

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet

Minutes

Meeting date: 17 October 2023

Meeting time: 6.00 pm - 6.40 pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

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

Also in attendance:

Claire Hughes (Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer), 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

Apologies were received from Councillor Lewis.

2 Declarations of interest

There were none.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2023 were approved as a true record.

The minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 28 September 2023 will be approved at the November meeting of Cabinet.

4 Public and Member Questions and Petitions

There were no Member questions.

Two public questions had been received:

1. Question from Mr Steven Thomas to Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency, Councillor Alisha Lewis

The Cheltenham plan details a push towards electric vehicles and commits to having the entire taxi fleet electrical by 2030.

It is my opinion that the extraction process for Lithium and cobalt batteries is not environmentally friendly and I have concerns around the use of child labour in the extraction process. Further there are concerns regarding the spontaneous combustion of these batteries. Lithium batteries can be prone to combustion if they are damaged and this is backed up with evidence supplied by the London fire brigade which show a record rate of e-scooter fires in the capital due to issues with these batteries:

<https://www.london-fire.gov.uk/news/2023/august/new-record-high-of-e-bike-and-e-scooter-fires-in-london/>

Can the Council advise whether it has conducted any assessments to understand the risks and impacts of this policy position? As a member of the public I am concerned about using public transport and taxis in Cheltenham where there is potentially a risk to my health from modes of transport that use lithium batteries.

Cabinet Member response:

Lithium batteries in vehicles are designed with multiple safety features to mitigate the risk of fire or explosion. This includes advanced thermal management systems, battery management systems, and robust structural design to protect the battery cells. EVs powered by lithium batteries are more energy-efficient than conventional vehicles. They can be charged with electricity from renewable sources, further reducing their environmental footprint. The use of batteries in electric vehicles significantly reduces greenhouse gas emissions compared to traditional internal combustion engines, contributing to our fight against climate change.

While there are some limited concerns about the safety of lithium batteries, we live in a world in which vehicles currently drive around our town powered by highly flammable petrol and diesel. These batteries represent a potential step forward towards a slightly safer town and a substantial contribution towards a reduction in vehicle emissions and improved air quality. They are not a total solution, and we will continue to advocate for more car sharing and the use of public transport to reduce the number of vehicles on the road and encourage opportunities for residents to take up even more sustainable transport options like walking and cycling.

Supplementary question:

Given the huge push for modes of transport where electric batteries are used, are Cheltenham Borough Council concerned about the exploitation of child slave labour and if so, what are they actively doing to remedy it?

Cabinet Member response

In the absence of Councillor Lewis, the Leader said a response would be provided in writing in due course.

2. Question from Mr Steven Thomas to Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing, Councillor Max Wilkinson

At the September meeting you stated that vacant units in Cheltenham town centre will be used for housing. I believe this contradicts comments made at the council meeting in July which were supportive of promoting a vibrant high street for businesses.

With costs continuing to increase what efforts are the council taking to drop rents and/or business rates for small businesses in Cheltenham in order that they can flourish?

Cabinet Member response:

Thank you to Mr Thomas for the question. He raises an important issue and this is an opportunity to clarify some common misunderstandings about the power this authority has. Rents are set by landlords and business rates are set by the government. The Council cannot set the rent for buildings it does not own and has limited powers to vary business rates. Despite the limits of the powers of this authority, members, officers and the BID will work ever more closely with businesses and property owners to produce positive solutions to the ongoing issues with empty premises. The good news remains that Cheltenham continues to perform well compared with other areas.

Supplementary question

I know of small businesses here in Cheltenham who are very concerned about future business rate increases for the next tax year, it seems inevitable. So, will Cheltenham Borough Council commit to ensure that every effort is made to cap business rates for small business through the powers that you do have through the Local Government Finance Act and Section 13A Officer?

Cabinet Member response

I'm not familiar with the specifics of the question. However, I'm happy to talk with our finance officers about all the arrangements we have for business rates.

5 Housing Regulations, Cheltenham Borough Homes Housing Review

The Leader introduced her report with the following statement:

'I became a councillor over two decades ago because I wanted to make changes to improve things for all our residents. Following the ravages of the pandemic and more latterly a cost of living crisis that has forced families to make unimaginable choices, I am more committed than ever to taking the right decisions to continue supporting our communities even when those decisions result in change. But change is something we must embrace in order to keep delivering our priorities. Back in 2003, it was the right thing to do to establish our ALMO (Arms' Length

Management Organisation). Indeed, I was part of this council, when the then Labour government were offering financial incentives which we took advantage of to bring our homes up to the decent homes standard. This funding stopped in 2016 but for twenty years, CBH has worked with CBC to deliver investment in existing stock, new housing, a financially resilient Housing Revenue Account, high tenant and leaseholder satisfaction, all of which we are rightly proud of and give our very sincere thanks to CBH for all they have done.

The reasons we need to look to wind up CBH as a company and bring the housing function back into the heart of CBC as one team are several this government is increasing the accountability on Local Authorities via legislation which we have to respond to in both the private and public sector housing that this council will be responsible for.

CBC has a medium term funding gap of £4m and we must look and re-look at every area of efficiency to protect services and support our communities. The strengthening partnership work that was undertaken over the last two years has been successful. However, since then we have seen a significant rise in interest rates now at an all-time 40-year high, a cost of living crisis, huge rises in materials for house building and massive energy cost hikes.

The significant reduction on ALMOs across the country (for a variety of reasons) also shows that it is those authorities who are retaining ALMOs who are increasingly the outliers, however a key priority for us has been and will remain is the tenants' voice which we must strengthen and grow.

Ultimately, as Leader of the Council and Shareholder, along with my Cabinet colleagues, we have to try and act on behalf of all of our residents and businesses. The financial pressures this council faces has, for the first time, forced Cabinet to look at stopping or reducing services. CBH customers are some of the most in need and vulnerable in our borough and they are more dependent on housing and council services than anyone else. Our residents in wards like mine have also suffered more than any other group. In this context, with this decision, I and my Cabinet have chosen to try and protect services, maintain customer satisfaction, and supercharge housing delivery by bringing CBC and CBH together so that we can continue to support our communities in spite of the challenges we face. On a personal note, I could not justify an argument on the doorstep about cutting back council services from leisure to street cleansing to try and retain an ALMO when we must try and maximise every possible efficiency from joining services first.

Yesterday, at Full Council, I mentioned that in 2016 we took the bold decision to introduce a commercial strategy; that decision and our journey has stood the test of time and, unlike many other councils, we are financially in a much better place than many. My mantra has been to be risk aware and not risk averse.'

The Cabinet Member for Housing reiterated that the priority is to provide an excellent services and strengthening the voice of tenants, who will continue to be our focus during the transition. She said the proposed new tenant offer will make sure they influence housing services now and in the future, and is delighted with the commitment to commission an independent tenant organisation to engage and consult with tenants and leaseholder. She is confident that this bold approach will provide better services for tenants and Cheltenham's wider communities.

She offered huge and warm thanks to CBH for the fantastic services they have provided for residents for the past 20 years, having first-hand experience of the caring and dedicated teams. She looked forward to working with and supporting CBH and CBC colleagues through and beyond the transitional stage, focussing on the new integrated offer for tenants. She said services, like anti-social behaviour, do not discriminate between homes, whether council- or privately owned, and joining as one team with greater capacity and skills there are many areas we can look to enhance the experiences of tenants, leaseholders and our wider communities.

She finished by saying we must that the growing regulatory environment places greater accountability and responsibility on councils, and as Cabinet Member for Housing, she remains committed to the safety of all tenants.

A Member said that since joining the Cabinet, it has been a pleasure to be closely involved with CBH, which works so diligently on behalf of residents. Looking at the report, the financial assessment is compelling: like the rest of the country, Cheltenham has faced a decade of austerity and many financial challenges, including the pandemic and cost of living crisis. With this proposal, we are evolving to meet those challenges. The key factor is to protect council services, and although it is tough to make structural changes, it is the right thing to do – we have to put residents and tenants at the centre of everything we do.

He said that while revenue and our day-to-day services remain our prime focus, he is looking forward to the future, and feels that CBC's approach to regeneration and housing delivery will pay dividends. He welcomed this exciting opportunity.

A Member added his thanks to CBH management and officers, saying that having previously worked in the sector, he is aware that CBH are the best social, caring and proactive landlords, and was reassured by the Leader's and Cabinet Member for Housing's comments that an outstanding level of service will remain at the heart of our future commitment to residents. He said that the financial environment in which councils now find themselves, with government incentives no longer applying, means that the era of ALMOs is drawing to a close across the country; we must be mindful of that and take a balanced opinion on the management of the council's finances. With the commitment to continue to the level of service in an uninterrupted way, this is the right decision and one which he is extremely happy to support.

In summing up, the Leader reiterated her sincere thanks to all CBH staff, and in particular the senior management team led by Steve Slater as CEO and all the

board. She said change is difficult and challenging, but together we are stronger, and jobs won't change for the majority of staff. Together, CBC and CBH can make the transition as smooth as possible, ensuring that tenants stay at the core of service delivery to maintain the very high levels of satisfaction that CBH has always attained. This decision is very much in the spirit of 'Team Cheltenham'.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. the work and commitment of Cheltenham Borough Homes over the last twenty years in acknowledged by Cabinet;**
- 2. the new regulatory framework for social landlords and the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy is noted;**
- 3. the options for the future delivery of the Council's Housing Services are noted, and the Chief Executive, Executive Director for Finance, Assets and Regeneration, the Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer, and the Housing Partnership Manager are authorised to undertake the required review to support the Leader in deciding to wind-up Cheltenham Borough Homes;**
- 4. the creation of a consultation framework is commissioned in order to develop a Tenant Offer which will provide tenants and leaseholders with the opportunity to provide their view on the proposed change in management, state their priorities in shaping the future housing service provision, ensure their continued involvement, and complement the new consumer standards;**
- 5. the consultation framework is acknowledged and the recommended tenant offer is subject to review by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee upon their request;**
- 6. the Chief Executive is requested in consultation with the Leader and the Cabinet Member for Housing to develop a housing integration action plan;**
- 7. the Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager is appointed as the Council's Health and Safety lead, as detailed in Section 7 of this report. This will be subject to review following the winding up of Cheltenham Borough Homes.**

6 Approval of Budget Strategy, Process and Timetable

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets said the council has faced unprecedented financial challenges over the last 5-10 years but has overcome these with a risk-aware approach to increased commercial activities, the Covid recovery budget, and a robust savings and reserves strategy to maintain services to residents and customers. The approach for 2024-25 has not changed, and we continue to move forward and review how resources are allocated, taking into account the Golden Valley Development and our climate change pathway. The starting point is ensuring the key priorities can be delivered and services to residents maintained, with assumptions built into the budget for inflation, interest rates, and pay awards. Areas of growth and corporate priorities have been assessed, a savings and efficiency strategy set, and reserves strengthened, following two years of offsetting the largest cost pressures. The timetable is set out at Appendix 2.

A Member agreed that the council has faced many financial challenges in recent years, yet has continued to delivery excellent services, particularly in housing. He said we have to keep taking decisions to deliver the right level of service to residents, and although no vote is required on this item, it is important that the right decisions are made. He thanked the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets and the finance team for their work – it is not an easy job.

A Member agreed that many people in Cheltenham, particularly the young and old, are living with enormous challenges, and much has been done to help them – which would not have been possible without secure finances at the heart of everything we do. She thanked the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets and all the finance officers for their work and looked forward to a good year ahead.

The Leader commented that with no information about any settlement until November, officers have to make assumptions on what the budget might be with no certainty from government. She said no private business could be run like this. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets agreed, but hoped for a quiet run into budget setting in November. He said there was a lot of work ahead for the team, but was confident that the would rise to the challenge, and thanked them for the work they are about to commence.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. the budget setting timetable at Appendix 2 and outlined in section 5 of this report is approved;**
- 2. the outline budget strategy outlined in section 6 is approved;**

- 3. the £475k overspend reported to Cabinet in September 2023 and large amount of work which will be required to close this gap and deliver the required savings and efficiencies in 2023/24 is noted;**
- 4. the intention for this Council to remain in the Gloucestershire Business Rates Pool in 2024-25 as outlined in section 7 is noted;**
- 5. the Section 151 Officer, Deputy Section 151 Officer and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets are requested to consider suggestions from the Budget Scrutiny Working Group in preparing the interim budget proposals for 2024-25.**

7 Briefing from Cabinet Members

The Leader invited Members to share any briefings.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing thanked the organisers of the recent Gloucestershire Property Forum, where empty shop units were discussed, and also Men in Sheds for welcoming him at Dundry Nurseries last week.

The Cabinet Member for Safety and Communities shared the following:

- the survey on the safety of women in Cheltenham can be accessed via the website, giving women the opportunity to share their thoughts on safety in the town centre. She was keen to welcome as many experiences as possible, and encouraged Members to share this with friends and colleagues;
- thanks to Helen Down and other CBC officers, colleagues at Cheltenham Alliance for Race Equity, the Everyman, Cheltenham Festivals and local schools for organising a summer competition which gave children the opportunity to say what they think about living in Cheltenham. There were many entries, and the Mayor is delivering prizes to finalists at local schools. Ten children aged 7-18 attended the Cheltenham Literature Festival last week and read their entries to a large group of people. This was an amazing experience, particularly appropriate in Black Lives Matter month, giving voice to those who don't always have it – something this council does well.

The Cabinet Member for Customer and Regulatory Services said that earlier in the year, the council approved £128k in community grants for all sorts of local initiatives, from defibrillators to pollinators to new pedestrian pathways. He was happy to report that these projects have now started, and recently visited Bath Road to see the new-repainted utility boxes, beautifully decorated by the brilliant street artist Rhys Cowe. He said this is something to celebrate, and was happy to say that there are more grants to come.

8 Member decisions since last meeting

Members reported on decisions taken since the last meeting as follows:

29 September, 2023: Cabinet Member for Customer and Regulatory Services
[Revised Fixed Penalty Fees for Enviro-crimes](#)

29 September, 2023: Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Street Services
[To award a contract to Talis Amos Ltd to supply 1x John Deere 6130M and side arm flail attachment](#)

05 October, 2023: Leader
[To use funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to enter into delivery agreements](#)

05 October, 2023: Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism and Wellbeing
[Public Art Celebrating Women](#)

9 Local Government Act 1972 - Exempt Business
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)

10 Exempt Minutes of Cabinet, 11 July 2023

The exempt minutes of the meeting on 11 July were approved as a true record.

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