day, Juan Carlos Garcia Clamp, Sandra Holliday, Martin Horwood and Stan Smith

Co-optees: Harry Booty, Margaret Cheung

Also in attendance:

Paul Jones (Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer)), Victoria Bishop (Head of Governance, Risk and Assurance), James Mogridge and Richard King (Construction Manager, Major Developments & Regeneration)

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Chandler, Healy and Joy.

2 Declarations of interest

With reference to Agenda item 7, Councillor Horwood said that his portfolio as Gloucestershire County Council Cabinet Member for Nature, Climate and Waste Reduction covers flooding, but he did not consider this to be prejudicial would therefore remain in the Chamber for that item.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 07 July 2025 were approved by those who attended as a true record, and signed accordingly.

4 Public and Member questions, calls for actions and petitions

There were none.

5 Cabinet Briefing

The Leader reported on the following items:

- most of her time is currently spent on Local Government Reorganisation, working collaboratively with county councillors and other districts, sharing thoughts and ideas, and moving towards submission of the final business case by 28 November;
- the sale of the airport is still on track and moving in the right direction with the preferred bidder, with due diligence hopefully completed by the end of October;
- negotiations are also progressing with the preferred bidder for the Municipal Offices, and it is hoped that the deal will be signed soon;
- the first round of consultation on the governance review is complete – thanks to Head of Governance, Risk and Assurance and Councillor Chelin for their input – and after analysis, the next stage will be decided, to ensure all residents are represented. Feedback will be provided at December Council for debate;
- the resident survey is now complete, and the outcomes will also be shared with Council. It is clear and interesting how stronger residents identify with Cheltenham as a place.

In response to Members' questions, she confirmed that:

- parish councils will be advised on the outcome of the first round of consultation once the feedback and views provided have been collated; the next round will set out potential options and invite further feedback. The Head of Governance, Risk and Assurance confirmed that the draft recommendations would be taken to Council on 13 October, with the second public consultation, based on those discussions, from 20 October to 19 December. This information will be reviewed, with the final recommendations to Council early in 2026;
- there is no definite target date for the airport sale at present, but this will be as soon as possible after due diligence is complete at the end of October. There will be no financial settlement or benefit for the council until the end of the year.

6 Preventative Maintenance on Council assets and Community Leased Buildings

The Vice-Chair said this subject had been discussed at a working group and sparked a lot of questions. In the absence of the report author, the Deputy Chief Executive presented the report; the interim Director of Property was present to help answer questions, with any they cannot answer taken away for written responses in due course.

The Deputy Chief Executive said the report and appendices were self-explanatory, and commented that local government reorganisation was causing some uncertainty in the workforce, with several vacancies currently out to advert. With the Director of Finance, Property and Climate Emergency on maternity leave, he advised that he

will concentrate on the finance aspects of her role, with Richard King of the Golden Valley team stepping in to manage Property Services.

The following questions were taken away for written responses:

- *[follow-up to written Question 2]* If inspections have been carried out historically on an ad-hoc basis but not written down, why is it six months to the target date for the action point? If it is a case of just writing down what is being done, it should be faster than that?
- *[follow-up to written Question 6]* The asset management document puts a value of £32.71m against community assets - larger than what is in the statement of accounts – and it is not clear from the answer whether the difference is because we are using a different valuation basis, so we actually think assets are worth 32.7m more than what we have in books, or whether it is a case of things being put in different categories between the two documents. Have we got hidden assets of £30+m?
- *[follow-up to written Question 7]* Noting the 28% increase in spend on unplanned maintenance in figures provided – why did this happen and is it expected to continue to rise?
- Following on from the previous question: in answer to a written question on year-by-year budgeted spend - ignoring 2025-26 - against those budgeted figures, it looks like we had an underspend £565k across years. The previous question noted significant amounts for unplanned maintenance over several years. Although we are budgeting 600k, are we looking to that budget to *not* spend if we need to as a council overall and that is why we have an underspend there? This might be storing up problems for the future – though it depends on whether that interacts with unplanned maintenance spends. If we underspend on one and spend a lot elsewhere, where do we end up overall?

A Member was reassured to see a lot of maintenance items listed which fall within the Cheltenham Trust's portfolio - includes some of Cheltenham's most important and iconic assets - following a history of misunderstanding about who is responsible for what, and asked if discussions have moved towards more agreement about how this is planned going forward or whether it still remains a challenge. The Deputy Chief Executive said it all comes down to affordability: the council has £600k to spend on preventative maintenance on an annual basis as part of the base budget, but one or two significant projects could use up two years' budget in one go. The property team identifies three categories for maintenance, but health and safety has been the dominant issue recently and cost more than £600k over the last few years, due in part to the identification of RAAC at Leisure@. The property team knows what has to be done, including replacement of the running track at the Prince of Wales Stadium, but this cannot be funded from the existing budget.

7 Flood Risk Management and Prevention

James Mogridge, Flood Risk and Drainage Engineer, presented his report, which highlights how Cheltenham fits into a complex national arrangement of stakeholders and flood risk management responsibilities; the importance of cross-boundary collaboration; and mitigation measures put in place since 2007 to ensure the borough is better prepared and protected. No two rainfall events are the same, and climate change presents further challenges, but more can be done to improve resilience, with nature-based solutions such as SuDs schemes being used to slow down the flow of water through Cheltenham catchments, at the same time complementing other aspects of the climate emergency. He said the standard protection offered by some of our flood defences is expected to decrease over time, and we need to ensure that our decision-making around choosing cost-effective schemes is robust and well-informed.

Members welcomed his report, the positive level of cooperation between the county and the borough, and the emphasis on natural solutions.

In response to questions from members of the committee, the Flood Risk and Drainage Engineer stated that:

- the greenspace team has submitted a bid to the county council's £100k fund for natural flood risk management at community level, for a project in one of the town's parks;
- providing the right level of flood risk mitigation in planning is a tough balance: developers are currently required to design up to and including a 1-in-100 year event, set at a national scale, plus 40% local rainfall allowance for climate change which is set by the Environment Agency, but 2007 saw two high magnitude events occur in two weeks. Developers do need to ensure exceedance events (ie events greater than 1-in-100 plus 40% climate change) are appropriately managed in their design. Over-engineering for larger events could contribute to the problem by creating more emissions, with additional concrete, pipes and machinery. The local 40% allowance will be reviewed against UK climate trajectory and revised by the Environment Agency if required.

The Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency confirmed that national guidance has to be followed but noted that the heavy rainfall in September 2024 which flooded roads and one house and threatened many others in St Mark's ward was classed as a 1-in-74 year event. There are clearly gaps in the flood mitigation schemes shown on the map, and he will be talking to the county council about this soon.

He went on to say that modelling is available – super Clausius-Clapeyron scaling calculates that with a 1° increase in global temperature since 1975, a 7% increase in moisture in the atmosphere – and therefore rainfall – is to be expected, and the projection is a 48% increase by 2050, potentially increasing annual rainfall from 900mm in 1975 to 1350mm in 2050. It is important to keep focused on this.

In response to further questions from Members, the Flooding and Drainage Engineer said that:

- when the surface water management plan was commissioned by the county council, it identified the highest risk areas, and the most cost-effective flood schemes that could be put in place. Residents in areas of localised flooding should use the online flood reporting tool;
- if highways drains are not being properly maintained and causing surface water issues, this should be raised with the highways authority. It could be that the underlying sewers are undersized and unable to cope with the level of rainfall we are seeing now. The flood risk management team at the county council and the flood team at CBC can look further into infrastructure upgrades, taking a more natural approach if possible;
- while recognising that there are areas of Cheltenham where heavy rainfall causes great concern to residents, CBC and GCC teams are only likely to get involved only when homes or commercial buildings are at risk of flooding. Flooding on the highway is a nuisance and a safety concern, but this is an issue for Highways drainage teams rather than for flood risk management teams
- regarding budget for flood management work, the team has a recurring budget, to cover maintenance of water courses and flood schemes amongst other things, and the flood alleviation reserve can also be used for schemes – although this tends to be spent on large asset repairs, an important part of flood risk mitigation work, rather than building more smaller-scale schemes to be maintained. Any new schemes would therefore usually rely on funding such as natural flood management fund mentioned earlier.

The Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency added that CBC's flooding and drainage team tracks and collects videos of problem areas for evidence, and he will soon be calling for an update to the 2011 surface water flooding plan. He said there is a network of flood wardens across the town, suggesting that if councillors knew any residents who might be able to help, they should direct them to the website, where advice is also available to residents who are concerned about the risk of flooding to their homes.

The Vice-Chair noted that some areas of Cheltenham don't appear to have any flood wardens, and reiterated the suggestion that councillors should encourage their communities to volunteer.

Returning to Members' questions, the Flood and Drainage Engineer confirmed that:

- Warden Hill is very familiar to his team, with its location and lack of natural greenspace making it susceptible to flash flooding. A working group including borough and county councillors has been set up, and has seen some successes and SuDS schemes delivered by the Wildlife Trust, with more work to be done by Severn Trent on undersized sewers which cannot cope with flash flooding. His team is working with the parish council and planning department on engagement regarding the planning rules around tarmacking of driveways as it is hard for planning enforcement to keep pace with the number of residents who perhaps unwittingly carry out this type of work, unaware that impermeable solutions over a certain size are not allowed. The CBC flooding team has previously worked with Warden Hill Parish Council to deliver 1000 leaflets promoting the use of permeable solutions and greening of properties, and there are plans in place for similar engagement next year.

The Vice-Chair wondered if a flooding supplementary planning document would help. The Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency suggested that, having walked around Warden Hill recently and compared it with his own ward (St Mark's) where some paved driveways have been replaced with grass and hedges, maybe the parish council could get some sort of rotation going, encouraging Warden Hill residents to do the same.

In response to further questions, the Flood and Drainage Engineer confirmed that:

- regarding the impact of building houses on greenspace and where the excess surface water will go, developments such as at The Folly in St Paul's ward have to present modelling with a consultant as part of the planning application. This must show that any new impermeable surfaces are balanced, in that case by a pond that will hold water and release it slowly. Even smaller developments of 1-10 houses must now use hydraulic modelling software to demonstrate drainage measures, such as attenuation tanks or ponds depending on the size of the development;
- following on from a written question and whether the complex relationship between different organisations works well in a crisis situation, a flood event such as that in 2007 as communication is well co-ordinated across all management authorities (emergency planners being the point of contact for CBC). A call to the wrong authority would be quickly passed on during the event; the one-call system suggested would be useful for issues outside flood events (such as bank collapses, debris in waterways or blocked drains) incorporating a system to identify who is responsible and directing the call to the correct authority, but it is hard to say how this would be done or who would implement it at the moment;
- regarding public perception that a lot of problems arise from floodwater running into the sewage systems, in new development on greenfield sites, surface water would not be connected to the combined network; where a site already drains to a combined sewer, all other options are considered before discharging surface water to a combined sewer as a last resort. A lot of attenuation would be required in such instances to better what is already there;
- regarding incidents such as the severe flooding in January 2025 which closed the A40, emergency planners and on-call officers collaborate with neighbouring districts during such events, and if one district is affected where its neighbour is not, will offer resources to help.

The Vice-Chair welcomed the very thorough scrutiny of this subject, and said it was helpful for unparished areas to hear about the grants and schemes available for flood mitigation.

8 Overview and Scrutiny (O & S) Annual Report

The Vice-Chair said the committee was being asked to note the contents of the report, which shares what it and other scrutiny committees have been doing over the past year, as well as highlighting some of the items to be considered in the coming year. It will go to Full Council for approval on 13 October.

There were no comments from members.

9 Feedback from other scrutiny meetings attended

No meetings have taken place since the last meeting of Overview and Scrutiny. Feedback will be provided at the next meeting in November.

A Member commented that the continued closure of the maternity unit at Cheltenham General Hospital is a huge concern, and it is not acceptable that, with a population of 120k, Cheltenham women and unborn babies are put at risk by having to travel to Gloucester Royal in labour, when seconds can count. The NHS decision was originally made on immediate safety grounds, which should have been challenged by now. He hoped that HOSC would raise the high level of concern.

The Vice-Chair said that the O&S representative on HOSC is an ardent scrutineer, and it was agreed that the Member would speak to him direct about this serious issue.

10 Review of scrutiny workplan

Members had nothing to add on this occasion. An O&S planning session is scheduled for 04 November at 6.00pm.

11 Any other item that the Chair determines to be urgent

There were none.

12 Date of next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for Monday 24 November.