

Council

Meeting date: 12 December 2022

Member Questions (9 total)

1. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

Due to the voter ID requirements set to be implemented from May 2023, and dealing with this on top of existing low voter turnout in many wards in Cheltenham, do we have a voter engagement plan in place to encourage people to vote and support them in voting?

Response from Cabinet Member

The Elections Act received Royal Assent in April 2022. Laying of the voter identification Statutory Instrument occurred on 6 November 2022 with it expected to come into effect by mid-January 2023 in readiness for the 4th of May 2023 elections. We currently do not have any elections planned for May 2023 in Cheltenham, somewhat of a blessing one may say, as the information and timetable for such a fundamental change in our voting system is somewhat condensed. We do have a draft engagement plan in place, but this may be subject to additions and changes.

2. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

Since the range of voter ID options are very restrictive for those on a lower income or from a younger demographic, with railcards or students cards not being considered valid ID and thus excluding them from the voting process, how will we publicise postal voting or special registration forms as an alternative for those who may not be able to bring the right form of ID to the polling station?

Response from Cabinet Member

You mention the restrictive nature of the ID options chosen by the government, and I have to agree that currently they will have a significantly detrimental effect for younger residents and those on lower incomes. There will be a national awareness campaign starting on 8 January. We are still waiting for the Electoral Commission to provide us with resources to reflect the key message of the mass advertising campaign. We have a draft Voter ID engagement plan that, through various mediums includes using social media, our website, CBH newsletter and website, provide leaflets to community groups, hold surgeries for electors to apply for Voter ID Certificate. This is not an exhaustive list of activities for engagement.

So in the period before the 2023 May elections we can maximise the key messages for the benefit of our residents.

As I have mentioned in my answer to your previous question we do not have elections planned during 2023, this will give Cheltenham an opportunity to evaluate the impact of this engagement campaign, and its effect in areas that do have an election in May 2023, its impact and how our residents responded will prove beneficial. Equally being able to understand the impact of the new voter ID process, the positive and negatives should again be beneficial in our planned elections in 2024.

3. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy to Cabinet Member for Customer and Regulatory Affairs, Councillor Martin Horwood

It appears that Gloucestershire County Council are extending the Zwings electric scooter trial in Cheltenham until May 2024. Does Cheltenham Borough Council have an official stance on this, what is our position, and how has this been communicated to Gloucestershire County Council?

Response from Cabinet Member

The scooter trial is part of a national initiative across 31 English regions and is being operated by the Department for Transport (DfT) and Active Travel England. Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) is overseeing the scheme in Cheltenham.

DfT announced in July that local authorities would have the option of carrying on with the trials up until May 2024.

The scheme was intended to support a 'green' restart of local travel and to help mitigate reduced public transport capacity as a result of the pandemic. In July 2020, the Department for Transport (DfT) made regulations allowing trials of rental e-scooters to be fast tracked and expanded.

Further details of the scheme which GCC successfully applied to take part in and how it has been extended to date are available via the following link:

[Government e-scooter trials guidance for local areas and rental operators](#)

Safety concerns regarding the scooters have been raised at the CBC Accessibility Forum, by members of the visually impaired community. Officers are currently seeking information from GCC about the number of reports of misuse, including any data on those e-scooters that are licensed as part of the trial and private ones which are not.

In relation to transport more generally, CBC has encouraged GCC to be more ambitious in relation to its local plans and commissioned a report from consultants Systra, entitled 'Connecting Cheltenham' to inform our comments to GCC about what we would like to see in the Local Transport Plan. Whilst e-scooters are not specifically referenced in the report, we are supportive of a significant shift towards more sustainable transport modes, together with an emphasis on the infrastructure needed to support that shift.

Further details of the Connecting Cheltenham report can be found here:

[What is Connecting Cheltenham?](#)

4. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy to Cabinet Member for Customer and Regulatory Affairs, Councillor Martin Horwood

Cheltenham has several heritage neighbourhoods, and while their management and upkeep is demanding for their unique profile, there are many residents who wish to install solar arrays to generate sustainable energy. Are there plans for Cheltenham Borough Council to relax planning rules and regulations to allow listed buildings to have reasonable and workable adjustments to add solar panels without a practical way forward?

Response from Cabinet Member

Both the National Planning Policy Framework and our own Cheltenham policy are quite clear: we encourage solar panels in pursuit of our climate change objectives and solar panels can be put on listed buildings and on buildings in heritage designated areas like the Cheltenham Conservation Area. But obviously this has to be done with care and in compliance with the rules still in force for heritage buildings. We can't relax national rules unilaterally. One of the best examples of imaginative flexibility to this issue in the whole country is the Grade II* listed church which is now Trinity Cheltenham but which was built in 1820 and modified by Cheltenham's most famous architect John Middleton. The church's new solar array was not only approved by Cheltenham Borough Council but we helped to fund them too through the Cheltenham Zero Community Fund launched by Cllr Wilkinson.

Our planning process has to take into account key issues of focus for Cheltenham such as heritage and the environment but these should not be in competition.

To promote sustainable energy the Council adopted the Climate Change Supplementary Planning Document earlier this year and through our application processes officers are encouraging all residents and homeowners to consider measures which will have a positive impact in tackling the climate crisis and include these in their proposals.

We must also recognise that our heritage is an important part of what makes Cheltenham a special place and we must take care to protect this. Applications for renewables, including solar panels, have to be carefully considered to ensure they sustain and enhance the special interest of listed buildings in line with national legislation surrounding listed buildings, which has not changed. Historic England have produced a range of guidance notes on renewable energy installations and recommending that a 'whole building approach' be taken to improve energy efficiency and provide the best possible balance to be struck between saving energy and reducing carbon emissions, sustaining heritage significance, and maintaining a healthy building. Links to these documents can be found via our website pages at [Working with listed buildings and within conservation areas | Energy efficiency, renewables and our built cultural heritage | Cheltenham Borough Council](#).

The Trinity example shows what can be done within these rules. We want a town that is beautiful, historic and green.

Our local planning policy is set out in our Cheltenham Plan adopted in 2020. In line with statutory requirements we are required to review this every five years and we will of course take the opportunity of the forthcoming review to see if we can strengthen even more our approach to tackling not just the climate crisis but the crisis in the natural world and pollution too. I want us to be one of the country's leading councils on climate action, biodiversity and a true recovery.

In terms of individual applications it is worth noting that each case must be treated on its own merits so while there is no relaxation in the requirement for listed building consent or planning permission for works that affect listed buildings our officers must consider our other policies too, consider all options available and take a 'whole building approach'. For those wishing to seek new installations we offer a pre-application advice service which includes a heritage surgery and full details of this can be found on our website at [Planning pre-application advice | Cheltenham Borough Council](#).

5. Question from Councillor Tim Harman to the Cabinet Member Cabinet Member Waste, Recycling & Street Services, Councillor Iain Dobie

Some meetings ago I asked if the Cabinet Member would meet me on site to discuss how the Children's Play Area in Rowena Cade Avenue could be upgraded . Can update me on any progress and if he will agree to meet

Response from Cabinet Member

Yes, I am still willing to meet you at the Rowena Cade play area with a member of the Council's Green Space Team to discuss how the play area can be improved, and how it might be funded. We anticipate there might be some funding available from the Council's rolling annual play area improvement programme in 2023/24. I understand you are looking at external sources of funding with local residents, and that the green space team have suggested a new piece of equipment. Please feel free to contact me at any time to set this up.

6. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

Will there be more active promotion of democratic engagement with Council, Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings, so that members of the public are better informed of the work these meetings do, as well as their right to ask questions and interact in those meetings with their elected representatives?

Response from the Leader

Thank you for highlighting an important topic. The council looks to educate the public about how it can get involved in its decision making and social media is used to flag upcoming public meetings of Cabinet and Council.

The [Get Involved page](#) on the CBC website functions as a useful directory for residents looking to engage with the democratic process, signposting them towards how to attend public meetings, ask questions, speak at regulatory committees, respond to consultations and submit petitions.

The Democratic Services team aim to make the relevant information accessible and understandable for members of the public. All public meetings are now livestreamed to the council's YouTube channel and those who wish to view the meetings in person can come to the Municipal Offices to do so.

In addition to this, our communications team works hard to share key topics of debate and decisions, especially around high profile issues and consultations, with the local media, residents, partners, businesses and community groups. They proactively and reactively manage this through the press, the council's website and a variety of online social media platforms.

Councillors also have a key role to play in raising awareness within their ward of the ways in which constituents can get involved, and alerting residents and community groups to steps in the process where they have a particular role to play.

Of course if Councillor Joy has ideas of how she thinks more could be done I am very happy to hear them, in addition perhaps she would like to request her Green party MP raise this with the education department in parliament. As we all know engaging at a young age and providing democratic education in schools would be of huge benefit and it was something that used to happen.

7. Question from Emma Nelson to the Cabinet Member Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing, Councillor Max Wilkinson

At the last Council Meeting, in response to a couple of public questions, and my question about lack of Tourist Information in the town, we were advised that Tourism information“is currently available from Monday to Friday in the revamped Municipal Offices reception, in a staffed area of the council building, a central part of the town. Visitors and residents are welcome to visit the reception area at the Municipal Offices between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday, (10am to 5pm Wednesday) where maps and town guides are available. Digital screens share up to date information on what's on and where to go in Cheltenham, and printed tourist information is available to collect.”

I appreciate this may well be the intention, and assurances were given to this end, however, as of Friday 2nd December there was still no Tourist Information available in Reception nor any sign of the other facilities listed above.

Please would the Cabinet Member advise detail of what will be provided and, most importantly, when?

Response from Cabinet Member

Thank you to Cllr Nelson for this question. Following something of a false start, I'm pleased to say that a stand with tourist information is now located in the Municipal Offices reception. Additionally, we have a digital display screen giving tourism information. Anyone without access to a mobile phone who wishes to make subsequent enquiries during their visit, is able to use the booths in reception, which now include lists of useful numbers.

8. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to the Cabinet Member Customer and Regulatory Services, Councillor Victoria Atherstone

I was disturbed to read the report in local press recently (Gloucestershire Live / Echo November 24th p8) concerning insect infestation of a CBH owned property. It seems CBH response was not as prompt, robust or effective as it should have been and officers were not as supportive to the resident as they could have been.

What processes and procedures are in place to ensure similar occurrences, where accommodation becomes uninhabitable (whether through insect infestation, damp, mould or other issues), are dealt with promptly and sensitively. What are the lessons to be learnt from this recent case?

Response from Cabinet Member

Thank you Councillor Nelson for bringing this to my attention however I am can confirm after liaising with the Head of Community Services at Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) that they did respond promptly, robustly and effectively and were supportive to all residents impacted by the infestation.

Cheltenham Borough Homes have provided the following response which I trust you find is supportive of my comments above:

Following the passing of the tenant in Edward Wilson House, a fly infestation issue developed (due to the hot weather) and this impacted three flats below this property. There was no delay in CBH's response to this issue. CBH arranged for pest control services to visit the property, the same day as we were made aware of the issue. CBH were aware of the issue on 19th August 2022 and had resolved the infestation issue by 25th August 2022.

The tenants of all three flats impacted by the infestation were offered alternative accommodation. Two tenants chose to remain in the flats while treatment was undertaken. The third tenant (the complainant) had pre-arranged plans to be away from her flat for the weekend and did not initially accept the offer of alternative accommodation.

CBH officers attended the properties, out of hours (at the weekend) to check the outcome of the pest control treatment. The pest control treatment had not delivered a satisfactory outcome at the complainants flat over the weekend; therefore, she was

immediately accommodated in a hotel, CBH covered the cost of the hotel and reimbursed her for expenses.

A further pest control treatment was undertaken, the complainant stated that she was still not happy to return to the flat. CBH arranged for another private contractor to carry out a further pest control plus a deep clean of the flat. Four pest control treatments in total were carried out at the complainants flat. The property was inspected, and the complainant advised that there were no flies present in the flat and that it was ready to be reoccupied.

Current position

- The complainant has stated that she wishes to be rehoused, and has been supported to make a Homeseeker application.

Summary

- CBH were prompt (responded the same day), robust (in arranging 4 pest control treatments within a week) and were effective in resolving the infestation issue. Photographs have been taken of the complainant's flat post infestation treatment as evidence of the success of the infestation treatment.
- CBH were supportive to all three tenants affected by immediately offering alternative accommodation, subsequently providing alternative accommodation to the complainant and covering expenses. CBH officers went the extra mile in checking the properties at the weekend to establish the success of the treatment.
- CBH have ensured that the complainant is fully aware of the complaint process. To date, CBH have not received a complaint. The complainant communicated her viewpoint via the media and CBH have responded to this media enquiry.

9. Question from Councillor Matt Babbage to the Cabinet Member Customer and Regulatory Services, Councillor Martin Horwood

What is Cheltenham's latest five-year housing supply assessment?

Response from Cabinet Member

The need for local planning authorities to constantly demonstrate a rolling five-year supply of housing, even when they have planned for all local housing need and more as Cheltenham has, is an onerous and often impossible test imposed on planning authorities by central government which has undermined their ability to deliver a plan-led system. The government has announced its intention to remove this requirement, providing the local authority has an up to date local plan in place, alongside the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill currently before Parliament and the Secretary of State confirmed this in his statement to the House of Commons on 6 December 2022.

The Council's most recent published [five-year housing land supply position statement \(1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020\)](#) sets out that the five year housing land supply calculation was that Cheltenham could only demonstrate a 3.9 year supply of housing land, largely due to the challenges in bringing forward the major strategic developments west and north-west of Cheltenham on which the town is heavily reliant for its demonstration of a five year supply. The Council is in the process of updating the five year housing supply assessment (up to 31st March 2022) and are intending to publish this information during January 2023. Of relevance here is that the supply will remain below the 5 years supply which is a position not unique to Cheltenham and local planning authorities across England are in a similar position.

Cheltenham Borough Council is also actively involved in the delivery of housing development above and beyond the planning system to cater for the needs of our community and to accelerate the delivery of much needed housing. 'Live' examples of that involvement include:

- Acquisition of land by Cheltenham Borough Council in West Cheltenham, [driving the Golden Valley Development](#). By working in collaboration with adjacent landowners, the West Cheltenham strategic allocation has the capacity to deliver a minimum of 1,100 homes. This has included preparation of a strategic masterplan for the wider West Cheltenham strategic allocation developed in collaboration with Tewkesbury Borough Council and approved as a Supplementary Planning Document which sets out a strategic framework for the delivery of thousands of new homes, including affordable housing and diverse living options, jobs and infrastructure.
- Active engagement with the North West Cheltenham developer consortium (Elms Park) to support the delivery of over 4,000 new homes through progression of outline application and detail of the first delivery phase.
- Full Council approval of £180m investment in affordable and private market rental stock in the borough.
- New affordable housing stock being delivered through Cheltenham Borough Homes.
- Ongoing property asset assessment to enable the release of council assets for housing development and regeneration.
- Empty shops assessment underway in collaboration with the [Vacant Shops Academy](#) and the Cheltenham BID which includes proactive engagement with the landlords and operators within the town centre to assess the opportunity of changes of use to residential.