

Council 7 December 2015

Minute number: 66

Questions on Notice from members of Council and responses from the Board Members and Leader, including supplementary questions and responses.

Introduction

1. Questions submitted by members of Council to the Board members, Leader of the Council, by the deadline in the Constitution are listed below in the order they were taken at the meeting.
2. Written responses, supplementary questions and verbal response to these are included.

Questions and responses

Board Member for Customer Services and Corporate Services

1. From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Brown

Can you tell Council why on ringing the Council main number of 01865 249811 at 1040 on Thursday November 26th, my call was not answered but the voicemail said 'the centre is closed for training between 1030 and 11; you can look online for information'? Do you think this is a satisfactory response to a phone call from someone who may or may not have access to the internet, wanting to speak to a Council officer?

Response

The contact centre has very high levels of customer satisfaction which are measured all the time. In order to maintain this, staff training is a vital part of the picture. The half an hour every Thursday morning is an invaluable way for staff to be jointly trained and updated on key messages. Managers in the contact centre instigated this after feedback from staff. Up until this point, no negative feedback from customers has been received about this training period. Online and face to face services remain open to customers and the message customers hear makes it clear the exact period that the centre is unable to take calls. The message is as follows:

We are sorry but the Contact Centre is closed for training this morning between 10.30 and 11 o'clock. You can visit our website at www.oxford.gov.uk where you may find an answer to your query. Alternatively please call again later to speak to a member of our team. Please accept our apologies for any inconvenience caused.

Supplementary question

Why is the training not staggered to maintain cover?

Response

There have been no complaints apart from this one and whole-team training was instigated to improve the overall service.

2. From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Brown

Following the decision to appoint SEC to provide the bulk of the City Council's ICT, involving the disaggregation of the city/county partnership in March 2016, how much extra funding has been set aside for the salary costs of covering the increased in-house responsibilities?

Written Response

The City/County Council partnership agreement is due to expire on 31 March 2016, after the County Council served notice on the City. As part of the new arrangements the City Council's ICT Operations Team will increase by four FTE's and the Team Manager role has been re-graded to take account of the extra responsibilities. These costs were all factored into the original budget proposal and the new arrangements are still better value for money than the previous contract. The exact increased salary cost factored into the budget is £210k per annum.

3. From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Brown

How much capital will be spent on the transition from the County to the SEC-managed service?

Written Response

The SCC (Specialist Computer Centres) transition cost is £118K, as per the publicly available report to the City Executive Board on 30 July 2015.

4. From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Brown

I am surprised to see that the budget for ICT is expected to rise from £3,138,213 in 2015/16 to £3,161,611 in 2016/17.

Why are these figures given to me on October 2nd in response to an FOI request different, in fact less, from those given to me on August 17th 2015?

What savings are predicted to materialise in 2017/18 and beyond?

Written Response

The current ICT budget position and medium term financial plan which show the proposed savings are as follows as at 02.12.15:

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Total Budget	3,007,581	3,004,150	2,859,150	2,794,150	2,794,150
Proposed Savings/Bids:					
Replacement of the County ICT contract and optimisation of the Cloud		(150,000)			
Idox contract			(70,000)		
Contractual Inflation		5,000	5,000		
Revised Budget		2,859,150	2,794,150	2,794,150	2,794,150

Note on assumptions:

- 1) The 16/17 budget is as at this point in time and is subject to changes before Final Approval in February.
- 2) These are the savings/bids currently on Appendix 3 at this point in time and are also subject to change.
- 3) Figures include ICT applications and staff/running cost centres
- 4) Figures are based on controllable budgets only.

The different information provided in the October request to the August request is explained by the fact that some costs included in the August figures are now accounted for in a different department following the council's restructure and the telephony costs were included in answer to the first question but not included in answer to Councillor Fooks' second question.

The 2015/16 Budget given in August – £3,420,103 – included staffing, running costs, licenses and telephony

The 2015/16 Budget given in October – £3,138,213 – included staffing, running costs and licenses but excluded telephony and £35k which was of a consultancy budget that was transferred to Finance for ICT consultancy costs

A further reduction of £70K pa is planned from 2017/18 following reducing costs of the contract.

Supplementary question

Why are there so many answers to the same question?

Response

The answer depends on the specific question asked at the time.

5. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Brown

When will the Council be increasing staff pay to the Oxford Living Wage – which was increased in November 2015 by 19p per hour?

Written Response

The Council always implements any required Living Wage changes in the following April so that we can make provision for the increase in the following year'. Changes apply to employees, agency workers and large contractors. All Council employees are currently paid more than the Oxford Living Wage. We will write to agencies and contractors to ensure the changes are made for April 2016.

6. From Councillor Brandt to Councillor Brown

Will the City Council consider adopting the London Living wage level (£9.40 per hour) as a policy to advocate in Oxford due to the high housing costs here?

Written Response

Approximately two years ago Members agreed a policy to set the Oxford Living Wage at 95% of the London Living Wage. This calculation was set in the context of the high cost of living in Oxford and ensured an automatic link with the London Living Wage. However, the rate also recognised a differential to London prices and helped make the payment more affordable. At this stage there are no proposals to move to the London Living Wage but the situation will be kept under review.

Board member for Climate Change and Cleaner, Greener Oxford

7. From Councillor Goddard to Councillor Tanner

Can Cllr Tanner give details of biodiversity surveys, city-wide or localised, carried out by the City Council and where the results of such surveys can be found?

Written Response

Biodiversity surveys are undertaken at the Council's parks. The results and records are shared through the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre. The public can view the boundaries of notable sites of value for nature conservation in the city on the Council's website on LocalView at:

www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decVanilla/LocalView.htm

Oxford is particularly fortunate in having such a broad range of biodiversity on our doorsteps and there is more information about this at:

www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decEH/Biodiversity.htm

The Council also commissions biodiversity surveys to accompany its own development schemes, and these are published and available to view on the planning portal. The City Council requires developers to undertake biodiversity surveys. We also work with voluntary groups, such as the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) which surveys some of Oxford's biodiversity.

Supplementary question

Where can surveys be found and can residents get in touch with officers to get copies?

Response

I am happy to facilitate finding these if they are available.

Board member for Crime, Community Safety and Licensing

8. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Sinclair

Will Councillor Sinclair be holding meetings with the likes of Crisis to discuss monitoring the impact of the city centre PSPO on highly vulnerable individuals engaged in the city's street culture?

Written Response

Multi-agency meetings have been in place for many years to coordinate the support needs of vulnerable individuals, and monitor the impact of legal actions. Relevant actions taken under the PSPO will be brought to the attention of agencies supporting the individual. The scrutiny committee is leading on the monitoring of the PSPO and views will be taken from all parties.

Supplementary question

Will a date be set in early 2016 to meet with Crisis to discuss monitoring the impact of the PSPO?

Response

I will ask but have had no contact from them on this as yet.

9. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Sinclair

Given that the City have written to Oxford University stating that no PSPO signs will go up on University land unless requested by the University, how will users of that land be made aware of the offences listed under the PSPO?

Written Response

A cross-party working group met on the 23rd November to discuss signage and other forms of communication about the PSPO. The law requires sufficient signage and information to be held on the council's website. The group agreed that signage will be kept to a minimum, focussing on hot spot areas. Officers will have with them a tear-off information pad that will be given to people who want more information on the PSPO.

Board member for Housing

10. From Councillor Wolff to Councillor Rowley

Is the portfolio holder aware that a Syrian family of 5 were turned away by the housing department last month and ended up sleeping in a garage?

Would the leader join me in thanking our Chief Executive for responding quickly, once the matter was raised with him, to the case of a Syrian family who have since been housed outside of the City?

Written Response

I am aware, but I am not prepared to discuss individual cases. When any individual approaches the Council for Housing Options advice, they are given the very best advice available, tailored to their specific case. Due to the extreme housing pressures in Oxford, it is clearly not possible to accommodate everyone that approaches the Council in housing need, and indeed homelessness legislation does not expect that to be the case.

11. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Rowley

When and where will the affordable homes contribution from the Westgate development be used to provide homes?

Written Response

The affordable homes contribution from the Westgate development is due to be paid prior to the occupation of 50% of the dwellings on site and will be used to provide affordable homes in Oxford. Whilst there is no specific site or location identified to which the provision is tied, it is hoped the homes will be provided close to the Westgate development. Regard will be had to the City Council's housing strategy in respect of where and when the homes are to be provided.

Supplementary question

Is it acceptable that we do not know where and how this will be spent?

Response

The contribution will be paid and will be used in the best way available to us at the time.

12. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Rowley

In light of changes to government policy on social and affordable houses, how many new affordable-for-sale and social homes does he estimate will be built in Oxford over the next 10 years under his current housing strategy?

Written Response

The trajectory published in the Annual Monitoring report in November, estimates that around 6104 (net) homes will be built over the next 10 years (2015/16 to 2024/25). In the same period, assuming the continuation of current affordable housing policies, we would estimate in the region of 2200 social homes to be built on qualifying sites of 10 or more dwellings; comprising 1760 homes for social rent and 440 homes for shared ownership or other type of intermediate housing to buy (or made available as affordable rent). These figures should be treated as a guide only and are subject to change depending on factors such as site viability and changes in the Government's housing and planning policies.

Whilst the Housing and Planning Bill has set out proposals to secure delivery of more starter homes for sale as a form of affordable housing, we are waiting for further guidance and detail of how these proposals are to be implemented. Therefore it is not possible to estimate at this stage how the Government proposals will affect the actual number and provision of housing for those in the greatest housing need.

Supplementary question

How can you deliver 2200 in the next 10 years given the lack of delivery in the past 10 years?

Response

Our policy is to deliver social housing but the government's policy seems to be designed to stop us. This is the policy we have in place and we will do our best to deliver it.

13. From Councillor Hollick to Councillor Rowley

How many Council houses have been sold off (either by the Council or through right-to-buy) in the last three years?

What are officers estimating will be the figure over the next few years following the recent disastrous changes to social housing policies?

Written Response

Under the Right to Buy, the Council sold 46 properties in 2013/14, 46 in 2014/15 and 19 in 2015/16 up to the end of October. A further two properties have been sold on the open market as they were unsuitable for use as local authority housing stock.

The details of many of the proposed changes are not yet known but in terms of the "Pay to Stay" policy, we have assumed that an additional 5 tenants per year will exercise the Right to Buy as a result, increasing our annual estimate of Right to Buy sales to 45 per year. The other key policy change affecting stock is the sale of high value voids to fund the extension of the Right to Buy to Housing Associations and we are currently estimating that the Council's payment to Government will equate to the sale of 95 Council homes each year as a result.

Supplementary question

Can the Board Member confirm that there is a 250% increase in the current estimate of sales and how can we mitigate this? Will you speak to Housing Panel about this?

Response

Yes I will speak to the Housing Panel.

14.From Councillor Hollick to Councillor Rowley

Is it acceptable for a tenant to be moved into a Council property with single glazed windows, some with rotting frames?

Written Response

Prior to re-letting all properties they are repaired to meet the Councils void standard. This question relates to a particular property which has very recently been the subject of an enquiry from Cllr Benjamin to which a detailed response has been provided. The property in question met the standard with temporary repairs being carried out, but it was recognised that it would benefit from the provision of double glazed new windows and on that basis it was placed in the 15/16 window replacement programme. The delivery of that programme has unfortunately been delayed against the original programme due to procurement taking longer than anticipated but is now underway. The current position is that we are awaiting confirmation from the tenant of an appointment date so that the contractor can carry out detailed measurements prior to manufacture. Attempts have been made between August to September for this to happen but it hasn't been successful. The neighbouring flats were measured up in September. Now that we are aware urgent steps are being taken to make these arrangements so that the works can be carried out as soon as possible

Supplementary question

If the council was a private landlord would it not have been taken to court over the failure to do the repairs, and will these be completed soon?

Response

I don't believe this would have resulted in court action and we are committed to completing repairs as soon as possible.

15.From Councillor Hollick to Councillor Rowley

After a winter where a tenant had to resort to emergency credit to keep her 3 young children warm and assurances that her windows would be replaced by March this year, is it acceptable for that tenant to still be waiting for those windows in December?

Written Response

Prior to re-letting all properties they are repaired to meet the Councils void standard. This question relates to a particular property which has very recently been the subject of an enquiry from Cllr Benjamin to which a detailed response has been provided. The property in question met the standard with temporary repairs being carried out, but it was recognised that it would benefit from the provision of double glazed new windows and on that basis it was placed in the 15/16 window replacement programme. The delivery of that programme has unfortunately been delayed against the original programme due to procurement taking longer than anticipated but is now underway. The current position is that we are awaiting confirmation from the tenant of an appointment date so that the contractor can carry out detailed measurements prior to

manufacture. Attempts have been made between August to September for this to happen but it hasn't been successful. The neighbouring flats were measured up in September. Now that we are aware urgent steps are being taken to make these arrangements so that the works can be carried out as soon as possible

16. From Councillor Gant to Councillor Rowley

Would the leader of the council join us in noting that stock-owning councils in Wales have the power to apply to the Welsh government to suspend right-to-buy, that Swansea and Carmarthenshire have already done so, and Flintshire is actively considering it?

Would he agree with the leader of Flintshire Council that "It is common knowledge that there is a shortage of affordable housing across Wales and the rest of the UK. Every property that the council sells through the right to buy reduces our ability to provide affordable social housing to meet local need, so the suspension of right-to-buy in Flintshire would be sensible, welcome and long over-due."

Would he agree with us that it is notable that where stock-owning councils can opt out of this policy, they are choosing to do so, and make every effort to lobby central government in England to reverse this regressive and damaging policy?

Written Response

I do indeed agree with the leader of Flintshire Council; what he says reflects the pressures we are also experiencing in Oxford. By contrast to the Tory government at Westminster, the Labour-controlled Welsh Assembly has adopted a pragmatic and localist approach that has enabled Councils to ease housing pressures significantly.

The City Council will of course continue to point out the negative effects of Government policy on Oxford people who are struggling to find anywhere to live in their own City. We have been arguing for many years for greater flexibility in the application of right to buy policies, and we are putting together a reasoned case for exemption from the worst effects of the Government's potentially disastrous new housing policies.

It remains to be seen whether the Government's response will be determined by pragmatism and localism, or by ideology and the Westminster political agenda.

Supplementary question

When will councillors have sight of the Council's case for exemption?

Response

This is being drafted and will be in good time for the April submission deadline but is not complete.

Board member for Planning, Transport and Regulatory Service

17. From Councillor Wolff to Councillor Hollingsworth

Preamble

In April of this year, and following consultation with a number of interested groups in the city, Alan Baxter Associates published a formal response on behalf of this City Council to Oxfordshire County Council's consultation on its draft 'Oxford Transport Strategy' (part of its LPT4 strategy).

In it (p.54) they/we said :

The Strategy does not consider the contribution that Oxford's waterways might make to cycling from the north and south along the Oxford Canal and River Thames. Although it would not be appropriate and there would not be capacity for these waterways to carry significant volumes of cyclists, they could provide useful connections, particularly for less confident riders. The Strategy should set out an approach to the waterways.

The stretch of the towpath between Donnington Bridge and Folly Bridge is in poor condition. This is the most important stretch serving as it does as the route for rowers, coaches and spectators for OUBC and as a major tourist and residential route. The quality of this path negatively impacts those with impaired mobility, stopping them accessing the river and the path to Iffley. The other pinch point which is dangerous to all users of this route is by the turning to Grand Pont Nursery, where the path is collapsed and presents a risk of slipping into the river.

Although pedestrians and cyclists share this heavily-used path reasonably comfortably, there has to be a lot of 'give and take' as it is not wide or well-maintained enough, and safety is an issue. The same consultants' document also said

Complete or semi-segregation will be provided wherever possible (otherwise mandatory cycle lane markings will be used)

which suggests that a towpath wide enough for segregation of cyclists should be considered.

The path is not under the control of the County Council but since the County should be developing a continuous cycle network it should nonetheless take an interest in it as part of a general approach to the waterways.

Question

- a) Could Cllr Tanner confirm that a consultant — possibly the same Alan Baxter Associates — has been engaged to produce a formal response to the now-adopted County strategy on our behalf?
- b) Could he tell us what their brief is in more detail, what their time scale is and whether they have been asked to consult with interested groups such as (in this context) the City Cycling Forum?
- c) Would he agree to ask the consultants, in the course of their work, to examine this river route in more detail and make recommendations both to City and County?

Written Response

- a) There is no intention to engage a consultant to further respond to the adopted County strategy. As the Strategy is now adopted, and no longer open to consultation, it would not be a good use of public money to further respond as it is unlikely any practical outcome would be achieved from such an exercise.
- b) A brief was prepared for the consultant's response to the County Council Local Transport Plan 4 and Oxford Transport Strategy, which was fully met and the work completed by the consultant within the agreed timescales and budget. A copy of the brief will be provided to the questioner separately. Discussions were held between the consultants, all City Council Members, the County Council, and the two largest bus operating companies in Oxford, as well as internal consultation within the Council, which included the Environmental Sustainability Team responsible for the Oxford Cycle Strategy. The City Cycling Forum did not formally exist at the time of

the consultation, however cycling and other transport user groups had the opportunity to feed into the County Council consultation on LTP4 and the OTS.

c) See answers to (a) and (b) above – the consultant project is now completed.

Supplementary question

Where does this leave the inclusion of riverside routes for cyclists; does this leave us back in charge; and given there is no uncommitted budget available for this would he encourage the cycling forum to draw up ideas o get these routes up to standard?

Response

We need to look at how the County Council works with us. The cycling panel needs to concentrate on deliverables as it is better to do what is possible than to concentrate on matters outwith our remit. We will do what we realistically can.

18.From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Hollingsworth

The City Council is responsible for many trees on pavements on unclassified roads in the city. Sometimes these trees cause nuisance, either taking light from houses or interfering with phone lines of nearby residents. Why does the city council take no responsibility for this, when any good landlord would be expected to take care not to cause such problems to their tenants?

Written Response

Following on from the tragic incident in Gloucester Street where a member of the public lost their life, and following a detailed investigation a number of recommendations were made. One of these was that Oxford City Council should form a tree policy which outlined how it discharged its duty of care to the public.

In order to carry out its duty of care sufficiently, the tree policy details how the Council should deploy its resources to efficiently and effectively deal with issues relating to trees and their safety to the public, whilst balancing the benefits that urban trees bring.

Due to the number of complaints and enquiries that the city receives each year in relation to trees including that of loss of light, the policy was drafted using both case and statute law. It should also be noted that Oxford City Council is no different from other City Councils in the way it follows the same principles of how it manages its trees in relation to legal precedents.

Excessive pruning of urban trees does not benefit them, as this puts unnecessary pressure on the trees resources making them more liable to pests and diseases amongst the other pressures that exist like pollution and climate change. This human impact can have long ranging effects on trees especially coupled with the long time periods for a tree to reach maturity.

I'd like to extol – very strongly – the virtues of street trees. As a country we are no longer planting enough of the large and long-lived street trees that are a crucial part of the urban design of our cities; the shape of our city streets was formed by the far sighted choice of trees planted to line them, and it is very important that our generation follows that lead and leaves for the generations that follow a similarly successful combination of trees and buildings.

Street trees bring many benefits including:-

- Supporting a wide range of wildlife, in particular birds and insects
- Seasonal interest including flowers, fruit and autumn colour.

- Contributes to clean air by both absorbing and trapping pollution on leaves.
- Calms traffic flows.
- Provides urban cooling by mitigating against the urban heat island effect.
- Provide an informal organic balance to urban landscapes.
- Contribute to enhanced mental wellbeing to urban communities.
- Provide added flood mitigation through water absorption.

In order to gain these benefits we must reach a compromise and in order to that we need to have guidelines which determine what we will and won't do. Having a tree policy does it allow us to determine what is and isn't a nuisance, and that can only be done by following what has been set in law. The policy*, which has been in place since 2008 and was reviewed in 2011, makes clear the reasons for removing a tree, and interference to light or telecommunications are clearly stated as not sufficient reasons for removal. The policy makes clear the process for a householder or ward councillor to challenge any decision made by the tree officer with regard to an individual tree made under the policy.

*<http://www.oxford.gov.uk/Library/Documents/Parks/Tree%20Management%20Policy.pdf>

Supplementary question

Does the Council take responsibility for its trees and respond appropriately to complaints where trees are causing nuisance

Response

There is a budget for tree works but we are not going to chop down trees without good reason. I will follow up these concerns with officers.

19. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Hollingsworth

Have central government written to the Council asking them to look again at their Core Strategy, and if so what is the review process?

Written Response

No. The Council wrote to the Secretary of State following the sending of a letter on this topic from Vale of White Horse to Ministers, which we have not seen. Our letter pointed out that we have a full range of up to date planning policy documents and an adopted Local Plan. The letter also pointed out that successive Planning Inspectors in recent examinations and inquiries have found our Core Strategy sound, and there was no requirement to review our Core Strategy. This position was also confirmed earlier this year by a senior Planning Inspector acting as a critical friend to the Oxfordshire Councils' Post SHMA process.

Supplementary question

Should the Core Strategy be reviewed?

Response

There is a report coming to the City executive Board setting out the timetable for reviewing planning policies to take the authority through to 2036 and we are holding discussions with neighbouring local authorities on meeting our housing needs.

20. From Councillor Gant to Councillor Hollingsworth

We note with interest the recent announcement of a "working assumption" of housing need reached with neighbouring district councils. In welcoming this measure of cooperation, could we ask the leader and the board member to brief council on the implications for Oxford, in particular:

- a) Why have they now undertaken to review Oxford's local plan, when they have declined requests to do so in the past?
- b) What will be the timing and scope of this review, particularly in relation to the expiry of the current plan and associated other policies?
- c) Will the council take the opportunity to review other aspects of the plan, including for example policies around key worker housing, affordable housing, agreements around student housing, and innovative design models?

Written Response

- a) Demands that the City Council review planning documents, including the Core Strategy (see answer given above) ahead of schedule have failed to make the case that policies needed review because they were not up-to-date. The City Council has rejected this argument and successfully defended its planning policies at examination and S78 inquiries. The Core Strategy is compliant with the NPPF. Policies are successfully continuing to deliver crucial development and growth in the City in terms of housing and economic growth. However, it is best practice and good project management to review strategic planning policy documents periodically, to ensure policies continue to remain up-to-date and responsive to local needs and national guidance.
- b) The Local Development Scheme will be taken to City Executive Board in January, and includes the work programme and scope of the Local Plan 2036 in more detail. The intention is that the Local Plan 2036 will be adopted in 2019. The Local Plan 2036 will replace the saved policies of the Local Plan 2001-2016, the Core Strategy and the Sites and Housing Plan. Saved policies of the Local Plan 2001-2016 can still be used beyond 2016; they do not 'expire'.
- c) The City Council will review all planning policy documents (other than the AAPs), in order to include all policies in one place. As part of this process all aspects of planning policy – including affordable housing, key worker housing, agreements around student housing, design - will be considered as part of the review process. It is important to note that considering a policy as part of a review process may mean retaining existing policies that will continue to best serve the interests of the current and future citizens of Oxford.

Supplementary question

Is no change envisaged in advance of this timetable?

Response

No change is planned unless there is challenge. All policies will be reviewed together and in context.

21.From Councillor Benjamin to Councillor Hollingsworth

The recent planning monitoring report shows that we have created no new residential moorings in the City since this started to be measured three years ago. What plans are in place to remedy this?

Written Response

Background work to the Sites and Housing Plan (adopted 2013) identified that there are only limited opportunities for creating new residential boat moorings within the City boundaries while - as set out in the Sites and Housing Plan - supporting in principle the creation of residential moorings in appropriate locations. The City Council therefore has been and remains open and receptive to proposals coming forward through the development management process.

22.From Councillor Benjamin to Councillor Hollingsworth

Does the Council still own the Temple Cowley Pool site and is there an agreed planning application for development of the site?

Written Response

On 24th December 2014 Catalyst Housing Association was granted a 999 year lease to the development site. The Council holds only the residual freehold, which it is contractually obliged to transfer to Catalyst on the granting of substantive planning permission. Only in the context of Catalyst failing to obtain planning permission for the housing development will a material interest in the site revert to the Council. Catalyst have not yet submitted a planning application.

Supplementary question

Is the application premature?

Response

No.

23.From Councillor Benjamin to Councillor Hollingsworth

Given the high level of planning applications for change of use to HMOs in the City, will the portfolio holder agree that in order to assist planning officers in processing these applications a site plan showing HMOs within 100m of an application site would be helpful?

Will he ensure that this is requested as part of the application and that this becomes standard practice as an aid to officers when making recommendations to committee or delegated decisions?

Written Response

Whilst an applicant can provide information on HMOs in support of their planning application, planning officers will still have to check the Council's data available at the time of the assessment prior to making recommendations or taking a decision. Such a site plan should not therefore be a formal requirement on the applicant to submit with their application.

Information on HMOs is available on the Council's Public Access service, but Council officers are currently exploring options for providing a map-based solution for known HMOs that will help both applicants and members of the public to obtain a clearer picture on HMOs in any particular area within the City.

24. From Councillor Wolff to Councillor Hollingsworth

What are the Council doing to actively oppose the dualling of the A40 and support a staged re-opening of rail links Witney to Oxford, through to Hinksey, Cowley and Wheatley as a series of steps to provide alternatives to car use in the Oxford area in the long-term?

Written Response

The City Council responded to the County Council's consultation 'Investing in the A40' by letter dated 6th November 2015. Regarding the option of a dual carriageway, the City Council expressed its view as:

"This option [A40 dualling] does not support the over-arching national objective of reducing trips by the private car. This option is not supported."

The County consultation included an option for a Witney-Oxford train line. However the City Council is concerned that the proposal shown in the consultation report would result in some destruction of the Oxford Meadows SAC (Cassington Meadow), so any scheme would need to demonstrate that the benefits of the project outweighed the costs and damage to the Oxford Meadows in construction. Overall, given the high costs (financial and potentially environmental), and the evidence that trips originating in West Oxfordshire and ending in Oxford are predominantly heading for Summertown, Headington and the centre of Cowley – none of which would be conveniently served by the proposed rail route - the City Council concluded:

"Currently this scheme not supported as there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate how real benefits would come forward."

In the response provided earlier in the year to the County Council's Oxford Transport Strategy and Local Transport Plan 4 recommended that rail should play a more prominent part in the long-term transport strategy for Oxford, for example by more supporting infrastructure improvements to facilitate a passenger rail service to the south-eastern part of the City using the Cowley Branch Line.

25. From Councillor Wolff to Councillor Hollingsworth

Will the City Council oppose the creation of expanded road links on the Oxford to Cambridge route in favour of restoring a non-stop rail service?

Written Response

The Government has announced its intention to review the so-called "Oxford Cambridge Expressway" as part of its post-2020 Road Investment Strategy. At present there is no detail of the scope of the review, and whether it will look at existing roads or new ones.

Oxford City Council has pursued policies based on restraining car-based traffic since the late 1960s, and those policies – focusing on placing housing and employment on existing public transport corridors and networks or within walking or cycling distance of one another, as well as restricting car parking and road space in the city centre - have meant that Oxford has seen some of the lowest growths in car travel of any city in the UK during that period.

In the mid 1990s, this Council opposed plans to build the Newbury bypass, arguing that the result would be a huge and unsustainable increase in traffic on the A34, which forms part of Oxford's ring road. Unfortunately that view was ignored, and the result has been exactly as I and others who moved the motion of opposition at that time said it

would be – a massively overloaded road network where the slightest incident has the potential to cause chaos across the city and the county.

While there are no specific plans yet as a result of the Government's announcement, it seems highly likely that any such expressway will create further knock on pressure on the road system of Oxford, particularly the A34. It is my view, and that of the Council, that investment would be better made on public transport links such as East-West rail, and on supporting the sustainable expansion of Oxford to provide jobs and homes close to one another so that public transport is always a better option than car travel.

26. From Councillor Gant to Councillor Hollingsworth

Does Oxford City Council plan to join other councils and sign up to the #Planning4People coalition, launched jointly by the Town and Country Planning Association and the Webb Trust, with the stated aim "to put people back at the heart of planning"?

<http://www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/planning4people.html>

Written Response

Yes. I am already a signatory in a personal capacity as a TCPA member.

27. From Councillor Brandt to Councillor Hollingsworth

When commenting on planning applications on the Council website – you must provide a title with the only options being Lord, Lady, Doctor, Mr, Mrs, Ms, Miss. Will the portfolio holder agree to change this list to a more egalitarian set of choices that also respects gender diversity?

Written Response

The system used to capture comments on planning applications is called Public Access and is part of a software suite called Uniform. This is thought to be used by the majority of local authorities for managing planning applications. What customers see is what is provided by Public Access rather than something we have devised, and as such we do not have direct control over the style of questions asked

In terms of good practice we would normally defer to the Government Design Manual (developed by the Government Digital Service) which has a helpful page on this issue:

<https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-centred-design/resources/patterns/gender-and-sex.html>

In short, the principle is to avoid asking questions about gender and sex unless required, and not to require titles in forms. The gender/title of respondents to planning consultations does not, in my opinion, fall into an area which such information is required.

It therefore appears that Public Access is out of step with national practice, and we will raise this as an issue with Uniform to see if we they will incorporate the changes to their product.

At the same time, we are reviewing all of our online forms based on customers' needs and will be proposing changes to our policies to reflect current best practice.

Deputy Leader of the Council, Board Member for Finance, Corporate Asset Management and Public Health

28. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Turner

How much brownfield land does the council own which might be suitable for building affordable homes?

Written Response

The Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) is a city-wide assessment to consider the potential suitability of sites for housing. The last update in December 2014 identified several sites as potentially suitable for housing which the City Council is in ownership of (full or in part). These are estimated to have potential capacity for in the region of 600 new homes over the next 15 years.

All sites would of course be subject to usual planning policy requirements and other planning considerations; the SHLAA does not affect whether or not the site planning permission will be granted, nor does its assessment indicate any intention to redevelop the site.

29. From Councillor Simmons to Councillor Turner

On 12 November, CEB agreed a deal to split up City Farm in Garsington and sell off the buildings and agricultural land. Recognising that the report stated that the agricultural land was unsuitable for development but that agricultural land is an important asset nonetheless, has the portfolio holder explored other options for generating a revenue stream from the land rather than selling it off?

Written Response

We extensively weighed different options for this land, and the proposal adopted by CEB represents the best way of securing a capital receipt and avoiding a substantial maintenance liability.

Supplementary question

Would it be better to retain the land and generate value rather than losing it?

Response

Because of liabilities and low returns retaining this site was not financially viable, although some interest was retained in case of there was future development potential.

Leader of the Council, Board Member for Corporate Strategy and Economic Development

30. From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Price

At the recent Business breakfast meeting, you told the meeting that potential sites for housing to help meet Oxford's need had been agreed with Cherwell District Council. Can you tell the City Council where they are?

Written Response

The Inspector for the Cherwell DC local Plan Inquiry required Cherwell to make suitable provision for a proportion of Oxford's unmet housing need. Subsequent discussions with Cherwell have been very positive and they will shortly be publishing proposals for consultation. Cllr Fooks will sadly have to abide her soul in patience until that happens.

31.From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Price

I understand that there is backlog of HMO licence work, due to a failure to appoint anyone who could authorise notices or licences when John Copley retired. Can you tell Council how many notices and licences have been affected by this failure, and when you expect that the backlog will be cleared?

Written Response

No statutory notices were delayed; the scheme of delegation allows for Directors to sign notices and in some cases the authorised officer is required to sign the notice. The HMO Licensing Scheme is delivered 100% electronically and changing all the templates created a backlog. There are 445 licences that have been affected and it is anticipated that the backlog will be cleared by the end of February 2016.

The steps that are now being taken to eliminate the backlog include:

- Training additional resources across the new Applications team in Business Improvement and a reduction in the reliance on temps
- A new online applications system is due to go live as a pilot in January 2016 and will have a significant impact on the speed of processing new applications
- Monthly performance monitoring
- A detailed review of the applications process to further reduce processing time and to provide a more customer-focused service.

Supplementary question

Have there been delays in making appointments or in implementing the admin review that we were unaware of?

Response

The Council is suffering difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, but while there were delays in appointments there were no delays in the administration as a direct result of this.

32.From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Price

At the September Council you reminded Council that the Mental Health Panel was established to oversee the implementation of the Oxford City Council Mental Health Action Plan. You also stated that the outcome of the review of the Action Plan, due in October 2015, would be reported to December Council as part of the regular partnership slot on the agenda.

Can you explain to Council why the Panel has not met to review progress, and why there is no report to Council in this Council's agenda?

Written Response

Thank you for raising this point. Cllr Rowley chairs the Mental Health Panel. Since he took over as the Board Member for Housing, he has been heavily committed to the strategic issues arising from the damaging changes in government policy, and it has not proved possible to arrange a meeting to review the work on the Action Plan before the December Council meeting. Cllr Rowley has discussed the matter with me and a Panel meeting has now been arranged for 18th January 2016.

33.From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Price

What steps is the Leader taking to preparation for the huge cuts in the provision of child services and homelessness services in Oxford?

Written Response

The County proposed budget cuts are of great concern and we have been actively engaging with the County as they consider options for delivering a further £50 million reductions over the next four years. Whilst recognising the difficult choices faced by the County Council in adjusting their services to fit within the massively reduced budget imposed on them by Tory Government cuts, and the increasing pressure on social care and children's services; the options being considered will have significant and detrimental impacts on the most vulnerable people in our city and are bound to increase cost pressures on other public bodies, including this Council. I have raised these concerns both informally and directly in our bilateral meetings with the Leader of the County Council, and the City Council has submitted a formal Written Response to the County's consultation. The impact of the proposed closure of children's centres, the withdrawal of housing related support grants, the reductions in funding for services to support older people and services provided by the voluntary and community sector are the areas that we have highlighted as particular concerns. We have urged the County Council to engage with all its partners to properly evaluate the impacts and options for different delivery models that could ensure that essential services are maintained and avoid shunting costs onto other organisations. The County Council has agreed to work jointly with us to assess options in a number of areas, including the children's centres and housing related support. Officers will be reporting to me and Cllr Hudspeth on progress with this work in early January.

Supplementary question

Can you expand on the proposals for joint working?

Response

There are a number of options including directly providing services being considered as a fall-back but some are more affordable or feasible. Our fundamental position is opposition to these cuts.

34.From Councillor Simmons to Councillor Price

What will the portfolio holder do to ensure that the Nolan principles are more rigorously applied by the Local Economic Partnership?

Written Response

The Oxfordshire LEP is a company limited by guarantee and therefore subject to company law. However, the Leaders of all the Oxfordshire councils are Board members and are responsible for ensuring that the decisions and activities of the LEP conform to that legal framework and conform to statutory requirements as regards equalities, environmental, and other EU legislative requirements. The LEP is currently seeking to appoint a new Board Chairman and I will ensure that the recruitment process and role specification are consistent with the Nolan principles. The Board's governance and accountability arrangements are set out in the LEP Assurance Framework, published on the LEP website.

Supplementary question

Should these operate with the same principles as local authorities?

Response

We need to be clear on the remit of these bodies and the government is clearly going to continue to use these but they are set up as LLPs not councils and their operating principles are therefore going to be different.

35. From Councillor Benjamin to Councillor Price

Will the City Council ensure that White Poppies as well as Red are available for sale through Council outlets next year and in all subsequent years?

Written Response

I will ask the appropriate officers to find out how the Council could source and make these poppies available in future years.

Supplementary question

Councillor Benjamin said she could supply details of where to source these.

36. From Councillor Wolff to Councillor Price

Can the Leader provide an update on what measures and practices have been put in place following the Council motion on refugees?

Written Response

Following the Council motion agreed on 23rd September the City Council has been working with neighbouring councils, health services and voluntary groups to develop arrangements for accommodating refugees under the Government's Syrian Resettlement Scheme. The City Council has agreed with government our proposals to accommodate an initial 10 households under the scheme in the coming months to test systems and help to develop a longer term county-wide offer. We now have all the appropriate policies and procedures in place to meet the requirements and implement the scheme. We will be resettling families as from December. In developing these arrangements we have worked closely with the voluntary, community and faith groups to build on their experience and expertise in developing arrangements for refugees and coordinate support and services. A full report updating on progress will be discussed by Council Executive Board on 17th December.

Supplementary question

What happens to Syrian families arriving through other routes; is there an a regularised partnership; and do specific officers liaise with other organisations?

Response

The assistant chief executive is working on the issues around the new scheme for resettlement and on the issues around refugees. Non-scheme arrivals would however have to go through the normal processes.

37. From Councillor Brandt to Councillor Price

Will the Leader ask officers to request that County Emergency Planning organise a presentation to City Councillors and relevant staff on nuclear safety with respect to the nuclear convoys that we know travel through the County?

Written Response

In its role as a category one responder within the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum, Oxfordshire County Council has ensured that the risks associated with nuclear convoys have been identified and there are sufficient preparations and planned

responses to deal with an accidental or deliberate release of a radiological substance as the result of any incident within Oxfordshire.

These include:

- Multi-Agency Procedures-Emergencies
- Evacuation and Shelter Protocol
- Mass Fatalities Management Plan
- Mass Casualties Framework
- Humanitarian Assistance Framework & OCC Supporting People Plan
- Recovery Plan
- CBRN and Hazmat Plan
- Site Clearance Plan
- Communications Plan - Warning and Informing
- Strategic Roads Plan

In addition to these plans, National Operational Guidance is available for Fire and Rescue Services when attending incidents relating to the release of chemical, radiological and biological and nuclear substances through an accidental release. Oxfordshire County Council also provides off-site plans for key fixed sites within the county, which include planning, training and exercising.

There is also national guidance from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) for dealing with the transportation of nuclear weapons which set out the levels of protection and the MoD response to an incident that has occurred whilst being transported by road. It lays out the specialisms with the convoy team, which includes fire fighting and radiological monitoring, as well as the MoD response and assistance to the local emergency services and local authorities. The guidance can be accessed via the following link;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-emergency-services-information>

Whilst there has never been an accident involving defence nuclear material which has led, or come anywhere near leading to a release of radiological material to the environment, the County Council, Thames Valley LRF and the emergency services within Oxfordshire have ensured that they are fully prepared and have resilient and exercised plans to deal with any such event. These plans have been exercised across the Thames Valley with the National Ambulance Resilience Unit on the last two regional exercises and the next planned exercise in Oxfordshire is in September 2016.

If additional information is required, Carol MacKay, the County's Principal Emergency Planning Officer, will try to assist. She can be contacted on 01865 323763.

Supplementary question

Can a briefing be arranged so that we can understand the issues and ask questions?

Response

If there is enough interest a briefing can be arranged or councillors can contact the officer directly.