

Council

13 October 2025

Public Questions (7)

1. Question from Richard Lawler to Cabinet Member for Planning and Building Control, Councillor Mike Collins

Data Centres and Water Use

National frameworks for water management, such as the *National Framework for Water Resources 2025* and the *Plan for Water*, focus largely on regulating water companies and supply infrastructure. They do not set sector-specific safeguards for high-demand industrial users such as data centres, whose cooling systems can place significant pressure on local water resources.

Given Cheltenham Borough Council's responsibilities as the Local Planning Authority, what steps will the council take to ensure that any future planning application for a data centre in our borough:

1. Includes clear and enforceable conditions on water use, abstraction, and discharge;
2. Demonstrates that local residents and businesses will not lose out to industrial users in the event of water shortages; and
3. Remains subject to local oversight and enforcement, even if data centres are later reclassified as nationally significant infrastructure projects?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question.

It is not possible to pre-judge a future planning application as the issues that may or may not arise cannot be accurately predicted. Please be assured however that the issues that you have raised, where material, will be weighed into the planning balance as part of any planning decision and expert advice will be sought where necessary (from the Environment Agency for example). Conditions will be imposed where the legal tests are met. Responsibility for enforcement matters will remain with the borough council irrespective of whether a data centre is classified as a 'nationally significant infrastructure project (NSIP)' in the future.

2. Question from Mr Richard Lawler to Cabinet Member for Planning and Building Control, Councillor Mike Collins

Fracking and Local Protections

While the Government has paused support for hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”), national energy policy continues to describe it as a possible future option. The National Planning Policy Framework allows certain major energy projects to be designated as *Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects*, which can override local planning controls and community objections.

Given Cheltenham Borough Council’s responsibilities as the Local Planning Authority, what steps will the council take to ensure that if fracking proposals were brought forward affecting Cheltenham or its surrounds:

1. Local environmental protections, including groundwater safety and air quality, cannot be set aside;
2. Biodiversity net gain and nature recovery requirements are fully enforced; and
3. The health, safety, and concerns of local residents remain central to the council’s decision-making, even if national policy seeks to override local control?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question.

Hydraulic fracturing (‘fracking’) does not currently sit under the nationally significant infrastructure (NSIP) regime; a conventional planning application is therefore a requirement.

Dealing with and determining a planning application for fracking (and associated enforcement) is currently the responsibility of Gloucestershire County Council in its capacity as Minerals Planning Authority (MPA). The borough council’s role in this scenario is one of consultee only.

It is not the borough council’s role to duplicate the planning process underway at the county council, but in the event that such an application is ever submitted, we will of course represent the views and opinions of Cheltenham residents through our role as a statutory consultee.

The particular considerations that you have raised in your question (environmental factors/biodiversity etc.) are legitimate planning considerations which the county council will need to take into account in the event that an application for fracking is submitted.

3. Question from Tim Harman to Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Wellbeing and Public Open Space, Councillor Izaak Tailford

In recent weeks, a number of popular Restaurants and Cafes in Cheltenham have closed such as Ask in Montpellier, Ox in Cambray, and Cake Alchemist, Domain 16 and The Find in Regent Street.

What steps is the Council taking to support businesses of this type in these difficult Economic times and to attract new businesses to invest in our Town?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question. As both a resident and cabinet member for the economy, I was disappointed to hear about the recent closures of these well-loved restaurants and cafés in Cheltenham. The retail and hospitality sectors are facing significant national challenges and, as an authority, we recognise the impact this has on our businesses, their staff, and the wider economy.

Many of the businesses you have mentioned have cited factors outside the council's control in their reasons for closing. This has included business rates, which are set nationally, increasing rent, which is set by landlords, and wider economic pressures such as rising costs of materials.

With this in mind, I want to reassure you that locally we are committed to doing everything we can to support local businesses and attract new investment into Cheltenham.

Some of our activities include:

Place marketing and promotion:

The council's Marketing Cheltenham team promotes the town to both residents and visitors as a vibrant place to visit, stay, and explore. Around 2 million people visit Cheltenham each year.

All visitor facing businesses are promoted on www.visitcheltenham.com for free and this website also hosts the biggest what's on guide in the town. It is a useful source of information and well used by visitors and residents with over 1 million visitors a year.

I took part in the regular Marketing Cheltenham meeting last week, where member businesses get together to promote and network – as well as having the opportunity to learn about the upgraded Visit Cheltenham website and how its changes will make it easier for them to promote themselves to visitors and residents.

Marketing Cheltenham are also the conduit for promoting the town to investors with our Moving to Cheltenham brand highlighting the many reasons to bring a business to the town.

Strong partnerships:

We work closely with Cheltenham Business Improvement District (BID) to support initiatives that enhance the town centre experience, including events, street dressing, and safety.

There are plenty of examples where we have worked together recently on things such as their town centre graffiti removal programme, public realm improvements, the Cambray Carnival for families and young people, and of course the Cheltenham and Gloucester Hospitals Charity Lions at Large trail, that brought many visitors and residents into our town centre during the summer.

This is a good opportunity to also say that I do hope that businesses in the BID area will back them in their latest ballot, so we can continue to work together going forward. They do a fantastic job and represent businesses very well.

We also work with other business groups including the Chamber of Commerce to support businesses across the town as a whole.

Support for start-ups and entrepreneurs:

Through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the council funds business support via the Growth Hub. Based at the MX, the team offer free advice to businesses at all stages of their development and in all sectors.

I visited the Growth Hub last week, and I would highly recommend that businesses reach out to them for free support, advice and workshops.

Town centre vacant units action plan

Between 8 and 9% of the retail premises in Cheltenham town centre are currently vacant. This compares to a national average of around 14%. However, we are not complacent and our vacant units action plan sets out a list of actions and priorities to support town centre businesses.

Culture

It would be remiss of me to not mention all of our support, both financially and in-kind, for our cultural sector in Cheltenham – including, but not limited to, The Wilson, Town Hall, The Everyman, Cheltenham Festivals and Cheltenham Playhouse too.

All of these venues and organisations are a focal point and bring many visitors and residents into our town centre, boosting our hospitality industry and making our Festival Town a great place to live and work. This helps us punch far above our size as a town.

To summarise - we understand the pressures facing the hospitality sector and remain committed to promoting the town and working collaboratively with our partners to support businesses. I appreciate the opportunity to highlight a slice of what we are doing as a council – but to also help signpost businesses to available support where they need it.

4. Question from Rich Newman to Cabinet Member for Planning and Building Control, Councillor Mike Collins

Does Cheltenham Borough council currently offer any particular protections for rare historic buildings and the businesses housed within them in our town? In short, does the council make any allowances for historic business/premises?

Cabinet Member response

Historic buildings which are deemed by Historic England to be of special architectural or historic significance are 'listed' on the National Heritage List for England. Listed buildings benefit from an enhanced level of protection; this means that any physical change which might affect its special interest requires the council's prior consent through the planning system. The protection provided by the 'listed building consent' regime does not however extend to the use of the building or changes from one business to another. Any physical works to a listed building which facilitate or encompass an associated change of use would however fall within the council's control.

Businesses accommodated within a listed building are subject to the same planning policies as those within an unlisted or non-historic building. The planning system does not provide protection for specific businesses; it does however provide a level of protection for certain commercial uses in a very limited and specific set of circumstances (for example protection for retail/commercial uses in a high street) where doing so is deemed to be in the wider public interest.

5. Question from Emma Nelson to Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries

Around 4 years ago CBC installed an Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP) as part of the upgrade to the Burrow's Pavilion. At that time, it was the first such installation in any of the parks in the Borough. It has transpired that the ASHP is not fit for purpose with running costs amounting to an unsustainable £6k-£7k per annum and has insufficient capacity to run the building. It seems that the contractor appointed under the CBC tender program had limited understanding of the technology. Furthermore, no form of guarantee as to its efficient performance is in place. Consequently, the ASHP now requires replacement at a cost to Leckhampton Rovers Football Club. The new ASHP will have running costs around £1.5k per annum.

Questions: Why was due diligence on suitability of contractor/supplier of original ASHP not carried out? Why is there no guarantee in place? How many other CBC parks have ASHP's in place and if so, have these been fitted by the same contractor?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for the question. Firstly, I think we need to acknowledge the success of Burrow's Pavilion and how the investment overall has supported sport and physical

activity to thrive on Burrow's Field which is to the significant benefit to the local community and to Cheltenham.

With regard to the ASHP itself, I think we need to establish the facts. It is not correct that due diligence was not carried out on the contractors. In fact, the works were awarded to an established, reputable and well-known local contractor and this was overseen again by an established and respected local firm as contract administrator on behalf of CBC.

However, it is often the case on any construction project that, following the completion of works, issues arise when a facility becomes operational.

In this case, CBC property team are currently in contact with the contractors to acquire warranty information for the installed equipment as this may enable a claim to be made for any credible defects. In addition, the council are also supporting the club to get a further mechanical and electrical assessment of the equipment. We hope through this support we can move towards reaching a positive resolution.

There are no other ASHPs in Council pavilions. There is one further ASHP in Montpellier Gardens Gallery but this was instigated, installed and is managed by the tenant.

6. Question from Wendy Flynn to Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, Councillor Flo Clucas

Can the Cabinet Member confirm the current number of void council properties in Cheltenham, the average time these properties are standing empty, and how many of these are classified as long-term voids—empty for over 60 days?

Cabinet Member response

Thank you for your question. It is important to note that when providing information on the number and costs of void properties we are not dealing with static numbers, for example since April 2025 the council has received 118 terminations and has acquired new stock which also count as voids before being let.

As of 30 September, the council held a total of 127 void properties as follows:

0-3 weeks = 21

4-12 weeks = 32

13+ weeks = 74

In addition, we have 18 properties which are currently advertised and going through the lettings process.

We fully accept that there have been substantial delays in the turnaround times for our void properties.

However, these delays were due to serious governance and legal issues which had not been addressed by the previous executive team or board and were therefore only identified following the transfer from Cheltenham Borough Homes. As a result, it was necessary to put a stop on all void work for several months so that the right changes could be made so the council could achieve compliance.

Now that these issues have been resolved and new contractors procured, work is progressing to bring the number down quickly. Due to our new performance management approach, we have seen the number fall by 14% since July.

7. Question from Wendy Flynn to Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, Councillor Flo Clucas

Given the loss of rental income from void properties, can the Council provide a detailed estimate of the total financial loss to the Housing Revenue Account from these voids since the management of council homes was brought back in-house? And what is the current monthly cost to the public purse of housing families in temporary accommodation, a cost that would be significantly reduced if these voids were brought back into use?

Cabinet Member response

The void rent loss for the 2024/25 financial year was £456,600 which represents a rent loss of 1.8% and for 2025/26 the void rent loss to date is £335,000 representing a rent loss of 2.64%.

As mentioned in the response to your previous question, as a result of serious governance and legal issues which had not been addressed by the previous executive team or CBH board prior to transfer it has been necessary to put a stop on all void work for several months so that the right changes could be made to ensure that the council achieves compliance.

Now that we are in a position where contractors have been lawfully procured and appropriate financial controls put in place the position on voids will be recovered. To that end I am pleased to report that due to the interventions made performance is already improving in bringing void numbers down, with a 14% reduction since July 2025.

It is also important to note that, despite this council having to take action to put right the legacy issues left by CBH, that we continue to move forward with delivering significant savings and efficiencies which can then be reinvested in the service to the benefit of our tenants, leaseholders and the houses they live in. None of this would have been possible without the Council taking the right decision to bring the service back in house.