

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE FROM MEMBERS OF COUNCIL

1. To the Board member for Sports, Events and Parks(Councillor Mark Lygo) from Councillor Jean Fooks:Cotteslowe Park trees

Volunteers, many of them children, have planted hundreds of trees in Cotteslowe Park and in other parks in the city. It is heartrending to see that many have been destroyed when nearby paths are mown; this has happened more than once. What steps are you taking to prevent this destruction? And what replacement trees are being planted to make up for those lost in this way?

Response

Having received this question the parks operations manager has undertaken an audit of Cotteslowe Park. None of the planted trees within Cotteslowe Park have been cut down and the staff are aware of the location of the trees. Pathways are cut infrequently due to the heavy footfall.

2. To the Board member for Sports, Events and Parks(Councillor Mark Lygo) from Councillor Jean Fooks:Cotteslowe Park rangers

There have been several incidents in Cotteslowe Park which might have been prevented if the park rangers had been on site. What are you doing to ensure that the rangers are able to spend more time in the park, not just in the office?

Response

The team covers 266 hectares of parkland and also support the countryside rangers to manage 387 hectares of countryside. We have a seven day patrol service and undertake a range of tasks that help to make Oxford's green spaces vibrant, active and safe.

The team plan and change their patrols based on feedback from stakeholders and the public.

With the parks team being based Cotteslowe the park has by far the highest level of presence from the parks team and we are not aware of an increase in incidents at Cotteslowepark.

As such we are not planning to increase the patrols at Cotteslowepark. If Councillor Fooks has any feedback on incidents then the team are always very keen to receive this as soon as possible so we can take the appropriate action.

3. To the Board member for Housing and Estate Regeneration (Councillor Scott Seamons) from Councillor Sam Hollick: Cuts to homelessness services

Will the Leader join me in condemning the planned cuts to homelessness services recently consulted on by the County Council? What has been the City's response to this consultation?

Response

Yes, the City Council are deeply concerned about the impact of the proposed cuts to Housing related support budgets by the County Council. Detailed below is the City Council's detailed response to the consultation.

'Oxford City Council strongly opposes the scale of cuts this this area of service. It considers that this funding stream is essential in providing quality services to assist some of the most vulnerable members of our community, at a time when they need help most, and to help them move towards independent living. Many clients, in the adult homeless pathway in particular, have very high and complex needs that without suitable support, in a supported accommodation environment, will fail to achieve this goal. Failing to address the needs of the various client groups impacted by this change, has the potential to destroy lives. Furthermore, the impact of not making sufficient, responsive and timely interventions to achieve effective outcomes, will significantly add to the pressure on other services, statutory and non-statutory, including adult social care, homelessness, physical and mental health services, hospital admissions, police, community safety, courts, and food banks, to name but a few.

Whilst acknowledging that Oxfordshire County Council is under increasing financial pressure from Central Government, and needs to make savings and efficiencies, Oxford City Council considers that making a significant cut to services that impact on these most vulnerable people is inappropriate, and that cuts should be directed elsewhere. With an effective 38% cut to this funding stream, there are insufficient funds to be confident of ensuring the continued delivery of effective services. It should be noted that Oxford City Council is proposing to maintain its overall budget for homeless services in full because it regards them as a high priority, especially if shielding the most vulnerable is to have any real meaning. We very much regret that the County Council has not taken the same approach.

As a partner organisation in the commissioning of these services, Oxford City Council agrees that the broad principles and outcomes, as proposed are correct. We appreciate the additional funding contributions proposed from Public Health funds, and feel that these do acknowledge the broader impact, and the social investment outcomes that in these services achieve.

The Council feels that the consultation proposals, as they stand at present, represent a missed opportunity for more effective joint commissioning of these services, between all Oxfordshire Councils and the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, with funding contributions from these organisations used to commission agreed joint outcomes, and we would welcome further consideration being given to this. Specifically, we are keen to offer a contribution at the same level as is currently provided to commission hostel services in Oxford City, subject to an appropriate local connection policy being available (as we cannot use our funds to support clients from outside Oxford), and to jointly commission this service. We would encourage the Clinical Commissioning Group to make a similar commitment and to be similarly involved.

In terms of the detail of the proposals, Oxford City Council would make the following comments:

- While we appreciate that there is no reduction in bed spaces to the adult homeless hostel provision in the City, we are concerned at the management implications of unsupported beds in hostels. This concern is heightened by the severe reductions proposed to floating support.
- We note that more support and accommodation is proposed in the neighbouring districts to Oxford, and acknowledge that a more dispersed model may reduce the draw of some vulnerable clients into Oxford City for services.
- We support the view that the drug treatment services will instead be commissioned under public health.
- We acknowledge that a strategic review of the domestic abuse services, including the helpline and outreach services, is to take place, and believe this is a better proposal than simply to reduce the service. We would want to ensure that refuge bed places are maintained at current levels. If the review shows that savings cannot be achieved in this area without harming victims of domestic abuse, we would encourage the County Council to reinstate funding to existing levels.
- We will work with fellow commissioners and providers to ensure that effective and high quality services can be maintained at the best value, and wish to ensure that support rates are set to ensure that quality staff can be recruited and retained to deliver these. Oxford City Council pays a living wage and would wish to see such a commitment included for these services.
- We understand that the 31% cut to floating support services will be implemented over two years rather than one, with a review after the first year to assess impacts and to draw lessons from any new models of delivering support, before further cuts are made. However, Oxford City Council remains gravely concerned, at the present time, that this level of cut will require a significant drop to the number of clients supported in their own homes, which risks higher numbers of people being evicted or falling out of accommodation, and increasing the demand on other services. Furthermore, the Council is concerned to ensure

that additional service demands for floating support can be met, for example, should some accommodation-based support be reduced.

Oxford City Council would also welcome a further review of the Social Impact Assessment of this proposal, as it assesses the impacts to be greater than those presently stated. Children are, for example, another protected group impacted, in the areas of domestic abuse and floating support, in particular.

These proposals are being implemented late in the day, and they would require a significant transition period, the timescale for which is not presently clear.

We would strongly encourage County Council members to reconsider their scale, and in doing so act decisively to protect the most vulnerable in our community.'

4. To the Board member for Housing and Estate Regeneration (Councillor Scott Seamons) from Councillor Craig Simmons:Empty homes

According to Government statistics, there are over 1,000 empty homes in Oxford City. What action is the City Council taking, and what more could it do, to put these homes back into use?

Response:

Response to follow

5. To the Board member for Housing and Estate Regeneration (Councillor Scott Seamons) from Councillor Sam Hollick:OxPAT charity box

In light of the recent rise in rough sleeping, why has the Oxford Poverty Action Trust collection box been removed from the Town Hall reception?

Response

The Oxford Poverty Action Trust was removed around 2 years ago. The Council have contacted OXPAT to see if they wish to relocate the box back at the Town Hall which we would be happy to accommodate. The OXPAT Secretary appreciated our contact and will follow it up with the Chair to check if they wish to do this, and respond in due course. The council is certainly aware of the gravity of the position with regards to rough sleeping and homelessness. For some months a collection box for the Oxford Homeless Medical Fund has been placed at the town hall reception. The Oxford Homeless Medical Fund supports a range of organisations working with homeless individuals, its main beneficiary being the Luther Street Medical Centre.

6. To the Board member for Crime and Community Response (Councillor Dee Sinclair) from Councillor Craig Simmons:Late night levy

Given that the Police and Crime Commissioner, Anthony Stansfeld, has made it clear that those local authorities in the Thames Valley that decide to introduce a 'late night levy' will be able to retain the entire sum – rather than hand over a portion to the Police – will the Councillor re-consider the decision NOT to introduce the levy in Oxford?

Response

Thank you for your question on the introduction of a Late Night Levy.

In 2012, the General Licensing Team identified the potential income that a levy in the city could raise. At that time the proscribed arrangements were for the council to receive 30% of the funds, with Thames Valley Police receiving 70%. The Police and Crime Commissioner has now indicated that local authorities can receive the full amount, approximately £100k. These funds would have to be spent on licensing-related activities to improve the late-night economy and assist in the prevention of disorder.

It is important to consider a number of issues. Firstly alcohol-related violent crime and disorder is falling in the city, driven down by the long running Nightsafe operation that takes place each weekend in the city centre and East Oxford. We are also in the midst of our Purple Flag assessment that recognises the breadth of offer in our night-time economy, transport infrastructure and levels of safety. We have received positive feedback so far and having been re-accredited each year since its inception we are hopeful of doing so again.

The biggest challenge we face of introducing a Late Night Levy are the legal implications this could have on our Special Saturation Policy. This policy restricts the number, capacity and opening hours of licensed premises in the city centre and East Oxford. It has been in place for many years and has been a very powerful tool in managing potential disorder. We need to better understand the legal challenges that a levy could pose to the existing SSPs.

The introduction of a levy would also impact on businesses. We are coming out of the longest economic depression in UK history and we have ambitious plans for the city. We want to see a vibrant city centre, economically strong and a range of offer second to none in the region.

In the light of the above, we are commissioning a review of the options that will help the Council establish the optimum course of action.

7. To the Board member for Cleaner, Greener Oxford, Climate Change and Transport (Councillor John Tanner) from Councillor Jean Fooks:Dial a Ride

Can you tell Council when you will be announcing the improved transport for the elderly and disabled, to be funded from the £50k contingency, originally intended for a second Dial-a-Ride bus?

Response

The City Council is still in discussion with the County Council and will look to bring negotiations to a conclusion shortly. We would like to see an improved Dial-a-Ride for elderly and disabled people in Oxford. But we are not prepared to hand over money unless as a result this County Council service improves'

8. To the Board member for Cleaner, Greener Oxford, Climate Change and Transport (Councillor John Tanner) from Councillor Wolff:Cycling schemes

In July, you stated that less than 5% of the £400,000 budget allocated more than two years ago for cycling schemes in the City has actually been spent. Can the Portfolio holder provide a list of the projects lined up for funding and indicate those being held up by the County Council?

Response

I'm pleased to say the budget associated with Cycle City is now fully allocated and significant progress has been made over the summer. I'm grateful for the many excellent ideas for cycling improvements suggested by the public.

Projects include new and improved cycle parking at our Park and Ride sites, upgrade of the surface in Hinksey Park and Meadow Lane, removal of barriers including in Queens Lane, and co-funding to the Canals and Rivers Trust to upgrade of the canal towpath near Aristotle Lane. The City Council will also co-fund a County Council led project to redesign The Plain Roundabout with on-road cycling improvements.

In addition, and this is extra money, we expect to make a financial contribution to the revamp of Frideswide Square which will include significant on and off-road improvements for cyclists.

Unfortunately the County Council is refusing to consider other cycle improvements until the new Transport Strategy for Oxford is consulted upon and agreed. This is likely to mean considerable delays to on-road schemes such as prohibiting parked cars from cycle lanes.

9. To the Board member for Cleaner, Greener Oxford, Climate Change and Transport (Councillor John Tanner) from Councillor Ruthi Brandt: St Giles Fair

Has any assessment ever been made regarding the effect that the St Giles Fair - and other city centre events which use many generators – might have on local air quality?

Response

The impact of the generators at St Giles Fair on pollution levels is likely to be negligible because they operate for only a few days and in a small area of Oxford. However this may be something we can look at in future years.

10. To the Deputy Leader, Board member for Finance, Asset Management and Public Health (Councillor Ed Turner) from Councillor Ruthi Brandt: Covered market rent negotiations

Can the Leader update Council on the latest regarding the Covered Market rent negotiations?

Response

The Council has met the Covered Market Traders Association (CMTA) and has written to the traders setting out formally two options; either an agreed settlement on the terms discussed at the meeting, or arbitration using an arbitrator agreed with the traders or an RICS appointment. The Council has asked for a decision by early October.

11. To the Deputy Leader, Board member for Finance, Asset Management and Public Health (Councillor Ed Turner) from Councillor Jean Fooks: Covered market and financial planning

Once the Covered Market rent issue has been settled, the City will be receiving extra income not allowed for in the Medium Term Financial plan. What will this extra revenue be spent on?

Response

The implications for the Council's budget of any eventual settlement of the rent determination for the Covered Market cannot be assessed until the terms are known.

12. To the Deputy Leader, Board member for Finance, Asset Management and Public Health (Councillor Ed Turner) from Councillor Ruthi Brandt: Oxpens temporary car park

How much is the Oxpens temporary car park costing to build and operate and who is paying for it?

Response

How much is the Oxpens temporary car park costing to build and operate and who is paying for it?

The budget for the new Redbridge coach parking bays and the city centre parking at Oxpens is £3.75m. The cost of operation is covered within the existing Westgate car park management budget. Both car parks are funded and operated by the City Council, and the full scheme is on time and within the budget.

13. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Dick Wolff: St Clements disruption

Now that the works at St Clements Car Park are coming to a close, what is the Council doing to help promote the many local small businesses that suffered during the disruption?

Response

The Council budgeted £10,000 for advertising and promotion to support businesses in the St Clements area during the construction period, in addition to funding an alternative car park and a bus service. The building works have now been completed and there has been no indication of any need for further investment or support. Parking services report that the new car park is popular and well used.

14. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Ruthi Brandt: Gloucester Green retail area

Can the portfolio holder update the Council about the current negotiations with New River Retail regarding Gloucester Green's retail area?

Response

The Council is not in negotiations with New River at the present time. The developer has approached the Council and expressed an interest in joint working and shown some initial concept drawings.

15. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor David Thomas: Cost of living

As Oxford is now one of the most expensive cities in the UK to live in, with numerous working men and women reliant on emergency food aid, does Councillor Price agree with me that Oxford City Council needs an action plan to see city jobs lifted out of minimum wages and onto living wages?

Response

Oxford City Council established the Oxford Living Wage in 2009. Currently, no directly hired employee or agency worker working for the Council earns less than £8.36. In early 2014 we agreed to tie the Oxford Living Wage to the London Living Wage by setting it at 95% of whatever the London Living Wage is – which safeguards its future value.

We are a large employer and major commissioner of services, with an annual third party spend of £56m, and actively use this position to influence others by demonstrating the business and longer term benefit of supporting the Oxford Living Wage. In all tenders over £100k anyone awarded a contract for services with us must pay their staff and sub-contractors our Living Wage.

We also promote the Oxford Living Wage at any conferences we present at, writing to local employers and meetings to encourage them to join the campaign. A procurement survey established that of 100 companies we used 80% paid at least the OLW and 50% of these were based in Oxfordshire.

We will continue to champion the initiative.

16. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Sam Hollick: Westgate new housing

Can the portfolio holder explain whether/why the 2014 Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment will reduce the estimate of new housing in the Westgate development from 122 to 75 new dwellings?

Response

The outline planning application from the Westgate Alliance only proposed a maximum of 75 residential units and this was approved by the WAPC. The current scheme has been developed with a very different approach and mix of uses than the earlier approved scheme from capital Shopping centres. The current proposals now have to be reflected in the SHLAA.

17. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Steve Goddard: Northern Gateway Area Action Plan consultation

Many residents had great difficulty in responding to the consultation on the Northern Gateway Area Action Plan.

One would-be respondent said

“The issue is that the pdf on your website claims to be editable and saveable: however it transpires that, whilst it is editable, the changes / text / insertions are not actually saved, so it appears to be an edited and saved file, but in fact contains no data.

There are two or three potential consequences of this:

- respondents may not realise that the saved file is in fact empty, so you receive empty and meaningless pdfs
- respondents do realise this, but have to then spend considerable extra time to re-do their replies, thus possibly missing the deadline
- respondents give up trying to respond"

I know of several cases where each of these consequences came about. Would you agree that this is completely unacceptable and that the Council should at the very least have extended the consultation period to allow people to find a way to respond to this very important consultation?

Response

Approximately 170 representations were received in relation to the Northern Gateway Proposed Submission Consultation. All have been accepted. The planning policy officers have responded promptly and helpfully each time that a member of the public reported a difficulty with the website. In cases where the form may have appeared blank to the respondent, when officers accessed the relevant field within the pdf form the comments were visible. Only five blank forms were received, and officers contacted those individuals in each case to explain that they would be able to resubmit their comments after the official close of the consultation.

It is worth noting that there were other ways to respond to the consultation: paper copies of the form were available in libraries, in council offices, and on request; the form could be printed from the website and filled in by hand; and responses by email or letter were accepted. We will of course continue to review our consultation methods in order to ensure an excellent customer experience.

18. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Liz Wade: NOVSCA Appraisal

The North Oxford Victorian Suburb Conservation Area (NOVSCA) Appraisal

The Appraisal document was drafted and sent out for consultation some ten years ago. This draft now needs to be revisited and published as soon as possible so that the local community, City planners and developers have a clear evidence base from which all parties can articulate an argument. Currently every application requires separate research from which different conclusions can be drawn.

Can the Board member advise how this Appraisal can be progressed? The urgency of this is apparent from the fact that the draft is already used in Applications and in evidence by the Planning Inspectorate.

Response

The Council is currently without a Conservation Team Leader. The vacant post has been advertised and it is planned to hold interviews shortly. Once the new post holder takes up their new role it will be possible to progress this important project.

19. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Craig Simmons: Resourcing planning services

With recent departures and sickness absence, coupled with a high workload, the planning enforcement team appears under-resourced taking a long time to respond to casework. Can the Portfolio holder outline what action is being taken to address the situation?

Response

Planning enforcement workload has remained fairly constant, at just under 650 enforcement investigation cases per year.

In the last six months 2 of the 3 enforcement officer posts have fallen vacant. They proved difficult to fill, although two permanent appointments have now been made; one new officer started in September and another will be starting at the end of October. In the meantime cover was being provided by agency staff, albeit here too one temp left rather suddenly recently to take up a permanent job elsewhere and a temporary replacement is currently being sourced.

The Enforcement Service has kept abreast of the work by continuing investigating all complaints within the agreed timescales. Indeed the number of live investigations has recently been brought down to below 200. It is accepted however that with the above staff changes and recruitment pressures, there have been some instances where target dates have been exceeded. Where this has occurred officers have sought to keep service customers informed. The Head of City Development apologises for any such delays, but believes that now we are beyond summer holidays the impact on casework has been resolved.

20. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Ruthi Brandt: Planning applications

Does the Planning Portfolio holder share my frustration that the planning systems does not seem to allow for the track record of applicants to be taken into account as a material consideration when determining new applications from these same applicants?

Response

The statutory framework for planning requires each application to be considered on its merits against the planning policy framework that is in force in the relevant local authority area. How members interpret the framework in relation to a particular application is of course a matter of personal judgment, and other factors, such as those mentioned in the question may be drawn into account.

21. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor David Thomas: Festival of light lantern parade

Given that the lantern parade was the single most popular aspect of last year's Festival of Light - as evidenced by Oxford City Council's own evaluation - can Councillor Price explain to the children of Oxford's primary schools why this event has been cancelled by the Council this year?

Response

Last year's Christmas Light Festival was an enormous success. Regrettably, however, there were also strong objections because of the impact that the road closures had on bus services, local businesses, and colleges. Following this feedback and a review of the draft budget for this year's event, it was decided that Christmas Light Festival 2014 would not involve road closures but would continue to be based on creating opportunities for young people to be involved, as well as engaging schools and communities from across the city.

This year's festival will be a collaboration between more than 20 venues in Oxford providing live music and dance performances, arts installations and free cultural activities with the overall theme of "See Your City in a Different Light." The Westgate Centre have taken over as this year's lead sponsors and, in particular, are supporting the Young Persons' Light Installation project. Children from six local schools will be working with education trainees from the Oxford University Museums to create six large light installations inspired by the museums' collections. The first meeting of the children involved was very exciting with the decisions about the subjects of the installations made very democratically. The giant structures will evolve in the school settings before being brought together for a private view before the Festival and then will be on show throughout the festival weekend

The full range of participatory projects organised by the core festival team or in close partnership with our cultural partners are likely to involve up to 650 children and young people. In addition to the Light Installation project, these will include the Ice Station Digital project with Film Oxford, the Day of Song Schools Concert, the Ark T Stardust and Snowflakes dance project, and the Magdalen Road pop-up festival with Pegasus and Magdalen Road Studios.

22. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Elise Benjamin: Press releases

Does the Leader think that it is acceptable for the Council to put out a press release promoting a ward party organised by residents without the knowledge or agreement of the organisers?

Response

No

23. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Sam Hollick: Councillor Champions

Can the Leader explain what powers and responsibilities the Councillors who have been appointed as Champions have?

Response

Members who accept the role of 'champion' are asked to work closely with officers, other members and relevant people and organisations outside the Council to develop and promote our policies and services for the group or topic that is 'championed'. They have no constitutional powers. Recommendations and/or decisions are channelled through the appropriate portfolio holder.

24. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor David Thomas: Outside bodies and partnerships

In the interest of transparency and accountability, will the Leader commit to putting a full list of those Councillors and Officers who sit on outside bodies and partnerships on the Council's website? (Note: At the moment the 'Outside Bodies' list is incomplete).

Response

Yes

25. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Dick Wolff:Staff exit interviews

Are staff exit interviews conducted and are these available for Councillors to scrutinise?

Response

Frequently but not invariably; and certainly not.

26. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Jean Fooks:Printed agendas - supply

Many members have said that they prefer to have paper copies of agendas rather than have only electronic versions. As this is to enable them to fulfil their roles as councillors, would you agree that the Council should ensure that they receive their agendas in the form that is most convenient for them?

Response

Members do have a choice as to the format in which they receive agenda. Those who chose to have an iPad as their means of receiving and viewing Council documentation understood that they would not then receive paper copies as well. Because the majority of Members chose to receive and use iPads, efficiency savings of £13,000 over 3 years were agreed by Council. Members have a collective responsibility to take up the offers of training to make this choice work effectively for them and to assist in the delivery of the agreed savings.

27. To the Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Jean Fooks:Printed agendas - budget

Members have been told that there is insufficient budgetary provision to supply the paper copies they are requesting. How much is the budgetary shortfall and how much contingency money was kept back for just such an eventuality in the current budget?

Response

There is a forecast adverse variance on the printing budget in the present financial year of approximately £6,000. Having agreed the level of savings indicated in the previous answer, members have a duty to assist in avoiding unnecessary 'double' expenditure caused by taking an expensive iPad and then asking to also receive paper copies.

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