

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet

Minutes

Meeting date: 19 September 2023

Meeting time: 6.00 pm - 7.00 pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

Rowena Hay, Peter Jeffries, Victoria Atherstone, Flo Clucas, Mike Collins, Iain Dobie, Martin Horwood, Alisha Lewis and Max Wilkinson

Also in attendance:

Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive), Paul Jones (Executive Director of Finance, Assets and Regeneration) and Gemma Bell (Director of Finance and Assets and Deputy S151 Officer)

1 Apologies

There were none.

2 Declarations of interest

There were none.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

Minutes of the meetings held on 11 July and 25 July were approved as true records and signed accordingly.

4 Public and Member Questions and Petitions

No Member questions or petitions had been received.

Two public questions were received as follows, which together with the responses were taken as read:

1. Question from Nick Hardy to Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency, Councillor Alisha Lewis

I have submitted a suggestion that the council look at the potential for deep geothermal energy to provide heating to the new developments. The town overlies a hot aquifer at around 2500m which could provide heating and hot water to the entire developments at Elm park and Cyber Park – a source of energy that has been overlooked by both the council and developer (who have only included ASHP and GSHP system in their applications). The council's own "Climate Emergency Action Plan – Pathway to Net Zero" states that the council has a commitment to review the feasibility of alternative energy sources, new technologies and innovations.

Will the council look fully into this resource that could provide a continuous, fully renewable heating resource for houses, office, school, medical facilities etc for many years to come and district heating plants have been running for more than 100 years in many area around the world and overlooked in this country (with the exception of Southampton which has been using this technology since 1986).

Cabinet Member response

CBC recently took part in a study funded by the Government Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) working with a consultant specialising in renewable heat networks and district heating, to investigate the potential for heating zones within Cheltenham. The data from this study was fed into the evidence base for the new Energy Security Bill and has directly impacted current Government policy. We have been awarded further funding to carry out a more detailed Stage 2 feasibility study of two areas of interest, in order to explore the potential to develop heat network zones at the Golden Valley Development site and in the Town Centre.

The initial feasibility study focused on the renewable technologies of air and ground source heat pumps and combined heat and power. The capital expenditure for the proposed Network 1 was estimated at £4.9m and for Network 2 at £31.5m, although costs could be significantly more in light of current building costs price inflation.

The International Renewable Energy Alliance (IREA), found that geothermal energy was the second most expensive renewable energy source to install, due to the need for deep well drilling, suggesting that the initial cost may be greater than that for the proposed networks.

District heating allows for a relatively quick transition to lower carbon technologies, because areas can be decarbonised without changing heating systems at the building level. It can also allow a combination of multiple technologies, again something often not practical at the building level. The carbon benefits associated with heat networks offer a potentially cheaper and quicker transition over deep drilling for geothermal energy, but this requires more detailed cost benefit and risk analysis.

The council therefore remains open-minded in relation to the potential for utilising geothermal energy sources and indeed, how the government may look to support such technology, including the potential for public or private sector investment, in relation the UK's overall energy supply strategy.

This question and response was taken as read; the questioner was not present to ask a supplementary question.

2. Question from Saskia Whitfield to Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency, Councillor Alisha Lewis

Most councils have Climate Emergency Committees based on international Net Zero policies. However, 5G is recognised as a massive energy consumer. It has been projected to “increase power consumption by 61 times from 2020 to 2030, due to its energy demands” as reported in 2020 by the ABI Research Data Center Forum. It is said too that a 5G mast consumes 3 times as much energy as a 4G mast – <https://ehtrust.org/report-5g-to-increaseenergy-consumption-by-61-times/>

Similarly, a report published by France's High Council on Climate warned that rolling out 5G technology could lead to a sharp increase in power consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. “The report, published in December 2020, found that 5G networks could be responsible for an extra 3 to 7 billion extra tonnes of CO² released into [the] atmosphere [in France].” https://www.hautconseilclimat.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/hcc_rapports_5g-en.pdf

The whole Net Zero Climate Emergency agenda is based on the notion that human activity is already generating too much CO², which is heating up the earth. It is important to recognise that the resulting plan to implement Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, Active Travel and 15-minute cities all require the high-energy consuming infrastructure of the 5G network.

Please can the member for Climate advise how this is compatible with CBC's plans for Net Zero by 2030 and what steps are being undertaken to mitigate these effects on CO² emissions?

Cabinet Member response

5G is absolutely indispensable for driving technological growth and innovation. It is a cornerstone of maintaining a strong technology sector in the UK, which is vital for Cheltenham's economic growth and the success of the Golden Valley Development.

While we acknowledge the environmental impacts, as many new technologies come with environmental costs, we are keen to encourage proactive steps to reconcile 5G rollout with the needs of the planet. A 5G rollout that relies on eco-friendly infrastructure and energy-efficient equipment can ensure we continue to thrive technologically, whilst minimizing the carbon footprint of this technology.

Supplementary question

As a concerned citizen of Cheltenham and having done some years' research into 5G, the response does not adequately address how 5G is compatible with Net Zero

ambitions. 5G is not just an upgrade of 4G but a completely different technology, and there is plenty of documentation in the public domain which shows that 5G originates and has been deployed as a battlefield weapon. This poses a serious and substantial risk to the people of Cheltenham. Can you advise how we, the public, will be safeguarded should the technology not be used for the stated purpose?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for the question and for attending the meeting tonight. There are currently no known health risks to 5G. It is known that the signals used are incredibly weak, on a similar spectrum to a remote control; there is substantial evidence from a range of reputable medical institutions that support this position. The World Health Organisation has not recommended any changes to exposure limits for wireless networks, and 5G is well within that scope. There is no scientific evidence to establish that birds, bees and other wildlife are negatively impacted by 5G, which is, to repeat, on the same spectrum as a whole range of wireless services currently in use. As stated in my previous response, I am excited about the possibilities that 5G technology can offer, both in terms of the Golden Valley and the investments in technologies to actively support of endeavours to achieve Net Zero. The consensus of the medical establishment, including the World Health Organisation, is clear, and the council takes its evidence from reputable medical sources.

5 The Cheltenham Trust Contract

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing introduced his report, highlighting the transformation of the Cheltenham Trust from a traditional third sector organisation to a modern, business-focussed one, which has contributed to the savings of the authority whilst delivering important services at the heart of the town – the Pump Room, Pittville Park, the Town Hall and The Wilson are all drawing in more visitors, and the new sports strategy will work with the Trust and other partners on a new strategy for the underused Prince of Wales Stadium and Leisure@. The report starts the process to re-procure the services delivered successfully by the Cheltenham Trust for an additional period of time, noting that where other authorities would have sold off, privatised or discontinued these assets and services long ago, CBC has chosen a different route. He thanked Richard Gibson, Tracey Birkinshaw and all officers of the Trust for the continued good work they do for the town.

The Leader said this marks the start of an important journey, looking at who runs our leisure facilities in the future, adding that the Trust has done an amazing job so far.

RESOLVED THAT:

- i. the management agreement between the Council and The Cheltenham Trust is extended for up to 5 years from 1 October 2024 as per the provision within the management agreement;**
- ii. subject to approval of The Cheltenham Trust, a variation to the agreement that will introduce a rolling break clause that can be**

triggered by the Council at any point after year 1 of the extended term, subject to the council giving the Cheltenham Trust 12 months' notice, is agreed;

- iii. authority is delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing, to agree the length of the extended contract and any variation provisions;**
- iv. authority is delegated to the s.151 officer, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance & Assets to agree the level of the management fee each year during the remaining term of the contract.**

6 Vacant Units and Town Centre Land Use Efficiency Action Plan

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Well-being introduced his report, the second stage of a report brought to Cabinet in July, which aims to tackle the vacant units in the town resulting from changing consumer habits, problems with business rates, and high rents. It includes an action plan to encourage more residential use of town centre units, extra enforcement against landlords who allow their premises to fall into disrepair, and how to bring empty units into temporary use as community hubs and privately-owned shops. The planning team will take action to achieve these goals via local and national planning policy.

He thanked officers – Helen Mole, Tracey Birkinshaw, and Heath and his team at Cheltenham BID – for their work on this important report, which can lead to us riding the wave of the change that is overtaking towns and cities across the country in a sustainable and progressive way, and building a more prosperous future for Cheltenham by filling empty spaces with retail, commercial and leisure units and, most critically, new accommodation in sustainable locations.

Before inviting Members to comment, the Leader advised that the live streaming was not working properly and that a recording of the meeting would be posted on the CBC website as soon as possible.

Members thanked and congratulated the Cabinet Member and officers for the report and made the following comments:

- being within easy walking distance of amenities is the most sustainable way to live, particularly from a climate perspective, and anything that increases the supply of town centre housing is a real bonus;
- plans for the town centre are key to the council's regeneration aims;
- opportunities for new housing in the town centre has been the council's direction of travel for some years, but this is often challenging due to absentee landlord and investment companies. Additional housing adds to the vibrancy and footfall in the town centre, supports local businesses and leisure, and provides affordable housing for people without cars;
- the old model of towns with separate areas for housing and for work is now out of date, and planning has to catch up with that. Cheltenham Local Plan policies will shortly be up for review to facilitate the drive towards this kind of change of use and intensification in the town centre, which will not only protect the green

spaces preferred by developers but also make town centres more exciting and engaging places to live and work;

- different pieces of work have been done over the years and Cheltenham has a good record of building on brownfield sites where possible, as well as an above-average shop occupancy but this could change quickly. The comprehensive report and proposed work with stakeholders is welcome.

A Member asked if town centre properties could be transformed into homes for families as well as individuals. The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Well-being confirmed that this was information of the town of the future. He agreed that planning models are outdated, and said that the action plan included points to monitor vacant units, drive the agenda with planning policy, and use the council's significant powers to nudge things along at local level.

The Leader thanked the Cabinet Member for his report and tenacity in driving this forward, adding that the bottom line is that most empty town centre properties are owned by overseas landlords.

RESOLVED THAT:

- i. the council will work with stakeholders to deliver the actions identified in the action plan;**
- ii. a report on progress with delivery of the action plan will be presented to Cabinet in summer 2024.**

7 Budget Monitoring Report, April-June 2023

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets presented his report, which details the forecast outturn position against the 2023-24 budget approved by Council in February, as set out in the executive summary.

Members thanked the Cabinet Member and officers, and commented as follows:

- every finance report demonstrates how incredibly tough it is to balance the budget, with little support from central government, but in the face of many challenges, CBC is in great shape;
- as shown by councils faced with bankruptcy, it is incredibly difficult for local authorities to work for local communities as they should. CBC is not going down that route and can be proud of the work it continues to do;
- further problems are coming down the line, such as the continued cost of living crisis, landlords selling private homes, lack of affordable homes and an increase in homelessness, with the resulting financial burden pushing more councils to 114 notices. Our finance team is doing a great job.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets thanked Members, and agreed that CBC has a very able finance team. He said this council was some steps ahead of the impending storm, with a commercial strategy, asset management strategy and

investment strategy which hold us in good stead, but it is difficult to know where the pressure will hit – we are still in the middle of the storm.

RESOLVED THAT:

- **the contents of the report are noted, including the key projected variances to the general fund and Housing Revenue Account (“HRA”) 2023/24 revenue and capital budgets approved by Council on 20 February 2023, and the actions to ensure overspends are reduced as far as possible by the end of the financial year.**

8 Disposal of surplus land - Idsall Drive

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets reminded Members that the Idsall Drive Car Park had been identified for disposal in the 2020 Covid Recovery Budget and that since then, in line with the council’s Asset Management Strategy, a considerable amount of work had been undertaken to address community interest and concerns, including a survey of usage to understand the impact the loss of the car park would have. This demonstrated negligible impact, with more than enough spaces available in the nearby High Street, as detailed in the appendices. He also said that the council engagement with the Parish council reached no conclusion, and that discussions about installing EV charging points in the car park also received a lukewarm approach. He concluded by reminding Members that capital receipts would be moved back into the town through the capital investment strategy.

Members made the following points:

- it is clear from the report that the car park is underutilised, having been observed over many days, and that there are 23 free parking spaces on Prestbury High Street, in close proximity to retail units;
- creating capital receipts from assets which are surplus to requirements makes good sense;
- a number of Prestbury residents are clearly very concerned about the loss of this car park, but the Covid Recovery Budget focussed on the different ways the council could keep itself solvent without drastically cutting services for residents;
- the council started its commercial investment portfolio journey in 2016, as a way to avoid cuts and to continue to deliver and expand its priorities, looking at all its assets and their usage, including Idsall Drive Car Park and one in Swindon Village. The council has offered to sell the car park to Prestbury Parish Council, and both the borough councillor and parish council have been fully engaged in conversations;
- the decision to sell was made some time ago, and the data and reasons presented with the report back up that decision. Whilst hearing and acknowledging residents’ concerns, it is important that the sale goes ahead, although the council remains open to conversations with the community or parish council should they want to buy it. If it is sold to an outside buyer, the parish council will benefit from the sale.

The Leader asked the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets to go back to the parish council for further dialogue, as some of its members were not present at the talks in 2021. The Cabinet Member agreed, saying that the council is supportive of communities and will find a solution to the satisfaction of all parties if possible.

RESOLVED THAT:

- i. the site is declared surplus to requirements;**
- ii. authority is delegated to the Director for Finance & Assets, in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Assets, to dispose of the site on terms that represent best consideration and upon such other terms as are deemed appropriate;**
- iii. the Director for Finance & Assets is authorised, in consultation with Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Assets and the Director of One Legal, to prepare and conclude the necessary legal documentation to reflect the terms negotiated.**

9 Freehold/Head Leasehold Investment Disposal - Regent Arcade

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets made clear that the recommendation is to dispose of the council's investment in the Regent Arcade, the Regent Arcade itself, which it doesn't own. The council's involvement in regeneration of the town centre is crucial, and this investment has reached the point where it is underperforming, hence the decision to sell and dispose of the freehold interest. He said the report is self-explanatory.

A Member agreed that it is about investment and how it works for the council – this has been a good investment for CBC in the past but is becoming less and less so. It is therefore the right time to make this key decision.

RESOLVED THAT:

- i. authority is delegated to the Executive Director for Finance, Assets & Regeneration, in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Assets, to dispose of the freehold and head leasehold interests in Regent Arcade Shopping Centre for best consideration and upon such other terms as are deemed appropriate;**
- ii. the Executive Director for Finance, Assets & Regeneration is authorised, in consultation with Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Assets and the Director of One Legal, to prepare and conclude the necessary legal documentation to reflect the terms negotiated.**

10 Briefing from Cabinet Members

The Leader invited all Members to give any briefings. Four Members responded as follows:

The Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency highlighted an exciting scheme for the public, councillors and staff, to help them lower their carbon footprint through fun tips, trips and tasks via a series of emails.

The Cabinet Member for Safety and Communities told Members that on 06 October, a group of Cheltenham children will be presenting their view of what it is like to live in Cheltenham at the Literature Festival. Their work will also be published. Thanks to their teachers, Cheltenham Alliance for Race Equity, the Everyman, and to all partners and colleagues for working to produce something unique.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Well-being thanked all those involved in a recent visit to Cheltenham from Arts Council England. He said members of the Culture Board spoke with the regional director Phil Gibby about all the good work the Culture Board and its various organisations are doing. It was a positive day, demonstrating how much is going on in the town's cultural environment. The recent announcement of a spend of £1.9m on cultural organisations is something to be proud of – Arts Council England were clearly impressed by what they saw.

The Leader said she was lucky to be at the recent Tour of Britain event in Tewkesbury, and it was particularly good to see so many parents and children inspired to follow the route of the race at their own pace. She had also attended Radio Gloucestershire's Make A Difference awards, celebrating the contributions of local people and organisations including two nominations from Cheltenham. She met with some amazing people, and was reminded of the importance of voluntary organisations and all that they contribute.

10a Cabinet Member decisions since the last meeting

The Leader invited Members to share decisions they had made since the previous meeting, as follows:

24 July 2023: [To grant a sum of £10,000 to support the Planet Cheltenham](#)

The Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency was delighted to support this grant for a new community space for climate activism, which will together various groups and pay real dividends for the future of the town.

31 July 2023: [To award a contract to Chiptech International for the supply of digital Lifeline and ancillary equipment](#)

The Cabinet Member for Customer and Regulatory Services thanked Judy Hibbert and her team for their work on this process and procurement. It is needed to ensure that Lifeline can continue to provide independence and freedom for vulnerable people after the analogue switch-off in 2025.

01 August 2023: [To commission artwork on the Honeybourne Line](#)

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing said this decision was needed due to new processes and a change in the organisation delivering the artwork.

21 August 2023: [Endorsement of the Cotswolds National Landscape Management Plan 2023-2025 as a material consideration in planning decisions including development plan formulation](#)

The Leader said this endorsement, requested by the Cotswold National Landscape Management, would take forward planning decisions.

23 August 2023: [To appoint an interim Managing Director and Accountable Manager for Gloucestershire Airport](#)

11 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 3 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)

12 Exempt Minutes of Cabinet, 11 July 2023

Due to the refusal of members of the public to leave the public gallery, the Leader terminated the meeting. The exempt minutes will be considered at a future meeting.