

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE FROM MEMBERS OF COUNCIL

Board member for Sports, Events and Parks

1. From Councillor Ruth Wilkinson to Councillor Mark Lygo

At Council on 14 July, the Board Member announced there would be a joint event held at the end of September when at least four new flower meadows would be created across the City. Please could the Board Member give a brief progress report on this and outline the action plans and timescales for each of the flower meadows?

Response

Work undertaken to improve the biodiversity in the city's parks includes:

- The Kidneys planting schemes (undertaken by the Friends Group)
- Cutteslowe Park - we have left large areas of grass to go long this year, next year we will cultivate these areas and add more wild flowers seeds.
- Blackbird Leys – we are introducing wild flower areas.
- Hinksey Park – new wild flower areas are now in place.

We have also introduced wild flower beds at Florence, Bury Knowle and Cutteslowe Parks.

A number of meetings have also been undertaken with partners to look at how we can best use the city's parks to encourage bees, actions from these meetings include bee hotels being constructed in some of the city's parks.

Board member for Leisure Contract and Community Partnership Grants

2. From Councillor Ruth Wilkinson to Councillor Mike Rowley

The Council announced recently that the BBL pool's wood chip boiler would be fuelled with waste wood from its Parks operations. Can the Board Member please confirm:

- (a) the quantity of waste wood generated from its Parks operations per annum over each of the last 3 years
- (b) the amount of waste wood it estimates will be needed to fuel the Pool each year?

Response

(a) We generate approximately 500 tonnes each year; further work is being undertaken to see how much of this is suitable for use in a biomass boiler.

(b) Approximately 151 tonnes per year; this needs to be good quality dried wood chip.

Board member for Culture and Communities

3. From Councillor Craig Simmons to Councillor Christine Simm

Given the unacceptable levels of food poverty in Oxford, will the portfolio holder join me in helping to support and promote the event being run by the youth volunteering charity vInspired in Oxford on 7th December to both raise awareness of the issue of food poverty and collect non-perishable food items for our local foodbanks?

Response

To be supplied at the meeting.

Board member for Housing and Estate Regeneration

4. From Councillor Jean Fooks to Councillor Scott Seamons

I see that Ed Balls has said “We believe that protecting the Green Belt is really important in terms of protecting valuable countryside but also allowing communities to keep their integrity, rather than spreading all over the place.” Can you assure the citizens of Oxford and surrounding districts that you will be following this policy in targeting areas for housing?

Response

The Council's strategic land availability assessment identified a large number of sites for housing development within the city's current boundaries including a number of Brownfield sites. This list was expanded somewhat in a recent report by independent consultants commissioned by the City Council – identifying sites for slightly under 10,500 new homes in the period 2011-31. However this figure is nowhere near the assessed need for that period in the SHMA of around 28000 new homes.

We are clear therefore that needs cannot be met within the current tightly-drawn administrative boundaries and that this is not an issue of prioritisation, but one of the need to have a strategic review of the surrounding greenbelt so total needs can be met. In this regard Mr Balls also said: “We need to make sure that councils like Oxford, where there is a real need for more homes, are not continually blocked by other councils that refuse to pull their weight.” To this end we support the Labour Party proposal to give cities like our own the 'Right to Grow', but also reflect that a Greenbelt review opens up the possibility to designate other areas of land within the county for new Greenbelt. However, the Greenbelt we currently have constrains necessary growth which would likely also prove more sustainable, for example by reducing the levels of commuting into Oxford from further away.

When it comes to new housing, the facts of the matter are clear. We simply have not been building nearly enough to ensure that Oxford continues to be a thriving city with strong communities and a growing economy. To meet the unmet housing need for Oxford would require less than 1% of the Oxford Green Belt to be given over to housing. This in practice looks nothing like the sprawling conurbation that is spuriously suggested by some commentators; rather it would provide opportunity to create exemplary, sustainable city suburbs that provide a great living environment

and remarkable gateways to the city. When there is so much at stake – our communities' desperate need for housing, the future health of our City's economy and Universities, and the need to prevent further deterioration of our transport networks – this is a very small price to pay.

5. From Councillor Ruth Wilkinson to Councillor Scott Seamons

Given that the City Council has identified sites for 8,000 new homes, can the Board Member please confirm:

- (a) how many affordable dwellings did Oxford City Council build last year?
- (b) how many affordable dwellings will it build this year?
- (c) how many dwellings in total will it build next year?

Response

Most of the sites identified for new homes across the city are not owned by the City Council and their development would be carried out by third parties. A protracted downturn has slowed the pace of development. This has consequently led to there not being any new affordable housing completions in 13/14 as confirmed in the Annual Monitoring report.

It continues to be difficult to estimate the precise number of completions but planning permission has been granted to other housing providers for 620 dwellings (excluding Barton outline permission) but progress with these developments has been slower than anticipated, in part due to delays in the planning process. Consequently, it is anticipated that only 11 affordable units will be delivered by registered social landlords this year and 67 in 15/16.

The City Council however is currently developing 5 sites in order to deliver 113 new Council homes during 14/15 and has committed a further £52m to deliver 354 new Council homes as part of its joint venture with Grosvenor estates over the next 5 years at Barton Park. This represents a level of investment by the council in new council housing not seen for decades.

Board member for Cleaner, Greener Oxford, Climate Change and Transport

6. From Councillor Dick Wolff to Councillor John Tanner

Of the £367,000 allocated for cycling provision until 31 March 2016, I see that 27% has been allocated to the creation of cycle parking at the Redbridge and Seacourt Park & Rides. Whilst I can see that this might be of some benefit to a few commuters from the County who prefer to leave their bike here overnight and cycle in (rather than taking the bus) I cannot see that it will encourage a single City resident on to a bicycle.

Could Cllr Tanner explain the thinking behind this >£100k investment (given the many useful, quickly implementable and far cheaper suggestions he says he has received) and the reason why it was not more appropriate to fund it from parking revenues? Would he say that the choice of projects to fund reflects, rather, the lack of suitably-qualified staff time to properly assess Oxford's cycling infrastructure needs?

Response

Every extra cycle journey in Oxford and every fewer car journey is to be welcomed. Providing a Park & Cycle option at Park and Rides in Oxford is an excellent use of taxpayer's money. Some of the alternative possibilities are being held up by the County Council's consultation on a new cycling strategy. But of course the City Council is also making significant financial contributions to cycling improvements at both The Plain and Frideswide Square.

7. From Councillor David Thomas to Councillor John Tanner

I'm sure Councillor Tanner welcomes the recent increase in public debate and scrutiny around the Western Conveyance, so when will he admit that there are genuine concerns that the scheme will fail to meet the Treasury's value for money criteria?

Response

Oxford residents have experienced regular flooding over recent years notably in 2000, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013/14. The City Council is keen to see improved flooding protection especially in the longer term as it is acutely aware of the impact upon major arterial roads, the railway line, schools and 4,300 homes and businesses which are at risk in a 1 in a hundred flooding event.

The Oxford & Abingdon Flood Alleviation Scheme does not yet have an approved design. At present there is a strategic outline case advanced as part of a partnership project fully supported by the City Council and led by the Environment Agency. The sponsoring group includes The Environment Agency, The Oxfordshire County Council, The Vale of White Horse District Council, The University of Oxford, The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, The Oxford Flood Alliance, Thames Water Utilities, Thames Regional Flood and Coastal Committee and the City Council.

The "Western conveyance" option arose earlier from the Oxford Flood Risk Management Strategy but this was not economically viable in 2010, when assessed against the criteria used for flooding protection schemes. However, following the development of the updated flood model for Oxford and further updating to the climate change projections as they are likely to affect the City, a major scheme now appears to be economically viable, subject to the funding being secured once all approvals are in place.

Once the approved design is finalised it will be possible to cost the project and at this point assess it against the Treasury's value for money criteria.

Of course the Western Conveyance is only part of the solution to flooding in Oxford. We are also working with the Environment Agency and land- owners to get streams and ditches cleared and we would like the Government to improve farming practices to avoid water run-off.

8. From Councillor Ruthi Brandt to Councillor John Tanner

How is the Council prepared for any winter flooding?

Response

Oxfordshire County Council became the lead local flood authority (LLFA) under the Flood Risk Regulations and it is the LLFA in conjunction with the Environment Agency that holds the primary responsibility for addressing flooding issues. The City Council has a duty to co-operate with the LLFA and it is also a major land owner in the area with riparian responsibilities.

Whilst the Council does not have a primary duty to address flooding it does take this matter very seriously as it is well aware of the impact of flooding upon local communities. It therefore invests significant resources into operational plans to improve flood protection, combat flood events and aid recovery. The Council chairs the Oxford Area Flood Partnership (OAFP) which includes The Environment Agency, The County Council, The Vale of White District Council, Thames Water Utilities, Network Rail and the City Council. It recognised the need for local leadership ahead of even the Pitt Review published in 2008 and the need for all involved organisations to work together closely to optimise response and make the most of existing budgets.

The Partnership has produced integrated operational plans which set out the actions for each organisation including the City Council. These plans have been tested by flooding events and improvements have been made progressively based upon lessons that have been learnt. A key part of the preparedness required is that this response may need to be delivered at any time in the year not just during the Winter.

The City Council has a well proven alert system via weather warnings from the Meteorological Office and the Environment Agency which allows us to make necessary preparations in advance of a flood.

The City Council works closely with the Local Resilience Forum and the Regional Flood and Coastal Committee. It has also been key in the drive for greater long term protection and welcomes the Oxford & Abingdon Scheme which should greatly enhance protection in the long term.

More information is available here:

http://www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decC/Flooding_occw.htm Including flood response plans for West Oxford/Botley and South Oxford

Deputy Leader of the Council

9. From Councillor Jean Fooks to Councillor Ed Turner

It is very welcome news that the Covered Market trialled an extension into Market Street, as was recommended by the Scrutiny Review panel as well as the independent Retail Group review. Can Council be assured that this will be repeated following its success, and that the other recommendations agreed by CEB such as

providing more cycle parking nearby and funding, from the now agreed increased rent income, serious improvements to the Market Avenues from the High Street will be actioned in the very near future?

Response

The independent Retail Group review recommended the extension of the Covered Market into Market Street, and this was endorsed by the Scrutiny Panel and CEB. The purpose is to strengthen trading by improving the connection between the Cornmarket and the market.

The extension into Market Street follows joint working between the Covered Market Manager and the market traders. It is a pilot and we will need to review the success of this initiative and any lessons, because Market Street is used by many people. In particular, we are very grateful to the wide range of organisations involved who have assisted, including the County Council, the police, retailers, colleges and the public.

There is already a significant programme of investment in the Covered Market, including maintenance and renewal of services, redecoration and proposed further improvements, such as new security gates. The increase in income from the rent reviews is less than inflation and the Council has already assisted tenants by waiving the back rent from the increase. Other improvements will be developed in partnership with the traders and come forward in due course.

10. From Councillor Jean Fooks to Councillor Ed Turner

Please would you circulate to all members the detailed, costed Action Plan and Programme for improvements to the Covered Market that CEB in February agreed should be produced?

Response

The draft Action Plan and Programme will be available within the next month. Actions have already been progressed:

- The Market Manager is in post
- The extension of the Covered Market into Market Street has been piloted
- The Market has been deep-cleaned
- Regular trader communications have been set up and a newsletter will be issued shortly
- A draft events and promotion programme is being developed with traders
- A draft proposed signage strategy is pending with the consultants
- The draft leasing strategy has been shared with the traders for comment – remove
- The draft tenants' handbook is to be issued shortly.

In addition drainage works have been completed and improvements to the roof and new security gates commissioned.

Leader of the Council, Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning

11. From Councillor Jean Fooks to Councillor Bob Price

Local Government employers have just agreed with trade unions a new pay deal for council workers. They are offering much higher percentage rises for the lower paid staff, ranging from an 8.56% rise for those on Spinal Column point 5 to 2.2% for those on Spinal Column points 11 and above. Would you agree with me that this is a much fairer way to increase pay without just extending the gap between high and low earners, and would you consider using the same approach to City Council staff pay rises?

Response

The Council is committed to a 5 year pay deal (2013 – 2018). This addressed the scandal of low pay by deleting the lowest spinal column points in the national agreement. This means that no Council employee earns less than £8.98 per hour. The pay deal also provides for incremental progression for those on the bottom of each grade and a Partnership Payment based on the achievement of the Council's agreed annual budget savings. These Partnership Payments are lump sums paid equally to all qualifying employees, thus giving much higher percentage increases to the lower paid. The pay ratio between top and bottom earners is less than 1:8. The Council will enter discussions with trade unions in 2017 for a new pay deal which will of course take full account of the agreements made at national level in the recent period. I should add that I am very pleased that a national pay deal has at last been agreed, following the transfer of control of the LGA/LGE to Labour after the May 2014 elections.

12. From Councillor Ruth Wilkinson to Councillor Bob Price

Given that Oxford City Council is keen to assist local retailers and small businesses, what plans does the Board Member have to help promote their use (as local retailers) both in the City Centre and in district centres over the festive period?

Response

The City Council is keen to support local retailers and small businesses and is supporting them in a wide range of ways, for example:

- The City Council is supporting Small Business Saturday on Saturday 6th December to encourage shoppers to shop in the city-both locally and in the city centre. The City Council will provide free parking in our Park and Ride sites to support this initiative.
- Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach have been asked to advertise Small Business Saturday on their buses and use social media in conjunction with the City Council's support of the campaign.
- The open air market in Gloucester Green goes from strength to strength and the Council has supported the new Saturday food and craft market.
- In the Covered Market the Council is actively working with traders on improving trading and the market environment, and we have seen the recent pilot to extend trading into Market Street to link with the shopping in Cornmarket

- Our City Centre Manager and the City Centre Ambassadors are working successfully with retailers across the city centre.
- The Council is also promoting the annual Christmas market in Broad Street and the Christmas Light Festival brought a large number of visitors and families into the city centre.

Background - Small Business Saturday

Small Business Saturday UK is a grassroots, non-political, non-commercial campaign, which highlights small business success and encourages consumers to 'shop local' and support small businesses in their communities. The day itself takes place on the first shopping Saturday in December each year, but the campaign aims to have a lasting impact on small businesses. In 2014 Small Business Saturday UK will take place on Saturday December 6th.

13. From Councillor Ruth Wilkinson to Councillor Bob Price

Can the Board Member please indicate what proportion of existing commercial property within the City boundaries is occupied?

Response

The Council does not monitor as a matter of course general commercial property occupancy in the city. It may review occupancy in the context of planning policy from time to time. There are no unlet properties in the City Council's City Centre commercial property portfolio, with the vacant shop in Broad Street let and shopfitting to start shortly. Outside the City Centre the Council has one vacant shop at Blackbird Leys.

14. From Councillor Jean Fooks to Councillor Bob Price

The Oxford Mail carried a story recently about the amounts of money spent on settlement payments. Oxford City Council was said to be spending almost £500k every year over a 5-year period, far more than any other local council. Can you explain to Council how this was good value for taxpayers' money?

Response

The figure quoted is an annual average over the period 2009- 13 of £449k. Two – thirds of the aggregate figure was paid in the period 2009-11 when the City Council adapted to the cuts in government grant and restructured by reducing tiers of management. This achieved huge ongoing efficiency savings and helped in the process of improving our services and delivering excellent customer services, leading to this year's accolade as the nationally recognised Best Achieving Council. Where staff have left the Council's employment through voluntary redundancy during this process, a Settlement Agreement is frequently used to ensure that the Council is protected subsequently against future tribunal actions. These agreements end the employment relationship with the staff member on a mutually agreed basis. There is a rigorous process of sign off for each case, with the relevant Director or the Chief Executive granting final approval. The terms for voluntary severance are agreed with the recognised unions. The Council has continued to drive forward with efficiency savings and is proposing a further 4- year balanced budget perspective over the 2015-18 period.

15. From Councillor Jean Fooks to Councillor Bob Price

Next year will mark the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta. As the foundation for the basic principles of freedom we now enjoy, this resonates with the calls from the Local Government Association, which I believe we all support, to devolve powers from a centralised government to local government. Can you assure Council that Oxford will be celebrating this anniversary in an appropriate and very inclusive way?

Response

The Museum of Oxford is planning events around the Magna Carta anniversary that will be of particular interest for young people and I expect that other county wide events will also be taking place. The Bodleian Library, as the repository for a number of copies of the Magna Carta, will also be marking the anniversary in their new premises.

16. From Councillor Sam Hollick to Councillor Bob Price

Will the leader condemn the Labour shadow work and pensions secretary's proposal that social security benefits should be withdrawn from EU migrants?

Response

Our social security system was established by the post World War 2 Labour Government on the principle that people should work and contribute before drawing on the system in periods of illness, disability or unemployment. The integration of Europe within the European Union is based on the free movement of goods and labour, and a future Labour Government, unlike the Tory elements in the Coalition Government, has no wish to change that basic principle. It means however that our social security system has to be adapted to a very different labour market and demographic context to that which prevailed in 1945. A recent ruling by the European Court of Justice, concerning a Romanian migrant worker in Germany, has confirmed that the freedom to move to another EU country does not automatically confer the right to access the same social security benefits as a worker who has either lived or worked gainfully in that country for a period of time. In the UK, the current regulations require workers moving to this country from elsewhere in the EU to observe a waiting period of 3 months before they are eligible for out of work benefits. The Shadow Secretary of State has proposed that this waiting period should be extended to 24 months, reflecting the underlying principle of work and contribution giving an entitlement to support from the social security system. The Shadow Secretary of State also pointed out that the evidence shows that the vast majority of EU migrants are young and in employment, and therefore make comparatively little call on the social security system. However, a proportion of these workers are recruited to low paid jobs by employers that are seeking to undercut wages and working conditions, in the knowledge that the tax credit and social security provisions will top up low incomes. A future Labour Government will raise the NMW, establish a stronger enforcement regime, and will ban recruitment agencies that only hire from outside the UK. Our social security system should not be subsidising low paid and insecure work. A further issue on which the Labour Government will work with EU partners are the regulations which provide for child

benefit and child tax credits to be claimed for children who live in other countries. There are currently 24,000 people receiving these in respect of children living in other countries.

17. From Councillor Craig Simmons to Councillor Bob Price

Will the Leader join me, and rest of the Green Group, in celebrating the decision of the House of Commons to agree a second reading for the National Health Service (Amended Duties and Powers) Bill which seeks to reverse the creeping privatisation of the NHS?

In doing so, will he write to those local MPs who opposed it (Ed Vaizey, Tony Baldry) and those others who did not vote or were unable to attend, to express our support for the Bill in the hope that they might yet have the opportunity to vote in favour, and/or lobby for the Bill, in the future?

Response

Yes. It was encouraging to see that most Tories didn't have the courage of their privatisation convictions to actually turn up and vote against a Bill which commands almost universal support across the country. I hope that they continue to sit on their hands and provide tacit support for the Bill as it progresses through the Parliamentary process. I am happy to write to all the county's MPs and seek their support for this important amendment to the current legislation governing the NHS.

18. From Councillor Sam Hollick to Councillor Bob Price

Will the leader support or reject calls from the Castle Mill boatyard developer to scrap this council's affordable homes target?

Response

A planning application for the Jericho Boatyard site, 14/01441/FUL, has been received. It proposes a mixed use development with 22 residential units, a community centre, a boatyard, a bridge and a public square. The applicant is offering 32% affordable housing. Officers in City Development are continuing to discuss aspects of the application with the developer, including the proportion of affordable housing. The applicant has been reminded of the Council's Policy in this respect. The application will come before the West Area Planning Committee for determination in due course with an officer recommendation. The circumstances in which a positive recommendation could be made for an application that does not meet the affordable homes requirement are set out in our planning regulations.

19. From Councillor Sam Hollick to Councillor Bob Price

Can the portfolio holder confirm whether any financial contribution from the Westgate developers towards affordable housing will contribute to providing more affordable housing, than our policy of 50%, on another site in the city?

Response

A s.106 agreement was completed with the applicant prior to the grant of Outline Planning Permission. This requires the developer to pay the City Council 15% of the sales value of the 59 flats as an off-site contribution to affordable housing. The value of the contribution will depend on sale prices in 2017/18, so the estimate of a £3 million figure should probably be taken as a minimum if, as seems probable, house prices continue to increase at above the rate of general price inflation.

It follows that we cannot know at this stage how many additional units of affordable housing will be acquired with the commuted sum. It will be included in the Housing Account Capital and used in conjunction with other resources to fulfil our capital programme priorities. With the Barton West/Park development starting to deliver homes in 2015/16, it is highly likely that we will seek to negotiate a higher social housing element in the scheme as it is built out.

20. From Councillor Ruthi Brandt to Councillor Bob Price

What is the total percentage of affordable housing that have actually been approved in developments which include 10 or more homes across the city in the past two years?

Response

This information is published annually in the Monitoring Report. The data for these two years show that there were 114 net affordable dwellings approved, compared to 253 dwellings overall; this gives 45% affordable housing provision overall. The data exclude the Council's own Affordable Housing Programme sites as they would skew the results.

21. From Councillor Craig Simmons to Councillor Bob Price

Now that the Roger Dudman Way EIA has finally been published, what process will the Council be following to determine which of the mitigation options set out in the EIA to pursue?

Response

The scheme of mitigation, as indicated by Option 1, is the University of Oxford's response to the City Council's request in April 2013 to bring forward measures to ameliorate the size and visual impact of the development.

Following the close of the public consultation on 19th December 2014 the West Area Planning Committee in the New Year and will be invited to consider whether it accepts the Option 1 scheme of mitigation proposed by the University.

22. From Councillor Craig Simmons to Councillor Bob Price

Will the Leader agree with me that, had the Roger Dudman Way EIA been available at the time of the planning application, the nature of the development would have most likely been different?

Response

It is, of course, impossible to say what difference the ES would have made to either the officer recommendation or the decision of the Planning Committee. The officer report discussed the issue of the height of the proposed buildings at great length, supported by a large number of view cone perspectives and photographs. The Committee's discussion was also very lengthy and focussed almost entirely on the height issue. Both officers and members were aware that this was an 'on balance' decision, in which the impact on the views had to be weighed against the benefits provided by the development to the University and the city's housing stock. The ES covers the same ground but in much greater detail; whether the detail would have led to a different recommendation or outcome can only be a matter of conjecture or speculation.

23. From Councillor Craig Simmons to Councillor Bob Price

Will the Roger Dudman Way EIA be referred to the newly established Design Panel for consideration?

Response

The purpose of the Oxford Design Review Panel is to assess planning applications that are still being developed, and to provide professional feedback and advice to the applicants. This ideally should take place at the pre-application stage. The Design Panel is not equipped to review a technical Environmental Statement (ES).

The Council has commissioned qualified independent consultants to review the ES and to provide members with a report on its soundness in terms of the relevant regulations and whether it is robust and reliable.